



Above, one of Ross's favorite guns for big game is a standard Ruger Bisley fitted with a Bowen five-shot cylinder. Right, the Bisley Vaquero usually rides in a Ringler shoulder holster where it is out of the way but ready for anything.



This group was shot with a basically out-of-the-box Bisley Vaquero firing 300-grain WFN bullets offhand at 100 yards. Any way you slice it, this is an outstanding hunting combination.

We know, of course, the .45 Colt is a blackpowder cartridge. We know the cases are weak and the guns are weaker. We know that if it is loaded to pressures much beyond a Daisy BB gun we and all bystanders will be maimed by flying bits and pieces. We know the .44 Magnum can be a powerful handgun suited to hunting and the .45 Colt cannot - or do we? Sometimes it is both fun and rewarding to beat up on conventional wisdom.

Many years ago I knew all these things. Every expert, including Elmer Keith, had told me so. He put tremendous effort into magnumizing the .44 Special and was thrilled with the advent of the .44 Magnum because the old .45 could not become powerful. Time flies when you're having fun, and the reality is I knew these things 20 years ago. Then I was near the beginning of my learning curve when it came to taking big game with a handgun. This learning curve was pretty frustrating. Yes, my "Elmer Special," a 4-inch barreled .44 Magnum, had taken a lot of game. Deer tipped over pretty well and elk would succumb if everything was just right.

In the midst of this I began to work in Africa. It was a handgunner's paradise. Plenty of deer and elk-like critters could be stalked to within honest handgun range. Many could be taken with the .44 Magnum, but I always felt like I was asking a boy to do a man's job.

Then it happened, the grand kudu bull with ivory-tipped spiraling horns that nearly touched the top of the trees stood behind the sights. He was only 60 yards away and the shot felt good; the front sight nudged the back of his shoulder as the recoil began. My Shangaan tracker followed the impossible, one track in a maze of hoof prints. He followed the occasional fleck of blood, followed him over the rocks and through the dreaded cactus maze known as the Devil's Jungle. He followed all that day and again the next morning. At last the great bull fell, fell to a lucky rifle bullet that nipped his neck as he flew through the timber. The .44 had hit well but not perfectly, just a little high. It was almost enough to make me quit.

The following year the .44 Magnum was again my companion. This time it carried heavier bullets, sort of pointy bullets designed by a handgun-hunting "expert." They were worse, much worse, than the old Keith bullets. These veered and turned, tumbled and crippled. To make matters worse, the great game - the holy grail - stalked my area. The idea that I might take a Cape buffalo bull with my "pistol" became an obsession. Three times that season I stalked close, three times I drew the hammer, and three times I let it down in silence. The stakes were too high, the gun too low.

Within this time frame, a fellow began to bother me with letters and phone calls. He was a nut-case, of course, because he advocated power beyond the .44's wildest dreams, advocated the .45 Colt. Perhaps if he had claimed to be able to approach my .44, or even equal it, I would have listened. But no, he suggested power and performance that nearly doubled the standard. I knew it could not be. I knew the cases were weak, I knew . . .

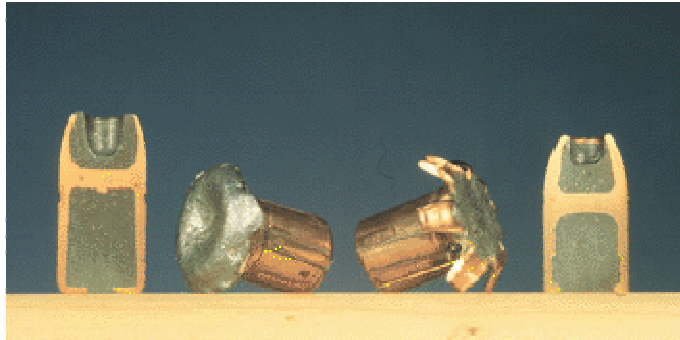
The fellow persisted until at last I could stand no more. Because it is difficult for me to be rude, I simply acquiesced by allowing him to drive to the ranch. There would be satisfaction, because my chronograph and bullet scales would prove the truth. Or, if he was crazy enough to actually try to fire the claimed power level, the show would be more than worth the aggravation. Good explosions are really fun to watch.

