

A Young Eagle's Perspective On South Africa

Max Mauer of the U.S. National Young Eagles Rifle Team competed at the 2024 Target Rifle World Long-Range Championships in Bloemfontein, South Africa, in March.

by MAX MAUER posted on July 26, 2024

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Supported by a grant from the NRA Foundation, the U.S. National Young Eagles Rifle Team traveled to compete at the 2024 Target Rifle World Long-Range Championships, held at the Gen De Wet Shooting Range in Bloemfontein, South Africa, in March.

Photo by U.S. Young Eagles

In 2020, I was selected to be a member of the U.S. National Young Eagles Rifle Team. Being a Young Eagle has been one of the most fulfilling experiences of my life and it led me to competing in the Target Rifle World Long-Range Championships in Bloemfontein, South Africa, this past March. Everyone involved has been looking forward to this competition, as it was delayed a year because of covid. Even with the anticipation, the trip did not disappoint.



Coached by Zach McClain, the author, Max Mauer, is on the firing line at the Target Rifle World Long-Range Championships in Bloemfontein, South Africa.

Shooting conditions in South Africa are much different from in America. For starters, in the U.S. we typically shoot prone slow fire with a scorekeeper. You have a designated amount of time to fire 15 to 20 shots, and you can shoot as fast or as slow as you like within the time limit. In South Africa, you shoot two or three shooters to a mound. Shooter one fires, shooter two gets ready, and shooter three scores for shooter one. After each shot, your duty changes (shooter three scores and so on). If you wait too long between shots, you can be thrown off the mound, and the rest of your shots won't count. This is compounded by the fact that you must bring your gun up to the mound without its bolt. If you forget and bring it to the mound or leave with it in your possession, you could be disqualified from the entire event. Needless to say, you cannot exactly hobble up to the line, and as my teammates know, I am not the fastest guy in the world. Thankfully, I practiced, so it was never an issue.



U.S. National Young Eagles shooters transitioning from shooter to spotter roles.

Something I could not have prepared for was the wind. I was never amazing at wind calls when shooting the NRA National Championships in Camp Atterbury, Indiana, or the CMP National Matches in Camp Perry, Ohio, but the Gen De Wet range near Bloemfontein put those places to shame. Don't get me wrong; I was not atrocious or anything, but I certainly was not the best wind caller on my shooting team. In South Africa, this was a whole different beast. There were wind conditions where you practically had to shoot at the target to your left and the target to your right within a minute. You must always watch the flags and mirage, and when you got on the gun, you had to shoot quickly so the wind would not change. I got my footing quickly and managed the unpredictable wind with fairly accurate wind calls that I was proud of. Sure, I was hugging the edges of the five-ring, but at least I was in there. Something else to note: the South African five-ring is equivalent to the 10-ring in the U.S.



U.S. National Young Eagles team shooters gather under a canopy to shield themselves from the hot South African sun.

U.S. National Young Eagles Rifle Team achievements in South Africa are below.

86th South Africa Open Bisley Championships

Winner of the Under-19 aggregate

- Sixth and seventh place in the Under-25 aggregate
- Second place in the RSA International Under-25 team match
- Second place in the RSA International Under-21 team match
- Second place in the Protea International Under-25 team match (by one point)
- Second place in the Protea International Under-21 team match

Under-25 and Under-21 World Championships

- Second place in the World Team Championship Under-25 team match
- Third place and fourth place in the Under-21 Championship
- Sixth place and seventh place in the Under-25 Championship

32nd Target Rifle World Long-Range Championships

- Second place in the World Team Championship Under-25 team match
- First place and second place in the Under-21 grand aggregate
- Fourth place and fifth place in the Under-25 and Under-21 grand aggregate



Under-21 teams at the 2024 Target Rifle World Long-Range Championships in Bloemfontein, South Africa.

An Experience Like No Other

Something I did not think I would enjoy as much as I did was meeting new people. I am friends with my fellow Young Eagles, and I have known the adults on the American teams (Palma, Veterans and Goodwill) for many years, so I did not expect to come away with new friends, but I did. The British Under-25 team were some of the coolest blokes and birds I've ever met, and Australia's Under-25 team was not half-bad, either. While I had heard that some people could be standoffish, not one person I met wasn't ready to help or just have a chat. While we were competing against each other, we were also competing with each other, and I am glad I got to meet so many cool people from around the world.

