

## Return of a Classic

All I could see in front of me was the head and deadly curved horns of one of Africa's most dangerous animals. I had never shot a buffalo before but I know that, when one of these critters is giving you 'the look', the place to put your bullet is the point of its nose.

The hammers of the heavy double were back and as the brass front bead found the vital area I squeezed the trigger. The first shot struck the armoured boss of the massive horns but a second later the heavy bullet from the left barrel smashed into the beast's brainbox.

As a whisper of wind slowly rolled the cloud of white smoke across the tops of the acacias I lowered the hot barrels and examined the gun I had just fired for the first time. The Cape buffalo beautifully engraved on the side plate, caused me to glance up again at my kill. Although there was no rejoicing from gun-bearers or backslapping from a professional hunter, a great feeling of satisfaction swept over me – even though my 'dead' buffalo was just a harmless cardboard cut-out.

You see, the purpose of this 'safari' was to test-fire the new .72 cal African Express from the Pedersoli range of muzzle-loaders.

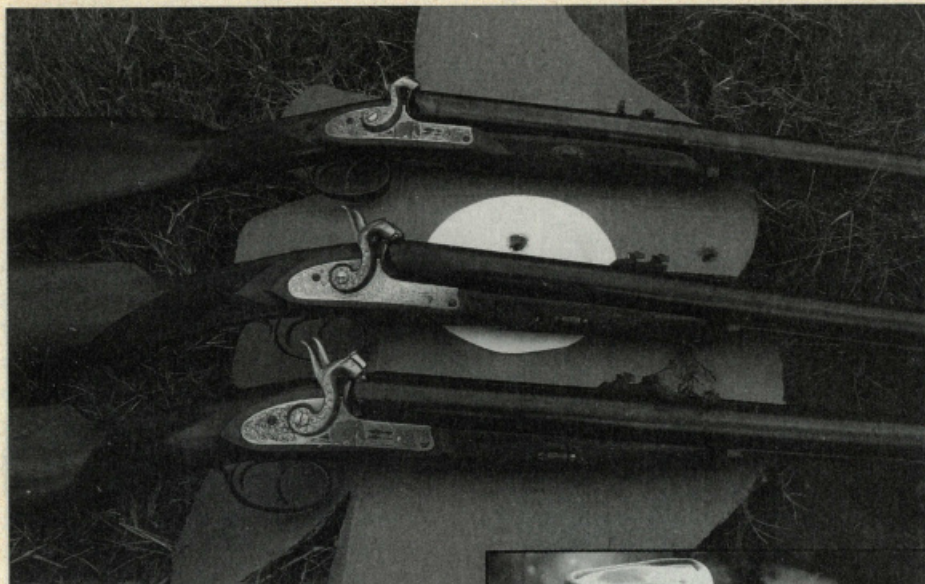
By ROBIN BARKES

And I was especially thrilled about this one. The reason? Well, in March 2006 when I wrote about the Pedersoli Kodiak Mk3 .72 calibre double-barrelled muzzle-loader, I suggested that it would be wonderful to have a special 'African' model – one engraved with elephant and buffalo instead of American creatures. To my surprise and delight, Pedersoli actually took it up and in no time at all I had the pleasure of examining the first gun in the African range when I visited Andrew Soutar at Classic Arms in Witbank.

Now here I was with a smoking African Express in my hands. Alas, the gun was not mine, but one recently acquired by friend Justin who kindly allowed me to use it on my 'buffalo hunt'. With us was Calvin with his The Pedersoli Classic African Express double-barrelled muzzle-loading rifle in .72 calibre.







**Above:** The three .72s used. The middle rifle is the Kodiak model on which the African Express is based.

**Right:** The writer drops a buffalo at 25 paces. A tame feat compared to the real thing.



African Express and Mike with his Kodiak Model – both .72s thus providing me with back-up aplenty. All three guns had been loaded up by their owners each using their own favourite bullets.

In the days of the first big game hunters there were some who preferred the round ball and some who claimed the pointed conical to be better. There was one thing they all agreed on however – African animals were very hard to kill. It is unfortunate that in their journals the old hunters refer to all projectiles as 'balls' and seldom, if ever, give other details. Samuel Baker seemed to prefer conicals because they shot straighter over longer distances. Perhaps this applied only to his smaller bore guns because I think he

