

# MUZZLE LOADING

## THE GAME

Recreational target shooting with muzzleloading firearms encompasses a wide variety of guns, targets and situations. Both flint and percussion locks are used, and matches usually include contests in which the participant may fire in rifle, musket, pistol and shotgun competition.

While shooting matches range from highly regimented to highly informal, the two main types are Rendezvous and National Championships.

Rendezvous: A gathering of shooters and bystanders usually characterized by clothing and accessories common to the 18th and 19th centuries and where the targets are basically the same as those used during that era.

There are two types of rendezvous—primitive or “buckskinner” affairs and modern. Shooting events may range from “formal” matches at set distances and standard 10-ring bullseye targets, to gong shoots or split the ball on the axe blade games.

The rendezvous strives to recreate the historical and aesthetic qualities of Muzzleloader shooting and is credited, to a large extent, for keeping the blackpowder tradition alive and growing.

National Championships: Standardized courses of fire, emphasizing shooting skill rather than historical accuracy in dress and equipment, are held annually at Friendship, Indiana. Since the beginning of the Nationals in 1933, where less than 100 shooters participated, the contests have grown and now encompass over 500 different matches involving some 2,200 Muzzleloader fans.

Trap and skeet matches at the Nationals are quite similar to those fired on conventional ranges, and the four shotgun fields at Friendship are shot well into the night during the nine days of competition. Upland bird shooters spend time on the Quail Walk which offer clay targets thrown to simulate wild birds much like the popular Sporting Clays game. Rifle ranges are packed as primitive, bench, silhouette, Scheutzen, slug, rifled musket and “in-line” type guns are fired.

At the 1989 National Championships, a total of 32 aggregate awards were presented for different types of competition, and the number of individual matches far exceeded that number.

Rifle targets vary from the primitive X target to the standard X-ring targets with one inch bullseye and Scheutzen 200 yard target with its two inch bull. Metallic silhouette targets are shot on a course like that used in regular rifle competition, but utilize shapes of crow, groundhog, buffalo, turkey and bear at ranges between 50 and 200 yards.

Primitive matches may offer paper silhouettes of antique bottles, or the shooter may try his hand at hitting the edge of an axe with a lead ball, splitting the ball and breaking clay targets on each side of the blade. Distances vary and are at the discretion of the range officers.

Unlike today’s modern shotgun, rifle and pistol matches which generally offer strict outlines concerning calibers, gauges and loads, muzzleloading matches stress individuality. Powder weights vary from



shooter to shooter and from match to match. Riflemen use differing patch material ranging from pillow ticking to precut linen, and lubricants may be anything from a space age synthetic to saliva. Shotgunners may stick with a basic volume of powder to the same volume of shot, or they may tailor weigh to produce a definite and desired shot pattern at a given yardage. These are shooters' games and those who know the specific quirks of their firearms score well.

## **EQUIPMENT**

**Ammunition:** Muzzleloading firearms use either blackpowder or Pyrodex as the propellant. You cannot substitute smokeless powder for use in Muzzleloaders.

Blackpowder has remained virtually unchanged for more than two centuries and is a mixture of 75 parts potassium nitrate, 15 parts charcoal and 10 parts sulfur.

Pyrodex is a 20th Century product of the Hodgdon Powder Company of Shawnee Mission, Kansas, which offers blackpowder qualities without some of the blackpowder problems. Pyrodex fouls the bore less than blackpowder. However, it functions best when the bore has been properly dressed—3 to 5 warmup shots fired.

Both have their uses, but Pyrodex is not listed in the same explosive category as blackpowder for transportation purposes. The shooter who intends to fly to matches across the country may find that some airlines prohibit carrying blackpowder, especially in amounts required for extended contests.

While only lead balls, bullets or shot are used, serious shooters often cast their own projectiles, inspect and weigh them for consistency and experiment with powder charges, patch thickness, different percussion caps or priming charges. They are, in effect, doing the same things that modern reloaders do in search of accuracy, but without the machines.

