

Closing the GAP

XS208: HW80K

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HW80K

Break-barrel springers are the mainstay of the British airgunner – but do you have to pay a fortune to get a good one? **Mark Camoccio** tests two top-powered sporters from different ends of the price spectrum to find out...

The speedy configuration and simple design of traditional break-barrel springers still provide immense satisfaction for many shooters, despite constant advances in PCP technology. So having recently covered precharged guns, I'm focusing on the more classic power plant this time, with a pair of modern, full-powered break-barrel sporters.

Sportsmarketing's XS208 is the standard sporter model in its highly-popular 208 range, and here it goes head to head with the HW80 from Weihrauch – a model almost three times the 208's asking price, and one that's over 30 years old. Be that as it may, it's also an air rifle with legendary status among airgunners, and represents a good benchmark for being 'a b****y good air rifle'!

FIRST IMPRESSIONS

Both sporters look striking at first glance – and the full-length SMK XS208 has a slick presentation and high level of finish that seemingly belie its price tag. Its light-coloured wood stain and pleasant graining give it an air of class – and there are fully-adjustable, fibre-optic opens to make it shootable straight out of the box.

Weihrauch's muscular hunter incorporates a fuller stock, and its beefy dimensions make for an imposing piece of machinery. My test model, which displays Weihrauch's renowned level of finish and engineering, is the carbine 'K' variant of the HW80, this one being the 310mm-barrelled version that also sports a silencer.

SMK XS208 ★★★★★★★★
Weihrauch HW80K ★★★★★★★★

TAKING STOCK

Both these sporters' stocks are fairly bland. The XS208 is the plainer of the two, with no definition to the cheekpiece – though this does make it ambidextrous, and it's perfectly adequate when using the fibre-optic open sights. Its sleek forend fully conceals the breech block, giving the gun a neat appearance, and the overall slimline configuration suits the rifle's role as a general sporter. The lighter woodwork sets off the action, helping to keep the weight down, too.

By contrast, the chunkier, deeper forend of the Weihrauch seems to complement the man-sized proportions of the action, but the cheekpiece is also a little low for scope use – a shame as this silencer-only model comes without any opens, making a scope mandatory! Bearing in mind my test

The SMK XS208's slimline configuration suits the rifle's role as a general sporter.



The HW80 can be more tiring when taking standers



Breaking the Weihrauch's breech is comfortable and smooth



A raised cheekpiece rounds off the HW80K's chunky stock, but it's a little low for scope use



A sharp tap is required to open the SMK's action, such is the strength of its lock-up



The SMK's cheekpiece is ambidextrous, and ideal for using the on-board open sights

XS208 is the 'base' version – with a luxurious thumbhole model available for a tenner more – the HW80's detail and definition have the edge, further cemented with deeply-cut panels of chequering on the grip.

SMK XS208 ★★★★★★ *Score*
Weihrauch HW80K ★★★★★★ *Score*

SCOPING UP

Fitting glassware to air rifles is a no-brainer for many shooters, given the range of top value scopes on the market – and the XS208 comes well appointed for attaching a telly. A small arrestor block sits to the rear of the dovetail rails, which prevents the rear mount from moving backwards under the whiplash effect of the recoil – scope creep, as it's known.

Weihrauch's HW80K features the company's time-honoured scope rails, with three arrestor stud holes. As many scope mounts now include a screw-in arrestor pin, achieving a perfect scope set-up couldn't be simpler.

SMK XS208 ★★★★★★ *Score*
Weihrauch HW80K ★★★★★★ *Score*

COCKING CYCLE

Breaking open the SMK requires the usual sharp tap to the barrel, where the ensuing cocking stroke is reasonable; one positive, sweeping motion sees the action primed and ready. Pellets fitted snugly into the rifling of my .177 calibre test rifle, and my only criticism is the slightly sloppy breech jaws, which allow the barrel to move in its arc without resistance. That said, the all-important breech lock-up was reassuringly solid.

