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Bolt-Action Vs. Semi-Auto Browning Versus Remington...

Many gunowners believe that bolt-action rifles are supposed to be more accurate than semi-automatics of the same caliber. But Browning's new BAR blows that theory right out of the water.

If they can't be on the range or in the field, there is little most shooters would rather do than discuss their theories of any given gun's accuracy, operation, and reason for existence.

No such discussion would be complete without the annual "bolt actions are better than autoloaders—oh no they're not" arguments. We all know, no matter how hard we try or how much evidence is presented, that neither side of the argument will change its mind. For instance, bolt-action fans will make what they consider to be an irrefutable argument: *Bolt actions lock up tighter than automatics, so they are naturally more accurate.* That state-

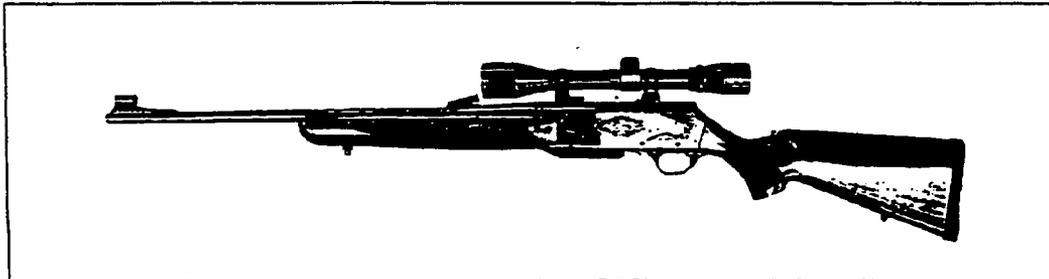
ment is proffered as fact, but in reality, it was more true 20 years ago than it is today. Autoloading locking systems technology has advanced to a point they will lock uniformly or they won't lock at all.

How a gun locks up will definitely affect its accuracy, but, mechanics aside, it is the shooter who will ultimately determine a gun's precision. Bolt actions merely make you work a little harder—and slower. That translates to accuracy. One reason autoloaders aren't regarded as accurate as bolt actions is that you tend to shoot them faster. Quick second shots are rarely as precise as a steady first attempt. Points of impact will also vary

minutely from shot to shot as barrels heat up, something usually associated with autoloaders.

Putting all this into perspective, we are still just talking about theories. We were more interested in what all this means in the real world, so we decided to find out for ourselves with a head-to-head comparison of the two rifle types in .270. We chose Browning's BAR Mark II Safari and A-Bolt

Below: The Mark II Safari is Browning's newest version of the BAR. Among improvements is a more versatile gas system, which is still capable of handling belted magnums.



November 1993

CUNTESTS 13

RIFLES

Hunter to go against a Remington Model 7400 and Model 700 BDL. All four guns were equipped with identical Simmons 6x40 Wide Angle scopes and Redfield-style mounts. Accuracy firing was done at 100 yards from sandbagged rests on covered concrete benches. Here are our findings:

Browning BAR Mark II Safari: Elegant Performance

Introduced in 1968, the Browning BAR is a centerfire semi-automatic rifle made by Fabrique Nationale of Belgium. This gas-operated long gun features a seven-lug rotary bolt that mates with the barrel extension, which is threaded into the receiver. Because of the strength of this lock-up, it is able to handle the pressures of belted magnum rifle cartridges. In fact, it is the only semi-automatic rifle built to do so.

This year, Browning made several changes to the BAR—now called the BAR Mark II Safari. First, it features an improved gas system that is capable of functioning reliably with a wider variety of ammunition. This was accomplished by redesigning the gas

port and buffering system. Second, it has a bolt-release lever mounted on the right side of the receiver at the lower front edge. Third, the trigger-guard assembly has a larger bow for easier trigger access with gloves and can be removed by punching out two pins located at the bottom edge of the receiver. Last, and definitely least in our book, is engraving on both sides of the receiver.

