

The Lure of The Double Rifle

More than any other gun, big-bore double rifles symbolize adventure. But actually own one ...?

BY JOHN ZENT, Editorial Director



S

o chalk up another disparity between my modest gunwriting career and the late, great Jack O'Connor's. No comely lady leopard hunters in my past. On my one and only leopard safari, the other hunter in camp was anything but. Rather, he was bald as a melon, hawk-eyed and remained red-faced as a lobster due to our daily exertions in the African sun. Appearances aside, he was in every way imaginable a prince of a fellow who generously offered to let me fire the double rifle he had brought to hunt buffalo.

It was my first go with a classic stopping rifle, and I steeled myself for punishment. With the professional hunters warily assessing our shooting acumen, I didn't want to screw up. My first impression was that the man's Rigby .470 Nitro was darned heavy, but not

totally unfamiliar. Essentially it was like a side-by-side shotgun, though more compact and beefier. Often we hear how this or that firearm balances so nicely between the hands, but I had never felt balance as intuitive as this. It was as if my hands were made to grip that particular rifle, a sensation akin to the "just-right" handling of a favorite baseball bat or trusty axe.

At that point muscle memory kicked in, the butt rose and welded itself to my cheek and shoulder, the ivory front bead split the rear V, then settled on an X that had been spray-painted on a block of wood. I took a deep breath and ...

BOOM! *Whoa, wasn't really ready for that!* The wood-block splintered and skipped backward. "Good show!" said PH Nixon Dzingai. "Hit the bloody thing again."

"The double rifle is a weapon of romance ... [it] connotes ivory hunting, long lines of safari porters, drinking sundowners beside a fire of nyombo wood while lions roar on the veldt, affairs of the heart with comely lady leopard hunters."

—Jack O'Connor in *Complete Book of Rifles and Shotguns*, 1961



Almost of its own accord the Rigby was already locked onto the target. **BOOM!** This time the block split. *Yeoww!* Yeah, I felt the recoil. Yeah, it rocked me. But it wasn't the whippin' I had expected. All things considered, my double-rifle intro was love at first bite.

Since then I have fired several more big-bore doubles, and the inherent grace so evident during my initial tango with the Rigby has impressed me as a common trait. The best of them make shouldering and sighting seem almost effortless. No doubt frequent shooting has helped to train me—perhaps ironically, shotgunning more so than rifle shooting—but there's something almost automatic about handling a double

rifle. No gun I have known is more businesslike, providing we keep in mind what business the double rifle is in. Like any hunting arm, it's vital that a double can strike with precision for clean, ethical kills. But the real measure is how it performs on defense.

By nature, double rifles represent a series of contradictions. They must be sufficiently powerful to drop beasts equipped with the size, tools and attitude to rip a man apart or crush him in an eye blink, and yet these rifles must handle quickly and fluidly enough to strike like lightning during a sudden encounter. To make recoil bearable they typically weigh 20 to 25 percent more than a standard big-game rifle, but

Today's "Working" Doubles

In recent decades double rifles have actually become more accessible and, relatively speaking, more affordable. So long as you're not insisting on a pedigree from Purdey, Holland & Holland or Westley Richards (all still in business), you don't have to head off to London and shell out six figures. An investment of \$10,000 to \$15,000 will net a perfectly capable German double comparable to a

British gun in handling and reliability.

In that price range, today's double-rifle buyer can count on a rock-solid firearm likely to eclipse everything else in his gun cabinet in terms of fit, finish and workmanship. We identified four makers in this category whose rifles are available through U.S. importers, and were able to obtain for testing a Blaser S2 Safari, Heym Model 88B PH, Krieghoff Classic and Merkel 140A.

In the vernacular of double-rifle fanciers, all of these are "working" rifles, meaning they are boxlock actions lacking the ornamentation that typically adorns premium doubles. All contain major components produced on high-tech CNC machines, but they also receive considerable handwork for barrel regulation and fit and finish. Each one boasts its own special features.

