



safari[®]

THE JOURNAL OF **BIG GAME HUNTING**
OFFICIAL PUBLICATION OF SAFARI CLUB INTERNATIONAL
SEPTEMBER/OCTOBER 2010 **\$12.95**



Rifle Maker on the Limpopo

BY WAYNE VAN ZWOLL

PAGE DESIGN BY MEG BENHASE

Inside a Better-Built Safari Rifle

McMillan offers its Custom Collection rifles in seven configurations for discriminating shooters who want higher quality and more options than available in standard commercial models. The company manufactures its own G30 round receivers in-house. They're machined to benchrest specifications from 17-4 stainless steel. Boltways are cut by EDM (electrical discharge machine) because "it's more precise than broaching and yields a better finish," Kelly McMillan said.

McMillan tailors its actions to cartridges. Choose from short, short magnum, long, long magnum and a "big-bolt" long magnum version for the .300 Ultra Mag and .30-378. Each G30 is "squared" so bolt and receiver faces are perpendicular to the bore. Ditto a thick, washer-style recoil lug, surface-ground and pinned to the receiver.

"We drill bridge and ring for 8-40 screws and Talley scope bases that also fit Remington M700 rifles," Kelly added. After polishing and heat-treating, receivers are bead-blasted to a satin surface, then finished in black Cerakote.

The bolt, of 93-10 stainless, is of twin-lug design for easy lift. (The steep camming surfaces on three-lug bolts can make cycling difficult.) Handles are silver-soldered on. "All our bolts are lapped for full and even lug contact," Kelly said. The Sako-style extractor clears empties for the bolt face plunger. An M70-style mechanical ejector backs it up.

"Our extraction-ejection system is as positive as that on 1898 Mauser actions," Kelly told me. "It's smooth and reliable, and we don't make extractor cuts in the barrel." The side-mounted thumb safety moves silently but with snap. When engaged, it does not lock the striker or prevent bolt movement. Jewell triggers are standard on all Custom Collection rifles. McMillan offers left-bolt rifles for southpaws, with a three- to six-month lead time for orders.

*Building the best rifles
for the bush
has a hollow ring
until you've been there.*

Some years ago, actively following the smallbore circuit, I packed a Remington 37 prone rifle. It wore a McMillan barrel installed by friend and fellow competitor Vic Fogle. "It's the best you can get," he told me. It was indeed. Outside, it looked the same as any well-turned stainless tube. Inside, its button-rifled bore, held to gnat's-lash tolerances, guided bullets into one-hole, X-ring groups that won aggregates.



Kelly McMillan took this waterbuck with a McMillan Dynasty in .338 Winchester Magnum.

The McMillan companies once included segments that provided just about everything you could want in either a match rifle or a sporter—barrels, stocks, even actions. Subsequent reorganization pushed some products to prominence. McMillan gunstocks—hunting and tactical—appear on rifles from several makers. And McMillan actions have become McMillan rifles. The Custom Collection includes seven models with refinements seasoned marksmen prefer.

The "great, gray-green, greasy Limpopo" snakes lazily around the northern bulge of the Republic of South Africa. Kelly McMillan had not been there before. He unpacked two huge gun cases in the lodge and showed their contents to the curious. Everyone at Dumukwa had seen rifles. These four had the look of quality, but a safari staff is more interested in marksmanship than in equipment.

"We'll check zeroes right away," Bertus Gerhardt said. Now 31, his fascination with hunting began early on. Now he indulges it as a professional hunter, with his own safari company.

The rifles Kelly brought all came from the McMillan Custom Collection, he told his host. He had chosen them carefully:

Tactical Hunter in .308 Winchester, Leupold VX III 3.5-10x40, Black Hills Gold Match, 168 Barnes TSX

Outdoorsman in .300 Remington Ultra Mag., Swarovski AV 6-18x40, Remington Premier, 180 Core-Lokt.

Dynasty in .338 Winchester Mag., Swarovski 4-16x40, Hornady Heavy Magnum, 225 InterLock

Prestige in .375 H&H Mag., Swarovski Z6i 1-6x24, Hornady DGS, 270 SP-RP InterLock

"So many." If the trackers didn't say so, they thought it. In sub-Saharan Africa, one rifle—even a weathered Martini—was a fortune. This gleaming hardware upstaged any the Dumukwa staff had seen.

At the range, Kelly attached the scopes, all in Talley QD rings. He'd packed them separately from the rifles, in bubble wrap, in one of his Americase Travel Vaults. A few shots later, he confirmed that none needed so much as a click of correction. "Let's go hunting," he said with a grin.

"We're committed to building the best bolt guns around," Kelly declared. "No compromises." G30 actions meld McMillan's innovations with selected features from classic bolt actions (see sidebar). Barrels are from the nation's top custom makers.

"We often install button-rifled Lilja and Schneider stainless barrels," Kelly



A McMillan Tactical Hunter in .308, shooting Black Hills ammo, accounted for this impala.

said, "but we have customers who specify other makes, like Douglas, Obermeyer, Hart, Shilen and Krieger. Twist, contour and length match the chambering." He added that the company installs chromoly barrels on .375 and .416 safari rifles. Each barrel is chambered by hand on a manual lathe, then hand-fitted to its action to ensure that bore and bolt are coaxial.

