

Meet Lou & Connie Murdica

World-Class Benchrest Sharpshooters



by Sharleen Nelson

Lou and Connie Murdica grew up in the San Fernando Valley near Los Angeles, but for the past 30 years they have resided outside Palm Springs in Sky Valley, which is known for its natural hot springs and scenic surroundings. The Murdicas have traveled all over the world together, but Sky Valley is their home. Lou and Connie share 10 acres with their son and his family; their daughter and her family live nearby. "Our property backs up to Joshua Tree National Monument, and there's nothing behind us but mountains," Connie said. "We like it because it's very quiet."

When the Murdicas aren't spending time with their kids and grandkids in California, they're world-class benchrest sharpshooting competitors. Described as, "A sport for those obsessed with perfection," benchrest shooting is a precision marksmanship technique in which highly accurate rifles are shot at paper targets from a sitting position. Benchrest shooting is anything but simple. The sport requires dedication, practice, skill, and attention to detail.

"You fire a group of shots at different distances," Lou said. "We shoot 100, 200, 300, 600, and 1000 yards." Unlike target shooting in which hitting the target's center circle is the goal, the object of group shooting is to place 5 or 10 consecutive shots through the same hole on the target within a fixed time limit. "You don't aim for the center because that's where you're holding your scope, and because you don't want to ruin where you're aiming, your bullet hits a little to the side," Lou said. Groups are then measured in thousandths of an inch at their largest outside diameter. From this measurement, the actual caliber of the bullet is subtracted from the measurement to produce your actual group size.

The rifles used in benchrest shooting are custom made to achieve extreme precision and accuracy. Most have heavy stainless steel barrels, scopes with as much as 45-power magnification, and stocks handmade out of graphite, fiberglass, or carbon fiber. Lou and Connie's custom rifles are made by a company in Ohio that names its guns after bears. "The pink one, Connie's, is called a 'Teddy action.' It's on a carbon fiber and fiberglass stock with a Bartlein barrel and a Leupold scope," Lou said. "The wood gun is a 'Grizzly action.' It has a walnut stock made with a Hart barrel and a March scope."

Lou was introduced to benchrest shooting in the 1980s. "A friend knew that I target practiced so he asked me to try this." Benchrest shooting can be traced back to the 1940s when returning WWII veterans—who had been trained as snipers—took it up as a hobby. "I took it on real heavy at first. Then after a few years, Connie and I started shooting all over the United States," Lou said. The Murdicas have been sharpshooting for 20 years now.

The past summer of 2007, Lou won the coveted Sniper King trophy, the first prize given



for the sport of benchrest shooting. The original trophy, which was awarded in 1944, is passed from one recipient to the next. When someone wins first place, their name is added to the trophy and they keep it until the next competitor wins the event. The annual event is held at one of the oldest ranges in the United States in Tacoma, Washington, the birthplace of benchrest shooting competition.

The goal of benchrest shooters is to achieve extreme rifle accuracy: A good 100-yard-group is 5 to 10 bullets hitting within .100" of each other center to center. At Tacoma, scores are based on the smallest 10-shot-group fired over a period of a year. "My group was a .274," said Lou, "so I had 10 shots in just a little over a quarter of an inch."

As a life member of the Palm Springs Gun Club, Lou spends a good deal of time practicing at the range. Although Connie also competes, she acknowledges that she's "middle of the pack" most of the time because she doesn't practice. "I have grandchildren, I don't have time to practice," Connie said. "She practices shopping," Lou joked, "and she does it well."

Competitions draw the couple to destinations throughout the United States, as well as abroad. "We shoot all over the world," said

Lou. In 1991, Lou and his four-man team won the first-place trophy at the World Championship shooting event in France. A smaller event, but similar in format to the Olympics, the World Championship is sponsored by the World Benchrest Shooting Federation and is held every two years in a different country. The next world competition in 2009 will be in South Africa.

Because 2008 is a qualifying year, the Murdicas will be participating in shoots throughout the country in hopes of qualifying for spots on the U.S. shooting team. The U.S. National competition is particularly challenging, according to Connie. "It's a marathon. It's six days and it is really hard. You're constantly moving, which makes it very tiring," she said. In a typical season, the Murdicas take two trips per month to competitions in Washington, Texas, Arizona, Missouri, Pennsylvania, and elsewhere. "They're all over, Lou said. "Whatever we can fit into our schedule, we attend."

With a full slate of competitions in many diverse locations, the Murdicas get plenty of use out of their 2001 Marathon coach. "We take it to every event," Lou said. "That's all we use it for because we shoot so much," Connie added. Indeed, the Murdicas spend more than a month



living exclusively in their coach during the prestigious Ohio Supershoot. Held yearly during the week of Memorial Day, Connie and Lou camp at the private range where approximately 400 shooters gather for the 4-day competition.

Over the years, Connie and Lou have owned several types of motorhomes and trailers, but by far, their Marathon has made traveling considerably easier and much more enjoyable. "A lot of our shoots take place over weekends and we like to be as close as possible to the range because it's more convenient," Connie said. "We used to stay in hotels when we traveled. We decided to buy a coach so everything would be right there with us. With our coach, we don't have to pack everything up at the end of a day of shooting and go back to a hotel at night."

Because most shooting events last anywhere from two days to a week or more and competitions often continue from sunup to sundown, the Murdicas like the fact that many of the ranges offer facilities that can accommodate their Marathon coach.

"A lot of the places we camp don't have hook-ups, so we dry camp a lot," Connie said. "This coach has been absolutely wonderful for that. We can stay for extended periods of time and we are totally self-contained. We tow a vehicle so we can leave whenever we want to explore or shop...we love the coach lifestyle."

If you should encounter Lou and Connie on the road, wish them luck. Chances are good that they're headed to another sharpshooting competition. •