



MUZZLELOADERS

Modern Muzzleloaders Provide More Hunting Opportunity



Today's hunters would be wise to take their image of muzzleloaders and those who use them and throw it out the window. Sure, there still are those who dress in buckskin, shoot a replica of a gun made in the 1800s and gnaw on tasteless jerky, but that's just not an accurate image of the majority of muzzleloaders and muzzleloading hunters. Modern muzzleloading rifles are modern in many ways - especially fit, function and form - and the hunters who use them are smart and as technologically savvy as any.

"Muzzleloading makes me a better hunter," said Tony Smotherman, co-host of Knight Rifles TV hunting show. "With muzzleloaders, you get to see what makes a gun go 'boom.' From measuring and loading the powder to pushing the projectile down the barrel, it captures the imagination and gives us more respect for the gun." The basic components of a muzzleloader are the same as with any firearm - a spark ignites an explosive that pushes a bullet. That's it in a nutshell, and it's the same no matter what you're shooting, and has been since the beginning.

Back in the day, muzzleloaders were cumbersome and rarely dependable or accurate. Plan on getting within 50 yards and hope for dry skies! The guns were termed matchlock and wheel lock. The matchlock actually involved a lit, slow-burning match that was levered onto a flashpan filled with a small amount of powder, which in turn ignited the main powder charge that pushed the bullet out of the barrel. The wheel lock was a better design, but was expensive and still not very reliable or accurate.

The flintlock rifle came next and is known as the gun that tamed the New World. This is the gun Daniel Boone, Davy Crockett and countless other men who wore dead critters on their heads carried as they explored and fought. The flintlock was used up to the first years of the Civil War. Flintlock rifles used a small piece of "flint" to create a spark that ignited the powder in the flash pan, which ignited the powder charge. Even though the flintlock was better than the was better than the wheel lock, it remained undependable.

While the flintlock was in use during the early years of the Civil War, the advancement of the percussion cap dominated at the end. The percussion cap replaced the "flint" in the flintlock and finally allowed firearms to fire relatively reliably. Evolved "percussion caps" are still used today as the ignition that triggers the powder, which pushes the bullet (which kills the deer, which hangs over the fireplace, and so on).

Percussion caps began as small copper or brass cylinders with one closed end, which held a small amount of shock-sensitive explosive material. The shooter placed the percussion cap over a hollow metal "nipple" at the rear of the barrel. Pulling the trigger released the hammer that struck the percussion cap and caused the small explosion that ignited the powder charge.

This concludes the boring history lesson and brings us close to the "modern" era of muzzleloading, although it's important to remember that along this long road small innovations were continually implemented, such as the discovery that adding spirals (rifling) to the inside of the barrel prompted the projectile (a round ball) to spin as it exited, resulting in much better accuracy. Think, though, that these advances took hundreds of years to occur. It can be said that more technological advancements in muzzleloaders have been made in the last 30 years than in the 300 described above.

MODERN MUZZLELOADING

The muzzleloaders available today resemble those used in the Civil War like a Mac resembles a manual typewriter. One's a state-of-the-art piece of technology and the other is a relic of a time gone by. Both function, but one does so in a far more efficient manner. Considering this, your question may be "so why do muzzleloaders still even exist?" indeed, 30 years ago black-powder rifles were gradually fading from the landscape.

Around this time several states began special primitive firearms seasons when hunters could take their percussion caplock reproductions out to the woods. Then, the "in-line" design appeared; rifles that abandoned the traditional side-lock mechanisms and created a faster and even more reliable gun. Instead of the spark having to essentially "turn a corner" to ignite the powder, the in-line design pushed the spark directly to the powder.

In 1985, Tony Knight developed an in-line rifle that utilized a "pull-type" ignition system that had safety features like that of modern centerfire rifles. This advancement established muzzleloading rifles as dependable, accurate and safe hunting weapons.

Where a settler on the frontier could hope to hit a buffalo at 50 yards, today's muzzleloaders guarantee 2-inch groups at 100 yards, and can actually produce better accuracy than that. Rifles that built on Knight's advancements have no problem taking a deer at 150 yards, making them not only viable hunting arms, but on equal footing with many modern centerfire rifles.

More innovations were to come. In 1997 the use of a No. 209 "shotgun" primer instead of a percussion cap became available. The No. 209 provides a stronger spark for more sure ignition. Stronger steels and receivers now allow the use of up to 150 grains of black powder, increasing effective range.

Even the powder has changed. Instead of black powder, most muzzleloading hunters now prefer substitutes such as Pyrodex and Triple Seven, which burn cleaner and cause less fouling.

