

South Africa 2023 – Reflections from a US Palma Team member

Sitting here sipping a little Select Barrel Bulleit Bourbon earning my name Party Marty #Bulleit. Ok, not living up to the party part, but enjoying the proceeds from a fundraiser while reflecting upon my March travel to South Africa with a small contingent of the U.S. Palma, Veterans, and Goodwill teams (who, along with the Young Eagles, comprise the [U.S Fullbore Team](#) (#USNRT)) to shoot the [South African Open Bisley Championships](#) (#SABU). Our scouting trip to South Africa was in preparation for the [2024 World Long Range Championships](#) (#WLRC). The WLRC are the Olympics of long range shooting. Everyone wants to hear stories and tales of the adventures. It has been hard to break this experience down and explain it to a broader audience, but what follows is my best shot (pun intended).

These trips are about the shooting (yes), but also the people – your teammates and those you meet. We all spend a fair amount of time together. Erik has been my long-time travel buddy and practice partner. He did not make the trip, but I wore his shirt for one of the practice days as it was my way of bringing him with me on the big adventure shooting in South Africa.



The travel is the least fun part of the trip. I left Minneapolis in the morning with my travel partner, and fellow teammate Rick. We hopped the first plane out of Minneapolis and flew into Atlanta where we meet more of our teammates at the gate departing for Johannesburg. This was

my first big plane flight to another country. I do not travel well and have actively avoided trips around the world for work. I have never really been interested in seeing the world. Not sure why, but we can dive into my shortcomings more later. The flight to Johannesburg was a quick 15 hours or so. Plane seats are not the most spacious so I opted for an upgraded seat, thinking this would be give me a better chance to sleep on the plane. Admittedly, I am not the best person to be giving travel advice, but I slept a fair amount on the flight to

Johannesburg. We landed, went through security, and claimed our luggage. Then we walked to another area to claim our rifles.



Traveling with a rifle is an art form. It should be a college level class on how to jam as much stuff in a case to protect a delicate instrument and stay below the 50-pound weight limit. I have been doing advanced studies in this area for the last year in preparation for this adventure. I would like to apologize to all the TSA security people for all the smelly sweatshirts and shooting jackets they have endured as I travel around the US shooting. I have used three different hard cases ([#SKB](#), [#PelicanCases](#)), three different travel cases and three different soft cases ([#CreedmoorSports](#)) to arrive at my current set up. Not to mention my experiments with two different spotting scopes ([#VortexOptics](#)) and two different spotting scope stands. Traveling by plane to shoot is A LOT different than driving my truck with all my normal comfortable stuff.

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With luggage and rifles in hand, we made our way to the hotel connected to the airport for a decent meal and a night of sleep. The porters at the airport were working hard to help all 28 of us get to the hotel. When you are traveling with this many rifles, you get a little attention. The airline staff at the desk were awesome. They are always interested to hear why they are handling so many guns all at once.

The next morning, we traveled five hours by bus from Joburg (experienced traveler slang) to Bloemfontein. This was our first real look at the city, countryside, and everyday life. We traveled with a security detail following us while we were on the bus. The hotel in Bloemfontein was the perfect location for us. The hotel had a connection to the local mall with a food court and a grocery store. With two weeks of shooting in a foreign country, there is a lot of stuff to buy that doesn't fit in your suitcase: food, snacks, sun block, chairs.

Back to travel for second, it takes a few days to adjust to the time change and new sleep schedule. This is where sleeping on the plane became a very questionable thing to do. Experience tells us to take a few days and adjust. Many people on the team needed a few days before we could sleep for more than a few hours at nights.

The range and shooting were different than I had pictured in my overly active imagination. The 25-minute drive from the hotel gave a little time to view the countryside and



look for animals. The giraffe and the ostriches were my favorite. The range has three rows of flags for the 60 targets being used for the two weeks of matches. We had flags on the far left of the range, flags on the far right of the range, and a row right down the middle. Doesn't sound too bad, eh? Well, the rub is that the wind we experienced changed quite a bit. The changes are most like Raton (#NRA Whittington Center), but that doesn't fully explain it. The flags made it hard to estimate the wind direction when you were between the rows of flags. I know, first world shooter problems! However, this is different than the ranges we have in the US. As Raton (#NRA Whittington Center), Phoenix (#Ben Avery Shooting Range, #Desert Sharpshooters), and Winnequah (#Winnequah Gun Club) all have plenty of flags. The firing points at the General De Wet range are extra wide by US standards. We are firing three people on a target at a time from 300m to 900m lines. This is called three to a mound. Surprise! The range is in meters. I didn't see that one coming.

I had this irrational fear about my ammo, but everything was perfect. Thank you [Capstone Precision Group](#) ([#bergerbullets](#) [#lapuabrass](#), and [#vihtavuoripowders](#)) for the support. I switched to Vihtavuori powder in one of the previous supply shortages and discovering them was the best thing to come out of any of the shortages. I don't often load ammo and have it shipped halfway around the world and hope it shoots. Thank you again Capstone Precision Group for helping me past that hurdle. My Berger Fullbore 155.5s with Lapua Palma

brass were not the weak link, but the author's wind reading was a little questionable at times. It was shocking to hear the costs of reloading supplies in other countries. We are truly blessed to be shooters in the US.