Blaser S2 Safari

A relative newcomer introduced in 2001, the S2 action takes an innovative approach by centering on what Blaser calls a "tilting block" system adapted from its single-shot K95 model. The tilting block is in essence a pivoting breechface containing the firing pins, and upon lockup it engages the standing breech, a protruding barrel shroud and the two-piece extractor block (no ejectors). A square underlug protrudes from the tilting block to engage the receiver floor. The S2 features a manual cocking piece located on the tang. Slide it forward to cock both hammers, or disengage by pressing on the tail of

the piece and returning it rearward. As such the rifle can be carried loaded but uncocked. The barrels are independently free-floated and not soldered together, and the direct trigger pulls measured 4 lbs., 4 ozs. and 4 lbs., 12 ozs. Blaser says that the balance point varies depending on caliber, so weight distribution is individually tailored to the specific rifle. The rear sight blade contains a thin notch that aligns with the front post, both of which were marked with white. Also, the rounded, upraised quarter rib is notched for scope mounting.

The well-figured stock exhibited

BLASER S2 SAFARI

IMPORTER: BLASER USA, Inc.; (210) 377-2527; WWW.BLASER-USA.COM
CALIBER: .375 H&H MAG. (TESTED), .470 NITRO EXPRESS, .500/.416 NITRO EXPRESS, .500 NITRO EXPRESS
BARREL LENGTH: 24.5"
SIGHTS: RAMP FRONT, STANDING BAR REAR
SAFETY: TOP TANG
STOCK: WALNUT
WEIGHT: 11 LBS., 11 OZS.
METAL FINISH: BLUED BARREL
MSRP: \$10,682+

moderate drop and was configured with a straight-lined comb, as well as a Pachmayr Decelerator pad and an in-board Kickstop that help manage recoil.



Blaser's S2 utilizes a unique "tilting block" lockup that engages the receiver, standing breech and barrel shroud. A muzzle adjustment fine-tunes point-of-impact.

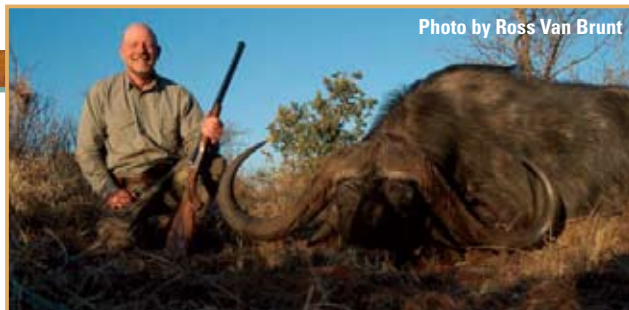


Photo by Ross Van Brunt

Dwight Van Brunt realized a lifelong dream, dropping a 51" Cape buffalo with a John Rigby double rifle.

it is not unusual for the hunter to have to lug one many miles over rugged terrain in equatorial swelter. Although shots are taken at comparatively close range on animals possessing sizable vital areas, the hunter's ability to shoot his rifle accurately is too often compromised by lack of practice, recoil flinch and adrenaline overload. Foremost, the dangerous-game double must be utterly reliable no matter what.

Yet in the hands of a capable hunter, good double rifles resolve all the contradictions.

Roar of the Empire

The perception of double rifles being a British exclusive is a bit of a stretch, but not completely unfounded. Though multi-barrel guns had been around for centuries, the double-gun form attained near-perfection in late Victorian-era shops in London and Birmingham.

Smoothbores produced by Greener, Purdey's, Rigby and others set the bar for handling, accuracy and aesthetics that far exceeded previous standards and literally transformed wingshooting into an art form.

Before long the great gunmaking houses adapted the same structural architecture—hammerless side-locks and boxlocks, sliding crossbolts, underlug “lumps,” top-release levers, full-bodied extractors

and elegant, minimalist stocks—to rifled arms. The frames and barrel walls had to be bulked up, the lockups strengthened and the finest steels employed to accommodate the roaring big cordite loads these rifles were chambered to shoot. The result was a somewhat specialized tool that mirrored the speed, grace and pointability of best-quality side-by-side shotguns. What the classic British double rifle lacked as a long-range sharpshooter, it more than made up for by being the ultimate close-quarters arbiter.

