

Familiarity Breeds Survival

For Dangerous Game, There's No Substitute

By Terry Weiland

There are many desirable qualities in a rifle for hunting dangerous game.

Foremost, of course, is sufficient power, followed by absolute reliability. Accuracy, which many American riflemakers like to stress, comes far down the list – especially if achieving pinpoint accuracy means compromising reliability. Having a rifle that will shoot half-inch groups at 100 yards is not an advantage if this accuracy is achieved with a chamber that is so tight it is difficult to seat cartridges.

Reliability requires more than merely a mechanical system that never fails. It also involves a shooter's own ability to use a particular rifle action and the parts thereof.

On the list of necessities, after power and reliability, comes familiarity.

Elsewhere in this issue, we look at the Krieghoff "Big Five" double rifle, with its "combi-cocking device" for cocking the tumblers manually, rather than having them cocked by the barrels when the rifle is opened. This is a highly reliable, proven idea, and similar systems have been used for many years on German and Austrian hunting rifles – doubles, single-shots, and combination guns. To German hunters, cocking the tumblers this way is as natural as aiming; for most Americans, however, it is unfamiliar and often disconcerting.

Fortunately, in operation it functions much like the sliding tang safety which is found on the vast majority of double rifles and shotguns. The major differences are its much larger size, and the greater resistance that is offered by the mainsprings as the tumblers are compressed. The slide requires a definite effort to push forward – far more than a normal safety catch. Once you become accustomed to that, however, it is quite a natural movement.

If you do not fire the rifle and want to de-cock the tumblers (the equivalent with a standard rifle of putting the safety on) you simply push the slide forward slightly, then release it. It slides all the way to the rear, the tumblers are uncocked, and the rifle is made safe.

This subject brings to mind several instances of strange happenings with dangerous-game rifles, both doubles and bolt actions. Each of these involves familiarity, or the lack of it.

For various technical reasons, many big-bores are made with systems noticeably different than smaller rifles, even though the basic action may be the same.

For example, in the later part of the 20th century, many rifles were built on the Enfield P-17, a massive military bolt action that could accommodate oversized cartridges like the .416 Rigby and .505 Gibbs. The only hitch was that the P-17 cocks on closing the bolt, rather than on opening. Considering that cock-on-opening became standard with the Mauser 98, it is a mystery why the British designers chose to use what was even then (1914) an archaic system. Regardless, having one of these actions



on a dangerous game rifle is potentially hazardous if all your other bolt actions cock on opening.

As you close the bolt, you encounter a sudden, stiff resistance as the striker spring is compressed. In a tight situation, anything that throws you off or distracts you is the last thing you want. With sufficient practice, of course, you would get used to it. But, human nature being what it is, few of us practice enough with big bores. Ammunition is always expensive, sometimes very hard to get, and the recoil can be awesome. Most people just sight in their rifle, breathe a sigh of relief, and head off to Africa. The majority never really become comfortable with shooting the rifle, much less getting accustomed to its idiosyncracies.

Another oddity you find is the operation of the safety. Most bolts now have some sort of trigger-blocking safety, with the catch located beside the bolt shroud. The usual system is to have the rifle on "safe" with the catch pulled back, and moved into the "fire" position by pushing it forward. Some years ago, the Czech gun-maker, Brno, made a bolt-action rifle with a safety that was the reverse of this.

with Lowe's son-in-law, who was using that very rifle. We had a close encounter with a buffalo, and he had difficulty getting the rifle to fire. It turned out the alteration had malfunctioned, and the rifle had returned to its factory configuration – back to fire, forward to safe.