For my non-shooting friends and my biggest fan (Hi Mom!), a typical day of shooting was ten shots at a distance with two sighting shots that you could convert for score if you wanted. With three people on each



target, you rotate and score with the other two people on your target. When you are done shooting, a second group shoots on your target. When all the shooters are done, you move to the next meter line and do it all again. This is repeated for as many times as described in the match schedule. Fifty (50) to sixty (60) shots are about average for a typical day of international shooting.

Remember you are shooting with people from all over the world and communication might be difficult. However, my experience was that most shooters spoke better English than me. Still, shooting with the competitors from Japan did

make communicating a little interesting. It was early in the first week and there was a good amount of sign language to work out concerning who was scoring for whom. Their English was still better than my Japanese.

The shooting was quite a bit different than what we do in the states. A command is given before you put anything on the firing line and the ready line is 25 meters behind the firing line. Earl Liebetrau ([#WinnequahGunClub](#)) would be proud of how smoothly the match was run. People gathered at the ready line and when the "Advance" command is given, you are allowed to walk up to the firing line. When the "Prepare" command is given you are allowed to put stuff on the line and handle your rifle. They gave us a minute to dry fire with the targets exposed and then the targets were pulled back down in the pits. When the targets came back up, everyone said good luck. The shooting started when you and your partners were ready. There is a list of standard commands, so have your range command card ready.



When the shooting started, the real game began. Shooting with iron sights, leather shooting jacket and a sling at distances up to 1000 yards is not a seeing competition. It is a wind reading and shot execution game. This is a little different that people might expect. Wind reading can be a huge part of the Palma game on the international stage. Wind makes the shooting unpredictable and not equal. We are also under a time constraint to execute a shot in 45 seconds. Using your allotted 45 seconds to shoot in the wind is a big part of the game. The wind typically has a cycle. You are trying to shoot in the most favorable wind condition. You may find your

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45 seconds of shooting time to be bad for the wind and the people shooting with you have better wind conditions. It can be hard to get out of a bad cycle. Thus, conditions are not the same for everyone on the range and can make a difference in the final results. You hope the differences average out over a few days. Sometimes they do sometimes they do not. Match results are very different than we are used to in the US. Some of my early match reports as a junior match report writing intern ([#PalmaAlliance](#)) summarized matches simply as yard line and shooter. The international matches are named and may be made up of a complex mix of yard lines and cover several days. The results are difficult to follow even with a program.

Additionally, these international matches bring international talent. If you drop a point or miss a V (a center shot), you can drop 20 or 30 spots in the overall standings. I happened to shoot a solid score at 300m one day. Of my ten shots, I got all the points and hit the smaller center V for eight of my ten shots. That put me in 11th place with a 50-8V behind the ten people who shot 50-9V. Welcome to the world stage!

The real draw for the international shooting community is the national team matches. For Palma, these are typically 16 shooter teams with coaches and back coaches creating a big team. There has been an effort in the US to promote more team shooting skills and team matches. Some of the other countries are clearly more focused on the team matches than we are, and it shows at the international level. It is a symphony of people

working together that wins at the international level. We put together a US team, but some of the other countries have the depth for several teams. As one of the big team matches was getting started, I took a depth breath and soaked up as much of my surroundings as possible. I really tried to make the memory last. We are so focused on the tasks and responsibilities that I wanted to stop and just watch for a few minutes. We all spend a huge amount of time and talent to get to this spot



and I didn't want to miss anything. To win at this level truly requires world class shooting talent and world class wind coaches all working together. Not sure I can explain this yet. Being a rookie on the international stage, my view of how it works together is still forming.

For overall team results, South Africa and Great Britain were in excellent form and beat the US team with points to spare. The Brit and South Africans were using this match to solidify their team selections for next

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year's Worlds and they had clearly come to compete. Expect some good competition at the 2024 World Long Range Championships being held at this same range in South Africa next March (2024).

A few results from our time in South Africa:

- Trudie Fay was the top US shooter and she managed to shoot well enough to be in the top three of all shooters for many matches.
- Eric Sundholm had a very good two weeks and managed a top 10 finish in the big aggregate of many matches.
- Many of the other US shooters had good days or distances and managed top 20 finishes.



This experience shooting at the South African Open Bisley Championships was exceptional. I met many of the 200+ shooters, and I now understand why we put our first and last names on shirts and coats. I talked with some wonderful people along the way and had many fun experiences. I am very excited to head back next year for the Worlds and share more time with the complete U.S. Fullbore Team (#USNRT, #USPALMATEAM). I would like to thank all those individuals, corporations, and foundations whose charitable donations to the [NRA Foundation](#) (#NRAFoundation), to the [Friends of the NRA](#), and to the [U.S. National Rifle Team, Inc.](#), helped offset transportation and lodging costs and team entry fees.