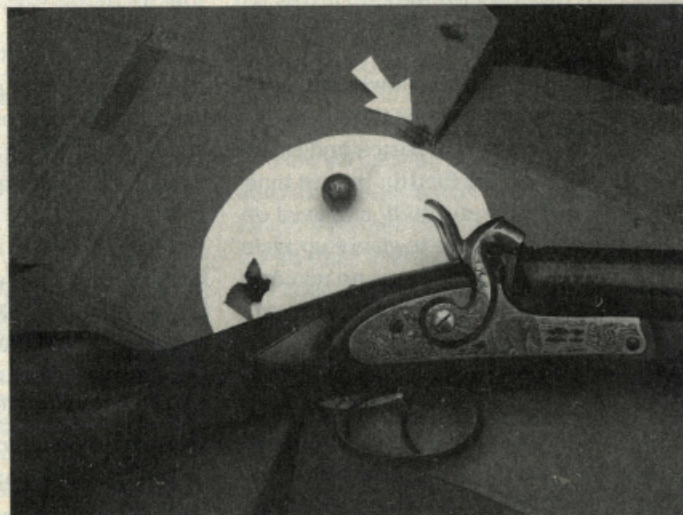
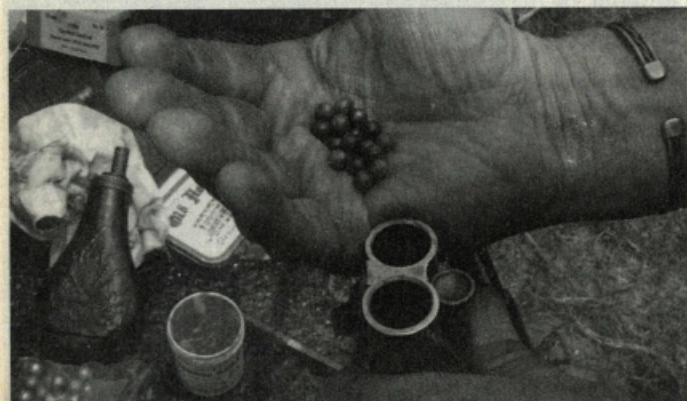
would have used a patched round ball in the monster 4-bore he called his 'baby'. Selous began his elephant hunting career using muzzle-loaders that took a four ounce round ball in front of what he described as a 'handful of trade powder'. With these guns he killed 78 elephant but not once do I recall him describing the lubricating grease or patching material used. I remember reading of a hunter in the early 1800s saying that he preferred the conical bullet because, although it was heavier than a

round one, it used less powder and its very weight gave it more penetrative power. However, he warned about using conicals with a thin-walled hollow base because he felt the expansion of the skirts could not be relied on to be even and accuracy would suffer. The same writer also claimed the pointed bullet penetrated an elephant's 'elastic' skin better. However, one advantage of a hardened round ball was that it never made contact with the metal of the barrel – it was always wrapped in lubricated material that bit into the rifling or provided a 'gasket' in a smooth-bore. Hollow-based conical bullets had to be soft to allow the skirt to flare and grip the rifling. The heavy conical I use in my 6-bore muzzle-loader easily drops down the barrel without the use of a ramrod. If the giant slug wasn't made of pure lead the accuracy would be woeful.

I wanted to try both round balls and pointed conicals as well as buck-shot in a Pedersoli African Express. So while I took pictures Justin stoked up the barrels using 545gr round balls wrapped in lubricated patches. The powder charge was, at that stage 70gr of Ffg. We had put up the life-size cardboard buffalo head only 20 or so paces away from the shooting mark to simulate a beast bursting out of the thicket from ambush.

Taking up my position I raised the rifle and hollered 'here it comes' as I pulled the trigger. The cap snapped and a totally agonizing, empty silence hovered for what seemed like forever before the explosion shattered the silence. That first, crucial, shot was a hang-

**Left:** Loading up with loopers. An experiment that did not work. **Right:** A right and left (arrowed) using the 545gr round ball. The top-most shot was the result of a hangfire.





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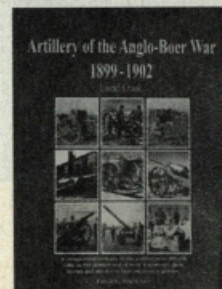
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Three East Cape frontiersmen pour out over 4600gr of lead just like the old elephant hunters did long ago.



fire and the ball flew high. However, the shot from the left barrel struck the white disc I had stuck on the head to indicate the brain. This incident although only 'play-play' showed why the most desirable gun for hunting dangerous game in Africa has always been the fast-firing big bore double rifle.

While the other fellows got to shooting their guns we loaded up again. This time using a conical Minie-type bullet with three wide grease-grooves. This bullet is a bit heavier than the 770-grainer I had used when test-firing the Kodiak last year. Cast from an imported mould, the heavy slug could be quickly seated with a blow from the heel of the hand then driven home with a ramrod.

As usual the grooves were lubricated before being firmly seated on top of the powder.

The test was mostly to see if I could put two quick shots into a charging buffalo at close range. Secretly, my overimaginative and romantic nature added to the scene a flaxen-haired khaki-clad damsel cringing behind my protective broad shoulders as the fierce beast came snorting through the dust and flying foliage. The first bullet, again flew high and struck the heavy boss but was followed instantly, almost, by the second thumb-size lump of lead that scrambled its brain. Through the smoke and terror of this jungle hell I felt the blonde's hand slip around – OK, OK back to the real world Barkes.