"Here," he said, "give it a try." Being no fool, because I KNEW, I said, "No, you try it; I value my fingers." And so he did. I stood well back, stalking rearward at a metered pace just as the old-timers did in a duel, as this maniac pressed the trigger on a hand grenade. The round spoke with authority, a surprising authority. To my dismay there was no blinding flash and no copious flow of blood. I crept closer, slinking toward the chronograph. The mechanical monsters always lie; it couldn't mean 1,500 fps, at least with the claimed 310-grain bullet! "Go ahead, try that again," still smug in my knowing accidents can happen. He did and it did, six times in a row - 310-grain bullets at 1,500 fps.

So far he had been lucky, but now the jig was up. I was going to pound the cases out of the cylinder. Pound, yes, I knew pound, because I had mildly overloaded the .44s before. When you add a little more powder, you pound the ejector. At this level the .45 Colt cases would have to be a mangled mess of weeping brass, but again my fun was foiled. One finger gently lifted every case from its nest, and one finger could press them home again. Then I tried it, and at last I had pulled the trigger on some real handgun authority. The nut-case was John Linebaugh. I sent him on his way with strict orders not to return - until my gun was finished!



Top, three groups of .45 Colt bullets: left are old-fashioned, perhaps obsolete - 260-grain Keith and 335-grain Keith and 360-grain Gould style. Far right are jacketed Nosler, Swift and Speer.



Center are the best working bullets for the .45 caliber, all are LBT designs - 300-grain WFN, 325-grain LFN dual crimp, 350-grain LFN and 360-grain WFN dual crimp.



Bottom, Hodgdon H-110 is an outstanding powder in the .45 Colt. A new powder, Lil'Gun was designed for the .410 shotgun and may ultimately prove to be the best powder of all.

Less than a year later I drew the hammer and took a bead on the last rib of the wounded hartebeest (the size of a spike elk). He did not dance, did not run as if flea-bitten; he simply went down while the bullet exited his shoulder and whined across the African woodland. This was not a .44 Magnum any more!

Before we get off on the wrong foot, this is not about how bad the .44 Magnum is but how glorious the .45 Colt can be. It comes in three levels: the original "blackpowder," modern six-shot and the supercharged custom guns made with five-shot cylinders. Of interest here are the last two where we surpass the accepted norm of 260-grain bullets between 800 and 1,000 fps. Before we go there, we have to explore how it is possible with "weak" brass and the other frailties we know the .45 Colt possesses.

The weak-brass syndrome is the most known. Any fool can tell you that if you reload a weak case with high pressure, you are in trouble. This is why it is impossible to get modern performance out of the old Colt. The problem is, the Colt case was, not is, weak. It began with balloonheads. These are the kind just beyond rimfire, where the primer pocket is raised within the thin head section. There was a good use for this, called 40 grains of blackpowder. Without the thin construction the big charge simply would not fit, but low and behold, times change. Colt cases can be made just like any other, out of excellent metal with modern solid-head construction. Without question the finest, most resilient and able-to-handle-pressure cartridge cases I have ever used are Federal .45 Colt cases. No, I do not mean the best .45 Colt cases, or even the best handgun cases, but the best

brass cartridge cases I have ever used. These cases handle more pressure, gracefully, than any of the best belted magnum brass. How do I measure this? Well, let's just say in the beginning we did not do pressure tests.

To make the new super-Colt fully compatible with big game, including my buffalo, larger bullets were in order. Then, the Keith shape was the best we knew. I ordered what was then a truly huge bullet from NEI, one that weighed 335 grains when cast from Linotype or 350 grains out of wheel weights. Not only was this bullet heavy, but it also took up a lot of space within the case. The loads I used seemed very mild. The cases fell in and out of the cylinder, even on a hot day. They could be reloaded 20 times, the primer pockets stayed tight, and all in all, every apparent sign pointed to normal working pressure.

After two years I had them tested at Hodgdon. Wow, the pressure was beyond the extreme maximum for a .300 Weatherby! No, I absolutely do not advocate using loads like this. That they worked speaks of three things: the ability of the Colt cartridge, the strength and resilience of Federal .45 Colt brass and that which looks after small children and fools.

