

"SMOKE SIGNALS "
Blackpowder Muzzle loading
By; Andre (Graywolf) Reed
A Pilgrims Journey

Some Thoughts On How To Give Advice To a Novice Shooter.

With the hundreds of thousands of muzzle loaders being sold today, you had better believe that the world is full of novice black powder shooters. It's great to add so many kindred souls to our roster but I only wish that each and everyone of them had the opportunity of being tutored for a couple of years under the watchful eye of some truly knowledgeable black powder experts like those who watched over me for many a year. It is unfortunate, to my way of thinking, that often the only help many will receive is a small manual that might come with their rifle. A few of those manuals are good; many however are more of a hazard than a help. All of this goes to point out the fact that anyone who has been shooting for only a very few months will often have a chance to become a resident black powder expert to a friend, co-worker or just some casual acquaintance. I am not belittling the job, I just want to point out the awesome responsibility that one assumes when that advice is apt to maim or kill the receiver. Isn't it interesting that when I am instructing a novice shooter, shooters that I recently trained a few weeks earlier now contradict me and have become experts. When I am asked for advice a crowd gathers and everyone has an opinion.

After spending many a year helping novice shooters I have developed my own personal style of giving advice. So for what it is worth, here it is. I find that I have one set of instructions that I use when I am able to go to the range with a new shooter and a completely different set of instructions when the advice is only verbal, over a cup of coffee. It just may be that it is the verbal side of my advice pattern that continually crops up in this article, and sometimes puts me at odds with other writers.

When I am just talking or writing, I find that I never refer to large charges, but when I am leaning over a shooter's shoulder it is an entirely different game. I ran into a new shooter at the range last week. It was his second trip out with his new rifle. The first trip had been a complete disaster. Approximately thirty-six rounds fired at a two-foot square target set at 100 yards resulted in only eight random holes on the paper. Now he had a good looking rifle; a .54 Hawken style with a 11/16 Douglas barrel and lots of evidence of craftsmanship.

I had taken my grandson out to show him how to shoot his new CVA Mountain rifle. He had already put eight or ten shots into his target and we had worked the balls into the centre of the 2" bull's eye. Those 2" groups weren't anything to get excited about but my grandson was praising muzzle loading to high heaven. He even went so far as to ask me what made a muzzle loader shoot better than a cartridge rifle; he had never got that kind of accuracy from a cartridge gun. He sure was a happy muzzle loader. So I had my grandson well on his way when this new friend showed up with his fine Hawken rifle.

After listening to his sad tale of poor accuracy, I inquired as to his load. He said that the gun shop salesman where he had purchased it had recommended ninety grains of 3fg. Now before any of you get excited, let me repeat that this was a heavy barrel.

The workmanship on the rifle was pretty good, so in this particular case I was not overly alarmed about that particular charge. But then this new shooter added. That 90 grains didn't work so I went up to 150 grains of Goex 3fg. and my arm was black and blue the next day. The only time I'll shoot next to 150 grains of 3fg is when a good friend has it wrapped inside a 2 1/2' 40lb bench rifle. There was a Canadian International Shooter at the Burlington Club that consistently shot 120 grains of 3fg power and had to quit shooting because of the headaches, the shock to his brain was too much. I could not resist asking this novice where he had gotten a 150gr. load; "from the Lyman Black Powder Handbook", he replied. The only thing he overlooked was that those are not recommended

loads listed in the Lyman book and that some of the larger loads are tests run with Curtis and Harvey powder, that has different burning characteristics than 3fg Goex powder.

This rifle wasn't shooting with that 90 grain charge because the gun store had also sold him some pre-lubed patches. Nothing wrong with the patches; these were just too darn thin for his size balls, and that 90 grain charge. The thin patches weren't sealing all that well. Now we come to "Graywolf's Law #54, when a person only has eight random hits on a two-foot square target, near anything will be considered an improvement, and an improvement is the easiest thing in the world to come up with.