Chambered for the .270, the Mark II we purchased had a 22-inch barrel rifled with a 1-in-10-inch right-hand twist. Measuring 43 inches long overall, its open sights had a radius of 18 inches. The walnut stock has a 13 $\frac{1}{2}$ -inch length of pull, a 2-inch drop at the comb and a 1 $\frac{1}{2}$ -inch drop at the heel. Unloaded, it weighed around 7 pounds 9 ounces. The magazine, which can be detached from the hinged floorplate, held four rounds. Suggested retail price of this model is \$714. Without sights, the gun sells for \$698.

Metal work on the BAR was outstanding. All surfaces, except for the white bolt, were highly polished and deeply blued. Both sides of the receiver had three-leaf-pattern engrav-

ing with the word "Safari" in the center panel. The gold-colored trigger and buck head on the bottom of the trigger guard provided a further touch of elegance. No cosmetic flaws or sharp edges were found, and fitting was first-rate.

Made of nicely figured walnut, the two-piece stock had a very high luster finish. A panel of expertly cut fine checkering was laid out on each side of the grip and another wrapped completely around the 9-inch-long fore-end. The solid, black-rubber recoil pad and blued metal sling studs were carefully installed. No spacers or grip caps were used. Wood-to-metal mating was close. There was a uniform, hairline space between the fore-end and non-floating barrel. The buttstock met the back of the receiver perfectly on the right side, but the wood on the left was slightly high.

The Mark II's handling qualities were excellent. Balanced exactly at the receiver ring 7 inches forward of the trigger guard, the rifle shouldered smoothly and naturally. Whether using open sights or a scope, the comb was the right height

Head to Head: Browning A-Bolt Hunter Versus Remington Model 700 BDL

Appearance. Each rifle had a nicely figured stock with a high gloss finish. But we preferred the Model 700 BDL's jeweled bolt, ski-line checkering and white spacer over the A-Bolt Hunter's fluted bolt, regular checkering and black spacer. Advantage: Remington.

Workmanship. No blemishes or sharp edges were found on either rifle. The Remington had more detailing on its stock, but the A-Bolt Hunter had a free-floating barrel and a much lighter trigger. Advantage: Browning.

Capacity. With one round in the chamber, both bolt actions held a total of five rounds. However, the A-Bolt Hunter's detachable magazine allows a faster reload using an extra magazine. Advantage: Browning.

Comfort/Feel. The lighter A-Bolt Hunter recoiled more, but its rubber recoil pad helped soften the kick. The Model 700 BDL's raised cheekpiece provided a more comfortable

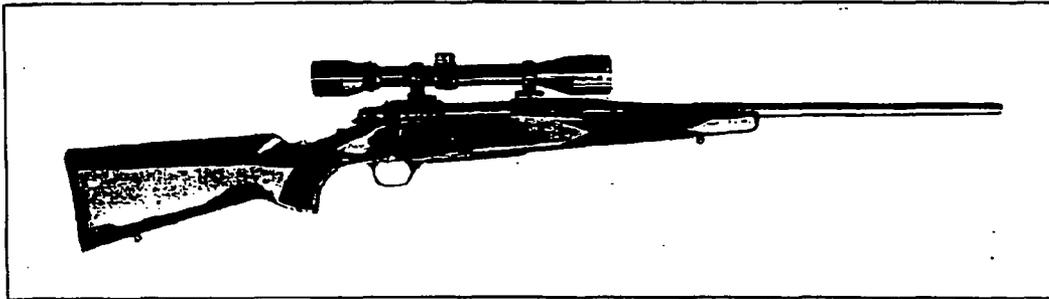
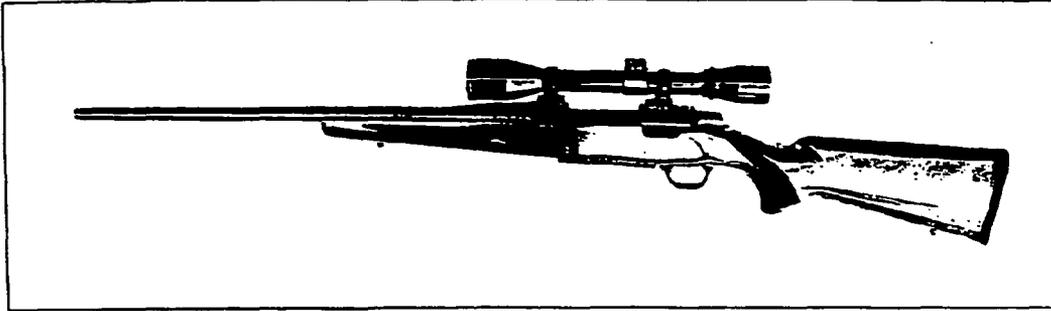
cheek-to-stock fit, but its hard butplate did nothing to lessen felt recoil. Advantage: Equal.

