

The Winchester Supreme has been given some tweaks.
Richard Rawlingson investigates

SUPREME TAKE TWO

Just a couple of years or so after its launch the Winchester Supreme — the gun intended to revive the great traditions of Winchester over-and-under guns — has been given a makeover.

The changes are not just cosmetic, the word from makers Browning International is that alterations have been made to the barrel profile to improve balance and handling while the gun also now comes packaged in a smart new ABS case in striking Winchester red.

I was interested to get my hands on one of the reworked guns. It is fair to say that the first version left me underwhelmed — although technically interesting and well made the gun was very disappointing dynamically and needed a rethink in terms of its handling. Clearly the company agreed as the 'mark II' model followed so soon after the launch. Would the changes alter my opinion?

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Technical Overview

For those not familiar with the Supreme, it is worth recapping on the technical specification of the gun. Made by Fabrique National in Herstal — home of the famous Browning B25 — the Winchester represents a totally different approach for the Browning group. In an attempt to differentiate the gun from other group products, the designers totally abandoned the traditional Browning style and layout of the action. Look at the close-up picture of the breech end of the barrels and you will see the locating holes either side of the top barrel that accept a locking bolt similar to the Beretta design. It is of course proven as a secure and durable means of locking barrels and action together.

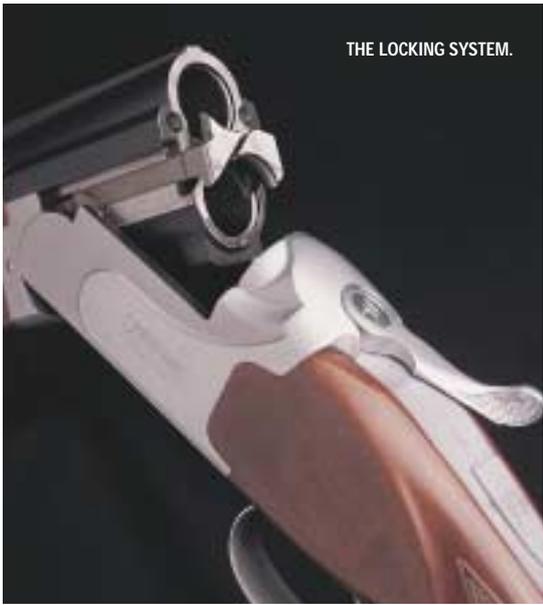
Unlike Beretta, FN have accepted the penalty of around 5mm in terms of the action's depth to accommodate an extra locking lug under the bottom barrel, which locates in a cut out in the action floor. In theory this should add even greater strength and make this a very rugged design indeed. Whether it is over-egging the pudding will not be readily apparent for some years but it is hard to imagine the gun shooting loose in a hurry.

The ejector work also moves away from traditional FN principles. Instead of having the kickers and operating springs housed in the fore end in Browning/Miroku fashion, they are housed entirely in the barrel monobloc, following the style used by most of the Italian makers of low to mid range guns. The ejectors are triggered by rods emerging from the action floor connection to levers in the fore end.

The barrels themselves are backbored, nominally to .740" although on our test gun the bottom barrel measured .743" on my gauge. They are fitted with the same Invector Plus long

chokes used on Browning guns and this will be useful as the vast range of specialist aftermarket chokes will also be available to the Supreme owner.

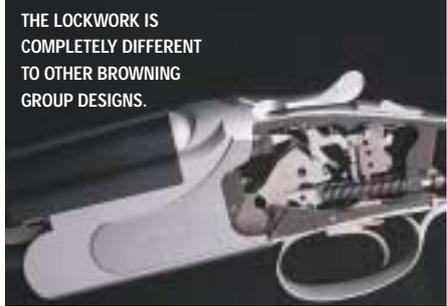
The mid rib is solid apart from the first 12cm or so which is hidden by the fore end, while the top rib is ventilated. It is plain and parallel (10mm), with two white beads. The sporting



THE LOCKING SYSTEM.

model is available with 28 or 30 inch barrels, the hunting version in 28 inch only with a 6mm rib. This gun is also chambered to accept 3" (76mm) magnum loads whereas the sporter is 2 3/4" (71mm) only. If you are thinking of a Supreme as an all purpose gun, the hunting grade is the more versatile in this respect if you can accept the lack of choice on barrel lengths.

