



Talbot on target! Muzzleloading

Communications Officer Sam Talbot steps back in time for the latest challenge as he continues his quest to shoot the SSAA disciplines.



If I've learned one thing from shooting the SSAA disciplines it's that so much of the sport is steeped in history. For centuries firearms were loaded from the muzzle end so it's fitting the SSAA has the Muzzleloading discipline to celebrate this unique practice and the many firearms which use this method. So like countless shooters before me, this month I too loaded a firearm from the unconventional end and learned about the many ingenious ignition systems that were dreamt up along the way.

How does it work?

Muzzleloading caters to the original and replica rifles, muskets, handguns and shotguns used during Australia's colonial days, the firearm categories very detailed with each having its own classes and subsections. Rifle events are shot from the offhand, cross-sticks/prone, benchrest and sometimes kneeling/sitting positions, while shotguns are shot around stations placed various distances from the thrower. In addition to range shooting, Muzzleloading shooters are often enthusiastic followers of historical events and re-enactments.

Lots of different firearms can be used in Muzzleloading including rifles, muskets, shotguns, revolvers and pistols. In fact, anyone looking to compete in all available Muzzleloading events in all categories would have to shoot more than 30 and need several different firearms.

National discipline chairman Kim Atkinson told me it's the firearms which set Muzzleloading apart from other disciplines. "You're using genuine or replica firearms from the 1800s as well as black powder single-shot cartridge rifles from the 1890s," he said.

"These firearms are as accurate as any centrefire rifle and Muzzleloading is perfect >

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for using these types of rifles safely and effectively in competition. The best way to learn Muzzleloading is to read the rules on the SSAA website, find a range that shoots the discipline and pay them a visit.”

So that’s what I did. My local SSAA Para range shoots rifle and shotgun Muzzleloading and I organised to meet section captain Frank Verdini for a shotgun shoot. Like many clubs there isn’t much focus on re-enactments at Para outside of special events, but competitors more than make up for it with interest in the firearms themselves.

At the range Frank explained some muzzleloading history and that, despite being cumbersome and needing lots of speciality equipment, firearms became more popular than bows and arrows for one main reason. “While it would take about 10 years to train someone to be proficient with a bow, the same person could become proficient with a firearm in just three months,” he said. This raised the question of how proficient I’d become in three hours. The answer is not very but I learned lots of theory.

Loading by the muzzle

Usually one of the easier parts of shooting is loading, but not muzzleloading, lots of measuring and pushing needed before going near the line of fire. But when you think about it, muzzleloading shotguns actually reload pretty similarly to modern shotgun cartridges, except instead of using a press you do it inside the barrel. It’s fairly simple once you get the hang of it.

Firstly, it’s good practice to block off the barrel you aren’t using. Then you add



black powder by pouring it down the barrel (Frank already had the portions measured out). Next, a piece of round cardboard is pushed down followed by an oily wad then another piece of cardboard. Now’s a good time to make sure everything is tight - so it’s all pushed down with a stick. Next the shot is added (we used 1oz) using a small measurer, before finishing off with another thin piece of cardboard and pushing everything down with the stick again. The firearm is now effectively loaded.

Ignition systems

Firearms are pretty simple. Take a tube, put in some black powder and a projectile then ignite it somehow. This was how firearms worked for a very long time but eventually we got better at the ignition part and this is one of the main differences in muzzle-loading firearms.

Percussion, flintlock, matchlock and

wheel-locks are the four types of ignition used to fire a muzzleloading firearm. Historically this takes us from the earliest practical hand-held firearms up to when smokeless powders replaced black powder. Each ignition system represents a jump in technology and ingenuity and all up they cover from the mid-12th century to 1886 when the French introduced the Lebel rifle using an 8mm bottleneck cartridge loaded with smokeless powder.

There are also different classes including Military, Traditional, Open, Firelocks and Shotguns. We were shooting Shotguns which are broken into two classes - percussion and flintlock ignition systems.

Finally - time to shoot

First up was a double-barrel Pedersoli percussion shotgun from the 1840s, quite modern by Muzzleloading standards. Percussion caps were introduced in the

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early 1800s superseding older types of ignition, the percussion cap a small cylinder of brass or copper with one end closed and a small shock-sensitive explosive inside. When the trigger is pulled the hammer on the firearm strikes the percussion cap, igniting it and sending a spark down the nipple and into the powder inside the barrel. "The percussion cap was an advancement in technology at the time," said Frank.

With the Pedersoli loaded, percussion cap attached and hammer back, it was finally time to take a shot. I was a little nervous to take my first shot with a muzzleloader, the pressure required to push everything down and loaded into the muzzle matched only by the pressure of taking the shot. So much time and effort spent loading the firearm meant missing the clay would be a pretty big disappointment. All of which meant I completely missed the target, the impressive blast from the black powder no match for the clay as it floated off into the distance.

