A Beginners Guide to Benchrest

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With the growth in popularity of BR nationwide and within the region, I thought a few notes on what BR is and how to get started in the discipline might be helpful.

What is benchrest?

In short, air rifle benchrest is an outdoor target discipline shot while sitting at a bench on which your rifle is placed in rests. The target is a card 25 metres away and it has ten large and ten small sighter diagrams and twenty five scoring diagrams. All of the larger diagrams are a fraction under 40mm in diameter. The centre of the diagram is a 2mm circle, hitting that ring gives you the maximum score of ten points, obliterating it completely counts as an X. Outside of the ten ring are nine, eight, seven, six and five rings. You have twenty minutes to shoot a card, during which time you can take as many sighting shots as you like, but you can only shoot one pellet into each of the scoring diagrams. A competition consists of shooting three cards and at the end of the competition, the highest score wins. There are other details, but that's the basis of the discipline.

It sounds too easy: Well, the maximum possible match score is 750:75X so seventy five perfect centre shots. In over 30 years of international competition, nobody has ever achieved that score. Remember, you need to hit a 2mm circle at 25 metres, outdoors!

Equipment: Let me start by saying that if you already have an air rifle, with a scope of around 24 mag or more, then you already have the basis of a benchrest setup. Single shot rifles, or magazine rifles fitted with a single shot tray are preferred, but I have seen good scores posted with a mag fed rifle.

Like FT, 0.177 calibre is the universal choice, simply because it is most accurate. That said, if you only have a 0.22 cal rifle, you can still give BR a go to see if it suits you.

Before you do anything else, you need to read the SWEFTA BR rules. These will show you what is and is not allowed and help you decide if you need to add anything at all to your shooting bag. For instance you may already have a bipod and a shooting glove or suitable rear bag, alternatively a pair of bags you use to zero your rifle, that's enough to get you started. Just give the rules a read.

Rifles: OK and now the bit you all want to know about, exactly what highly exotic and massively expensive rifle is going to guarantee you success? I'm afraid such a machine does not exist, but I can tell you what other shooters in the region use, by popularity.

Within several clubs in SWEFTA and nationally, the bog standard, straight from the shop Air Arms HFT500 is a popular choice, some of the top UK shooters use them. You will see the HFT500 actions in purpose made BR stocks, but the vast majority of those actions are pretty much standard. The Air Arms S400 and MPR are also rifles that have enjoyed a lot of success.

Next we come to the more complex rifles with regulators. The Anschutz 9015 is a popular choice, I use one myself which I have owned from new (in 2017), and previously used for FT for several years. Steyr's are also popular, and then a handful of other brands, the RAW TM1000, especially the older versions make an excellent BR rifle as does the Daystate Tsar / Ataman M2.

You don't need to rush out and buy brand new, all of these rifles can be found second hand, as they have all been around for a fair few years.

Can other rifles be used? Yes of course, most quality pcp rifles are more than capable of producing excellent accuracy, so whatever you have, it is worth giving it a try.

Scopes: Something that is worth remembering is that the distance from the bench to the target card is 25m. This does not change, ever, so changing the parallax of the scope, other than to finely clarify the sight picture is not something we do in BR. This means either a side wheel or front focus scope will do the job perfectly, as changing the distance or focus on the scope hardly ever happens.

Two things I would consider essential in a scope; a relatively fine reticule, centre dot or line whichever is your choice and a nice bright sight picture. I would add to this that a magnification above 24 mag is an advantage.

Many shooters use fixed 36 mag scopes, either made by Sightron or the now rare Weaver T36. Leupold also used to make a 36 mag Competition scope. Fixed 45 mag scopes are also available, Sightron currently make one, Leupold used to (my choice) and it looks like Falcon may be about to introduce a new BR model, but variable mag scopes are just as useful and are used by at least half of the current shooters in SWEFTA, Falcon and Vector optics being the two most commonly used brands.

Rests: There is a perception that a £1000 front rest is an essential item. I have to tell you that as a newcomer to BR, even one with years of other shooting experience behind you, an expensive rest will not gain you any points at all. Much better you start with a couple of bag rests, or if you want something a little more solid up front, then one of the simple rests from someone like Caldwell will be perfectly serviceable. Ignore other shooters at the club who tell you you MUST have the latest all singing, all dancing coaxial rest. Yes, if you take to the discipline, you may wish to upgrade to a more adjustable and complex rest at some point, but you can put in competitive scores without one, as highlighted by the recent SWEFTA final where the first and third placed shooters were using complex rests and the second and fourth placed shooters were using cheap and very simple rests. Fancy gear is nice, but at least in the beginning, it is absolutely not needed.

Pellets: These are the last and I would say, most important choice in your BR setup.

For pretty much every barrel, there is a preferred pellet, it may be an H&N, a JSB, a QYS or something else. It may need lubrication or sizing, but once you have tested, tested and tested until you are sure you are getting the smallest groups again and again and again, then you will find the true accuracy of your rifle.

It is impossible to stress how important the right pellets are. Many people spend money on replacing their rifles, several times, when really, all they needed to do was find the right pellets. Yes it can be time consuming, but you can be sure that the people winning competitions, locally or nationally have done that testing, as those people leave absolutely nothing to chance.

So, you already have a rifle you use for FT, HFT, hunting or plinking. You have a scope that's nice and clear and you have a couple of bag rests at the back of the gun cabinet that you occasionally use for zeroing in your rifle. Add to this a couple of tins of your good pellets, the ones that give you the most accuracy, and you are all set.

That's it, that's all you need to give BR a try at the club, and if your club doesn't cater for BR, make a call to one of the clubs in SWEFTA that are already involved and arrange to visit. Those clubs are Dartmoor, East Devon, Purbeck and West Devon and at every one of them you will find shooters more than happy to help you have a go at benchrest.