With the stock removed we see lockwork that again owes very little to other designs in the Browning family. Barrel selection is by the conventional H-pattern movement of the safety catch, the second barrel being set by inertia block. Chunky coil springs power the lock, set low and in a straight line. All the lock parts are nicely machined and finished.



THE LOCKWORK IS COMPLETELY DIFFERENT TO OTHER BROWNING GROUP DESIGNS.

Cosmetics

The sporting model differs primarily in having at two-tone surface finish and minimal engraving compared to the hunting grade's game scene engraving. Of the two I much prefer the understated look of the sporter on the grounds that no decoration is usually preferable to basic machine engraving. The minimalist theme continues to the underside of the action.

I rather like the contrast between matt and polished areas and think it gives a distinctive look to the gun that sets it apart from others in this price range. It matches well with the matt finish blacking on the barrels.

The standard of finish is generally good for an entry level gun. There are none of the rough edges and slightly crude castings that often detract from the final look of sub £1000 guns, FN obviously using their vast production resources to good effect. The non-gloss theme is extended through to the woodwork, with a dull satin lacquer finish covering a blank that on our test gun had some character. The wood to metal finish is a bit approximate in some areas but not objectionably so given the price.

The package is housed in a fitted ABS case (non lockable) that comes in startling red with the Winchester logo in white. If you plan on making an unobtrusive entrance to hotels and guest houses then something more subtle may be appropriate!

On Test

Weight was the Achilles heel of the first Supreme — not total weight because the gun tips the scales at a couple of ounces under 8lbs (3.55kg) — ‘normal’ weight for a sporter. No, it was weight distribution that was the problem, with front-heavy barrels giving the gun a decidedly nose down attitude.

The revised barrel profile has improved things slightly but the 28” tubes of our test gun still weigh over 1500g (3.3 lbs) and it is still concentrated towards the front thanks to that ribless section at the rear and the added weight of the Invector Plus chokes. The balance is still therefore distinctly barrel heavy, if not as pronounced as before. This of course can be cured quite easily with the judicious use of lead in the stock to get the handling set as you want it.

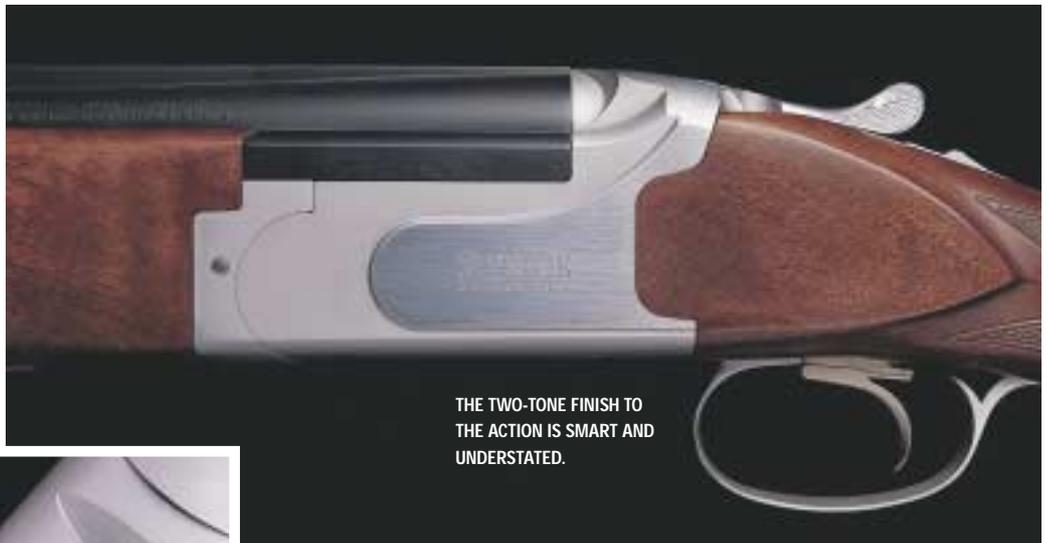
A few additional ounces to the overall weight would not harm the gun at all for competition use, indeed it would help absorb recoil. My point is that a gun in this price range is likely to be bought by a relative newcomer to the sport who will probably not be experienced enough to see what is needed.