Meeting cool people was not exclusive to foreigners; the South Africans were really nice. Every person I met—besides some aggressive people at the airport—was down to earth, and they sure knew how to make good food. South African spices taste completely different from those you find in America, and it was a nice change of pace. I tried a lot of new dishes, like corn fufu and malva. Yet, I could not help but gravitate towards their steaks and escargot, as the two at a nice establishment like New York Restaurant or Margaritas Seafood and Steaks only cost about \$10. While I gained a couple pounds, it was worth it to eat like a king.

During one of our few free days in Bloemfontein, our Team Adjutant, Sue Friguglietti, planned for us to go on a safari tour at Nature's Pride Safari. Hats off to her because it an unforgettable part of the trip. My shooting team and I saw plenty of South African wildlife, from tiny meerkats to an enormous Nile crocodile. Highlights of the tour included a monkey perching on my shoulder, playing with a serval, cuddling with a cheetah and, of course, wrestling with some lion cubs. Never in my life did I think I would do that, and it was as awesome as it sounds. I also held their baby siblings, but saying I tussled with a lion is a lot cooler.

The next day, my dad and I went hunting in an area about 30 minutes away from the hotel. Our safari tour guide from the previous day, Yuri, along with one of his acquaintances, put us in the back of a truck with welded-on seating and a rack to hold up our gun. He handed us a bolt-action sniper rifle to share that was equipped with a suppressor, which is legal in South Africa. I had never shot a suppressed rifle before, and the kick and sound during our practice shots felt great.

As we were driven slowly up a mountain, we passed two red hartebeests, which are medium-sized antelopes with horns that form a heart-shaped opening between them. Although they were easy shots, we decided to pass on them, as only a few minutes had passed since we got in the car. My dad was after a waterbuck, a larger antelope known for a unique oily secretion emitted from its sweat glands, allowing it to remain in water for extended periods of time. It was his number-one African animal, and he had been talking to me for weeks about wanting one. We found a herd of waterbucks standing at the base of a mountain, and my dad successfully shot a large one that we were both proud of. Maybe it was because they trampled Mufasa to death in “The Lion King,” maybe it was because they kept causing ceasefires on the range, or maybe because it’s one of Africa’s most recognizable animals, but I had my eyes set on a wildebeest.



The author holding a lion cub and with his taken wildebeest.

Wildebeests come in two varieties: blue and black. I prefer the blue ones, which were coincidentally found on the property. We chased a confusion of wildebeests (confusion is the term for a herd, similar to a murder of crows) around the property for ages before I chose the second biggest one and aimed my sights on it. In my excitement, I forgot to not aim with my crosshairs, as Yuri had a rangefinder hooked up to my scope. My bullet went clean over the wildebeest, so we had to drive around for a better shot. But, I did not make the same mistake twice. A few minutes later (which felt way longer), I had bagged my first-ever antelope with a clean shot. Since we had successfully hunted our game so quickly, my dad and I decided, “Heck with it, let’s get another.” We tracked down the red hartebeest we had seen earlier, and I took one down with a nice shot to the heart. I found hunting in Africa far more rewarding and enjoyable than sitting in a treestand for 12 hours, and I think my dad felt the same, as he was already talking about going back to Africa just to hunt sometime soon.

There are many other experiences I did not detail (like visiting the Big Hole diamond mine, the National Museum, the Oliewenhuis Art Museum and more), but this is a good summary of my experience of the 2024 Target Rifle World Long-Range Shooting Championship and Bloemfontein as a whole.

Traveling to South Africa was one of the notable experiences of my life and, like my dad, I can't wait to go back. I want to thank all our sponsors—the NRA Foundation, the MidwayUSA Foundation, Sierra, the United States National Rifle Team, Inc., and the many private foundations and individuals who have supported the U.S. National Young Eagles Rifle Team.