

The Winchester Super Short Magnum

By JOHN JOHNSTON
Special Correspondent

In the early part of this century Winchester and Olin, the parent company of Winchester ammunition, decided to develop a new group of cartridges.

They had seen the benefit of a short, fat case in the benchrest success of the BR and PPC cartridges. They thought that making these shorter cases in a larger diameter, thus increasing powder capacity, would bring higher velocities and maybe better accuracy. They also thought the shorter, stiffer action would be lighter and more accurate.

So in 2002, the .223 WSSM was tested. Initial reports indicated that

along with increased velocities came the problem of barrel burnout. It was decided to line the barrel and chamber with chrome, thus slowing the burnout significantly.

They also decreased the overall length of the cartridge and magazine. This kept reloaders from increasing the case capacity even more by seating the bullet farther out in the case. So in 2003, the .223 WSSM was born, with the .243 and .25 calibers not far behind.

To clear up in my own mind exactly what "barrel burnout" is, I called the most knowledgeable man I know in the barrel business: Ed Shilen. Shilen Barrels are world renowned for quality and accuracy.

Ed said barrel burnout is simply a large-capacity case filled with slow-burning powder. This acts like a blow torch in the chamber and throat area when the round is fired. Even though this usually leads to higher velocity bullets, it is not the bullet that wears out the barrel.

Ed said he has examined many burned-out barrels and if you use a bore scope on the muzzle end of the barrel, you find normal barrel wear that shows no sign of being worn out.

Since he does not chrome line his barrels, he could not comment on this process.

After talking to Ed, things started to make a little more sense to me. Of course, in small-caliber rifles with large-capacity cases the heat from the burning gases would be more intense, thus causing more damage. The .243 WSSM was chrome-lined also, but not the .25 WSSM.

I wrote a column a few years back about my new .243 WSSM Browning Medallion. The column was not too favorable. That particular model had a pencil-thin barrel that heated up with two shots, throwing the third

shot off.

The accuracy was not any better than my .243 Winchester and not as good as my 6mm Remington, which shot at the same velocities.

Reloading was not beneficial and actually difficult due to the shape of the case and length of the magazine.

That rifle was replaced with a Browning A-bolt in .243 WSSM with a heavy varmint barrel that will shoot less than one-inch groups at 100 yards.

So what is the future of the WSSM cartridges after only five years? Well, you probably will never see it again in the Winchester Model 70 because the 70 is now made in a different plant that is not set up for these cartridges with their shorter action.

As far as Browning is concerned, it is not in the current lineup, but if a distributor wanted a large run of rifles it could happen. They are not completely dead yet, as there are quite a few AR-type rifles along with some custom rifle-makers now chambering in the WSSM cartridges. Olympic Arms offers all three WSSMs in the AR rifles.

You may be asking what went wrong. After talking to a lot of folks, I have compiled a list of probable nails in the WSSM coffin:

- There was a lot of misinformation put out on the Internet about the WSSM before it even hit the market. The Internet is a great place to do research, but verify any facts presented. Believe me when I say there are companies that will put out false information to undermine their competitor's products.

- The ammunition was expensive. For example, a box of .243 WSSM cost almost twice as much as a box of regular .243 Winchester. Now, however, there is some less expensive WSSM ammunition available.

- The barrel burnout problem was misunderstood. With proper care the factory chrome-lined barrels will last far longer than expected. What is proper care? No barrel should be shot if it gets so hot you cannot hold the barrel for three seconds, and it should be cleaned after every 20 shots. You will be surprised how easy a chrome-lined barrel cleans up. If you reload the round, do not load the maximum for each round fired.

- The closing of the Winchester plant in Connecticut in 2006 ended production of the Model 70 until this year.

- These three cartridges were not as revolutionary as Winchester
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PHOTO BY JOHN JOHNSTON

Above: Winchester Coyote .223 WSSM
Below: Browning A-Bolt .243 WSSM

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