**Firearms:** Open or Unlimited Class matches allow the use of the modern "in-line" muzzleloading rifles which resemble contemporary centerfire rifles, but most other contests require that rifles be the traditional hunting types like those in use over 100 years ago. The ball, bullet or shot charge must load from the muzzle and be ignited by an approved ignition system, usually percussion cap or flintlock.

The Traditional Offhand Rifle is one typical of those commonly available prior to 1840 and the Unlimited Offhand, Traditional Offhand and Rifled Musket follow the same basic guidelines, but have specific rules which apply under NMLRA auspices.

The Squirrel Rifle cannot weigh more than 10 pounds and must be 40 caliber or smaller, and the X-Stick (Buffalo) Rifle cannot exceed 14 pounds in weight. Handguns range from flint and percussion pistols to percussion revolvers. Any original or reproduction muzzleloading shotgun can be used, and the same is true for smoothbore muskets which adhere to original designs. In fact, a muzzleloading shotgun becomes a smoothbore musket when loaded with a patched ball instead of lead shot.

Some of the firearms seen at the National Championships bear little resemblance to the original "smokepoles" of the past two centuries, looking more like pieces of industrial machinery than rifles. But, in some of the "unlimited class" events, as with most precision competitions, the name of the game is simply to produce the tightest possible group.

Competitive blackpowder shooting appeals to a broad range of people, no matter whether they prefer recreating the games enjoyed by the mountain men or utilize the latest technology.

Targets: Targets rival those used in most other shooting competitions in variety, coming in a multitude of sizes and shapes, ranging from standard bullseye to game simulation. Scoring is usually done on a five-shot relay format with a 50-point, 5X maximum score per match. The “10X” ring is used as a tiebreaker.

## **HUNTING**

More and more sportsmen are turning to blackpowder firearms as a way to expand their hunting opportunities and hone their hunting skills. Practically every state offers some type of special hunting season for Muzzleloaders. With the proper gun and load, practically any game can be taken by blackpowder. And because of Muzzleloader range limitations, sportsmen are finding blackpowder hunting to be a challenging test of ability.

A muzzleloading shotgun is capable of producing the same pattern and ballistics as a modern scattergun, and a 32 or 36 caliber smallbore blackpowder rifle delivers comparable energy of a 22 long rifle. With big bore bullets and proper charges to deliver them, any of the standard blackpowder calibers—45, 50 and 58—are suitable for taking most big game at proper yardages.

## **HISTORY**

The history of all shooting sports began with blackpowder and Muzzleloaders. Unlike more modern games, the use of firearms cannot be dated with any degree of exactness, but the first provable use comes from an illustration made in 1326. The original inventor of blackpowder is unknown.

By as early as 1472 there were major shooting matches in Europe and competition drew shooters from many parts of the continent. Gunners competed on the same fields but often with different targets from those used by archers and cross-bowmen.

Distances were as long as 500 yards, and bullseyes were as large as 5 feet. Sights and rifling were commonly used by the year 1500, causing targets to shrink and differences to be made between rifles and smoothbores even as they are today. Various types of locks were used. The cannon lock into which a lighted coal or hot wire was pushed, the matchlock, wheellock, snaphaunce and flintlock were some of the earliest. In 1793, the Reverend Alexander Forsythe’s experiments with a percussion compound laid the foundation that eventually evolved into the modern day percussion cap, but not before the “pill lock” which used a pinch of priming compound with no copper cup to hold it, and another “tape primer” like the caps used in children’s toy guns today, were tried. The percussion cap was more weather resistant than flint ignition systems, firing was almost instantaneous with the hammer fall, hangfires (delayed firings) decreased and accuracy was enhanced with the new caps. Not until the advent of the self-contained, metallic cartridge was it possible to improve on firearms accuracy and dependability.

The first organized Muzzleloader competition in modern times took place in 1931 along the Ohio River Valley. Two years later, the first national championships were held and the revival of blackpowder firearms was born. Today, there are over 27,000 members and 350 chartered clubs in the National Muzzleloader Rifle Association, the governing body for blackpowder shooting in the U.S.

Today’s muzzleloading shooters carry on sports and traditions that began over 500 years ago, and the firearms commonly used still strongly resemble those in use when the United States was composed of 13 sparsely settled colonies.