Reliability. Neither of these rifles malfunctioned, and each was built using a tried-and-true action. Advantage: Equal.

Accuracy. Both were capable of 2-inch groups at 100 yards with the right ammunition. Overall, the Model 700 BDL produced groups that were a half-inch smaller than those of the A-Bolt Hunter, though. Advantage: Remington.

Price. This A-Bolt retails for \$25 less than the Model 700. However, the BDL was equipped with open sights, which is a \$64 option on the Hunter. Advantage: Remington.

Other Factors. We thought the A-Bolt's safety and bolt release were more accessible, but the Model 700 BDL's floorplate release was more conveniently placed than the Hunter's magazine release. Advantage: Slightly to Browning.



Above: Browning's "plain Jane" A-Bolt Hunter is considerably cheaper than the fancier BAR. But it was also less accurate.

to establish a stable stockweld with firm jaw contact. Although most of the wide, oval-shaped fore-end was of little use, placing the off-hand at its rear against the protruding bottom of the magazine made it easy to keep the butt snugged into the shoulder. Felt recoil was about normal for a .270, but the rifle's gas operation made the kick from 150-grain ammunition no worse than that from 100-grain loads.

The BAR performed admirably, going through a variety of ammunition brands and weights without one malfunction.

The magazine loaded to capacity without undue effort, slid in and out of the well readily, and released with ease when the grooved catch lever at its rear was pushed. Bolt movement was smooth, and its recoil spring didn't seem to be overly stiff. The serrated bolt-release lever and crossbolt safety mounted on the rear of the trigger guard worked perfectly.

Our Safari's receiver, drilled and

tapped for scope mounting, also was equipped with a sturdy set of open sights. The gold bead front was mounted on a serrated ramp screwed to the barrel and covered by a removable hood. The fully click-adjustable rear had a large face with a U-shaped notch and was also screwed to the barrel. Its large-headed adjustment screws, colored direction-indicator arrows and white index lines made adjustments simple and repeatable—one of the best arrangements we've seen on a rifle.

We found the Mark II's trigger was above average, breaking cleanly at 3 pounds after a light ¼-inch of slack.

Accuracy was more than acceptable with the right ammunition. Winchester 100-grain pointed softpoints produced the smallest three-shot average groups, which covered 1.5 inches at 100 yards. Remington 130-grain Core-Lokt pointed softpoints and Federal Premium 150-grain boat-tail softpoints both yielded 2.5-inch groups. All loads shot to the same

point of impact at this distance.