In many ways this is a shame because the Supreme has the potential to be the ideal starter gun and a very effective competition tool from the ‘simple is best’ school. There are very few frills on this gun — the two setting adjustable trigger is about the only ‘feature’ I can spot — yet the basic set up is fine. Sensible stock dimensions are married to a nicely profiled grip that is ideal for sporting clays use. Even the sticky recoil pad that I criticised first time around has been improved by the addition of a hard insert at the heel to aid mounting. The trigger pulls, at 5 1/2 lbs, are still a pound or so heavier than ideal, but otherwise everything functions smoothly.

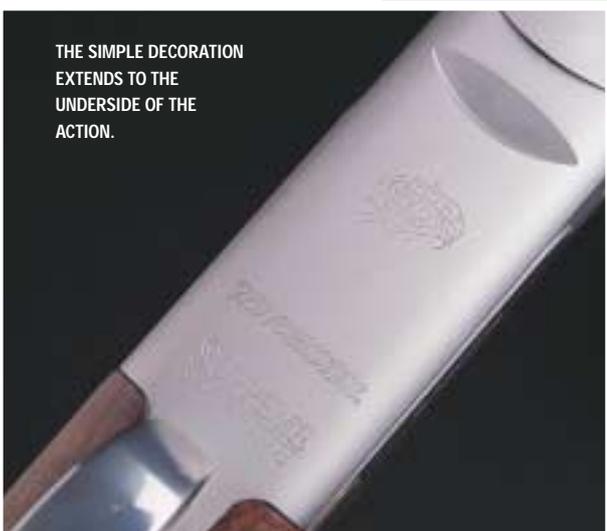
This Winchester is positioned differently in the market place to the competition guns of old. It is an entry level model, priced accordingly, that is not competing directly with the Brownings, Berettas and Mirokus as its predecessors did. As such it should be judged differently. Mechanically and in terms of production quality, it is a very strong contender against other basic grade guns. It also looks startlingly good value with package deals such as the current offer of a 28” sporter and Masters shooting vest for under £700. In many ways the newcomer to the sport can ask for little more. That little, though, would definitely be more life in the handling.

If you are a relatively inexperienced shot or newcomer to the sport, tempted by the Winchester, don’t let me put you off. In so many ways it is a very good buy indeed in this price bracket. Get the help of an experienced coach to help you set it up and you have a sound choice.

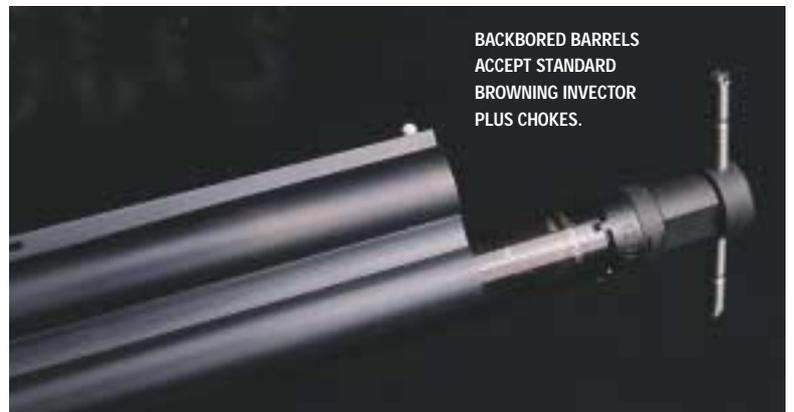
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