From those humble and unwise beginnings the .45 Colt has grown. We learned about bullets, powder and the guns themselves. Perhaps some of the most interesting lessons were not at full-maximum. Instead, they came in the midlevels where they could be used in normal production revolvers, equaling or at times greatly exceeding the .44 Magnum, while using much less pressure.

For this data we owe a debt to Hodgdon Powder Company for doing an extensive workup for "modern" .45 Colts in its No. 26 manual. Here, they worked to a maximum pressure of 30,000 CUP. We find delightful loads, such as one delivering 300-grain bullets at 1,330 fps out a 7-inch test barrel. By comparison, in the same manual, the .44 Magnum drives 300-grain bullets about 1,300 fps, while needing 35,000 to 38,000 CUP to get there. Again, we are not mad at the .44, just very happy with the .45 for its extraordinary ability. At similar levels the Colt will heave a big 325-grain bullet over 1,200 fps. We are now at my old "Keith" .44 Magnum velocity but using 325 grainers instead of 250.

The great part is that we do not need highly specialized or expensive custom revolvers to get this remarkable performance. These loads are for out-of-the-box Ruger .45 Colts or other arms with similar strength. Loading the Colt to this level is perfectly logical. If we begin with a .44 Magnum revolver designed to operate at 40,000 CUP pressure and then reduce the metal thickness in the outside cylinder wall by about 10 percent, we have a .45 Colt cylinder. The cylinder metal is the same and the frame is the same, but we only ask the Colt to work at 30,000 CUP, a pressure reduction of 25 percent. In the end, the "frail" Colt actually increases the margin of safety.

While it may be out of place in Handloader, there is a source of fine quality factory ammunition loaded to this same level. Buffalo Bore offers three loads. The first two are outstanding, the same ammunition I load for myself. They are the 300-grain Speer jacketed and a 325-grain LBT hard cast. Both are specified at 1,350 fps by the maker (no doubt out of a nonvented pressure barrel.) Both chronograph right at 1,275 fps out of my stock Ruger Bisleys. In essence, they are factory loads that can be fired out of factory revolvers and be up to taking any game in North America, and almost anything else.

A third load is for those who think a lighter, faster bullet is better for small deer. This is a 260-grain jacketed hollowpoint with 1,400 fps velocity. These loads also point out an interesting facet of the .45 and other big-bore revolvers. That is, it is easier to drive big bullets than small ones. All three loads are loaded to the same pressure level, and the diminutive 260-grain bullet only exceeds the spectacular 325-grain LBT by 50 fps.

For the few who want or need more power than the stock revolvers can deliver, the five-shot conversions await. For me, these constitute my general duty, super-power revolvers. On occasion I use the .475, but my day-to-day workhorse is the five-shooter .45.

I do not use the .454 Casull. Many will want some explanation surrounding my disregard for the .454. Basically it is not necessary. That is, the .45 Colt can do virtually anything the .454 can do. This is because large-bore revolver performance is a function of cylinder capacity, not case length. The short cylinders in the Freedom revolvers actually have less capacity than a long, custom Ruger cylinder. Other revolvers with full-length cylinders chambered for the .454 Casull have the same capacity as, not more than, the .45s. The long cases are really only added expense. The only real excuse for owning a .454 is to be able to say the cartridges will not fit in a .45 Colt chamber.

While this is usually true, it is not absolute, and in a moment I will show you a way to achieve an even more reliable safety factor with .45 Colt cases. I also do not like the double action .454s because they lack the lines, balance and shootability of the Ruger Bisley. Having said all of that, if you own a .454 with a full-length cylinder it can be as good as the .45 Colt. Oh, if Ruger had only made us a five-shot .45 Colt or even the .454 on the proven Bisley design!

The five-shot .45 Colt functions at the same pressure levels as the .454 Casull. This is true magnum rifle pressure of 50,000 to 55,000 CUP. With this we can push 325-grain bullets over 1,500 fps and 360 grainers over 1,400 fps. It is important to realize that performance, penetration and game-taking ability in revolvers is not a pure function of velocity.

The “.45 Swift” concept fails miserably. This is the idea of driving light, 225- or 250-grain bullets at speeds approaching 2,000 fps. Expanding bullets usually splatter, while solids lack the sectional density for good penetration. We must not be deceived by thinking that hunting handguns behave or perform like modern smallbore rifles. Therefore, the mid- to heavyweight bullets, 300 to 360 grains, become the superstars. They are efficient in that they allow the moderately slow powders to do their best work, and they have the momentum to drive a large flatnose unerringly through critters large and small.

