

Local



Photo courtesy of Cold Bore Ops

Some of the world's top marksmen gathered last weekend at The Powder River Sportsmen's Club to compete in the Oregon Sniper challenge.

Oregon Sniper Challenge

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Little by little, the parking lot filled with vehicles bearing the insignia of various law enforcement agencies—rigs from the Sherman County Sheriff's Department and Baker Rural Fire among the earliest. Competitors came in from the Seattle SWAT, Ft. Benning, Georgia, and rangers from Ft. Lewis, as well as two California SWAT teams among others. The undersheriff of adjoining Grant County, Todd McKinley, also competed; he came in at 32nd.

The event has grown considerably since its origination, and now stands apart from other shoots due both its international flavor and law enforcement/military focus.

Competitors include military, former military, law enforcement—including those who have been or are currently involved in special ops or counterterrorism. The 50 slots were filled after Huisman and his team invited participants, and also hand-selected them from among applications received.

Though a competition, the camaraderie was palpable and the greetings effusive—this is an environment in which even visiting reporters receive a hug or two.

From Afar.

As the vendors continued to set up, Huisman's father, Dan, pointed out the targets set up a paltry 600 yards up the hill. Paltry, because the Powder River Sportsman's Club boasts one of the few ranges in existence with a 1,000-yard capacity—one key factor in its selection this year.

Dan Huisman introduced John McQuay III who had driven from "southern Indiana" to compete. Along with his father, the pair drove 16 hours the first day—12 hours the next.

McQuay is no stranger to the event. "I've shot this every time since 2009. I won it the first year and placed, I'd say, in the upper half the rest. The competition here is getting better and better and better."

McQuay, who appears fairly laidback upon first glance, gives away his intensity upon closer look.

A former Marine Corps Scout Sniper—1st battalion, 2nd Marines—McQuay has both his time there as a sniper and later as the member of a SWAT team to his credit. He is currently an Active Law Enforcement Officer who also owns 8541 Tactical.com. His blogs and videos

are there.

McQuay looks at the event as hard-core competition and as a chance to hone his own skills.

"Steve doesn't set up an easy course," he said with a nod. "Nothing but respect."

McQuay's weapon of choice? An Accuracy International AT with a Proof barrel, which was provided in a sponsorship by that manufacturer. Proof barrels are carbon fiber-wrapped rather than old-school steel.

Accuracy International Rifle Systems seemed the prime choice for many of the competitors.

McQuay took home 6th place this year.

From Abroad.

Not getting into their specific backgrounds and preferring to be identified by first names only, John and Pat were two more competitors—they placed 23rd and 12th respectively—stating only that they were with a "municipal police force in Canada," according to John.

Their employer paid for the two to attend the competition, which John calls "significant training."

"This exposes us to new shooting conditions that we don't experience everyday," said Pat.

John said that in their line of work, "a shot may often be just across the street. Or maybe 60, 70 yards." He explained that at 1,000 yards "anything you're doing wrong is amplified." A slight miscalculation in aim at a close range is more forgiving.

"It puts us out of our comfort zone," Pat said.

For a while, the two discussed the cultural differences, with most eastern Oregon citizens and some media more gun-friendly than what they experience in their homeland from time to time.

Those same cultural differences were on the minds of Team Ireland as well.

"We don't have a second amendment," said Graham Murry with a clear lilt that fascinates the American ear. "Ireland's gun laws are very, very strict."

Murry traveled a solid 24-hours with his fiancée Brenda, and teammates Michael Ward and John Taylor to reach Baker City. While many in the competition arrived early on Wednesday to take in the sights, the three Irish competitors actually left home that day.

The three also competed in the last Oregon Sniper Challenge, which was held in the Portland area in 2013. Ward placed 13th at that event, favoring a Remington .308.

(The major rules for the challenge are: .308 caliber rifles only, factory ammunition only, muzzle velocity not to exceed 2750 fps, no exceptions.)

This year Ward placed

28th, Taylor 20th, and Murry 26th.

The three were quick to point out the generosity of Asym Precision Ammunition out of Arizona for sponsoring the ammo they needed for the challenge—about 800 rounds, they supposed. They gave credit to Huisman for helping arrange that sponsorship.

Murry, Taylor and Ward said they were excited to shoot in a landscape somewhat different from Ireland.

Ward said, "It's nowhere near as open there. And we don't have the mountains."

Murry agreed. "Long range, the wind challenges here are a lot different. The wind seems to swirl here straight from the ground up."

"It's definitely more arid," Taylor said.

The Irish group is composed of "civilians," as they put it. They prefer, like many in the shoot, to keep the details of their occupations off the record.

Their rifles were purchased through Southern Rifle and Optics, owned by a fellow named John Green.

"It's a very small shooting community in Ireland," Ward laments.