It was as if the British had created a firearm to reflect their zeal for conquest. Quite purposely, the double rifle was a brash, no-quarter-given firearm, as much firepower and overkill as a man could deliver with one squeeze of a trigger. Armed thusly, ruddy Englishmen had the cheek to march right up within snarling distance

Heym M88 PH

The mid-1980s debut of the Heym Model 88B Safari helped to kick off new-generation double rifles, and now the base-model PH offers intriguing value. This big boxlock from the long-time German maker keys on traditional engineering and is loaded with extras normally found on far more expensive guns. Locking integrity is supplied by a Greener crossbolt and twin underlugs. Shooters will appreciate touches like visible right/left cocking indicators on either side of the tang and an articulated (hinged) front trigger that flexes under recoil to prevent bruising one's trigger finger. Ejectors enhance the rifle's suitability for dangerous game,

and intercepting sears help prevent “doubling” under recoil. Heym boasts the broadest range of calibers offered in a production double rifle and was the first of several makers to adopt Hornady's Dangerous Game Series ammunition for regulating barrels in certain rimmed calibers reintroduced by Hornady. A two-leaf rear sight wedged into the standing quarter rib is paired with a front bead at the muzzle and the rib is machined to accept claw-style scope mounts.

The classic stock offers a beefy pistol grip, wide buttplate, straight comb and shallow cheekpiece. The silver-finish receiver lacks decoration and, along with the PH's clean lines,

HEYM MODEL 88B PH

IMPORTER: HEYM USA;
(214) 606-2566;

WWW.HEYMUSA.COM

CALIBER: .375 FLANGED, .375 H&H MAG.,
.416 RIGBY, .450/400 NITRO
EXPRESS 3", .458 WIN. MAG.,
.470 NITRO EXPRESS (TESTED),
.500/.416 NITRO EXPRESS,
.500 NITRO EXPRESS

BARREL LENGTH: 24"

SIGHTS: EXPRESS FRONT AND REAR; RIB
MACHINED FOR SCOPE MOUNTING

SAFETY: TOP TANG

STOCK: EUROPEAN WALNUT

WEIGHT: 9 LBS. TO 10 LBS. 8 OZS.

METAL FINISH: GRAY/BLUE FINISH

MSRP: \$17,000

makes for an “all-business” appearance. Heym makes its stocks to order, ensuring owners get a perfect fit.



The Heym PH echoes tradition with a Greener crossbolt and tang-mounted cocking indicators. The quarter rib holds a two-leaf rear sight and is machined for claw-type mounts.

of the world's most dangerous beasts. It was jolly good sport then, and that certainly hasn't changed.

Icon Vs. Standby

For many American riflemen infected by the Africa bug, owning a double rifle becomes a compulsive part of the safari experience. Frequently they cite classic African hunting books, wanting to relive the exploits of legendary figures like Selous, Roosevelt, Hunter and Ruark (who, in *Horn of the Hunter*, dubs his "the big, ugly rifle"). Reliving the legend comes at a price, of course, and for a big-bore double regulated to shoot both barrels to the same point of impact, the starting point is about \$10,000.

Beyond cost, the practicality of this compulsion may be another matter altogether. For a century, "double vs. bolt-action" has been a burning campfire debate. Is it better to have two nearly instantaneous, instinctive shots than to have twice that many at a bit slower rate of fire? Is it better to switch to a gun with a thoroughbred lineage, or to stick with a familiar, dependable workhorse?

No one disputes that the double earned its place on the

pedestal. Lightning follow-ups coupled with chamberings way up the power scale make it the definitive "stopping" rifle. Given equal barrel lengths, the twin-tube gun will be considerably shorter overall than any magazine rifle with its comparatively lengthy receiver. That compactness helps center the rifle's weight between the shooter's hands, so it's no wonder the handling resembles that of a lively shotgun. The open sights are fast and intuitive and, because the sight line is low to the bore, they shoot spot-on anywhere from 75 yds. to literal spitting distance. Since double rifles contain two separate locks controlled by separate triggers, the shooter remains in business even on the rare occasion one of them fails.

Regrettably, most American shooters have never even fired one. So regardless of one's bank balance, a double-rifle wannabe must confront more serious questions of familiarity and skill. Can you become skilled enough with a double to deal with a charging buffalo or elephant? Wouldn't it make more sense to rely on a lifetime of bolt-rifle training when there is time only to react?