Custom Collection rifles wear McMillan graphite stocks. Standard versions weigh 24 ounces with 1-inch decelerator pads. They feature "a little cast-off, a little cant," according to Kelly, "to put your eye naturally behind the sight."

I like their lean, almost austere, profiles. Some have understated Monte Carlo combs. Forends, also straight of line, are slightly pear-shaped in cross section. Dimensions suit the barrel on each model. Aluminum pillars and glass bedding secure the actions. The barrel floats. Still, the channel gap on McMillan rifles is paper-thin and uniform. Hunting stocks have black, textured finishes.

"We don't guarantee a level of accuracy," Kelly said. "But we accept back any rifle that doesn't shoot to customer expectations." This policy is more than reasonable. Guarantees of sub-MOA accuracy presume a skilled shooter and exceptional ammunition. All the McMillan rifles I've fired have printed well within the capabilities of the ammo. My .30-

Safari Shooting School

"That two-day course gave me confidence," said a smiling Kelly McMillan, who's been around rifles all his adult life. "It helped me determine my maximum effective range from field positions, and it convinced me never to hurry a shot. Also, it taught me how to use sticks. Stateside, hunters don't often use shooting sticks. In Africa, they're pretty much indispensable."

That's only part of the program at Safari Shooting School, the Texas operation run by Monty Kalogeras. He specializes in one-on-one or two-on-two instruction for people planning their first trips to Africa. The staff at the 250-acre facility, an hour and a half from San Antonio, is well versed in African hunting and the equipment you need to make a safari successful.

"I also got recommendations for travel," Kelly added. "Getting there requires planning, too."

Safari Shooting School is ideally located for shooting. Hill Country terrain gives you practice on uphill and downhill and cross-valley shots, out to 400 yards. Steel silhouette targets partly hidden by natural vegetation lend an element of realism you won't get at your local rifle range. Sessions on ballistics, wind doping, range estimation and animal anatomy complement the marksmanship training.

"It's one of the best things you can do to prep yourself for a safari," said Kelly, who added that you'll probably shoot better there with a McMillan rifle.



All-around performer: The .300 Remington Ultra Magnum in a McMillan Outdoorsman killed Kelly's 58-inch kudu.



This 37-inch gemsbok fell to Kelly's McMillan Dynasty in .338 Winchester Magnum.

06 Prodigy put Federal 150-grain factory loads into a 0.8-inch cluster right away. Of the first eight groups I printed, with four different bullets, half measured 0.8 or less. And the others weren't much bigger.

Africa forces your eye to probe for different shapes and colors. "The waterbuck stood for several minutes as I tried to find him," Kelly recalled. "Bertus pointed him out, but it wasn't until I saw a section of horn ring that the animal popped out. Then, suddenly, he was all there."

Spotting game got easier as the days spun out great herds of antelopes. "From our first thirty minutes until safari's end, we were awash in game," Kelly said. "Some you had to look hard for—we spent two days seeking a big gemsbok. Sifting pieces of color from dense thorn with my binocular, I passed up many bulls."

Kelly's patience paid off when he spied a magnificent gemsbok and shot it with his .338 Winchester Magnum. After tense minutes of trailing, the bull fell to a second bullet. Gemsboks wrote the book on tenacity.

Bertus and Kelly also found an exceptional kudu, with horns that taped 58 inches. In a remarkable twist of fate, they subsequently came upon another big bull.

"It was much later in the hunt," Kelly said. "We spotted him browsing, at about eighty yards. Easy shot. Bertus urged me to

fire. He told me the horns would go sixty." But Kelly passed up the shot. Two more inches of horn would not justify another kill. "It seemed best to leave the kudu for another hunter, who might get as big a thrill from it as I did from mine."

The .308 killed an impala at 180 yards. "With that Black Hills load, it's a deadly cartridge," Kelly said, echoing what many hunters in South Africa have known for decades. Andy Duffy, Kelly's partner, shot a blue wildebeest with the .308. "For most plains game, you really need nothing else," Kelly said.

Kelly said that on his next trip to the southern veldt, he'll take only one rifle, a .338. "It's so versatile. About the only animal I'd like to shoot that

would require a bigger bullet is a Cape buffalo." He'd book a trip to Mozambique for sables, he mused, and wants to hunt elands. Satisfied with the ammunition he took this time, Kelly said he would pack fewer cartridges next. "We didn't need eight boxes, even with four rifles."

"We didn't worry too much when we failed to bring an animal to bag," Kelly said with a smile. "There's so much game at Dumukwa, and enough country that you can always find fresh cover. We hunted four tracts of fifteen to thirty thousand acres each."

Many hunters on their first African safaris agonize over rifles and optics but give little thought to services that can make the travel easier and minimize hassles. "Safari Shooting School helped me use sticks more effectively and prepared me for the kind of shots I'd have at Dumukwa," Kelly told me.

The hunt flew by, as safaris do. Packing up his rifles, Kelly bade farewell to the other hunters in camp. "They were shooting Weatherbys and Remingtons," he recalled. "But we got to be really good friends. Someday they may return with a McMillan from our Custom Collection. I know I will." 🐾

For more information on the Custom Collection and special-order options, contact McMillan Firearms, 1638 West Knudsen Drive, Ste. A, Phoenix, AZ 85027. Phone: (623) 582-9674, visit www.mcmillanusa.com



Springbok prints are dwarfed by gemsbok tracks. Both occur in numbers in South Africa.