

# Eastern PROMISES

Affordable spring-rifles made in the Far East have never really captured **Mark Camoccio's** imagination... but he's giving them another chance courtesy of this sub-£100 brace from SMK

**DB5  
V  
XS36-1**

It's true. In the past, I've been less than enthusiastic about the entry-level, budget end of the airgun market, which consists of rifles that tend to be manufactured in the Far East. They've always left me wanting in the quality stakes, although I concede that quality control has improved considerably in recent years. So the editor's asked me to look at two Chinese-made offerings – both from Sportsmarketing – to see if they can raise my enthusiasm. SMK is a leading player in the budget sector of the market, and here we have the brand new SMK Custom DB5 and the more established SMK XS36-1 – both underlever springers.

## FIRST IMPRESSIONS

Side by side, both of these airguns appear well made. The new Custom DB5 is smart and purposeful with a deep-coloured stock. Its profile, with the relatively short woodwork and protruding underlever, echoes the classic Webley Mk3.

However, its rival, the XS36-1, takes things up a notch. Its chunky, well-shaped woodwork displays some beautiful graining through the finish, while its flattened-off, elongated trigger guard is a definite throwback to the ill-fated, but beautifully made, Parker-Hale Dragon. With solid features on show wherever you look, this rifle is a real beauty.

**SMK Custom DB5** ★★★★★★☆☆☆☆

**SMK XS36-1** ★★★★★★☆☆☆☆

## TAKING STOCK

Woodwork is the most eye-catching feature of any air rifle, and both SMK models come well appointed. The DB5, based largely on the no-frills DB4 underlever, is housed in a new timber – an attractive, Italian-crafted European hardwood with a smart, sleek finish. Complete with a rich walnut varnish and some super-fine, if shallow, chequering, it's a definite improvement over its predecessor. I would, however, have preferred to see an ambidextrous cheekpiece, instead of the right-handed design on offer.

But despite the DB5's attributes, the XS36-1 outshines its new stablemate in the woodwork department. The subtle matt finish and wonderful graining on display makes this the best quality stock I have ever encountered on a Chinese-made rifle – with the excessively hard ventilated butt pad being the only minor let-down.

**SMK Custom DB5** ★★★★★★☆☆☆☆

**SMK XS36-1** ★★★★★★☆☆☆☆

Both stocks exhibit some highly pleasing woodwork







The DB5's rearsight is fully adjustable, with finger-wheels for windage and elevation



SMK has opted for a classic black design on the XS36-1's open sights

## OPEN SIGHTS

In-keeping with current market trends, both rifles come fitted with open sights. The XS36-1 adopts the more traditional approach of the two, offering a notch and bead design in black. The rearsight is fully adjustable, and the foresight actually allows for interchangeable elements, which can be fitted by unscrewing the rear of the hood. While I admire the attention to detail, I'm not convinced that many people will bother changing the elements, given the intended market for this rifle. Looks-wise, though, the front hood assembly is particularly impressive.

The DB5, meanwhile, offers a fixed foresight element and a fully adjustable rearsight, again featuring finger-wheels for windage and elevation. It manages to edge this category, courtesy of its fluorescent, fibre-optic elements, which really bring the sight picture alive in low-light situations.

**SMK Custom DB5** ★★★★★★★★☆☆

**SMK XS36-1** ★★★★★★★★☆☆

## SCOPING UP

With both rifles costing less than £100, many shooters will opt to add an affordable scope to the mix to extract maximum accuracy. Dovetail scope rails are machined into the top of both rifles' receivers, with the DB5 offering a fractionally longer useable length of 100mm. This may sound prohibitively short, but it's fine for a small, budget scope. With a small, built-in arresstor block provided on each gun, scope creep should be no problem, too.

**SMK Custom DB5** ★★★★★★★★☆☆

**SMK XS36-1** ★★★★★★★★☆☆

## COCKING AND SAFETY

Both rifles surprised me with the efficiency of their cocking mechanisms. The DB5 requires only modest effort to cock – though my example was fairly 'graunchy'. The cycle involves pulling the lever all the way back until the action is cocked. A pellet is then pushed into the breech and



As the heavier of the two SMKs, the XS36-1 is a solid, reassuring handler

Dovetails feature on both offerings, with a slightly longer rail on the DB5...





*A sliding breech system is fitted to both rifles*

the lever returned to close the action. Loading the DB5 is a fiddly affair, as the lip of the barrel is set back. No safety catch is present, either – though an internal anti-beartrap system is fitted for peace of mind.

Cocking the XS36-1, by comparison, is incredibly easy and smooth. Chambering a pellet is simpler, too, as the barrel protrudes further. To return the lever, you depress a small button just inside the rear of the trigger guard. Finally, you pull back the rather crude safety catch, situated just inside the front of the guard, to ready the trigger for the shot. It's generally a more reassuring design.

**SMK Custom DB5** ★★★★★★☆☆

**SMK XS36-1** ★★★★★★☆☆

## TRIGGER

Regular readers will know I always place great emphasis on the need for a good trigger when it comes to accurate performance. However, where standard spring-powered rifles are concerned, the bar is so often lowered.

Both rifles come with single-stage triggers that felt a little vague in use. That said, my DB5's factory setting was actually very acceptable. Once the initial creep had been taken up, the final let-off point released after no great effort, leaving any criticism centred on the blade itself, which is narrow and set slightly too far forward for many shooters.

As for the XS36-1, the trigger was far cruder, and easily the weakest feature on an otherwise great rifle. Again, pulling through the initial creep helped a little, but I was always battling against the trigger in my attempts to register some accurate shots.