One credible viewpoint comes from Kevin Robertson,

Today's "Working" Doubles

Krieghoff Classic

Just as Krieghoff over-unders have dominated clays competition, its side-by-side Classic rifle has had a profound influence on safari hunting. Present-day professional hunters are far more likely to carry doubles than their fathers, and the Krieghoff is reportedly the most popular. The renewed availability of double-rifle ammo coupled with the Krieghoff's attainable cost has made it a mainstay in contemporary Africa.

The Classic relies on a relatively simple, sturdy lockup, employing four rectangular underlugs that mate into receiver-floor recesses. A large, one-piece extractor rides on the barrel monoblock, and there are no ejectors. The cocking rods and springs are contained behind the standing breech—rather than in the receiver floor—thereby leaving more steel in the receiver.

The Krieghoff double is manually cocked with a sliding piece on the tang (similar to the Blaser's), a feature that has sparked controversy. Though it facilitates safe carry with rounds chambered, in the heat of confrontation that step has stumped some. For the pros who stake their lives on it day-to-day, it becomes an ingrained reflex. A thumbpiece makes the cocking lever fairly easy to manipulate, and nudging the lever forward releases it and decocks the hammers. Both front and rear sights contain red fiber-optic inserts, and the quarter rib is machined to accept detachable scope-mount hardware.

The stock on our test rifle was nicely grained walnut, checkered with a diamond pattern on the wrist and fore-end. It was straight-combed with a generous cheek-piece and a Pachmayr Decelerator pad.

KRIEGHOFF CLASSIC BIG FIVE

IMPORTER: KRIEGHOFF INT'L, INC.;

(610) 847-5173;

WWW.KRIEGHOFF.COM

CALIBER: .375 FLANGED,
.375 H&H MAG., .500/.416 NITRO
EXPRESS, .450/400 NITRO
EXPRESS 3", .470 NITRO EXPRESS
(TESTED), .500 NITRO EXPRESS

BARREL LENGTH: 23.5"

SIGHTS: V-SHAPED EXPRESS REAR SIGHT
AND RAMP FRONT WITH FIBER-OPTIC
INSETS

SAFETY: MANUAL TOP TANG

STOCK: EUROPEAN WALNUT

WEIGHT: 9 LBS., 8 OZS. TO 10 LBS., 8 OZS.

METAL FINISH: SATIN GRAY RECEIVER;
BLUED BARRELS

MSRP: \$9,795 TO \$12,795

The coin-finished receiver was decorated with scroll engraving that was attractive but not overly ornate.



Popular with African hunters today, the Krieghoff Classic features a cocking-piece on the tang that allows safe carry with rounds in the chambers.

a Zimbabwean PH and veterinarian whose practical field guides have made him a hot new voice on African hunting. In his latest volume, *Africa's Most Dangerous*, Robertson concludes that for visiting hunters, the best dangerous-game rifle is a scoped bolt-action, because it is familiar and will facilitate all-important first-shot accuracy. Conversely, he points out that the double represents a superior tool for the professional hunter, who will normally fire only when things go wrong.

Despite all that, the romance with Ruark's "big ugly" is going strong, and determined hunters are clamoring to join a select fraternity that traces its roots to the ivory trade and tiger shikars. "I was enamored with the romance and nostalgia, like a lot of guys in my generation, who've gone on to become double-rifle owners or wish they were," says outdoor media veteran Cameron Hopkins. "I was reading Taylor, Hunter, Hemingway, Ruark, all the greats, and dreaming of adventure.

"But it was more than just that," says Hopkins. "I was nearly as interested from a technical standpoint. The gunmaker's art truly reaches its zenith with the double

rifle. Regulating the barrels, assembling all the small action parts with precision and ruggedness, fitting the stock. It's a gun-builder's challenge that has never been surpassed.

"When I was editor at *Guns* magazine I had the chance to buy one of the first Heym 88s brought into the country. The stock was a bit too long for me, and what I knew I really wanted was an English double built in the classic period before World War II. So I sold the Heym, and during a chance visit to a small gun store in rural Missouri I found my prize: a 1919 William Evans in .500, which is pretty unusual. I just had to have it, so I ended up trading several guns and cash. Now I've got the double rifle I dreamed about."