With target missed I returned to the reloading bench and started the procedure all over again. This process of missing and reloading in shame went on a further three times, giving me plenty of time to continue over-thinking the target - a target I'm sure I'd hit any other day with a modern shotgun. Eventually I did break the clay and began feeling better about black powder.

Taking the shot is similar to a normal shotgun and while I'd forgotten my shotgun jacket, all the reloading time meant my shoulder wasn't under much pressure. I did feel some heat on my left wrist and had to slightly adjust where my hand was on the stock.



Frank and Sam prepare to shoot.



The cardboard and wad that goes down the barrel.

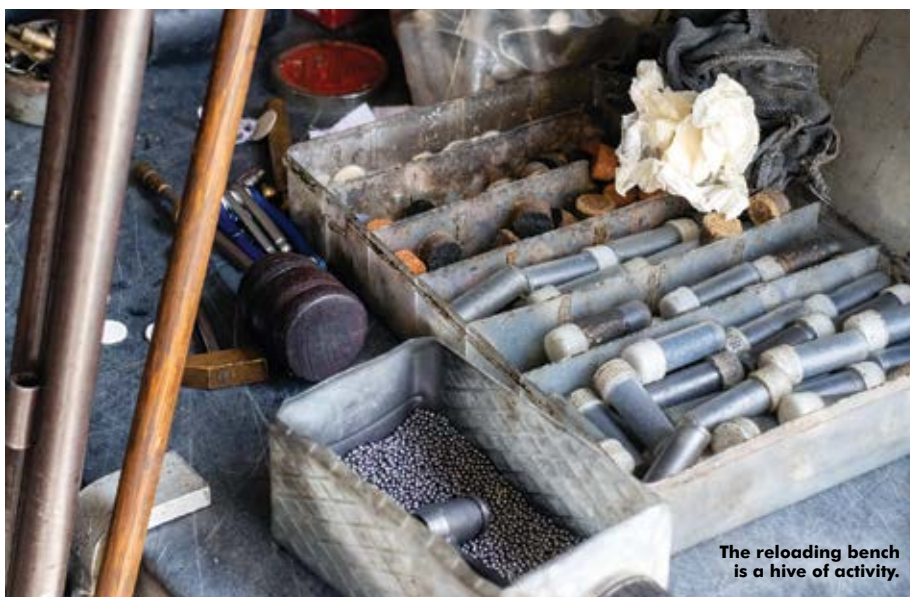
Flintlock

It was time to step further back into history with a flintlock shotgun. Instead of percussion caps the powder would now be ignited using a flint and frizzen (steel). After loading the flintlock the same way I had the percussion, I headed for the line of fire again but instead of a percussion cap in my hand I now had a powder flask.

At the line of fire I poured a small amount of powder from the flask on to a pan right next to where the flint causes a spark. This pan connects to the powder inside the barrel and when the trigger is pulled the flint strikes and sparks, setting off a chain reaction to the power. My first shot felt strange as when I pulled the trigger I could feel the flint being struck then the gun firing a fraction of a second later, although the delay was probably amplified in my head.

A few shots later I was feeling pretty comfortable with the flintlock and was soon loading through the muzzle, dispensing powder and operating hammers like a marksman from the 17th century - at least that's how it felt.

Frank collected the flint I was using from the Nullarbor and a skilled craftsman shaped it by hand. A flint can last anywhere from 30 to 50 shots but is also the main cause of misfires as it becomes dull and prone to not sparking. As for things going wrong with the firearm, Frank said most problems stem from barrel damage after not being cleaned properly. There are lots



The reloading bench is a hive of activity.

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more fluids and powders thrown around in muzzleloading than in more modern shotguns so cleaning is essential.

Old limitations

I recently wrote on the importance of chokes in shotgun shooting but when it comes to muzzleloading you can forget that as these shotguns have open chokes. Basically, technology didn't allow for machining of the barrels and even now chokes are not permitted in competition.

And speaking of technological limitations, about an hour into our shoot it started raining. Usually this is an inconvenience and not a problem for clay target shooting but in Muzzleloading it can really complicate the ignition systems. Wind is another factor as it can whisk the powder right off the pan before you have a chance to shoot.

As for muzzleloading rifles, as far as I understand they function similar to shotguns. I think I'll give them a go and I'm particularly interested in using round ball projectiles as well as even older ignition methods. Matchlock and wheel-lock ignition systems are even more primitive than flintlock but also ingenious and were revolutionary in their day. And I'm amazed



Aim, percussion cap, fire!

Muzzleloading competitions can take place out to 1000 yards - and that's without a scope.

Conclusion

Muzzleloading gave me an appreciation of just how simple firearms can be with almost endless designs and history to explore and

research. The discipline caters to lots of different shooting styles and I'm keen to give more muzzleloading a try and would encourage anyone reading this to do likewise. It might just be the best way to see, feel and appreciate centuries of shooting evolution. ●

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