



Guiding Rifles

Bob Nixon - Feb 2021
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After being involved with FGASA Advanced Rifle Handling training and assessments since 2012, I have recognised that Trail Guides could benefit if rifle manufactures were approached by the Guiding Industry, to build rifles specifically for guides. Even some of the doyens of the Guiding industry have put together suggestions of modifications to off the shelf rifles to suit Guides.

All the rifles available to Guides are hunting rifles, and in many cases just without scopes fitted. It is a great shame that Guides are not equipped with purpose-built rifles to assist them to better manage issues when faced with a charge or to assist them when walking long hours carrying a heavy rifle.

So, what would be required to make a specific Guiding rifle? Well, I thought that we could go back in time and see what other firearm experts have to say regarding purpose-built rifles.

1. Jeff Cooper, to many regarded as the doyen and father of Practical Pistol shooting as well as having his ranch, Gunsite, built specifically for training of pistol, rifle, and self-loading rifles in use for civilian and military defensive techniques. Jeff was of the opinion that current hunting rifles were poorly constructed for normal "walk and stalk" hunting purpose. He designed the Scout Rifle, which has a barrel length of 19 inches or less, and an overall length of 39 inches or shorter and fitted with a practical Ching sling. Now this design was for defense and was fitted with forward mounted low-power long eye relief optical sights to allow for easy top reloading. His design was taken up by companies such as STEYR, SAVAGE, RUGER, MOSSBERG, and HOWA. This design is not suitable for the Guiding industry but is here to show how an idea can be taken up by manufacturers and made available to the public.
2. Another manufacturer who rewrote rifle design was BLASER. These R8 German engineered rifles have a straight pull bolt action that makes reloading incredibly fast. They have been made in calibres that suit the guiding industry, namely 375H&H and 458WIN although they come with a serious price tag. They are even available to switch barrels for different calibres, keeping the action the same. Calibres can go from .204 Ruger to .505 Jeffry.
3. The Japanese also got involved in rifle manufacture and produce some great quality rifles from the HOWA factory. Their rifles in the 375 RUGER calibre have since unfortunately ceased production. Their rifles were built on synthetic stock formats but by all reports were extremely accurate and well built. They seem to only concentrate on the smaller more common calibres now rather than the Guiding type calibres.

4. A name that many FGASA Field Guides may know is Charlie Haley, of the Hayley's Hop (sic) fame. Charlie trained many Rhodesian field rangers and was particular about two items:
 - a. Shooting off sticks
 - b. Ghost ring sights

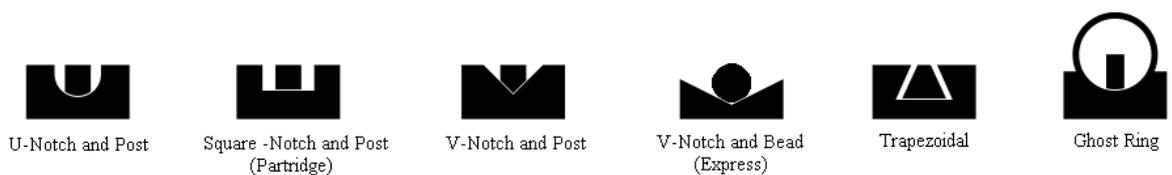
Well plainly Guides cannot carry shooting sticks, so we will leave that option off the table. Ghost ring sights are extremely quick to use as you look through the ghost ring as the rear sight and place the front sight onto the target. Interestingly BRNO rifles used to come out with ghost ring sights factory fitted and they could be recessed if the conventional express sights were to be used.



There are a variety of sight options on rifles but most of the conventional heavy calibre ones have the express sight option with leaves that can be raised for distances from 200 to 300 metres.



Other rifle manufacturers use styles of sights that vary greatly as the following shows.



5. A number of South African Trail Guides have also added their suggestions to rifle modifications namely Bruce Lawson, Adrian Louw and other larger than life names in the Guiding fraternity. Their suggestions have included:
 - a. Bolt handle modified
 - b. Cut down the safety catch
 - c. Weatherproof the metal work

So, we now have several options available on conventional hunting rifles as well as options from manufacturers and knowledgeable persons and can start analysing which options suit the Guiding industry.

Action – Well there doesn't seem to be too much dispute in this regard unless you are a double rifle fan. The favoured option is a bolt action. Just to ensure that the “double fans” are not put out, the reasons for choosing bolt action over double tubes is price!

Magazine capacity – The BRNO and CZ rifles have always had capacity for 5 rounds while RUGER and MAUSER actions can only hold three rounds. I am not aware of specific problems relating to magazine capacity being a problem when managing an animal situation but if you keep count, you can remember when a reload is required.

Barrel length – The standard barrel length for a CZ 550 is 600mm or 24 inches. This is a bit too long for a Guiding rifle so let's go with Jeff Coopers suggestion of shortening the barrel to around 21 inches (530mm).

Weight – A new CZ550 weighs in at over 3kg and has an awful lot of wood around the fore-end. This can be trimmed down to get an overall weight of under 3kg. The overall weight will also depend on the calibre as 458 barrels are a little heavier than 375 barrels.