But Weihrauch's design feels notably slicker, requiring just a small jolt to nudge open the breech, with a similarly weighted, but smoother cocking stroke. Once cocked, the barrel is snugly supported within the breech. However, feeding ammo into the breech is unexpectedly unsatisfactory – all the pellets I tested were loose and dropped straight into the lip of the barrel!

Both rifles can be de-cocked if required – a feature many hunters find handy in the field.

SMK XS208 ★★★★★★ *Score*
Weihrauch HW80K ★★★★★★ *Score*

TRIGGER AND SAFETY

The test duo come with automatic safety catches, and while I'm no great fan of these, each gun's worked flawlessly. The XS208 features a small safety tab to the rear of the compression cylinder, which needs thumbing

SMK'S XS208 is lighter and very user-friendly on longer outings



Pellets feel slightly loose when pressed into the Weihrauch's barrel



Weihrauch's famous Rekord trigger unit excels in operation



Though a 'budget' rifle, the SMK features a metal trigger blade and works flawlessly



Loading pellets into the SMK's rifling proves snug and satisfactory



forward before taking a shot. The trigger blade is metal, and the final release weight is reasonable – but I found it a little 'spongy' as the trigger sears creep over each other.

Weihrauch's Rekord trigger unit, by contrast, is a multi-component cassette that delivers subtler, crisper and lighter settings. This feature alone accounts for a significant part of the asking price. It is money well spent, though, as the HW80's potential performance is way ahead of most comparable rifles.

SMK XS208 ★★★★★★☆☆☆☆
Weihrauch HW80K ★★★★★★☆☆☆☆

HANDLING

Handling both rifles in quick succession reveals a major difference in weight. SMK's XS208 tips the scales at 3.3kg, making it very user-friendly for longer outings. The HW80, on the other hand, feels a real handful at 3.9kg. However, heavy rifles tend to absorb more recoil – and the additional weight can aid steady shooting in certain

scenarios, such as seated shots. But it's certainly more tiring when taking standing shots.

Ultimately, it's a matter of compromise and personal taste. The XS208 offers a great deal of balance, though the Weihrauch's saving grace is that its more refined grip and butt do make for enjoyable handling... if you can cope with its weight.

SMK XS208 ★★★★★★☆☆☆☆
Weihrauch HW80K ★★★★★★☆☆☆☆

OVERALL BUILD

Putting any other springer up against Weihrauch often makes for a one-sided scrap, but the quality of Eastern-made hardware has improved significantly in recent years. Made in China, SMK's XS208 is a real case in point – and while the metal surfaces don't get the 'nth degree' of treatment that German manufacture normally guarantees, the machining tolerances have tightened up and particularly impressed me on my test gun.

Rich chemical bluing is a process the Chinese seem reluctant to incorporate, however – so the SMK does have slightly rougher metal surfaces. To be fair, though, that is typical of air rifles in this sub-£150 price bracket – they've got to save money somewhere! But overall, the 208 is a well-presented and well-engineered gun.

XS208: HW80K

The HW80, meanwhile, is a shining example of Weihrauch's superiority in build quality, and its immaculate finish and precision-engineered components are to be expected – you're paying for the privilege, after all. Of course, you're also getting a Weihrauch silencer thrown in.

Head-to-head, the HW has to take this category... but take price into account, and you're laughing all the way to the bank with the SMK.

SMK XS208 ★★★★★★★★

Weihrauch HW80K ★★★★★★★★

CONSISTENCY

I repeatedly marvel at modern spring-gun consistency – and both guns here are superb examples of the art. Over the chrono, the XS208 posted impressive figures over 10 shots, with a total spread of just 14fps with Air Arms Diabolo Field pellets, and a 12fps spread using Webley AccuPells.

The HW80K also boasted a remarkable level of consistency – a spread of just 5fps over 10 shots with Diabolos... and just 3fps with RWS Super Fields! While that took some of the shine off the excellent performance of the XS208, you can't argue with these figures – they're nothing short of outstanding for an out-of-the box springer.