From another perspective, long-time African PH Joe Coogan adds, "Unless someone has vast experience with a double shotgun and has really practiced with the rifle, it's a huge mistake to show up on safari with a brand-new double. At the very least, get out and hunt other game first."

Merkel 140A

Located in the historic armsmaking town of Suhl, Germany, Merkel remained there when other gunmakers fled to the west in the spring of 1945. While the company continued to produce well-made sporting guns under communist rule, styling and technical innovation were frozen in pre-war standards. Even now, the 140 appears to be an old-school design, with an action centered on the proven Greener-style crossbolt lockup and supplemented by two blocky underlugs. The rib joining the 23.6" barrels includes a standing quarter rib that contains the rear sight and an upraised muzzle block for the front sight. The rear sight consists of three square-notched leaves, two of which fold down. A shiny

brass bead tops the front sight post for high visibility in shadows and low light. In addition to the multi-leaf sight, this rifle offered a few more welcome features. Brass cocking indicators on opposite sides of the receiver provide an immediate reference, and this gun is equipped with robust ejectors. The stock—straight-grained walnut—isn't fancy and doesn't suggest a German origin; its pistol grip has an open radius, the fluted comb is quite straight and the cheek-piece rather dainty. The wood-to-metal tolerances, nicked receiver and deep barrel bluing were expertly executed.

Overall weight of the Merkel is just over 10 lbs., the lightest of the guns tested. In our .375 H&H loaner the recoil

MERKEL MODEL 140A

IMPORTER: MERKEL USA;

(205) 655-8299;

WWW.MERKEL-USA.COM

CALIBER: .375 H&H MAG. (TESTED),

.416 RIGBY, .470 NITRO EXPRESS,

.500 NITRO EXPRESS

BARREL LENGTH: 23.6"

SIGHTS: FRONT BLADE, V-STYLE REAR


SAFETY: TANG

STOCK: WALNUT

WEIGHT: 10+ LBS.

METAL FINISH: SILVER/GRAVED RECEIVER, BLUED BARREL

MSRP: \$10,995

was really not a problem, though perhaps that could become an issue in the bigger calibers. 



The solid, well-finished Merkel 140A follows a vintage pattern centering on a Greener-style lockup along with folding-leaf express sights. New this year are robust ejectors.

Double Rifle T&E

Firing the new Hornady Dangerous Game Series ammunition, we put four doubles through multiple exercises and involved a team of shooters in the project. Because the true test of a double rifle is how it performs in real-world situations, we felt it more useful to focus on field simulations rather than customary benchrest accuracy and function-firing data.

All rifles were fired at 25-, 50- and 100-yd. stationary targets in order to evaluate the sights and trigger pulls. The Blaser S2, by virtue of sights that provided a fine, repeatable alignment and the lightest triggers—was the most accurate in this phase, though not by a great deal.

The secondary sight blades on the Merkel and Heym provided proper elevation from a dead-on hold at 100 yds., and the others hit low at that range. It is unusual, however, for hunters to take a 100-yd. shot with a big-bore double. PHs typically insist on getting in close so clients shoot no farther than about half that on dangerous game.

At 50 yds. we fired three shots from each barrel over sandbags to check the regulation, and were pleased to see that all of our working doubles attained the so-called “minute of grapefruit” standard.

The principal exercise was firing on a “charging” buffalo target fixed to the target carrier on the NRA Tech Range. Although our half-sized “dugga boy” was pretty slow-footed, it provided a valuable reference for how each gun performed the shouldering/firing/reloading sequence under pressure.

Beginning with the rifle on sticks, we fired the first shot from varying distances between 50 and 20 yds. Thus hit, the buff “charged” the shooter, who then fired the second barrel, cleared the empties, reloaded with fresh rounds from his belt and fired again. The aim was to get four rounds in the vitals (chest or brain) before the bull ran us down. About 60 percent of our shots hit in the kill zones marked with

stick-on bulls-eyes. Here’s what we observed in the different stages:

Handling—Because balance is so critical in this class, it was no surprise that all of the test rifles shouldered smoothly and felt balanced and solid between the hands. While the Merkel and the Krieghoff finished in a dead-heat as the No. 1 preference, the Heym, thanks to a slightly longer stock, got the nod from one long-armed shooter.

