

Thompson/Center Icon rifle

by Technical Advisor Brendan Atkinson

My first experience with Thompson/Center firearms goes back to the 1970s, when Metallic Silhouette pistols first appeared in Australia. Metallic Silhouette shooters at the SSAA Para Range purchased Thompson/Center pistols in such exotic (at the time) calibres as .30 Herrett, 7-30 Waters and, of course, the .44 Magnum. I fired one such pistol in full .30-30 chambering, but only once. My memory of these pistols is that they were well made and eminently suitable for the Metallic Silhouette shooters.

Thompson/Center is now actually a Smith & Wesson company and with such a background, it is no wonder that they have been an innovative and progressive organisation that produced the first Contender pistol some 40 years ago. For years, they have made pistols with interchangeable barrels, all based on a single-shot action.

Thompson/Center's decision to produce a bolt-action repeater, built from the ground up, raised a few eyebrows in the US firearms industry. It seemed that every manufacturer had a bolt-action repeater in their inventory, but many of these were either not produced in the US or were merely a spin-off from another action. The idea to manufacture a new rifle totally within

the one factory and using all US components seemed most patriotic, but could it be done and sold at a price that would be competitive?

The heart of any firearm is the action. Thompson/Center had vast experience in investment casting, but it was decided that this new action would be machined from one single piece of 4140 steel. The factory has extremely precise machining facilities that have tolerances down to single-digit 10-thousandths of an inch. Several million dollars were spent buying the best available and they can produce a complete action body from bar steel in 41 minutes. Of note is the fact that integral scope ring bases are machined into the top of the action - these will accept any Weaver-type scope rings.

To reduce the weight of the all-steel action, metal was removed by machining flat surfaces where possible. The action has a flat bottom with three machined recoil lugs and is designed to mate with a 0.25" alloy plate bedding block, which is glass bedded into the stock. Three take-down screws bind the action to the stock and these are torqued down to 65 inch-pounds. The Icon features a three-round box magazine. It's of a polymer-type construction and I don't mind that, as it is light and can't rust. The release button is at the front and



No surprises here, and the simple lines of the Icon rifle add to its appeal.

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the magazine appears to be spring-loaded as it jumps out, so be ready for it!

The single-stage trigger was also designed in the Rochester factory. Unlike some US factory triggers, which require a hefty pull to make them operate, the trigger is factory set at 3lb. It is fully adjustable with the tool provided and can range between 2.5 and 6lb. It is possible to make the adjustments without removing the action from the stock. Straight out of the box it was as clean and crisp a trigger as I have ever pulled - there is absolutely zero creep in it. There is a two-position safety catch fitted. When engaged, it locks the trigger, but the bolt may be

withdrawn and replaced.

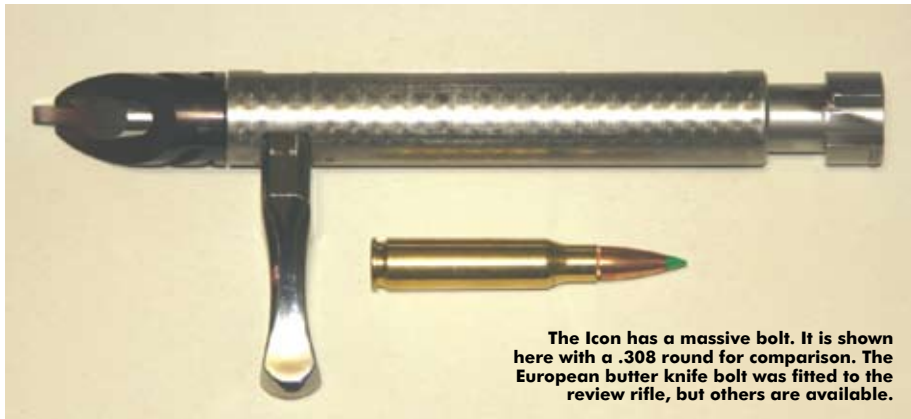
The bolt is a real work of art. Machined from a single piece of 4140 steel, it features three locking lugs, a plunger ejector and a Sako-style extractor integrated into one of the lugs. Being a three-lugger means a 60-degree bolt lift, but a slightly heavier bolt lift than the conventional two-lug set-up. The full diameter bolt measures .85" and needs no bolt raceways; thus, it can operate extremely smoothly and quietly in the action.

Initially, the Icon will be a push-feed action, but there are plans to make it a controlled-round feed, similar to the Model

70 Winchester. It will be interesting to see how they manage that.

One of the really innovative features of the Icon bolt is the ability to change bolt handles and the owner's leaflet goes into great detail as to how to do it. This can be accomplished without the use of tools and choices range from a European-style butter-knife handle to a more traditional knobbed type and a knurled style similar to a Remington. The review rifle had the butter-knife style. I didn't really like it at first, but I guess it grows on you with time.

Should the need to dismantle the bolt occur, Thompson/Center supplies a bolt



The Icon has a massive bolt. It is shown here with a .308 round for comparison. The European butter knife bolt was fitted to the review rifle, but others are available.



The three-lug set-up of the Icon bolt means a 60-degree lift when operating. Note the Sako-type extractor in one of the lugs.

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take-down tool with each rifle. It's a very simple matter to strip the bolt down to its components for cleaning, maintenance or changing bolt handles.

The barrel is of a lightweight profile and is 24" in length. There is no provision for open sights. The crown is recessed to prevent damage when in use. It has a right-hand rifling twist of one turn in 10", which should stabilise bullets up to 200 grains with no problems. When I first received the rifle, I was checking the bore with my Hawkeye borescope - the odd-looking rifling had me reaching for the owner's manual. Yes, it is 5R style, which is the same type used on Remington's awesome M24 SWS rifle.