Because almost every shooter is accuracy-conscious, let's take a moment to look at the old .45 Colt's potential. We have always been told that it is an accurate cartridge, but that was at the blackpowder power level. Conventional wisdom usually says if you want a gun to be accurate, don't lean on it. I can tell you the Colt does not care, and perhaps even enjoys healthy doses of gunpowder. The six-shot, midlevel loads fired from factory revolvers will regularly group in less than 3 inches at 50 yards. Of course, there really are no accurate cartridges. The correct wording is that there are accurate guns.

When I asked Hamilton Bowen to create a revolver that would show just how accurate a revolver could be, he chose the five-shot .45 Colt system. The goal was to fire one-inch groups at 100 yards, to produce fine rifle accuracy with a revolver. A one-inch revolver raises the difficulty level to extreme, when we realize this is not necessarily easy with a bolt-action rifle. Asking a revolver - with five different chambers that are disconnected from the bore, with a gap between the barrel and cylinder, with all of the inherent inaccuracies - to play on the rifle field is akin to changing lead into gold.



Above, the gun that started it all is a six-shot conversion with oversize cylinder on an El Dorado frame with the case and bullet that finished the buffalo. Above right, the front sight is a completely resculpted front band from a Ruger No. 1 rifle. Right, Ross with Hugo Scia, the buffalo and the "short .458."



To his immense credit, Bowen succeeded on the first attempt. Several loads hovered around 2 inches. One magical combination, the big 360-grain LBT wide flatnose, loaded to maximum with H-110, fired many groups that were an inch or less. This is an entire story unto itself, but suffice to say the .45 Colt is accurate. Further, the technology that went into that special revolver is now standard equipment on all Bowen conversions.

The .45 Colt is easy to load. Magnum Large Pistol primers serve perfectly at either the 30,000 or 50,000 CUP level. Both levels are at their very best with H-110 or Winchester 296 powders. Others work, but none are so friendly. Having said that, there is a new powder lurking on the .45 Colt (and many other) horizons. This is Hodgdon LIL'GUN. It was designed for the .410 shotgun where H-110 and W-296 used to rule the roost. Essentially LIL'GUN is like H-110 but easier to ignite. Also, looking at data for many cartridges, we see some very interesting pressure and velocity relationships where LIL'GUN gives more velocity, at less pressure, than any other powder. I have tried it in my .45s and am delighted. Hodgdon is currently working on .45 Colt load data, and it should be available by the time you read this. Below maximum performance, LIL'GUN might prove ideal for moderately reduced loads. With 300-grain bullets for example, H-110 at times has too much velocity variation in the 1,000- to 1,100-fps range. My tests with LIL'GUN, even at 30 degrees Fahrenheit, had less than 20 fps variation at 1,075 fps. Soon we may be able to change the name of LIL'GUN to BIG CRITTER.

Data for the five-shot revolvers is not published by any powder company for obvious liability reasons. Normally, I do not print specific loads either because of the variables involved with custom revolvers. All makers of these pieces will furnish you with loading data for their revolvers. Essentially they are loaded to a given velocity level with a given bullet. Maximum loads occur just before or when the base of the bullet makes contact with the powder in the case, using H-110 or

W-296 powder only! Any degree of compression can create excess pressure. For those who wish to use .45 Colt cases in their .454 Casull revolvers, the case-capacity judgment can be used.

To get the utmost from the .45 Colt, the LBT bullet designs are very helpful. In addition to their accuracy and game-taking potential, the bullets are made so as much of the bullet as possible is out of the case, maximizing case capacity. If I could only have one bullet for the .45, it would be the 325-grain LBT long flatnose. This is an outstanding bullet at any velocity from 1,100 to 1,500 fps, and it will work well on almost any game animal. Bullet selection can be rounded out by adding a 300-grain wide flatnose and a wide or long flatnose in the 350-grain class. While production of LBT moulds has ceased, at least one maker has agreed to produce the designs. They can be had from Robert Applegate, PO Box 58, Yoncalla OR 97499.

