

BLACK POWDER FOR DUMMIES!

Pete Moore considers the perils, pitfalls, and frustrating fun of shooting and owning a muzzle-loading revolver

When I got my first FAC, a muzzle-loading (ML) revolver was not on the cards. However, over the years as Editor of Guns & Shooting and Shooting Sports magazines, I was sent guns for testing and learned a lot about them. Plus, I owned a pair of Uberti (ML conversion) Colt Peacemakers after the handgun ban, for British Western Shooting Society (BWSS) use.

RETHINKING IT

Muzzle-loading and black powder guns in general, along with competition, are controlled by the MLAGB (Muzzle Loaders Association of Great Britain). Given the niche area of this discipline, you need a strong governing body to keep it growing, and with a range at Wedgnock, with classes and disciplines to suit all ML equipment, they are a one-stop shop for experts and novice alike.

Everything changed after the handgun ban, as unless you wanted something with a 12" barrel and a coat hanger attached to the butt to make it 24" long and legal, ML revolvers were the only game in town.

RETRO TRANSITION

A lot of ex-pistol shooters, most unaware of the intricacies of running these guns, got on board, only to realise they had made a mistake and got off again. The only other people that really embraced them, after the ban, were the BWSS. As,



transitioning back to handguns, which were still allowed, seemed a workable and historically correct solution.

TOO MUCH

Although I knew how to successfully run one, the time-consuming loading drills and the ever-present spectre of problems, turned me off. Present day, at the back of my gun cabinet, are a pair of Uberti Remington 1858 New Model Army (NMA) wheel guns. One stainless, one blued. I've never done anything with them, but suddenly had the urge to give it another go.

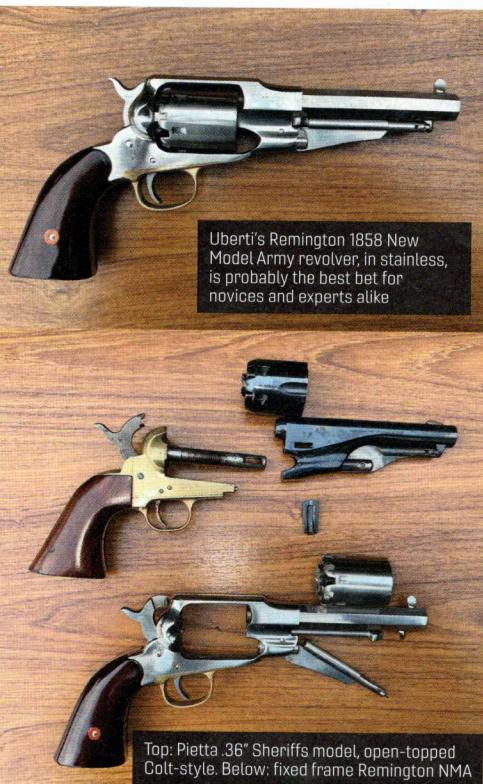
WHAT ABOUT YOU THEN?

Let's start with the hardware. There are three options. One - Colt's 1851 Navy,

1860/61 Army, the heavier Dragoon, and the massive Walker. Two - 1858 Remington New Model Army (NMA), and three - Colt's Peacemaker (Model P), ML conversions. The only modern option was Ruger's Old Army! All-stainless, with coil springs, and just that bit slicker and easier to use all around. Sadly, discontinued, but still sought after by those who know.

SPLIT DECISION

All the Colts, apart from the Model P, offer an open-topped, split frame build. Here, the pistol grip and lower/rear body (standing breech) have a large, fixed cylinder pin (arbor) that retains the front section with a transverse wedge, which consists of the barrel and rammer assembly. There's no top strap, so no rear



Uberti's Remington 1858 New Model Army revolver, in stainless, is probably the best bet for novices and experts alike

Top: Pietta .36" Sheriff's model, open-topped Colt-style. Below: fixed frame Remington NMA

As can be seen, a ML wheel gun requires a fair bit of support equipment and some knowledge



sight. Instead, a simple V-notch is cut into the hammer nose.

In terms of practicality, the better choice is the NMA, as it offers a solid, one-piece frame with a rear sight inset. The arbor is easily removable too, as is the cylinder, and generally speaking, the more rigid build tends to aid accuracy. There are also target models with adjustable sights.

The Peacemakers retain the cylinder in a similar manner as the NMA, but it has to be removed for loading, as there's no integral rammer. Instead, you can get an off-gun loading rig.

SENSIBLE CHOICES

The NMAs are the only ones available in stainless steel, for easier cleaning. There are many configurations, but the best calibres and barrel lengths would be .36 or .44" and 5.5" to 8". My Uberti is a 5.5" all-stainless with fixed sights.

As the name implies, all the components go in from the front of the cylinder, with nipples for the chambers at the rear end. The mechanism is single action (SA), so you must thumb cock the hammer for each shot. It can also be set at half-cock for loading, which frees the cylinder to rotate, and there are safety notches so you can lower it between chambers when fully charged.

