

U.S. Veterans Team Journey To South Africa 2024

One U.S. Veterans Team member's account of the 2024 World Long-Range Championship held in South Africa in March.

by JON HOWELL at U.S. VETERANS TEAM posted on May 10, 2024

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Supported by a grant from the NRA Foundation, the U.S. Veterans Team traveled to South Africa to compete at the 2024 Veterans Target Rifle World Championship, held at the Gen De Wet Shooting Range in March.

Photo by U.S. Veterans Team

The journey to South Africa for the United States Veterans Team to the 32nd Target Rifle World Long-Range Championship started in August 2020 at the Buckeye Blossom Long-Range Midwest Nationals matches held at the Alliance Rifle Club in Malvern, Ohio.

The Veterans Target Rifle World Championship Team Match is shot concurrently with the Under 25 Target Rifle World Championship Team Match. These matches are shot the first day of the Worlds. The course of fire is 300, 600, 900 and 1,000 yards (or 300, 600, 800 and 900 meters). The teams are composed of one captain, one adjutant, 10 shooters (two reserve), one main coach and two target coaches.



The U.S. Veterans Team on the firing line at Gen De Wet Shooting Range in Bloemfontein, South Africa, during the 2024 Veterans Target Rifle World Championship Team Match.

Our intrepid Captain was Leo Cebula, a former U.S. Veterans Team Adjutant. We began shooting practice and tryouts around the country. For example, there was the Midwest Palma held at Winnequah Gun Club in Lodi, Wisconsin, and at the East Coast Fullbore matches hosted by the North State Shooting Club at Camp Butner, North Carolina. Along the way, Cebula was selected as the U.S. Team Captain for the 2022 Americas Match held at Connaught Range near Ontario, Canada. Two of our veterans—Jon Howell and Mike Schallow—joined with one member of the U.S. Palma Team, John Field, plus five highly capable shooters from the U.S. Army Marksmanship Unit, and together the team won the Americas Match for the United States.

The final U.S. Veterans Team selection was made at Reade Range near Fallen Timber, Pennsylvania, in May 2023. The team consisted of 21 shooters, administrators and coaches, including Leo Cebula as Captain, Gerard DeCosta as our trusty adjutant, coaches Peter Laberge, Blair Clowdis, Don Phister and Charles Clark, and shooters Dan Altman, Jeff Miles, Greg Brown, Norm Crawford, Keith Hoverstad, Tom Colston, Jon Howell, Russ Jones, Randy Pike, Mike Schallow, Ron Sekellick, Kent Shomber, Bob Steketee and John Hofman.

Additional team practices in 2023 were held at the Canadian Fullbore Championships at the Mons Range on the Canadian Forces Base Borden, located near Toronto. The team also practiced with the U.S. National Team before the Spirit of America U.S. National

Fullbore Championship, hosted by the Bald Eagles Rifle Club at the NRA Whittington Center in Raton, New Mexico. Following team practice, the team also shot the Spirit of America Team matches to gain additional shooting experience as a team.

At this point, the countdown clock to South Africa and the World Championships really started. Two informal practices were held in February 2024 just before boarding the planes. One group of 10 Veterans team members shot at the new Central Carolina 1,000-yard range in Burlington, North Carolina, where Coach Blair was kind enough to mark off the firing lines in meters to simulate the South African ranges. Another group was able to get some practice by shooting the 2024 Southwest Nationals in Phoenix, Arizona.



March marks the end of summer in South Africa, with temperatures in low 90s, low humidity and heavy sun. Shade is at a premium and when available, members of the U.S. Veterans Team took advantage.

At the beginning of March, the team began to arrive in Johannesburg, South Africa. After nearly all the American teams were present, next was a five-hour bus ride from Johannesburg to Bloemfontein which is located in the Free State province, closer to the center of South Africa. “Home” for the next few weeks was a nice hotel about a 25-minute drive from the range. The daily journey to and from the range made the trip even more memorable. First, the team had to get used to being in the “wrong” lane, since the South Africans drive on the left side of the road. Occasionally, the streetlights were out due to power shortages that made for some exciting driving. Also, sometimes the red and green lights were side by side. You really had to pay attention.