It's obvious that the technological advancement made in the muzzleloading arena have created accurate and dependable guns. We now have muzzleloaders you can depend on to go 'boom' with a trigger pull, and we can be assured that the projectile will hit where we're aiming, but the question remains as to why any hunter would use one when more convenient firearms are available.

"There are several reasons I spend so much time behind my Knight smokepole," Smotherman said. "There are so many states across the country that have great deer hunting but don't allow centerfire rifles. If you want to hunt these trophy rich areas you must shoot a slug gun or muzzleloader. In many cases, hunters choose a slug gun for its ability to handle more than one shot, but I've always chosen a muzzleloader due to its extreme accuracy."

Smotherman took advantage of a muzzleloader, the new Knight KP1, during Iowa's shotgun deer season last year. The KP1 is a breakopen style muzzleloader with a twist - interchangeable barrels allow the gun to go from muzzleloader to centerfire to rimfire to shotgun in a few seconds, just by removing one barrel and adding another.

While videoing a hunt for the Knight Rifles TV hunting show, Smotherman used his KP1 to take a big 10-point buck. On his fourth evening of hunting, the buck walked into the agriculture field 100 yards from his perch in a treestand.

"That was a great buck," he said. "I had total confidence in making that one shot count. The shot was perfect right behind the shoulder and the buck didn't go but 50 yards off the edge of the field."

Smotherman also says that states such as Kansas and Kentucky offer very early muzzleloader seasons, giving hunters the first chance (even earlier than bowhunters) at big bucks.

"You get the opportunity to hunt bucks while they're still in bachelor groups and still on feeding patterns," he said. "Bucks come to the agriculture fields every evening like clockwork, giving a hunter the chance to pick out the biggest buck. It's a great opportunity that can't be capitalized on unless you're toting a muzzleloader."

MUZZLELOADER CLEANING AND SAFETY

Cleaning the muzzleloader still is an issue, but not like it was years ago. Our modern powders shoot cleaner and leave less residue in the barrel than black powder, but for accuracy's sake and the condition of the barrel, shooters should quickly swab the barrel between shots, and give the gun a thorough cleaning after a shooting session.

Access to the breech plug is important since it channels the fire to the powder. Most muzzleloading malfunctions are due to a blocked fire channel, which prevents the spark from reaching the powder charge. Shooters should remove and clean the breech plug after each shooting session, and fire a few primers afterward to dry and clear the channel.

Muzzleloaders used to come in one style, but now are available in several types, including pull-type, bolt action, drop action and break open. Break open muzzleloaders, similar to single-shot shotguns or centerfire rifles, are perceived as the easiest to clean because when the gun is open the breech plug is exposed. The break open style, such as the Knight Shadow, are the some of most popular on the market. It's safe to say, however, that nearly all of the muzzleloaders on the market offer easy access to the breech plug for easy removal. The drop action, in which the trigger group and hammer assembly are all in one piece, and drop out of the bottom of the receiver and provide easy access to the breech plug. Most of the bolt-action rifles feature an easily removable bolt that allows for easy access to the breech plug.

Today's firearm safety principles have their roots in the muzzleloading era. People learned to keep their muzzles aimed in a safe direction, keep their fingers away from triggers until they were ready to fire and keep their hands away from the muzzle.

Because you're dealing with loose powder or powder pellets, sparks or flames are a consideration, meaning no smoking when loading or even handling powder. When sighting in, establish a loading area away from the firing line to eliminate any chance of a spark coming in contact with a container of powder.

ADDITIONAL SAFETY PRECAUTIONS

- Never pour powder into the barrel directly from a horn, flask or can. Instead, pour a specific amount of powder into a measure and then into the bore.
- When inserting the projectile (patched round ball, lead conical or sabot) push it in a little ways with a short starter rod, then push it all the way down to the top of the powder charge with the ramrod. Be sure to seat the bullet directly on top of the powder. Do not leave any space between the powder and bullet.
- Always point the muzzle in a safe direction.
- When loading, keep your face away from the muzzle.
- Keep your muzzleloader clean, for safety and accuracy's sake.
- Never leave your muzzleloader loaded for more than a few days.

Changing barrels on the Knight KP1

Step 1, Remove the forearm.

Step 2, Pull the extractor.

Step 3, Push out bolt.

Step 4, Lift barrel.

The Knight Shadow's simple design makes it easy to use and maintain, and the extra safety features give you the confidence you need for a successful hunt.

The Knight Rolling Block muzzleloader is a new concept in front-loading rifles. The rolling block is a tried and true action design that has been upgraded with enhanced technology.

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