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NRA convention starts with a bang in Atlanta

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Really, is there any other way to put it?

The cliché is actually apt, though. Shortly after Sidney, Ohio twins Blaine and Aaron Simpson, 11, arrived with their mom and grandfather for **the National Rifle Association's annual convention in downtown Atlanta** they were firing pellets from air rifles at a variety of moving targets.

The boys eagerly chattered about what they were most looking forward to – checking out manufacturer displays, visiting with exhibitor friends they've met at past conventions – but were stumped when asked what their favorite firearm is.



Blaine Simpson, 11, is literally fired up for the NRA's annual convention in Atlanta this weekend. Photo: Jennifer Brett, jbrett@ajc.com

“All of the above,” Blaine said. He and his brother shoot competitively, having been schooled from age 6 by grandad Donald Simpson, a former Navy SEAL.

They were quick to respond when asked what they enjoy about the NRA.

“It helps the Second Amendment,” Aaron said.

Organizers expect 80,000 attendees to attend the 146th NRA Annual Meetings and Exhibits, as the gathering is officially called. It runs through Sunday at the Georgia World Congress Center. A full schedule and details on attending are online at home.nra.org. Detractors have made plans to protest.

The groups Moms Demand Action for Gun Sense in America and the Everytown Survivor Network plan a Saturday protest in Woodruff Park and Betsy Riot, calling the NRA “gun lobby death merchants” whose only aim “is to lobby for firearm companies so they can peddle their weapons of war and drive the U.S. to the highest gun death rate of any developed country,” plans to hoist billboards and fly a banner around the downtown area while the event is going on.

“We are protesting this murder fantasy convention with mockery and anger and will continue our direct actions until the country is free from the grip of the violence-for-profit industry,” Betsy Riot said in a media release.

There was no sign of protesters Thursday afternoon as members started arriving, and the atmosphere at the check-in area was a convivial one.

Cheryl Boll of New Mexico enjoyed running into her buddy Jim Hicks of Arizona. Boll lives in a mountainous area replete with rattlesnakes, and she’s glad to be able to protect herself when they slither into her yard.

“I shot my first rattlesnake five years ago and I’ve been shooting them ever since,” said Boll, who’s in the market for some more firepower while she’s in Atlanta.

She’ll have plenty of merchandise to choose from – more than 10 acres of hunting, shooting and other outdoors gear is being set up in the giant exhibition hall in the bottom of the World Congress Center.

President Donald Trump is scheduled to speak early Friday afternoon. Other events include a concert from Hank Williams Jr. Return for updates.