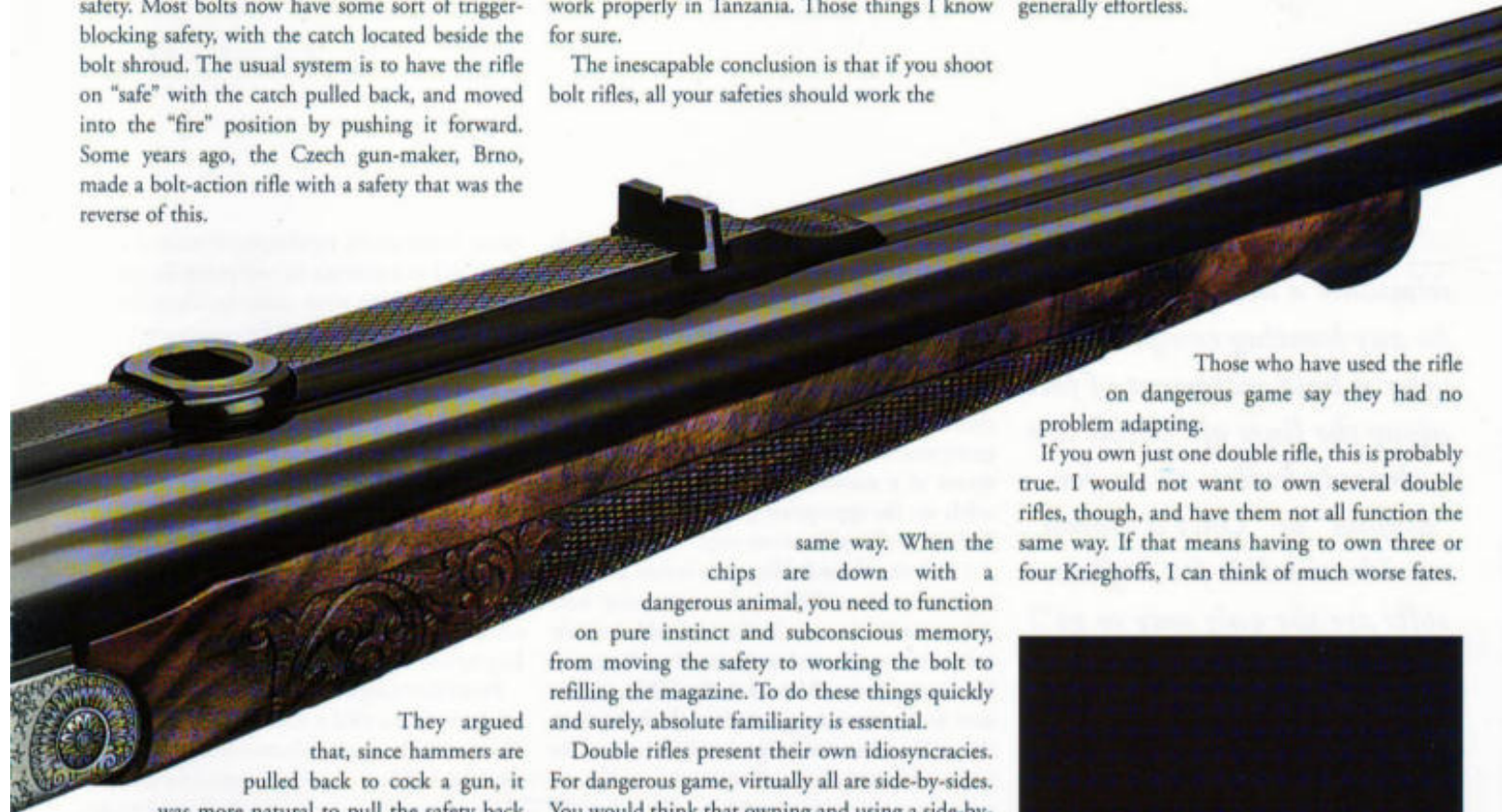
We concluded that the rifle may have malfunctioned the same way with Lowe in the fatal encounter with the elephant, and that the unfortunate PH thought it was ready to fire when, in fact, it was not.

These are the basic facts, and there is some controversy about them. Paul Roberts, who owned Rigby at the time, says that what I described is impossible. The fact remains, however, that Lowe is dead and the rifle did not work properly in Tanzania. Those things I know for sure.

The inescapable conclusion is that if you shoot bolt rifles, all your safeties should work the

at least ten pounds, and often much more; a side-by-side game gun weighs less than seven. The difference in weight makes the rifle handle considerably differently. Even if you practise at shooting and reloading a shotgun quickly, as with driven game, you still need to practise as much as possible with the big rifle to get used to the difference.

Ironically, this difference in weight and balance may work to the advantage of a devoted shotgunner who buys one of the Krieghoff double rifles. It feels sufficiently different in the hands that you are unlikely to try to manipulate it like a shotgun. As for the manual-cocking feature, it works enough like a conventional double that growing accustomed to it is natural and generally effortless.



Those who have used the rifle on dangerous game say they had no problem adapting.

If you own just one double rifle, this is probably true. I would not want to own several double rifles, though, and have them not all function the same way. If that means having to own three or four Krieghoffs, I can think of much worse fates.

same way. When the chips are down with a dangerous animal, you need to function on pure instinct and subconscious memory, from moving the safety to working the bolt to refilling the magazine. To do these things quickly and surely, absolute familiarity is essential.

Double rifles present their own idiosyncracies. For dangerous game, virtually all are side-by-sides. You would think that owning and using a side-by-side shotgun would provide all the familiarity you would need to shoot your .470, and to an extent that is true. The top lever generally works the same way, and you will have either extractors or ejectors. If all your shotguns have ejectors, and your rifle has extractors, this is something you do need to practise with.

Shotguns normally have an automatic safety. It moves into the "safe" position when the gun is opened, and must be pushed forward to fire. Rifles normally do not have automatic safeties, so you need to accustom yourself to putting the safety on manually after you reload. This may not be a factor when it comes to fast operation, but it certainly will be a concern to those around you.

A larger problem, however, is the difference in weight and balance. A big double rifle will weigh

They argued that, since hammers are pulled back to cock a gun, it was more natural to pull the safety back when you were ready to shoot. This argument is questionable at best, since very few modern hunters learn to shoot with a hammer gun. That aside, having a system the reverse of every other is extremely dangerous.

In 1992, the Zimbabwean professional hunter, Alan Lowe, was killed by an elephant. The exact circumstances of his death remain a mystery. He was an experienced hunter with a good rifle, yet he died without firing a shot.

At the time, he was carrying a .416 Rigby built by Rigby in London, on just such a Brno action. At Lowe's request, the system had been altered to make the safety work the way all other bolts do. When his body was found, the rifle was unfired and the safety was, apparently, still on. The following year, I hunted Cape buffalo in Tanzania