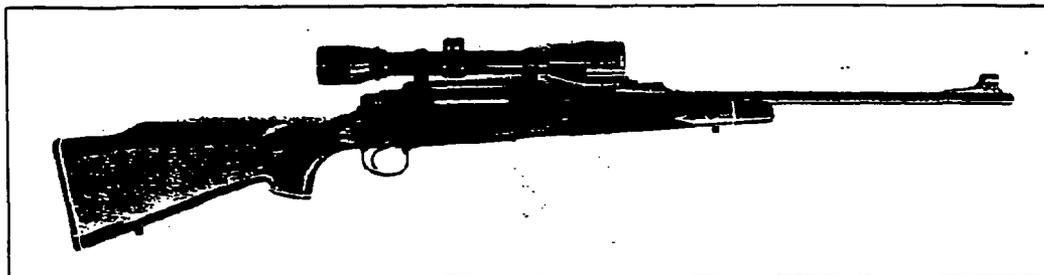
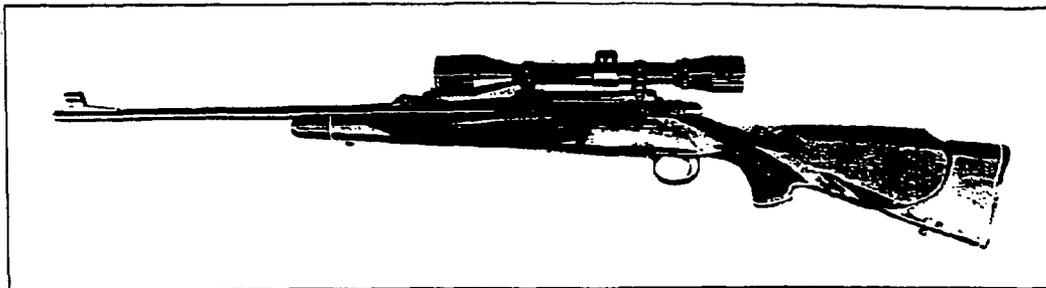
Ballistically, Winchester's 100-grain load proved to be the best performer out of this autoloader. Averaging 3,349 feet per second at the muzzle, it generated 2,492 foot pounds of muzzle energy. Remington 130-grain Core-Lokt ammunition produced 2,894 fps and 2,420 foot pounds. Federal's Premium 150-grain BTSPs left the muzzle at an average of 2,716 fps for 2,459 foot pounds of energy.

Bottom Line: We liked the changes Browning made in developing the BAR Mark II Safari. Its price is steep, but quality is rarely cheap. If you're looking for a first-class semi-automatic hunting rifle, this is it.

**Browning A-Bolt Hunter:
Acceptable**

Browning describes the Hunter Model as the "no frills" version of its A-Bolt bolt-action rifle line. This term is relative, though. Features this

RIFLES



Above: Despite the Model 700 BDL's good looks, this Remington couldn't match the BAR in accuracy. It is offered in a left-hand model.

place. Unless forcefully seated, it alternately fell out after the first round was fired or allowed the bolt to override the next round. Our gunsmith solved the problem with a couple of file strokes. All other aspects of the rifle's function were routine, regardless of the ammunition. The magazine release, positioned directly behind the magazine, and the crossbolt manual safety, located on the rear of the trigger guard, worked smoothly.

Like the BAR, the 7400 receiver is drilled and tapped to accept a scope mount, but it also comes with iron sights. The serrated ramp front had a white bead that worked together well with the rear's U-shaped notch. Adjustments, made by loosening the appropriate screw and sliding the rear's blade in the desired direction, were rather tedious, but the sight picture wasn't bad. This autoloader's trigger was clean, but heavy. It didn't have any unnecessary movement, and after a short amount of rearward travel, it broke crisply with 4.5 pounds of pressure.

In accuracy, the Model 7400

wasn't a strong performer. Our best three-shot average groups, 2.5 inches at 100 yards, were achieved with both Remington 130-grain Core-Lokt pointed softpoints and Federal Premium 150-grain boattail softpoints. Winchester 100-grain pointed softpoints only managed groups measuring 3 inches at the same distance.

Chronographing these loads did not reveal any surprises. We found Winchester's 100-grain load produced a muzzle velocity of 3,316 feet per second, yielding 2,444 foot pounds of muzzle energy. Remington 130-grain Core-Lokts measured 2,955 fps and 2,523 foot pounds. Federal Premium 150-grain boattail softpoints had an average muzzle velocity of 2,745 fps, generating 2,512 foot pounds of energy.

Bottom Line: The Remington Model 7400's magazine fit, trigger and butt covering need improvement, in our opinion.

