



BROWNING'S CROWDED STABLE HAS TO FIND ROOM FOR ANOTHER NEW MODEL WITH THE INTRODUCTION OF THE NEW GRAND PRIX SPORTER. HAS THE WORLD REALLY BEEN HOLDING ITS BREATH FOR YET ANOTHER BROWNING? RICHARD RAWLINGSON FINDS OUT.

Back in the dim and distant, I used to teach marketing theory to graduate trainees. To explain market segmentation to them I used the salami analogy: you start with a whole salami and then decide to slice it into sections. You can be quite crude and hack it into three chunks or you can slice it ever so thinly. If you are a car maker you can simply segment the market into small, medium and large sized cars or you can take one basic model and adapt it to fit lots of different market segments — family hatchback, sporty coupe, mini MPV etc.

In guns, Browning are sausage slicers supreme. Until the arrival of the Cynergy a couple of years ago they made their basic B25 derived gun cover every market sector with a multitude of grades and variants for different disciplines. It is a policy that has worked incredibly well — if you had a budget of under £3000 and couldn't find a Browning to do the job then you were being picky.

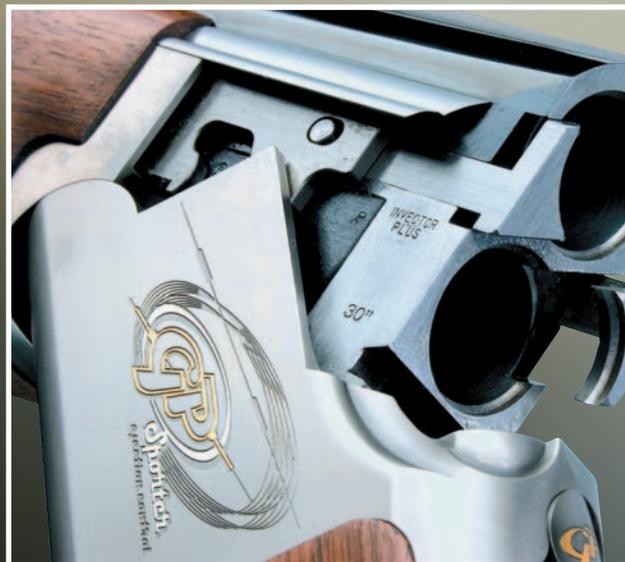
Reading the rationale for the latest gun however, I couldn't help thinking that this might be a slice of salami too far. Apparently, the thinking goes that there was a group of unfulfilled would-be Browning owners out there for whom the B525 sporter was too basic but who couldn't afford the tricked-out XS models. Enter the Grand Prix to sit neatly between the two, both in specification and in price. It should be on the shelves now for around £1450 and if it gains Browning extra business all will be well. If all it does is cannibalise XS sales however, it might not look so clever...



BROWNING GRAND



INVECTOR PLUS SIGNIFIES
BACK-BORED BARRELS





PRIX SPORTER

TECHNICAL OVERVIEW

Because the new gun is so clearly based on the basic B525 action, it would make sense to look at how it differs from that gun. First and foremost we need to look at the barrels (choose from 28/30 and 32 inch) where we find Browning's 'back-bored' 18.7mm (.739") boring rather than the conventional 18.4 mm (.724") of the B525. The arguments in favour of a mild degree of over-boring have been well aired since Browning first introduced these barrels back in the late 1980s. My view is that the recoil reduction is noticeable and I am prepared to believe a modest improvement in pattern quality too (being too lazy to count endless patterns to check for any difference). For competition guns that will get high volume use, with mainly plastic wad cartridges, I think the back-

bored barrels are well worth having. Mark up one reason to step up from the B525.

Back-bored barrels mean Browning's longer Invector Plus chokes and these too are a worthwhile improvement over the standard tubes, especially in the Midas form supplied with the Grand Prix. You get a set of five with the gun and I got excellent results from them using mainly Improved Cylinder and Modified (quarter/half). The barrels are chambered for 3" cartridges and are proofed for high performance (1370 bar) steel shot. Both mid and top ribs are ventilated, the latter 10mm parallel with the usual Browning centre channel — a style I have always liked because it seems to draw the eye out to the target more effectively than a plain rib. Two white beads are fitted.

The trigger adjusts along a rail as on the more expensive competition guns and the trigger blade is interchangeable, although no others were supplied in the kit that came with our test gun. If you want a different type to the one fitted, your dealer will be able to supply it at modest cost.