SMK XS208 ★★★★★★★★

Weihrauch HW80K ★★★★★★★★

ACCURACY

I always put several brands of pellet through test guns to properly evaluate their accuracy potential – and, surprisingly, both these rifles proved pellet fussy. Despite its power with AccuPells, accuracy-wise they weren't the best feed for the SMK – though I was able to get AADFs to group inside 30mm at 30 yards.

The pellet 'fit' in the HW80K worried me – it appears that the breech has been machined with an oversized chamfer, and all of the several pellet brands I tested proved a slack fit; I just couldn't 'feel' the pellet into the rifling, which is less than ideal on a break-barrel.

The HW80K grouped AADFs around the 20mm mark at 30 yards, and RWS Super Fields tighter still – which is excellent and what I expect from a Weihrauch... but I was still surprised that so many other brands simply didn't perform out of my test rifle.

SMK XS208 ★★★★★★★★

Weihrauch HW80K ★★★★★★★★

VALUE FOR MONEY

This is a head-to-head test, where performance is absolute, not relative to price – so should Weihrauch be scoring nearly three times as many points as its SMK rival, given that's the price differential? Clearly, that hasn't been the case, and while the HW80K reaches this stage slightly ahead in the points stakes, the significantly less expensive XS208 is hot on its heels.

FINAL VERDICT

SMK XS208	80/100
Weihrauch HW80K	86/100

These are two very different rifles – and whether you think the higher quality of the Weihrauch is worth the higher asking price is a matter of opinion, depending on what you want from a break-barrel sporter.

Personally, I would always stump up the extra cash and invest in fine engineering. But many shooters with, perhaps, different priorities and tighter budgets may decide otherwise – and there are tens of thousands of satisfied customers who can testify to the top value of Sportsmarketing's airguns.

Regarding the performance of these two rifles, the more expensive model has, as one might expect, triumphed. But considering the differences in asking prices is over £250, the gap of just six points in the final score of this head-to-head suddenly looks a lot, lot smaller in the grand scheme of things!

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

MODEL	XS208	HW80K (silencer model)
MANUFACTURER	for SMK	Weihrauch
COUNTRY OF ORIGIN	China	Germany
ACTION	Spring and piston	Spring and piston
COCKING	Break-barrel	Break-barrel
CALIBRE	.177 (tested) and .32	.177 and .22 (tested)
OVERALL LENGTH	1,156mm	1,143mm
BARREL LENGTH	483mm	310mm (not including supplied silencer)
WEIGHT (UNSCOPE)	3.3kg	3.9kg
SIGHTS	Fully-adjustable, fibre-optic open sights	None fitted on Silencer model
TRIGGER	Two-stage, adjustable	Two-stage, adjustable
SAFETY	Automatic, resettable	Automatic (resettable on re-cock)
STOCK	Beech sporter	Beech sporter
POWER	11.4ft/lb	11.7ft/lb
CONTACT	Sportsmarketing 01206 795333 www.sportsmk.co.uk	Hull Cartridge Company 01482 342571 www.hulcartridge.co.uk

Both guns give a good return on investment – and, to be fair, are deliberately aimed at different ends of the market. For less than £160, the SMK XS208 is superb value, making it not only a good starter rifle, but also a budget-beating hunter for shooters who want a decent tool that they're not too worried about hanging over the fireplace. And it comes with high-tech opens.

The Weihrauch, on the other hand, is a classy piece of kit that many springer fans may aspire to, and despite its age and price, it still represents the pinnacle of mass-produced break-barrel sporters. The fact that you also get a silencer on this model will be a nice bonus for many field shooters and, to some extent, helps to keep the German gun 'competitive' with its cheaper adversary here.

SMK XS208 ★★★★★★★★

Weihrauch HW80K ★★★★★★★★