On the test rifle, the chambering was .308 Winchester. This rifle will also be available in .22-250, .243 and a new one called a .30TC. A longer-actioned model for larger-cased calibres should be arriving soon.

The Ultra Wood (patent pending) stock is constructed from high-grade walnut. On the review rifle, it had some attractive grain in it. Apparently, Thompson/



SSAA Hunting & Conservation hunter Graham Henley was impressed with the handling, balance and general feel of the Icon. Both Graham and Brendan Atkinson agreed that it is a good 'carry-around' rifle.

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Center harvest their own walnut from areas that they had purchased some time back. It's certainly a nice piece of timber and features chequering at the fore-end and pistol grip. Sling swivel mountings are provided front and rear and a Pachmayer White Line recoil pad gives the finishing touch.

Such a nice rifle deserves a good scope. Steve Smith from Lightforce supplied a Nightforce NXS 2.5-10x24 and a set of very tough looking Nightforce mounts. This is an excellent scope power choice for a .308, as it allows for close-in work such as pigs in lignum or game a bit further out. Nightforce mounts and scopes are not cheap, but quality always costs a bit more. We were quoted prices of \$1760 for the scope and \$240 for the rings. This particular scope was fitted with the NP-1 Big Game reticle, which can be illuminated - a feature standard on all Nightforce scopes. Nightforce scopes carry a manufacturer's guarantee for as long as you own them.

Mike Papps of Frontier Arms in Adelaide is the importer of the Icon rifles and assured me that by the time you read this, a shipment of Icon rifles should have landed in Australia. Mike is a world-class shooter, having represented Australia, and he knows a good gun when he sees one.

Range testing

August is a good time for testing rifles down here in Adelaide - it's cold, but reasonably calm days are usually available. The colder weather is also good for shooting lighter-barrelled rifles, as these tend to heat up quickly with five-shot groups. We had a selection of .308 factory loads available and these ranged from target to outright hunting loads.

The rifle was brand-new when we received it, so a thorough scrub of the barrel was in order before firing it. Most manufacturers leave some sort of rust preventative in the bore when the rifle leaves the factory and this must be removed before firing. Never assume that the gunshop will have done 'pre-delivery' cleaning. We did a quick run-in, cleaning for the first 10 rounds, but copper fouling did not appear to be a problem.

Shooting over the sandbags really highlighted the crisp trigger, which



The Nightforce NXS 2.5-10x24 scope was very securely held in place with these massive Nightforce mounts. It's not often that one fits a mount using a spanner.



The Icon magazine holds three rounds. Note that the factory loads only just fit for overall length, so handloaders seating bullets out further will have a problem.



The chequering on the wooden stock is well finished with sharp points that give excellent grip during offhand shooting.

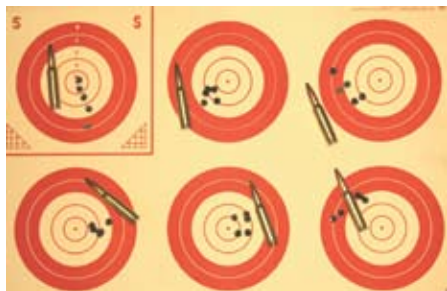


The aluminium plate is embedded into the wooden stock and assists excellent bedding between plate stock and action.

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helped when trying to shoot some respectable groups. The Icon showed a preference for our 150-grain factory loads and would put five shots into 1.25" with no problem at all. We tried both Remington and Winchester and the Icon did well with both. Federal Fusion loads shot a bit tighter on the target with plenty of accuracy for .308-sized game.

The 180-grain loads that we tried stayed less than 1.5", with increased recoil of course. These were five-shot groups. Had we stayed with three shots, the overall size



This is a test target shot with the Icon. The sighter shows the consistent tracking of the Nightforce NXS 2.5-10x24 scope when sighting-in. The two targets on the right were shot with hunting ammo and the others were shot with match loadings.

would have been smaller.

As usual, we tried some NRAA target loads, which are 155-grain Sierra MatchKings over AR2208. The Icon would regularly put the first three into .6 MOA, but five shots would be around 1 MOA, so the accuracy potential is there. Federal Gold Medal 155-grain loads produced similar results.

For a sporter-barrelled hunting rifle, we were impressed with the consistency with which the Icon would put down group after group without tending to throw 'flyers'. Not too many light barrel units will do this and one has to take it a bit easy, as the barrel does get hot, but it also cools down in reasonable time.

One thing to watch with lighter-barrelled rifles is the sensitivity to changes of bullet weight or even style (boat-tail/flat-base) and if changing anything, the point of impact will definitely move. If you change any part of your ammo, the golden rule is to always resight the rifle.

Conclusions

For the potential buyer who wants something just a little different, this might just be the rifle for you. There won't be a lot of these around the place, so you could

have something unique. Thompson/Center has built a reputation for manufacturing high-quality gear at an affordable price. It's accurate, nice looking and won't wear you out carrying it around. Fitted with a quality scope, it's a top unit. ●

Specifications

Manufacturer: Thompson/Center Arms

Model: Thompson/Center Icon

Calibre: .308 Winchester (tested), others available

Action: Thompson/Center turn-bolt three-lug repeater

Magazine: Detachable box, three rounds

Barrel: 24", one in 10" twist

Stock: Walnut

Overall Length: 44"

Weight: 7.5lb

RRP: Medium calibres: \$1995; larger calibres: \$2145

Warranty: Limited lifetime for original purchaser