To make things a bit more interesting we placed 2-litre plastic bottles filled with

**Below: Justin with the hartebeest taken with his African Express. A single ball exploded the tough animal's heart.**



water at various ranges in the open patches on the sloping ground in front of us and the men were blowing these to bits with their .72s. I tried an increased load of 140gr of powder and put a ball into the instant kill area of the buffalo with the right barrel and exploded a water bottle with the left.

Next came an experiment to see how the shallow rifling would handle buckshot. On top of 80gr of powder went a card wad followed by a felt wad and eighteen SG pellets sealed off with another card wad. This charge was fired at a normal cardboard box at 25 paces and would you believe it – not one single pellet struck the target. The shallow rifling was just enough to send the loopers spiralling out like a leaden whirlwind hitting everything but the target it was aimed at.

That ended the experiment using the .72 as a Cape gun with one barrel loaded with bullet and the other with shot; but one day I will try again using a 12g plastic shot cup to hold the charge together. Incidentally, Pedersoli do make a .50 and .58x12g combination muzzle-loader that replicates the traditional Cape gun or lion gun as it was sometimes called by East Cape frontiersmen. Whether these combination barrels would fit the African Express frame I don't know; but what I will tell you (with a tear in my eye) is that the .72s barrels won't fit my Pedersoli 12g shotgun frame because I tried it with Mike's set of spare barrels.

The African Express just breathes old Africa and, like all Pedersoli products, is superbly built. Weighing 10½ pounds, the overall length is 42" and the 25½" barrels are fitted with two sets of fully adjustable back sights. The reason for this is that, to contain costs, the barrels are not regulated so each needs its own sight. The wood, dark walnut with chequered wrist and forearm, is absolutely beautiful and combines well with the browned barrels to provide a super frame to highlight the sideplates, engraved on one side with buffalo and on the other with elephant. The rifle comes with nipples that take the small size 11 caps but thick fingered shooters who find these too fiddly can change them for nipples that take the larger musket 'top hat' caps. This is a good idea and I would do the same if I owned one of these classics. However, a common capper makes it faster and easier if the

smaller caps are used – even a home-made leather one does the trick.

Although the sling attachments are of excellent quality, I could do without them. I feel they break the lines of the gun, and I don't believe the old hunters ever used slings because they could catch on something. After a lifetime in the bush, I can say that "anything that can catch, will catch" and, in accord with Murphy's Law, it will happen at the very worst time of all.

One of the African guns on this safari had historically correct browned barrels, the other's were deeply blued – so you have a choice – a beautiful one either way.

About those dual sights: on my Kodiak .45/70 breech-loader, I set the rear one to accommodate both barrels at close range. This puts the bullets only an inch or two



apart when hunting bushpig or anything in thick bush. There is no reason why this cannot be done with an African Express – all it requires is some thinking and then burning a bit of powder at the range. Everything, of course, depends on what distance the average shots will be taken. (Two inches apart at 20 paces will be a heck of a lot further apart at 60 paces and off the map at 100 plus.) The .72 calibre barrels have six shallow grooves between wide lands with a slow twist of 1 in 86". The makers suggest the optimum load to be 80gr of Pfg behind a .715" patched round ball that would weigh about 545gr. I have recently made up a complete set of loading ingredients from Bushveld Muzzle Loading Supplies for one of my guns. This includes balls, bullets, patches, card and felt wads plus lubricant, so the owner of a new African Express will get everything he needs by phoning them at 083-454-6742.

Once the first visiting big game hunters realized they needed much more powerful rifles than they used to hunt wild boar and stag in Europe, they hit a problem. They discovered that bullets from large bore rifles stripped across the rifling when the pow-



The ball on its greased patch ready to be driven in by the short starter.

der charge was increased; but without the necessary velocity the heavy bullets used in their 10- to 4-bore rifles were useless. Therefore the choice, of some, was the hefty smoothbore taking a heavy charge that gave tremendous velocity but only at close range. They could also opt for a smaller bore, rifled gun that was more accurate at longer ranges and sacrifice the brute power needed to stop a charging rhino. The problem was solved when a compromise was reached and deep two-groove rifling

appeared. These guns took the winged, the conical, or the belted ball with protrusions that fitted into the grooves and could take a really heavy charge of powder without stripping. Accuracy was also reasonable and 150 yard shots could be taken.

Purdy built a 2-groove gun like this for Sir George Gore and as they became popular Purdy soon produced others of this type giving them the name 'Express Train'. Since then (1856) the word 'Express' has come to signify a rifle possessing a long point-blank range and low trajectory. However, although I refer to the .72 double as an 'Express' I do so only because the name suits a gun so big and powerful; but it cannot be considered a long range weapon – no double rifle is.

The double rifle appeared when hunters realized the frequent need for a fast second shot – vital if they wanted to live long enough to tell tales of their adventures. So today, long after the sun has set on the glory days of old Africa, we can, thanks to the Pedersoli people, still enjoy stepping back in time to shoot and hunt with a muzzle-loading legend – the African Express double rifle. **m**



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