**SMK Custom DB5** ★★★★★★☆☆

**SMK XS36-1** ★★★★★☆☆☆

## HANDLING

Weight plays a big part when handling these rifles – though it's worth bearing in mind that every shooter has their own preferences in

## SMK DB5: SMK XS36-1



*Though it does creep slightly, the DB5's factory-set trigger is very acceptable*



*The XS36-1's trigger incorporates both a safety catch (front lever) and cocking arm lock*



*... while arrestor plates are also in place on each gun to prevent scope creep*

*The relatively lightweight DB5 is slimline and comfortable in the shoulder*



## SMK DB5: SMK XS36-1

this area. The more slimline DB5 tips the scales at a manageable 3kg, where its rival comes in a full 0.5kg heavier. Where juniors are concerned, the weight differential could be a factor – though I don't consider the sliding breech on this style of rifle to be well suited to novices and juniors anyway, given its fiddly nature.

The DB5 certainly handles well, and feels good in the shoulder; it would particularly suit shooters in search of a lighter gun. At 3.6kg, unscoped, the XS36-1 could be a handful to some – but the balance and overall configuration is spot-on. The sheer quality of the stock, and the solidity of the action give this rifle a mature feel, though, which has great appeal to me.

**SMK Custom DB5** ★★★★★★☆☆

**SMK XS36-1** ★★★★★★☆☆

### OVERALL BUILD

These rifles have definitely made me reconsider my views on airguns manufactured in the Orient, with the XS36-1, in particular, coming as a revelation – for that, I have to thank the editor!

The DB5 loses a point or two for its rather crude barrel clamp, which is one let-down on a generally attractive rifle. Otherwise, both guns sport reasonably well-engineered components. In the past, I would have expected to see sharp edges around the breech cut-out on Chinese-made airguns – but the overall improvement in machining quality is plain to see.

However, this class of rifle still lags behind in the final metal preparation and bluing process. A slightly abrasive, non-polished surface is indicative of lower-cost manufacturing – and, I know, won't trouble everyone. And what lies beneath is now definitely in a higher league than in the past.

**SMK Custom DB5** ★★★★★★☆☆

**SMK XS36-1** ★★★★★★☆☆

*In terms of bang for your buck, there's little to separate this duo!*



**SMK Custom DB5** 76/100

**SMK XS36-1** 79/100

The attraction of self-contained spring power means that traditional designs such as these will continue to enjoy huge popularity in the face of increasing competition from the PCP world – especially when it comes to entry-level products.

While the DB5 is the new kid on the block – and a highly capable rifle – I just couldn't help falling for the more mature design of the XS36-1. For me, given my own preferences in terms of weight, the final choice was an easy one, even if the scores suggest it was a closer-run contest.

### TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

MODEL	CUSTOM DB5	XS36-1
MANUFACTURER	BAM, for SMK	SAG, for SMK
UK IMPORTER	Sportsmarketing	Sportsmarketing
COUNTRY OF ORIGIN	China	China
TYPE	Underlever springer	Underlever springer
CALIBRE	.177 (on test) and .22	.22 only
WEIGHT (UNSCOPED)	3kg	3.6kg
OVERALL LENGTH	1,029mm	1,041mm
BARREL LENGTH	445mm	438mm
STOCK	European hardwood	Hardwood
TRIGGER	Single-stage	Single-stage
SAFETY	None (but anti-beartrap system)	Auto safety
POWER	9.9ft/lb	9.9ft/lb
CONTACT	Sportsmarketing ● 01206 795333 ● www.sportsmk.co.uk	

### ACCURACY AND PERFORMANCE

Technical improvements have apparently been made to the DB5, with the air transfer arrangement featuring a cone-shaped breech, which dovetails into a conically-shaped cylinder-end, complete with a conical seal. A shorter transfer port improves air flow, giving more power for less recoil. Firing the DB5 revealed a quick snap that, strangely, seemed a little noisy, due to something other than spring resonance – but it's still more civilized than a few supposedly superior rivals.

If anything, the XS36-1's action felt a little more muted, with just that fairly heavy trigger to contend with. Over the chronoscope, both rifles displayed stunning consistency, with the DB5 managing a total spread of 7fps across 10 shots, and the XS36-1 just 6fps. For 'budget' guns, that's impressive to say the least.

Surprisingly, accuracy at 30 yards was initially average to poor with the DB5, using SMK's own Black Dome pellets. However, switching to JSB-made pellets slashed the groups down to around 12mm. The XS36-1, on the other hand, fared well with the SMK ammo, posting sub-20mm groups at 30 yards, and then superb 8mm clusters with the more expensive JSBs.

With these price tags, I wasn't expecting blistering accuracy downrange – but I was pleasantly surprised, if not a little shocked: these are easily the two most accurate SMK rifles I have ever shot!

**SMK Custom DB5** ★★★★★★☆☆

**SMK XS36-1** ★★★★★★☆☆

### VALUE FOR MONEY

While they have some superb flagships in their range, the SMK brand is has primarily built its reputation around value for money airguns – and it'll come as no surprise that both models excel in this department.

The sub-£150 price bracket is fiercely contested these days, but many options in this sector are seriously made down to a price, and subsequently come up short. Both the DB5 and the XS36-1 seem to fly in the face of that reckoning – and given the performance of these guns on test, they represent truly astounding value for money.

**SMK Custom DB5** ★★★★★★☆☆

**SMK XS36-1** ★★★★★★☆☆

**FINAL VERDICT**