Stock – This is a problem in South Africa as most rifles are imported from the USA and are configured for rifle scopes. This means that the comb has a rather large hump (Monte Carlo stock) which tends to climb into your cheek on firing. Many stocks also come with a cheek piece. A straight comb with no cheek piece is the answer for open sights and will also reduce overall weight.



Modification of a stock to remove Monte Carlo humps and cheek piece, can be done by a decent woodworker who understands rifle stocks. If you feel so inclined, then it can be done at home – be careful about removing too much wood. Little by little, mount the rifle each time more wood is removed until the sights line up correctly.

Safety catch – I would like to quote Jeff Cooper on this subject and include a portion of a letter he wrote to the Editor of African Hunter magazine back in 2004.

“I cannot share your concern with the design of safety latches. If one observes Rule three and keeps his index finger where it belongs, he need not concern himself with buttons, switches and levers. I stopped bothering with safety switches many years ago, and I cannot see that it matters whether they work backwards or forwards.”

I too have long believed the safety catches on both BRNO and CZ rifles should be cut down to the point where there is absolutely no possibility of inadvertently putting it on. I feel that because of the rule of walking with the rifle in Stage two, that when a round is chambered and the necessity to fire is immediate, any further hesitation, such as switching the safety on “by mistake”, could cause loss of life.



BRNO showing factory safety catch



CZ 550 with "cut down" safety catch

Trigger – The new CZ rifles come with a set trigger, this said, many of the current Guides are not aware of this option and they should stay ignorant of it too! A heavy calibre rifle with a set trigger actually set, is a disaster waiting to happen. Why CZ installed adjustable triggers after BRNO rifles proved their unfailing reliability, is a matter to discuss around a well-stocked campfire. So, the set trigger option must be disabled, and trigger weight set to about 1.5kg. Some pundits offer the following: *“A good place to start with trigger pull weight is one no more than half the weight of your rifle. If your field ready rifle weighs 8 pounds, then use 4 pounds as a maximum for your trigger pull weight.”*

Bolt handle – Well here we can take a leaf from BLASER. Their straight pull involves a bolt handle that is upturned.



BLASER R8 showing kit with two barrels



BLASER R8 showing upturned bolt handle

This feature is easily managed by a competent gunsmith and requires the bolt handle to be heated and bent upwards to ensure that the open palm can easily and quickly fit under the handle to ensure smooth operation when working the action. CZ rifles have a hollow bolt knob and this can be filled in to stop the hand from being hurt by the sharpish edges of the bolt knob.

Sights – The tried and extensively installed Express sight option works well when used correctly. Perhaps the front flip-up leaves can be removed as they are an added and unused accessory. If an aftermarket option is to be installed, then the ghost ring sight must be an option that is looked at carefully. As Trails Guides, when the chips are down, there is no room for “finding your sights” it is something that is instinctively done and developed after hours and hours of practice. Using a tool such as a ghost-ring allows a faster target acquisition but that said, with practice express sights can also be brought into action just as fast. It’s all about practice, rifle fit and that overused phrase of “muscle memory”.

Weather proofing – This part involves two areas, namely metal work, and stocks.

Most rifles come standard with blued metal surfaces which wear off after a few hours carrying the rifle under the magazine box. This silver metal increases the possibility of rusting. There are two options to resolve this issue, and both require complete dismantling of the metal work by a competent gunsmith or armourer.

Gunkote – done by DENEL and other private companies and a process that is used on many military weapons around the world.

Cerakote – A commercial paint and heat-treating process that is available in a multitude of colours.

Both coatings are wonderful in the areas of being thin, wear-resistant, heat tolerant, and holding up to a wide variety of chemical cleaners. The simple difference between the two options is the colour varieties available from Cerakote.

As far as weatherproofing stocks, there is only one option and that is the synthetic stock option. It involves hand-laying fiberglass layers in a mold with epoxy resin to bind the layers into a solid shape. Next, the void inside the stock is filled with polyurethane foam and catalyst, which expands outward, pressing the layers of resin-impregnated fiberglass cloth tightly against the inside of the mold.



ARMTEK synthetic stock

The purists still prefer wooden stocks, and these should be treated against harsh weather conditions by applying a more robust finish than the oiled or polished finish that is provided by the factory.

So, the above are some of the options available to the Guiding industry to setup a rifle for the harsh conditions and potential eventualities that could be encountered. Wouldn't it be wonderful to approach a rifle manufacturer with the above specifications and then be able to select a rifle purpose-built for a Trail Guide!

Well, that's what our dreams are for, but the good news is, with some extra pocket money, a friendly and competent gunsmith, you can setup a rifle to be exactly what you require and enjoy many hours of walking with a rifle that you know will point just where you want it to if that dreaded situation should arise!

And some final advice: "Maintain it immaculately, keep the action screws tight, and practice whenever you have an opportunity." Your investment will last a lifetime and enable you to pass it on to the next generation.

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