TROPHY POINTERS

By BOB HAGEL

Hunting Rifle Safeties

OPINIONS OF WHICH type of safety is most desirable for a hunting rifle are as varied as the designs themselves. Many opinions are based on *use* of a certain type of safety and the fact that the hunter is familiar with it. Long association with a rifle and its safety may blind the owner to any drawbacks it may have. If it has performed well, and he is used to operating it, he may never become aware of faults it may have under some severe weather conditions, or other rigorous use to which it has never been subjected.

If you use a rifle long enough, a poorly located safety becomes so familiar that you never give a thought to the fact that other locations may be handier and faster. And if it has never malfunctioned or given you any other mechanical problem, you may never realize how much trouble it can give under certain hunting conditions, or that it is far from *safe*.

I won't attempt to cover the mechanical function of the intricate parts of some modern safety systems, because space does not permit. So we'll stick to convenience and reliability under various hunting conditions.

In thinking of reliability and looking back at some of the older safety designs found on both military and sporting rifles made up to 85 years ago, I'm not convinced that we have made much progress as far as *safe* safeties are concerned. Starting with the original Mauser-type safety found on foreign-made military rifles, and also on our own Krag and Springfield, you'll find a safety that was *safe* when in the ON position. When the activating lever was rolled over it placed about a quarter-inch of steel through a notch in the striker, at the same time pulling it back so that the sear was disengaged — leaving the trigger free of contact with the striker. There was no way the rifle could fire unless the striker rod broke forward of the safety — something somewhat less likely than winning the Irish Sweepstakes.

While the old Mauser-type military safety, which was also used on a number of Mauser sporter actions as well as the Model 54 Winchester, was as safe as a safety could be made, it was neither handy nor fast. Neither was it practical when a scope sight was mounted low over the bridge. FN solved this problem by extending the finger lever out and curving it down under the scope eyepiece, and some U.S. rifle accessory makers followed suit.

These replacement safeties had a number of disadvantages; they had only two positions, ON and OFF, so in order to open the bolt the safety was completely off even though it did lock the bolt in the ON position. But the biggest problem arose from the fact that the lever movement between ON and OFF was very short. If the rifle was carried on a sling with the safety lever toward the hunter, it was probable that it would soon be moved to the OFF position by rubbing against the clothing. (Some were on the left, some on the right side.)

When Winchester replaced the Model 54 with the Model 70, the safety was far changed for the better. The Model 70 safety has been revamped since that day, and has evolved into what is perhaps the most reliable safety used on a modern bolt action rifle. Often called the "wing" safety, it is in a handy location on the right side of the cocking piece. It is a three-position safety that blocks the striker and locks the bolt in the full ON position, but when pushed to the center position it allows the bolt to be opened while still locking the striker — an excellent feature.

Another very reliable military safety that was adapted to low scope mounting, along with a handy, fast location just behind the bolt handle, was found on the Model 1917 Enfield. That safety rocked forward to FIRE position by a simple push of the thumb, and when it was rocked back to the OFF position a hook grabbed a notch in the side of the cocking piece on the striker rod and pulled it to the rear to disengage the sear and leave the trigger free. Remington carried this design over to the Model 30 sporter based on the Enfield action. Few modern safeties are as fast and reliable.

The modern version as found on the newer Model 700 Remington has the same handy location and is fast to operate, but it *does not* lock the striker; it simply blocks release of the trigger. Should something happen within the trigger

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the bedding the next time around? Not doing so would allow pulling down on a part of the action that has no support directly under it and would seem to impart bending stresses on the action detrimental to accuracy.

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The Sako Vixen is nothing but a baby Mauser, and the bedding should be approached in the same manner as any Mauser action. Dave Hull, a pioneer bench rest shooter, and holder of many world records and National Championships, once told me that there are two ways to bed a Mauser so it would shoot. One is to bed it loose everywhere except at the normal bearing points, and the other is to bed it so tight that it can't move at all (he also said he hadn't been able to figure out how to get one that right).

