

A Heavy Hitter in the Heavy Gun Class
Kathleen Burdett-McRee shoots a club record
By Julie Anne Overton

For many shooters, recoil is the unpleasant side effect they have to tolerate to participate in the shooting sports. But for Kathleen Burdett-McRee, it's an important part of the game.

Burdett-McRee is a competitive benchrest shooter – she describes herself as a novice – who just happened to set a heavy gun record for the Northwest 1000 Yard Benchrest Club in June 2005.

“When I think of rifles and weaponry, I associate them with a certain kind of toughness. When I shoot a rifle, I want to know I've shot a rifle, not a BB gun. When I pull that trigger, I want to know that something has gone off.”

That's why she is one of the few women who participate in benchrest's heavy gun class. In the heavy gun competition, there is a 100 pound weight limit – you shoot what you bring off of sand bags as long as it is a safe bolt-action rifle with mechanical front and rear rests.

On June 12 this year she shot a 4.451-inch 10-shot group at the Deep Creek Rifle Range in Missoula, MT, one of the best long-range shooting ranges in the country. (Late in the season, her club record fell to another shooter, but she'll be back in Missoula next summer to see if she can regain it.)

Burdett-McRee's .30 caliber rifle weighs 78 pounds – definitely in the “heavy gun” class. It has a 36-inch Lilja barrel with a 1/10 twist, Shilen trigger, AMT action and Nightforce optics. She uses 210-grain Berger VLD bullets and 300 Dakota brass. Her powder is Hodgdon 4831 Shortcut and her primer is Federal 210M.

“We used to use different brass but it was terrible quality. We switched over to Dakota, bought about a thousand sticks of the 330 Dakota which we necked down to 300. Even through our fireforming, it was just beautiful. This brass is absolutely phenomenal.”

Burdett-McRee is originally from South Africa and never expected to find herself in America. But on a trip to visit relatives who live in Coeur d'Alene, ID, Burdett-McRee met her future husband, Scott McRee. Much to her surprise, she fell in love and moved halfway around the world to Post Falls, ID, in August 1999.

“We have a heck of a lot in common, so we just hit it off.” But the one thing they didn't share initially is a passion for shooting. In South Africa, the average citizen's exposure to firearms is minimal. “I had a little .22 pistol just for protection, but I never really shot the thing. I didn't know if I could actually shoot something until I got to America.”

In Idaho, McRee, an avid shooter, started teaching his wife to shoot. She not only thought it was fun, but “the heavier the caliber I shot, the more I enjoyed it.” On her first trip to a benchrest match, McRee set her up with a 6.5-284 caliber rifle. “That caliber was not for me. It didn't have enough kick, it was too easy.”

A friend at the club offered her his .30-caliber rifle to try. “The first time I shot that rifle, I knew that was what I wanted. Some of the guys at the club told me I couldn't shoot a .30 caliber because it's not for a woman. I just said, ‘Bring it on.’” We started the search for the right cartridge. We found the Dakota line and concluded that the 300

Dakota was proportioned just right, gave us everything we wanted on a standard magnum bolt face.

Burdett-McRee started competing in benchrest in 2004. She and her husband make the three-hour trip over the mountain to Missoula throughout the summer. The Northwest 1000 Yard Benchrest Club has extremely talented shooters among its membership, men who have been doing it for years. “Coming in as a novice, it is just great to be able to say that I have shot with the best and didn’t do too badly at all. I love shooting against the guys – I ‘m not sure they always enjoy it though,” she quipped.

As far as Burdett-McRee is concerned, the only downside to benchrest competition is that it’s over too quickly. “I’d love to sit there and shoot for an hour.”

Small business owners and partners in McRee’s Multi Services, Burdett-McRee and her husband are self-described seekers of the “holy grail” of extreme accuracy. In addition to fabricating stocks and metal art work, McRee’s Multi Services offers powder coating and hybrid ceramic coating. “We do all kinds of things, make all kinds of gadgets. We sell Dakota brass and Berger bullets, measuring devices for bullets and brass and we sell stocks of our own design, anything that relates to precision shooting.”

The husband-and-wife team is so busy, it’s hard to find the time to shoot. “I used to let him go to matches because benchrest was really his forte. Then I found out it was mine, too. Some of the guys rag him terribly, but for us shooting together is just the cherry on the cake.”

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