

Captains lead from the front

Our newly appointed GB Captains showed how they mean to continue; by winning the first League match they entered since getting their Captaincies, what a great start on their road to 2026, well done Simon West and Tony Marsh.

The 2023 Highland Challenge will be remembered for many years to come, we are of course accustomed to getting wet when shooting outdoors; it goes with the sport and is inevitable. Over the years we've endured many a heavy downpour at Bisley and more than our fair share of deluges at Diggle. This weekend at Blair though, was memorable for an extraordinarily long heavy downpour, we've seen heavier spells, but never one protracted over 36 hours, as we would find out, it was to have ominous effects on our match, but more on that later.

We nearly had a full house for this match; 35 entries out of what now seems to be our "post covid" limit of 36, it is strange but prior to Covid, we regularly got a field of around 45 to 48 shooters, but now we seem to max out at 36. Not that anyone is really complaining as 36 equals 3 details per stage, so it makes for a quick day under normal circumstances. Those who do attend tend to be a convivial bunch; good humoured, helpful and sociable, it makes the Blair matches small but happy events.

Normally, I'd thank everyone at the end of a match report, but in a break with the usual format, I'd like to say up front; thanks to everyone for all your help, patience and fortitude. In particular, we must pay tribute to Adam & Julie Bagnall who stepped up to the plate when our resident SMT expert, Paul Harkins found himself double-booked and unable to join us. Adam & Julie provided an extra layer of expertise in running the SMTs and problem-solving. A big thank you to Paul Sandie for taking a day off his busy work, driving 200 miles and helping to assemble the target frames, we are fortunate indeed for having such committed members. Big Richie ran the show from his position at mission control, under the GBFCA gazebo, ably assisted on the technology front by Tom Reynolds, Brogan O'Shea Smith and Garryk Campbell – these young folk simply seem to have a natural aptitude for technology, thank goodness or we'd be lost without them. Thanks to all who pitched in to help in multiple ways, especially Les Holgate who found himself performing a multitude of tasks, mainly due to having to van share with me.

On with the match.

On Friday, Adam & Julie helped set up the SMTs and all looked promising for another weekend, the targets were working, and the weather was lovely; mild dry and bright. From noon onwards shooters arrived, tired from their long journeys far to the south, keen to get a few shots on target to confirm zeroes and maybe get some clues from the wind flags. Our two long distance men from Ireland; Noel and Mark Bannon had the distinction of being our furthest-travelled visitors, all credit to them, they show a degree of commitment that puts many UK-based members to shame.

On reflection, Friday was probably the best part of the whole weekend...

Saturday

There was no escaping the forecast, as much as we might've hoped for some microclimate around Glen Tilt or perhaps some "rain shadow" effect of the nearby mountains, it wasn't to be – the rain started as it meant to continue. Thank goodness at Blair Atholl we have the big gazebos, it may surprise you to learn that the gazebos were not really for the benefit of the shooters, they were bought by the West Atholl club to provide the Kongsberg target monitors with added protection

from the elements, any benefit derived by the shooters was entirely incidental. The gazebos made things tolerable at least.

Stage 1

Anyone looking at the Stage 1 scores might have been forgiven for thinking that the FTR shooters had massively outshot their FO colleagues, but it wasn't the case. By popular demand the FTR shooters shot a 2+20 while their FO counterparts being concerned about burning out their barrels did just 2+15. Regarding the wind conditions, as is often the case, it seems as if you can have either wind or rain, Stage 1 had only a little rain but probably the most wind of the day, that wasn't saying much really, perhaps equivalent to a minute or so, but it was enough to thwart anyone hoping for a possible, that said, it was notable that the Stage 1 winners were on the whole, our better wind readers and that we'd see more of them on the podium later. One of the SMT eTargets wasn't spared the night, although in good order on Friday, it seemed to have given up the ghost. That forced us to change our squadding and thereby our course of fire to ensure we'd get through the day.

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|--------------|-------|---------------------|-------|
| Adam Bagnall | 89.03 | Mark Bannon | 72.04 |
| Shawn Miller | 86.05 | Tony Marsh | 70.05 |
| Simon West | 86.02 | Brogan O'Shea-Smith | 70.05 |

Stage 2

By mid-morning, the die was cast, the heavens opened just as forecast and the relentless downpour started, there was nothing else for it, we just had to grin and bear it, well maybe grin is putting it too strongly, grimace was more like it. But every cloud has a silver lining as they say, and as I noted that as the rain got heavier, the wind got lighter. Many shooters were complaining that the flags were so heavy with rain that they were effectively shooting "blind", but I really don't think there was all that much wind there to see in any event.