Its accuracy is probably adequate for most hunting needs, but the other little nagging difficulties are just enough to spoil a hunt.

Remington 700 BDL: Good Looks, Heavy Trigger

Introduced in 1962, the Model 700 rifle is the culmination of bolt-action-rifle efforts Remington began in the late 1800's.

The basic Model 700 features a Monte Carlo-style walnut stock and open sights, and is available in two grades. The standard ADL has a satin-finished stock with normal checkering, a blind magazine and an uncovered front sight. The BDL has a high-gloss stock with skipline checkering and the usual caps with a spacer, a magazine with a hinged floorplate, and a hooded front sight.

Our .270 BDL had a 22-inch barrel with 1-in-10 rifling and an overall length of 42½ inches. Depending on where the adjustable rear is placed, the open sights had a radius of 15 to 17 inches. With its four-round internal magazine empty, it weighed around 7¼ pounds. Stock dimensions were: length of pull, 13¾ inches; drop at the comb, ½ inch; and drop at the heel, 1¾ inches. At \$524,

this bolt-action rifle costs \$21 more than the semi-automatic Model 7400 we just covered.

This Remington's workmanship was above average. All the metal parts fit well and had no sharp edges. The silver-colored bolt was brightly polished and jeweled, while all other metal parts were flawlessly finished to a low-glare deep blue. The nicely grained one-piece American walnut stock had carefully cut checkering and a smooth glossy finish. The grip cap and butt plate, made of shiny black plastic and accented by a white spacer, were expertly crafted.

Stock-to-metal mating was precise. The barrel was not free floating.

Handling characteristics of this bolt action were good, but could have been better. The rifle, balanced at the back of the receiver ring, shouldered smoothly and pointed well. However, replacing the slippery and unyielding hard-plastic butt plate would have made those two tasks even easier. A stable hold was saved by the deep checkering on the rounded fore-end and full-bodied grip. The full cheekpiece provided the most comfortable cheek-to-stock fit, affording good jaw contact when using either sighting system. Perceived recoil wasn't as severe as it was on the Model 7400, but our

"The rifle shouldered smoothly and pointed well. However, replacing the slippery hard-plastic buttplate would have made those two tasks even easier."

shooters still would have appreciated a rubber recoil pad.

During our extensive live-fire testing, this rifle performed commendably. The bolt moved freely in all directions and locked up solidly. Top-loading the internal magazine was uneventful, and the smooth-operating floorplate release on the front bow of the trigger guard made unloading quick and easy. Fired cases extracted with little effort and ejected positively. The two-position manual safety lever, located near the right-rear of the bolt, was within reach of the firing hand and operated cleanly.

The BDL's iron sights, mounted on the barrel, are identical to those on the Model 7400, save the added hood on the front sight. As with the

autoloader, making adjustments wasn't very convenient, but the front sight's covering was an improvement to the overall sight picture. We considered this Remington's trigger pull weight of 6½ pounds to be ridiculously heavy, especially when you consider that it had virtually no slack or overtravel.

The groups we produced with this BDL were a half-inch smaller than those of the Model 7400. Remington 130-grain Core-Lokt pointed softpoints achieved the smallest three-shot average groups, 2 inches at 100 yards. Both of the other loads we tried, Winchester 100-grain pointed softpoints and Federal Premium 150-grain boattail softpoints, managed 2.5 inches at the same yardage.

Remington's 130-grain load produced the most muzzle energy out of this rifle. Clocked at 2,988 feet per second, it developed 2,579 foot pounds of energy. Winchester 100-grain PSPs produced 3,357 fps and 2,504 foot pounds. Federal's 150-grain ammunition left the muzzle at 2,726 fps, generating 2,477 foot pounds of energy.

Bottom Line: Remington's Model 700 BDL is attractive and reliable enough, but would be significantly better with an improved trigger and something other than that hard-plastic butt plate. ■

"I KNOW IT'S HERE SOMEWHERE!"

Did May's article on .30-06 bolt-action rifles get deep-sixed? Lose sight of the April evaluation of shooting glasses?

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