With a relatively light load, moderate accuracy is possible with darn near any combination of patching material and ball size, but by the time you get up to 150 grains you might find that you need a .010 oversize ball and .020 mattress ticking and a hammer just to prevent blow-by. So don't forget blow-by and the resultant patch destruction, and a horrible loss of accuracy is more a function of the amount of powder used than it is the kind of patch used. Most any kind of material will function to some fair degree at modest powder levels.

So now it's time for you to give advice to a novice shooter. If you can go to the range with him, examine his rifle, pick out a good patch and ball combination, you might recommend 60 grains of powder. You might also hit a perfect load right on the nose. Then if you could instil in the new shooter the necessity of never making a mistake in this powder charge, I would not fault your recommendation.

But let's say that you are asked the same question over a cold beer and won't be there to supervise. There is one excellent answer to that question that will make any rifle shoot tolerably well with any patch and ball combustion and leave a fair amount of slack for most any shooter error.

This is what a novice shooter needs.

A .45 calibre rifle, recommended 50 to 55 grains of 3fg.

A .50 you might recommend 55 to 60 grains of the same powder.

A .54 suggest they try 60 to 65 grains

A .58 the recommendation might be 60 to 70 grains.

It should never be tried, because of the inherent danger, but the above loads don't shoot all that bad without any patch at all. Stick in a piece of bed sheet or cleaning patch and they shoot better. Better may only be a 2 or 3 inch group at 25 yards, which isn't really all that much, but it is at least a group, and one which can be improved upon, a lot better than no group at all.

I had my grandson get some of my favourite .015" pillow ticking, and with the .535 ball this CVA Mountain rifle answered every sight correction. That particular combination would never have come close to placing in a rifle match, but my grandson was elated with the fantastic accuracy he was achieving. Which goes to prove that accuracy, as well as lot of other things, is relative. I moved him up to 65 grains and he commented on the greatly increased recoil. He was happy to drop back to the lower charge. And don't think for a moment that a well-placed .535 ball and 60 grains won't do a job on a deer inside of 100 yards.

We loaded up the .54 Douglas with 60 grains of my 3fg and the thick mattress ticking and the first four shots developed a 1 ½" group about 6" low and 4" left. Several sight corrections and the group moved to 6" low at six o'clock. A five grain increase moved the group up 2" and a higher hold moved them into the 2" bulls eye. This sure has been a long and involved way to get to where I wanted to go when I started.

Did you ever hear of the old-timer's rule of working up a powder load? It says start with one grain or less per calibre. It doesn't say use one grain per calibre, it merely says start! Then it says to try incremental increases of five grains or so to see what load is best. The first requirement is to come up with something resembling a group, and then it is onward and upward. If you have a good barrel and some basic skills that might help prevent errors, just keep on adding 5 grains until your groups are destroyed, (10 grains may do it).

When they are destroyed, one of two things have caused it. The larger charge burned out the patch and/or the smaller ball caused it to strip. A larger ball and/of heavier patch will solve the problem and it's onward and upward again. Loose the next one (with 10 or 15 more grains of powder) and maybe one more time a larger ball and heavier patching will help. But let me tell you one thing; by now you had better know about barrel steels, pressure parameters, and have a 20lb. rifle so the pain doesn't work on your nervous system.

The old-timers were absolutely correct. Always start with one grain or less, per calibre. The only flaw in their system was that they assumed that the shooter would stop when pinpoint accuracy was obtained. It really works. Just be sure that you know when to stop adding powder. The two targets attached were shot with my .54 flintlock using 60fg powder a .015 patch and a .535 ball. It did work.

My Grandson is keeping all his shots in the black after only 5 months of shooting. We are now working his trigger control, his stance, sight picture and his breathing. Many a new shooter to black powder wants to start at the expert level and finds they can shoot 85 to 90 but misses the score of 100, you need to start as a novice and work up to an expert level by practice, practice, practice.