It was at this point that another one of well-tried and tested SMT targets showed that it to had limits to its endurance, despite our best efforts at resolving the problem, the target couldn't be revived so we were forced to reshuffle our squadding to accommodate the shooters on just 4 targets. Many thanks to Richie and Tom for acting swiftly to reassign everyone to a target in threesomes. I must admit to approaching the idea of shooting in threes with some trepidation as its been a very long time since shooting that way. I needn't have worried, one of the biggest and most pleasant surprises of the weekend was that shooting in threes could be done remarkably quickly and quite efficiently. It did of course present its problems; several very notable shooters got a bit confused and shot out of turn, costing them a 1-point penalty. Avoiding that fate forced many to concentrate a bit harder. In FTR it was very much a family affair with Father & Son each netting a medal. Asad Wahid made sure he wasn't going home empty handed, taking silver, it could be viewed as his second win as he'd won a free entry to the Highland Challenge at the Europeans.

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|-----------------|-------|---------------|-------|
| Ewen Campbell | 73.06 | Gordon Waugh | 75.09 |
| Asad Wahid | 72.08 | Des Parr | 75.07 |
| Garryk Campbell | 72.06 | Gary Costello | 74.12 |

Stage 3

By now we were really “getting the hang” of shooting in threes and most were quite impressed by the quick progress we were making, perhaps it was due to the weather – nobody wanted to dither around and get any wetter and the wind was still remarkably gentle and stable, with only the very rare occasional gust. Those gusts were enough to lift the heavy sodden flags, but most of the time only the very tips of the flags betrayed any wind at all. This was reflected in the scores which were mostly quite respectable. An element of luck is, as always involved but any wind that was strong enough to lift a heavy water-logged flag could not be ignored, even if it was only a brief flicker.

By this point in the day, water was flowing freely down past the 900yd firing point, the gateway was just a quagmire of water and mud, wellies were essential, I pitied anyone who only had boots, by then everyone and everything was utterly and thoroughly soaked through. It was surprisingly cold too; my fingers were quite numb – not ideal for good trigger control. Notably, Dan Lomas made his first appearance on the podium after his astonishingly dominant performance at the Scottish Championships.

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|--------------|-------|---------------------|-------|
| Adam Bagnall | 75.08 | Des Parr | 75.09 |
| Dan Lomas | 75.06 | Gary Costello | 74.09 |
| Mike Harris | 74.09 | Brogan O’Shea-Smith | 74.06 |

Looking at the Saturday aggregate, many familiar faces were present; on the FO side, Gary Costello Brogan O’Shea-Smith and yours truly had netted all but two of the available medals, on the F/TR side the medals were a bit more widely distributed, but Adam Bagnall, Ewen Campbell and Simon West were all having a particularly good day with only 1 point separating the three of them.

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|---------------|--------|---------------------|--------|
| Adam Bagnall | 231.15 | Des Parr | 219.21 |
| Ewen Campbell | 231.15 | Brogan O’Shea-Smith | 218.21 |
| Simon West | 230.11 | Gary Costello | 217.25 |

It had been a tiring and stressful day, one burns up a lot of calories in such circumstances just trying to stay warm and dry while heaving heavy water-logged kit around on muddy slippery ground not to mention all the tension of trying to shoot to one’s best ability. It was lovely to retire from the range back to our digs and to luxuriate in a hot shower, what bliss! Then off to dinner and to watch the Scotland v Ireland rugby game in a warm dry pub and a cold dark beer, what perfection.

Sunday

Before I even got up, I could hear the rain on the roof, it was heavy – judging by the sound, it was heavier than it had been on Saturday. True enough, on looking out it was clear that things had deteriorated, there had been no respite in this deluge for well over 30 hours and no end in sight. On the way to the range, the streets were awash, water flowed across the roads and formed huge puddles as the drains clearly struggled. All of this was to prove prescient as the day unfolded.