The Colt also likes jacketed bullets, but it is important to choose ones with good construction when the velocity goes up. The 300-grain Speer plated jacket is an excellent bullet. These, besides the Nosler Partition and the Swift A-Frame, offer fine performance on midsized game. If you are after big critters, nothing but nothing is as good as the hard, cast solids with flat noses.

Whenever we load .45 Colt cases to extreme levels, a good dose of common sense is necessary to avoid their being fired in a revolver not suited to the pressure. I follow two plans. The first, when possible, is foolproof. That is, each level of ammunition is loaded to an overall length that will prevent it from being fired in revolvers with less capability.

The basic guns have the following effective cylinder length (length of actual cylinder, plus the rim thickness): Colt SAA - 1.660 inches, stock Ruger Bisley/Blackhawk - 1.750 inches and the five-shot conversions - 1.840 inches. Thus, each kind of ammunition can be loaded so it is too long for any lower level. This is especially easy and important for the big five-shooters, to be absolutely certain no 50,000 CUP load finds its way into a Colt SAA.

If bullets with short noses are used, making it impractical to crimp at the long OAL dimension, another safeguard is practical. This is to use different brands of brass for different applications. If you have both Colt and stock Ruger revolvers, for instance, reserve one brand of brass for the high-pressure "modern loads." Make the rule unbreakable. If, for example, you choose to load the high-pressure loads in Winchester brass, simply never fire a W-W case in your Colt.

As we move up to the five-shot pressure level we can begin to detect differences in the brass's ability to withstand pressure. Federal, Starline and Buffalo Bore headstamps are the toughest, while Winchester and Remington are just a little more apt to get "sticky" at extreme maximum pressure. Therefore, it is logical to use one of these in five-shooters. Because I began with Federal brass, all my super-power five-shot loads are assembled in Federal cases. Starline brass is used in my regular Rugers, and SAA loads are in W-W cases.

A last thought on reloading these and other revolver rounds with heavy recoil. To avoid having the bullets "jump the crimp," you must have plenty of case tension on the bullets. Be sure your expanders are less than .450 inch for bullets sized to .451 or .452 inch. Also, apply a heavy crimp, swedging the case mouth well into the crimp groove. If you fire only part of a cylinder full and reload, be sure the unfired ones from the first batch are next in line. This way no round will have to endure more than five recoil cycles.

There it is, without peer the finest big-bore hunting cartridge in existence - more powerful than a .44, able to leap tall buildings and take Cape buffalo.

Yes, at last I found the gun that gave me the confidence to let the hammer down with a loud noise. It was the original, made on an El Dorado frame, firing 335-grain Keith bullets made of Linotype. We followed the tracks of five old bulls into the thorn thicket. Dense thorn bush and poor visibility made the situation seem impossible, until the lead bull stepped up on an old ant hill. Against all wisdom, better judgment and common sense, I tried the brain shot. He went down

like a stone and bounced up like a rubber ball. Now it was potentially ugly. A wounded bull, fully unhindered but very angry, dove into miles of hooked thorns. I followed with only the revolver.

After all of them I have followed, this is the only one that did what they are all supposed to do. He laid a trap, doubled back and waited. My good friend Hugo Seia saw him first, probably saving my hide, because at his nod the bull was unlimbering from 30 feet to our left. I pounded his shoulders twice as he swiveled, breaking his concentration and slowing the charge. Then I planted my feet square on for the fight. It was time to wait through the hour and a half it took for the next second to unfold.

Over my shoulder Hugo spoke quietly, "Shoot well, senior, he is coming." The two shoulder shots had diminished the brute's power not his determination, but to touch me with his horns he had to step into the 10-foot long clearing. I would have one clear shot. As he roared into the clearing, he hooked a small ebony tree with the sweep of his left horn, and in his weakened state needed to bow his neck and turn his head slightly to snap it. The base of his neck was exposed for a half second. The .45 drove him to the ground.

From this incident and perhaps 20 other remarkable things this old gun did over two years, Hugo dubbed it The Short .458, because so many times it performed as if it were a big-bore rifle. This was the supreme compliment from an Angolan professional hunter with more experience than almost any of the "famous" ones. Put in perspective, he carries a .460 Weatherby he calls a "Portuguese Twenty Two." I suppose it is not surprising that I remain rather prejudiced in favor of the ancient .45.