



KERRIE MOGUGAN



Australia's Oldest International Sport.



Full bore target shooting isn't about shooting at all, it is about the wind.

By Nic Boyde

I was looking for a competitive sport that suited my encroaching years and the increasing decrepitude caused by years of high-impact, high-stress conventional sports. Long-range rifle shooting, where you move a fingertip, only, 10 times in 15 minutes, followed by a long rest, seemed the kind of thing I was after.

I started shooting at the ripe old age of 44 while living in London. My eye fell on the Stock Exchange Rifle Club, and I was invited down to be shown the ropes. In a brightly-lit basement beneath a short remnant of London's ancient city wall, a small rifle range was busily in operation, with half a dozen figures sprawled on the floor, dressed in the most outlandish gear, wearing spectacles reminiscent of insect antennae, and firing at tiny targets.

Safety is everyone's concern, and when you begin the sport, safety is drummed into your head continually. No-one is immune from remark, and that is forced into one's consciousness as well. Anyone can make a mistake when distracted for some reason, and a quick friendly reminder will always be more welcome than an accident. Shooters accept that they all have a responsibility to each other and the world at large. As a result, shooting is by far the least dangerous sport around – even dancing ranks in the top 10 in Australia. Shooting is ranked so low as to be statistically zero.

The next thing one learns is that it is surprisingly easy to do quite well – and then that to do really well requires effort and skill and discipline, like any other competitive sport.

I quickly gravitated towards long range target shooting, one of the myriad disciplines within the sports shooting world. Conducted outdoors, at ranges from 300 to 900 metres, in all weathers, this is the ultimate test of marksmanship.

The target is a large piece of card with a large round black mark painted on it, a mark that fits within the concentric circles of the sights. Indeed if it weren't for the wind, it would be hard to miss.

In fact, full bore target shooting isn't about shooting at all, it is about the wind.

The kind of breeze that has the recreational sailor rubbing his hands with glee has enough deflection in it to blow a bullet yards off the target when firing at longer ranges.

A miss by an inch is still a miss, let alone yards, so what is the rifle shooter to do?

Rifle ranges are festooned with flags. These give a festive, even jolly appearance, but are there to indicate the strength of the wind. Shooters look at other manifestations of wind if they can – trees swaying, whitecaps on the sea, angle of the rain, and the mirage on warm sunny days.

Judging the strength of the wind by these signs is a bit of a black art, but the flags are the best guide of what is happening generally,

showing both strength and direction. A side wind has a larger effect than a wind coming from almost dead ahead.

Having settled on a judgement, the sights at the rear of the rifle can be adjusted sideways to compensate for the effect of the anticipated wind. "Anticipated", because the wind varies between shots, during shots and even while the bullet is in the air. It shifts up and down in strength and from left to right in direction.

Shooting is the most egalitarian of sports – the rifle does all the work, all the shooter has to do is adjust for the wind, hold steady and aim. Young and old compete together, and men and women compete on equal terms. No veterans, no heavyweights, no sex discrimination, and for many disabled people, a chance to compete on an equal basis with the less disabled.

Eyesight, while a factor, is not *the* factor – many a shooter complains of seeing at best a grey smudge in a grey ring, but sharp or fuzzy, what matters is centering the grey smudge within the grey ring. If you can do that, you can shoot straight. The rest is up to your wind judgement, and here experience outweighs youth and strength. Shooting is almost unique in providing an outdoor competitive sporting environment where the 80 year-old woman can thrash the 18 year-old man.