One slightly quirky detail on the Grand Prix is the facility to switch off the ejectors. I am not quite sure why it is there, although if it encourages more people to put used cases in the bin by hand rather than flinging them into the mud all around them, I am all in favour. All other details are standard Browning, with the usual H-pattern barrel selector and safety.



COSMETICS

Browning have left the grey nickel action plain, save for a white and gold logo on each surface. I find it much less offensive than the styling on the XS — a gun I hated at first sight and still do — although it does rather emphasise the slab-sided profile of the design.

I am told that the Grand Prix gets grade 2.5 wood (is that slightly less squirly than grade 3?) and our test gun had an appealing dark colour and some character on one side at least. Unfortunately it is rather masked by the high gloss lacquer — I would certainly prefer a traditional oil finish, not only for looks but because I feel the inevitable knocks and bumps can be passed off as ‘patina’ on an oiled stock, whereas they just look like wear and tear on lacquer finishes.

Both the stock and fore end get the same wrap around chequering pattern as the B525, quite fine (around 24 lines per inch) and neatly executed. Which brings me on to general build quality. It has been increasingly noticeable in recent times that other makers are catching the market leaders up in this regard. A decade ago the ‘second division’ brands were definitely inferior in the quality of machining and overall fit and finish. That gap has been narrowing fast, not because the Miroku factory’s standards are slipping, but because others have made huge strides. I have in mind particularly the most recent guns I have seen from the likes of Fabarm, Rizzini or Caesar Guerini.

Finally, while we are looking for reasons to upgrade from the B525, factor in the very smart fitted case that comes with the Grand Prix as standard.



GOOD GRIP SHAPE – AND NO PALM SWELL



BROWNING’S TRADITIONAL HARD PLASTIC BUTT PLATE REMAINS – WOOD IS GRADE 2½



MIDAS CHOKES DELIVER EXCELLENT PATTERNS

IF YOU ARE A POTENTIAL BROWNING BUYER WONDERING WHETHER TO SAVE UP A BIT MORE TO GET THE GRAND PRIX RATHER THAN A BASIC B525 SPORTER THEN MY RECOMMENDATION WOULD BE A WHOLEHEARTED YES. I THINK IT IS A BETTER PACKAGE AND WORTH THE EXTRA. SHOULD YOU SAVE UP EVEN MORE AND GO FOR THE XS? UNLESS AN ADJUSTABLE COMB IS IMPORTANT, THEN I THINK NOT.



THE GRAND PRIX IS BASED ON THE B525 ACTION



ON TEST

First impressions are that the stock is a little lower than we are used to with recent Browning sporters, something that other reviewers and my shooting companions also picked up on. The drop however measured 36mm at comb, 56mm at heel, standard Browning dimensions, so perhaps it is an optical illusion. Having tested it extensively, I am in no doubt it was shooting exactly to point of aim. There are no alternatives, so if you want something different to this then it is the XS, with its adjustable comb.

Following usual Browning practice, the stock is left a touch on the long side at 375mm, which, happily, fits me almost perfectly. It also has the usual plastic butt plate with its exaggerated toe — something that I have discarded immediately on every Browning I have owned for something softer. Dave Izzard's new Isis Green Pad would complement the gun well, because it would not require too much wood to be removed.

My gut feeling out on the range was that the gun had rather lighter barrels — and with it a noticeably less muzzle bias — than on either the last B525 or XS models I tested. I have criticised the XS in particular in the past for being nose heavy.



DECORATION IS MINIMAL

Back home I found the 30 inch barrels of my sample weighed just 1500g and a check of my notes revealed 1650g for the last 525 through my hands and 1600g for the XS, confirming the shooting impressions.

It's a change for the better, especially in the context of the overall weight of 3.6kg (just under 8lbs). While still by no means fast handling, it is more lively than any XS I have shot.

I like the grip shape (and especially the absence of a palm swell!), while the trigger pulls were as consistent as ever, measuring just under 4lbs on my gauge for both barrels. The minor tweaks first introduced to the lockwork on the B525 do seem to have made an already very

good design even better.

So, let's get back to our market segmentation lesson: have Browning established a clear identity and positioning for the Grand Prix? I'm not sure they have. If you are a potential Browning buyer, wondering whether to save up a bit more to get the Grand Prix rather than a basic B525 sporter, then my recommendation would be a wholehearted yes. I think it is a better package and worth the extra. Should you save up even more and go for the XS? Unless an adjustable comb is important, then I think not. I think the Grand Prix will cannibalise XS sales and you can save yourself a few hundred quid with which to buy lots more cartridges!

More information: www.browningint.com