Stage 4

While setting up the range for another day, we found that yet another of our SMTs hadn’t survived the night, despite trying everything we could think of, there was no way of bringing it back to life. I suspect water had found its way into the innards; despite all the waterproofing we have applied – a level of waterproofing that goes far beyond what SMT consider sufficient. The targets have come

through many severe duckings over the years, but clearly this weekend was exceptional and despite all our precautions, electronics and water don't mix. We were then faced with processing everyone through just the 3 surviving targets, there was no other solution, we just had to crack on and make the most of it. Shooting in threes again, we got on with it. It wasn't much fun lying on a sodden shooting mat, heavy and saturated with water from the day before, every bit of kit seemed to be wet; water found its way up sleeves, down necks and into coats, what a palaver.

We got the first detail processed through in pretty good time, folk were getting used to the idea of shooting in threes, then there was an unexpected interruption; a West Atholl Committee member contacted me saying the Atholl Estate had a request; could we pause our shooting? – it transpired that the road on the other side of the glen had been washed out by the heavy rain, that left “our” road as the only way in and out of Glen Tilt and a party of visitors were trapped further up the Glen, to cap it all they needed to get out to reach flights. So, we paused shooting and the party were able to escape and we thought no more of it, resuming our Stage 4. That was not the end though, at about 12, Noon the Athol Estate Factor got back in touch, saying that further people needed to get in and out of Glen Tilt and as “our” road was the only route left, then we would have no choice but to curtail shooting for the day.

To be perfectly frank, conditions were so miserable, I had fully intended to call for a “show of hands” after Stage 4 anyway, to see if we should continue to Stage 5 or call it a day, so the decision was effectively made for us by the Atholl Estates and I was, for one quite glad, it was a relief.

As for Stage 4, well the wind had picked up quite noticeably after the doldrums of Saturday, even the soaking, heavy flags were being lifted this way and that, it made all the difference to the scores, Tony Marsh scored the only possible of the day, everyone else's scores were depressed, it was a stellar performance in the face of adversity. It was also good to see Julie Bagnall doing well in the only really windy detail of the match.

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|---------------|-------|---------------------|-------|
| Mike Harris | 73.06 | Tony Marsh | 75.09 |
| Simon West | 73.05 | Brogan O'Shea-Smith | 73.09 |
| Julie Bagnall | 72.06 | Tom Reynolds | 73.05 |

That concluded the Highland Challenge and what an ordeal it had been; trials and tribulations of weather and electronics had tested us, yet there was much good humour on and around the firing point, I suppose you have to laugh or you'd cry. We muddled through in that great British tradition. I was gratified to see so many of the shooters all zoom down to the butts to help dismantle the targetry, in absolutely no time we had the range derigged, what had taken Paul Sandie and I all morning to build, the assembled throng dismantled in say, 20 minutes. Speaking of Paul we awaited him coming lastly from the butts only to see him standing on the running board of Hugh Inglis' 4x4 somewhat in the fashion of a US Secret Serviceman of the Presidential detail. Big Richie was as always omnipresent – he was in the butts dismantling targets and he appeared on the firing point organising the prize-giving, what a human dynamo he is! He is often first on to the range and he was also the last to leave the range, packing all the SMT kit into his 'Tardis'. Regarding the SMTs, they have been taken south for Mr Harkins to dismantle and examine, I fully expect he'll find water has entered the control boxes and caused corrosion despite our best efforts, rest assured we will learn from this experience – already it has been suggested we follow the PSSA example and encase our electronics in sealed plastic sandwich boxes – if it works for Diggle (and it does) then it should work for Blair, in fairness to the SMTs this is the first time they have been overwhelmed by weather and I think 150mm of rain in 24 hours would test any system.

The winners

All credit is due to our new Captains Tony and Simon – what a superb way to start their tenure as Captains of the F/O and F/TR teams; leading by example and showing the troops that they know what they're about. Not only are our new GB Captains the Highland Challenge Champions, both are currently leading in the 2023 National League! What better way to instil confidence in their Captaincies, than to lead from the front.

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|---------------|--------|---------------------|--------|
| Simon West | 303.16 | Tony Marsh | 292.27 |
| Ewen Campbell | 298.18 | Brogan O'Shea-Smith | 291.30 |
| Adam Bagnall | 297.20 | Des Parr | 289.27 |

Typically, on the drive home the weather improved; the rain stopped, and the sun came out, but all around the evidence of that prolonged deluge was evident; flooded fields, overflowing rivers and cascading waterfalls. Any farmer who hadn't got his bales in would have lost them; I saw wrapped bales scattered and washed away down river. It was a Highland Challenge we'll not forget for some time, yet we need to put that aside now and focus on the finale of our 2023 season; the British Championships at Bisley in November – hopefully by then you'll have dried out! – see you there.

Des.