I would bed the Sako exactly as the Ruger bedding described in the article in Rifle No. 55; that is, contact should be allowed only on the back side of the recoil lug, the flat back of the recoil lug, and the bottom of the rear tang. Also, the back one inch or so of the barrel should be bedded for about one-third of its diameter. All other areas should be taped to allow clearance so the guard screw tension is applied only to the bedding points. I have a Sako Vixen with a fairly heavy match grade barrel that was bedded in this manner several years ago. I used it for a couple of years as a bench rest rifle, and it still shoots very well.

You mentioned the possibility of stressing the action with the front guard screw if the bedding is relieved under the recoil lug. This doesn't seem to happen, but it is important that this relief be provided. I've seen this proven too many times to be a doubter any longer.

Finally, even the short, stiff rear tang on the Vixen can be warped if the guard screws are used to horse the action down into the bedding compound. Leave enough room around the edges so the compound can squeeze out and the action can be pressed into place without a lot of pressure. If a Sako is properly bedded in this manner, and it still won't shoot, then I'd start looking for some other cause.

Bob Brackney

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mechanism to cause the safety device to malfunction, the striker is free to fall with the safety in the ON position. Nearly all of the adjustable triggers found on Mauser-type actions, as well as most of the custom adjustable triggers, function on the same principle. They are handy, they are fast, they are quite reliable and cause few accidental discharges — but they do not lock the striker.

Trigger guard safeties, either at the front or rear of the guard, become handy with a little practice and use, but completely safe they *are not*. I prefer the button be located at the front of the guard because there is less danger the trigger finger will accidentally push it to the release position when holding the gun at "ready" position. But even if this does not occur, there is a fair chance that the button will be pushed to OFF by pressure from the arm, clothing or what have you. It is also possible that if the gun is accidentally dropped solidly onto the butt, the jar will cause the safety to release and activate the trigger at the same time, causing an accidental discharge. This will not happen with *all* actions, either rifle or shotgun with trigger guard safeties, but it will happen with some, especially after extended use. This is not just theory; I've experimented with unloaded guns and found that at least some will release the striker when banged down hard on the butt with the safety on.

As far as speed of operation is concerned, many hunters prefer the shotgun-type tang safety to all others. I agree that they are fast, but to me no faster than the location on the right side just to the rear of the bolt handle. They really shine for the left-handed hunter, regardless of the type of action used. But there are a couple of disadvantages to the tang safety that are not always apparent under certain conditions. To be quick and sure, the tang safety should have a release button that is rough and high enough to afford a sure grip even during cold weather with heavy gloves. But if this feature is present, as on the Model 77 Ruger, and the rifle is chambered for a magnum cartridge, the recoil can tear hell out of your bare thumb if you wrap it around the grip. Some tang safeties are located far enough forward that this does not happen, the Savage Model 99 for example, but that safety button is low and quite smooth, not easy to release with gloves on.

Then there is the safety on the Savage Model 110 that snuggles down in the grooved tang. No danger of bumping your thumb on that one, but there is a great deal of danger you will not be able to release it when wet snow or rain forms ice on and around it, or with gloves on even if there is no ice.

There is also the type of safety found on a few bolt actions that do not lock the bolt. This can put you in a bad position if the bolt is raised fully or partially when you are hunting with a chambered cartridge. You release the safety, pull the trigger and nothing happens, except that the game may vanish before you figure out what's wrong. It could also prove fatal when hunting dangerous game!

There are other types of safeties not covered here, but most work along the same lines. This does shed some light on the good and bad features of those that are most commonly used, and why they are or are not reliable under certain conditions.

There are some rather startling ideas advanced by various hunters concerning the use of rifle safeties — some hunters apparently have no use for one, while others depend on them when they shouldn't. And after you spend enough time watching hunters in the hunting country, some of their ideas on rifle safety, as well as safeties, make you a little nervous. Some of them can lead them, and you, into plenty of trouble. We'll look at these in another column.