Sighting—The fine Blaser sights, which seemed to give it an edge in deliberate firing, proved difficult to deploy under stress and in the low light of an indoor range. So too, the Krieghoff’s fiber-optics were a bit tough to see. In brighter conditions they are readily visible, but not all dangerous game is shot in full sun. The traditional V-blade and brass bead setup employed by the Heym and the Merkel was the favorite of most shooters.

Shooting Accuracy—Although the .470 NE rifles, the Krieghoff and Heym, kicked significantly more than the .375 H&H Blaser and Merkel, they placed just as many, if not more, hits in the kill zones. The misses, it was felt, were because shooters rushed and did not exercise proper trigger discipline. Given the nature of the exercise and our relative inexperience, we were pleasantly surprised with the results across the board.

Reloading—Understandably all hands preferred the ejector actions (Heym and Merkel) since breaking the gun open clears the empty brass in one motion. Those rifles also offered greater clearance with the actions open, which made it easier to slip fresh rounds in the chambers. None of the shooters was experienced with extractor-only guns, and frankly we fumbled with both the Krieghoff and Blaser, and neither proved reliable about “dumping” the spent shells. In fact, the Blaser extractors appeared unable to move the cases at all, and with the protruding barrel shroud and tilting breech in the mix, it was

tricky to pluck the empties free. Obviously such a situation would have to be resolved before hunting, and in such occurrences an owner should consult the manufacturer.


As the exercise proceeded we got quicker at the procedure, so clearly it is a skill that can be learned and thus merits serious practice.

Recoil Management—The big guns do kick, but in this exercise, as in actual hunting, it was barely noticeable on all models.

Bringing Home A Legend

Now, \$10,000 or more for a firearm is much more than most of us have ever seriously considered, and for some it’s just crazy talk. In the face of the current economy, readers are justified to wonder why *American Rifleman* would choose to do an article on guns that cost so much.

Here’s why: Our mission since 1926 has been to cover all kinds of firearms in good times and bad, and in fact we published articles on African hunting and double rifles during the Great Depression. Then—and now—*Rifleman* readers are characterized by their passion for learning about firearms, especially those whose utmost quality and utility embody the true art of gunmaking and which therefore represent lasting value.

Consider too, what most of us have seen happen to our investments and retirement accounts in recent months—right in the tank! The value of quality firearms is a different story. If I had purchased a few good double rifles instead of playing it “safe” in the “securities” market, my nest-egg would indeed be more secure and at the same time could give me tangible satisfaction. Although we are in no way presuming to offer investment advice, it is inarguable that our firearm collections almost always remain positive assets in times of economic downturn. 

Stateside Doubles

We can only speculate on why American manufacturers conceded the double rifle to English and Continental makers for so long, but thankfully that's no longer the case.

A California shop, B. Searcy & Co. (www.searcyent.com), has played a big role in popularizing double rifles and in the process earned the esteem of safari hunters and fine firearm buffs. Furthermore, proprietor Butch Searcy has generously supported NRA through auction donations of eye-opening custom rifles that have raised considerable funds to underwrite NRA-ILA political advocacy and shooting education endowments in The NRA Foundation.

Searcy doubles span a wide range of grades and pricing. The Field Grade features an Anson & Deeley boxlock action that is highly regarded for durability and field performance. With pricing starting around \$10,000, this is a genuine value in this market segment. Meanwhile Searcy's handsome sidelocks are equally regarded for stunning looks on classic English lines and match the capability of great old guns in the bush.

Ironically, the oldest name in the British gun trade, John Rigby & Co. (www.johnrigbyandco.com), is also building its wares nowadays in California. U.S. investors led by Geoff Miller acquired control of the historic company in the 1990s, and under Miller's direction have revitalized the proud tradition, primarily focusing on safari rifles built on both bolt-action and double-rifle platforms. Rigby's contemporary doubles—both sidelock and boxlock models—appear quite traditional in engineering and styling but also feature modern Pachmayr Decelerator pads and recoil-absorbing mercury tubes installed in the buttstocks. The Rigbys shoot .375 and .416 Flanged, as well as a trio of bigger Nitro Express rounds.