POWDER, BALL AND...

The firing train consists of a percussion cap on the nipple, a powder charge, a lubricated wad (optional), and a soft lead

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ball, or bullet. For most uses, the latter is perhaps more trouble than it's worth.

The powder is the main concern, as real black powder is classed as a low explosive and it requires a licence and has strict storage rules, which is a lot of hassle. These days there are many substitutes, most notable is Hodgdon's Pyrodex P (pistol) that's equivalent to FFFG granulation. This is classed as a propellant, so can be bought off-the-shelf with a FAC. It is, however, corrosive if not cleaned off. Probably better, although requiring an explosive license, is Hodgdon's Triple 7, as it can be washed off with water and is non-corrosive. There are also exterior lubes that can be placed over the cylinder face that evaporate as the gun fires to coat the bore and cut down general fouling.

LITTLE HELPERS

Percussion caps come in different sizes, and the Uberti accepts No. 10s, although they were a tad tight and needed pushing

on with a non-steel punch. If not, they might not go off when first struck.

Kranks supplied a tub of Pyrodex P, caps, an in-line capper, a powder flask, a nipple spanner/tool, .454" lead round balls, and some lubricated felt wads.

LOAD UP

So, to start, make sure the bore and chambers are clean and dry, and the nipples tight. Before going any further, cap all the nipples and fire them off to clear their vent holes, which will also indicate if you have put them on correctly. My gun was a bit spotty the first time, so I had to go around again to fire the last two. Luckily, the Uberti has a screw that adjusts the hammer spring tension, so I wound it in and bingo, six for six every time.

For dispensing the propellant, I favour the powder flask, as it has a dispensing tube and thumb-operated valve that allows you to throw a reasonably consistent charge. Mine produced 26-grains, sort of medium,



The firing train: percussion cap, powder, wad, and round lead ball



Percussion caps are pushed onto nipples at the rear of the chambers



Not too bad. Varying the powder charge can have an effect on group sizes and the point of impact



Actual group size (2.181" at 10 yards)

but accurate enough with easy recoil control. Hodgdon says that for a .44 revolver, a charge of 35-grains of Pyrodex P is the maximum.

Given the fixed sights, upping or downing the charge will affect the group's size and point of impact, so you'll need to experiment. 26-grains threw a 2.2" group, 3" low and 2" right at 10 yards.

RAMMING STATIONS

Next, with the muzzle vertical and all your makings to hand, set the hammer to half-cock and throw a charge into the chamber, on the right side of the frame, one away from the 6 o'clock position. This should be followed by a wad and the ball, which will sit proud. At .454" it's designed to be too big, ensuring the essential gas-tight seal in the chamber mouth. Now rotate it to 6 o'clock, unlatch the rammer, position its end over the ball, and pull it down until it's below the chamber mouth. If it's proud, it will jam up against the side of the barrel as the cylinder rotates, which is a real pain to sort out.

CAP IT ALL

When you've filled all the chambers, rotate the cylinder to ensure everything is free. The in-line capper

allows you to position the caps easily on the nipples and also push them down. Finally, turn the cylinder again to check everything is right at the back end and you're ready to shoot.

The 5.5" Uberti sits nicely in the hand and is easy to hold. Even with the hammer spring tightened, the trigger break was pretty good. However, the trigger guard is quite small. Now, thumb back the hammer, take aim, and squeeze!

IMMEDIATE ACTION DRILLS

If you have a miss-fire, it's probably a cap that was not put on correctly, so go around again and the loner should ignite. If not, recap and try again, as 99% of problems are cap-related. If you have to clear a loaded chamber, there are CO2 unloaders that push the charge and ball out by gas pressure, with the advantage of freezing it too. There's also a spike and screw version that pulls it out from the front.

END GAME

I have to say, I still found the loading process long and involved, but it was mitigated by the fact I thoroughly enjoyed the shooting experience. I was also impressed by the group sizes the Uberti produced.

KEEP IT CLEAN

Now the messy and essential bit. If you're using real black powder or Pyrodex P, you must clean the guns thoroughly. Remove the cylinder and nipples and with water or a solvent, remove all the residue inside and out. Once clean, dry the bore and chambers, lightly oil all surfaces, and the nipples, then reassemble. The gun is now ready for its next outing, with a quick pull-through and six caps popped through the nipples, prior to loading.

From a novice's viewpoint, the process does look a bit long-winded. However, it's easy enough to learn and there is a deal of satisfaction in owning a more sensibly proportioned handgun that can shoot well. If you're in a gun club then the chances are they will have a ML revolver for you to try, and if you like it, then the rest is up to you!

My thanks to Henry Krank for their help and support. They are the importers of Uberti, Pedersoli, and Pietta and offer their own brand of black powder in all grades, along with every accessory you might need for the job.

CONTACTS:

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