The team made a quick trip to find the Gen De Wet Shooting Range on March 6 to pick up our ammunition, which was last seen in September. (Thank you to Sierra Bullets for shipping the ammunition.) The range is reminiscent of the George E. Tubb High Power Rifle Range at the NRA Whittington Center, where if you look behind the range to the right there is seemingly nothing for a hundred miles except flat. The Gen De Wet Shooting Range was similar with a generally flat view interrupted by a few small hills around. One also had to watch where you stepped, as there was animal dung everywhere. One also stayed out of the tall grass bordering the defined ranges because of the potential for puff adders, one of the most lethal snakes in the world. Thankfully, none made their presence known.



The U.S. Veterans Team gathered for a group photo at Gen De Wet Shooting Range in Bloemfontein, South Africa, during the 2024 Veterans Target Rifle World Championship Team Match in March.

Team practice started promptly at 8:00 a.m. on March 7. The team was anxious to get zeros at 300, 600, 800 and 900 meters. Then on March 8 the competitions began with the Free State Provincial Open Championship, which is equivalent to an NRA Regional match here in America. The weather was hot with highs in the low 90s, low humidity and plenty of sun. It was the end of summer in South Africa and a real culture shock for us coming from the middle of winter in the U.S. As the match progressed from the South African Open Target Rifle Championship to the World Long-Range Championships, it got progressively hotter, ending in the upper 90s—more like 100 with the heat index—during the last few days.

The 87th South Africa Open Target Rifle Championships aggregate started on March 9 and ended on March 15 with a shoot-off for the SABU Cup, named after our host organization, the South Africa Bisley Union, which is the South African National Rifle Association. The SABU Cup is one of the most highly coveted prizes for the South Africa Championships. It ends on the last day with a top-20 person shoot-off at 900 meters. Getting to the shoot-off is no simple task. One must qualify in two different matches fired at close range out to 600 meters, with matches consisting of two convertible sighters and seven or 10 record shots with three people on the mound. Then, if one qualifies for the third stage, one then shoots, still three to a mound, in two stages of two and 15 shots at 800 meters and 900 meters. Four of the U.S. Veterans Team members, along with an additional 21 Americans made the cutoff for the third shoot.



The ostriches and wildebeests down range during firing were an interesting addition.

For the World Long-Range Championship Individuals, the aggregate is comprised of three Palma course of fire matches at 700, 800 and 900 meters. Unlike in the U.S., all these stages are shot three people to a mound. So, with two convertible sighters and 15 shots for record multiplied by three, we were laying on the firing line for a least an hour in the blazing sun. The team was drinking at least a gallon of water and sports drinks every day. Everyone suffered from the heat.

The Veterans and Under 25 or Under 21 team matches are the first team matches of the World Long-Range Championships. They are usually fired before the Individual World Championship matches, and so it was in South Africa. The day of the match, March 16, was

hot and dry as usual. The U.S. salutes the winning team from Australia, with the U.S. Veterans Team finishing fourth.

In conclusion, the U.S. Veterans Team had a fantastic time in South Africa competing in their National Matches and the World Long-Range Championships. As Veterans, some of us had the fortune to be part of prior international U.S. teams and over the years had made long-lasting international friendships. These matches gave our newer members the opportunity to meet other national teams and forge new friendships of their own. Overall, the camaraderie was outstanding, some of us shot some great scores, most of us were humbled a bit by the wind and some of us might not have choose to do it over, but all of us on the U.S. Veterans Team would certainly not have missed this prestigious event.

LINKS

NRA Whittington Center: nrawc.org

The NRA Foundation: nrafoundation.org

Alliance Rifle Club: alliancerifleclub.org

Winnequah Gun Club: winnequahgunclub.org

North State Shooting Club: northstateshootingclub.com

Reade Range: readerange.org/index.php

Canadian Fullbore Championship: legacy.dkra.ca/events/month

Bald Eagles Rifle Club: baldeaglesrc.org

Sierra Bullets: sierrabullets.com

South Africa Bisley Union: sabisley.com