The three said they grew up shooting in large part thanks to their grandparents and parents maintaining traditions of old in their families—and those traditions include hunting.

Because of Ireland's gun control laws, Murray says, "We're behind in technology." The Challenge is a chance to check out the latest.

The largest caliber handgun available to anyone in Ireland, they said, is a .22, and that only after nearly prohibitive fees and background checks. A .308 rifle "is restricted," they said nearly in unison. Many weapons were banned in 2008.

"Being here is an opportunity to learn," Taylor said.

In Irish Gaelic, their motto, *Ná géill choíche*, translates as "Never quit." And they didn't.

Local Involvement.

After Friday's public opening, the range closed to most spectators Saturday and Sunday as the actual challenge began.

The Baker Rural Fire Department, primarily with Chief Dan Weitz and Sean Lee attending at various times, were on hand Saturday and Sunday should an errant spark set off a fire in the dry conditions.

"We wouldn't miss this," Weitz said.

Weitz, at 58, ended up participating in the Challenge, finishing next to last, but finishing. Several others who had signed up for the event withdrew upon hearing SEALFit, providers of an intense physical fitness regime utilized by Navy SEALs,

would be integrated into the obstacle course. Weitz was not to be intimidated, and was given special recognition in the end for his fighting spirit.

New to the Challenge was competitor Sgt. Mike Regan from the Baker City Police Department.

"This was definitely a worthwhile challenge. It was an honor to be invited," said Regan.

Regan attributes some of his skill to "the Eastern Oregon Regional SWAT Team and sniper monthly training" he receives in his current position.

"These are a lot of highly skilled competitors who are invited," he said "We have special forces, army, past marine corps. It's incredible. A lot of dedicated people."

After two injuries among competitors, Regan said, the SEALFit portion of the course, which Huisman later said contained maybe one-percent of what actual SEALs may go through over the course of training, did get altered along the way. (The movement of 120-lb. poles was removed from the event.)

Regan pointed to the "unknown distance" portion of the challenge as particularly helpful for honing estimating and engaging skills with targets anywhere between roughly 100 and 500 yards, he guessed.

While Regan predicted he wouldn't finish in the top half on this, his first try, he finished at a respectable 30th place.

Baker City's Micah Huyett had an impressive performance, blowing the competition away with a third-place win, and claiming a .308 AR-10 as his prize. His wife, Lindsey, was also given recognition among the female shooters who target practiced on the side during the competition.

Like Ward from Team Ireland, Huyett chose a simpler model with which to compete. Huyett's Remington 700 PSS, a \$1,000-rifle he said, was pretty basic compared to other setups he saw that ran into the \$9-10K range, optics and rifle prices considered together. "I was putting rounds directly into the barrel," he said. "That may have slowed me down a little."

Depending on the course, competitors were scored on accuracy, speed or both.

Huyett almost wasn't able to compete at all. After hearing about the Challenge from friends, he said, "I called Steve and asked about it, but all the slots were full."

When some of the men withdrew due to SEALFit, however, Huyett was offered one of the openings. He had specifically been looking for a challenge that incorporated both shooting skills and physical fitness.



Kerry McQuisten / The Baker County Press

Marine legend, Chuck Mawhinney with wife, Robin, attend the event every year. Mawhinney prepared the BBQ, which fed the crowd.



Kerry McQuisten / The Baker County Press

Baker Rural Fire Chief Dan Weitz receives an award for his "sticktoitiveness" from Steve Huisman (right).



Kerry McQuisten / The Baker County Press

Sgt. Mike Regan attended the awards ceremony with wife, Shannon and daughter, Kara.

Huyett is a former Marine Scout Sniper (shot twice in the line of duty) who began "as a grunt," he says, then worked his way up through infantryman to team leader, eventually becoming a sniper and finally instructing at a pre-sniper school. That school prepared Marines for actual sniper school. "There's something like a 50% failure rate getting through the school."

He currently works in the medical field in both Baker City and La Grande.

Huyett didn't leave instructing far behind, though.

Last year he opened Oregon Trail Defense, LLC (www.OTDefense.com), based here in Baker City.

While offering long-range and carbine instruction, lately handgun instruction has been popular with the law-abiding citizens who come to him as customers.

"We start with safety and handling—keep it simple

and work on up," he said. "We find a lot of people have handguns but shoot them maybe 10 times a year and don't really have a foundation on how to shoot them."

Huyett provides that foundation, which served him well during the competition.

"Our first shot was at 50 yards at a half-inch dot," he said.

Of the competition? "I liked it a lot," he said. "I would definitely like to do it again."

Huyett said, "It's like Ecclesiastes. Time and chance happen to them all. Many of the shooters were in the same league. Maybe one of us made one better wind direction call. That's not to say that shooter is better. These are top shooters. I mean, there were specs forces out there, and these guys get paid to shoot for a living."