

GUN-E-SACK

By Jon Sundra

■ No other gun is more uniquely American than the lever action, yet when you get right down to it only one stamped "Made in U.S.A." qualifies as a real high-intensity, high-velocity centerfire—Savage's Model 99. Now in its 86th year of production this brainchild of Arthur Savage is still going as strong as ever. Though two of the 99's contemporaries—the Winchester Model 94 and the Marlin 336—are also lever guns and enjoy a similar degree of popularity, nay, veneration, they are not capable of handling "high intensity" rounds like the .243, .308 and .358 Winchester and, new for '81, the 7 mm-08 Remington.

Adding this newest .28 caliber from Bridgeport was a natural for Savage, just as the .243, .308 and .358 were naturals since all are based on the same short 7.62 NATO case that is about as long as can be accommodated by the 99 action. For almost two decades the 99 was given strong competition by Winchester's Model 88, a thoroughly modern, rotary bolt, short-stroke lever gun that was introduced in 1955 and discontinued in '73. While the 88 sold fairly well, it didn't have the charisma that the old 99 had, despite the fact it was a more up-to-date design, more attractive, and was available in identical chamberings.

For quite some time now the only other gun competing with the 99 in the high-performance lever-action market has been Browning's BLR, a Japanese-made number loosely fashioned in the traditional Marlin/Winchester genre. The BLR's a fine gun with an exceptionally smooth, rack-and-pinion bolt system and a detachable box magazine, but its somewhat unorthodox appearance does not endear it to the traditionalists. Caliber-wise the Browning has always offered the same chamberings as the 99: .243, .308, and .358 Winchester. Surely the 7 mm-08 is in the cards for the near future.

With the minor exception of the Browning, then, the perennial Savage 99 has the high-performance lever-action market pretty much all to itself. With the addition of the 7 mm-08 I expect to see it become the best-selling chambering among the four calibers offered. Though the term "plains rifle" doesn't conjure up a lever gun, the 99 in 7 mm-08 would certainly qualify on ballistic performance, if not aesthetics.



For '81 the new 7 mm chambering will be available only in the 99-C, the detachable box magazine version which is the most gussied-up of the three 99s currently offered. The other two, the 99-A and 99-E, both have Savage's famous rotary magazine. The most traditional-looking is the A-model, which features the old, slender forearm with Schnabel tip and a straight-grip stock. In addition to the .243 and .308 chamberings that are available in all three models, the A-model can also be had in .250 Savage and .375 Winchester. The 99-E, the economy version of the C, is offered in .300 Savage. Why anyone would choose a .300 Savage over a .308 is beyond me. Perhaps nostalgia?

Some other noteworthy goodies from Savage for '81 are the Fox Model FB-1 deluxe-grade .22 sporter and, of course, the new Fox FA-1 and FP-1, a brother-sister act of gas-operated and pump-action shotguns, respectively.

Apparently, after offering deluxe grade .22s by Anschütz for many years, Savage has decided to offer one of their own in the FB-1. Reviving the Fox trademark to indicate Savage's top-of-the-line, the FB-1 is a handsome bolt-action sporter very similar in line to the Anschütz 54 except for lacking the Schnabel fore-end; on the Fox they went with the squarish, reversed-angle rosewood tip with white spacer a la Weatherby.

Other features which make the FB-1 a distinctive .22 are the select-grade walnut stock, cut checkering, a Wundhammer-swell grip and rollover checkpiece. I'm glad to see that pains were taken to make the five-shot detachable magazine flush with the belly of the stock; its release button is recessed in the right side. The FB-1 is a handsome rifle the deluxe status of which is indicated by its \$270 price tag.

It's taken a while but Savage now has a gas-operated semi-auto 12 gauge in the form of its FA-1, and a companion pump action in the FP-1. With this being the first year of availability for either gun, the choice of chamber, barrel lengths and

chambers is limited. Both guns will be available only in 28 and 30-inch vent-rib barrels choked Modified or Full. The pump will handle either 2½ or three-inch magnums while the semi-auto digests 2½-inch shells only.

BOLT SAFETIES

For a long time now I've been on record as being opposed to two-position safeties which lock the bolt handle. Try as I may, I just can't come up with a cogent reason for such a feature—one that would outweigh the safety considerations.

The only defense I've been able to come up with—and one which was brought to my attention by a reader in no uncertain terms recently—is that a bolt-lock safety precludes the accidental opening or partial opening of the action if the gun is slung and you're going through heavy brush.

I'll buy that. The aforementioned circumstance is the one defense for the bolt lock safety. Another, and one closely akin to the preceding scenario, is the one of the bolt being partially raised by some limb or vine. If unnoticed by the shooter when he unslings his rifle for a shot, that partially raised handle will cushion the blow of the firing pin to some degree—sometimes enough to cause a misfire, depending on how far the handle is up.

Under some circumstances, then, a partial or fully-opened bolt could be responsible for missed game. But that's all that can be lost; nothing more is at stake.

It seems to me that whenever there exists that slim possibility that your bolt handle could be raised accidentally, you're doing something you shouldn't be doing in the first place: negotiating heavy brush with your rifle slung instead of in your hand. Even when threading my way through moderately thick cover I find I must hand-carry in order to thread both myself and my rifle through the limbs and branches with a minimum of noise and physical effort.

So in spite of the fact that there is something to be said for the bolt-lock feature, it turns out to be more academic than real. What we gain in terms of safety far outweighs what are surely minor objections indeed to a mechanism which allows the action to be worked with the safety engaged. After all, at what times do we most want a gun on "Safe"? When closing the action on a live round or extracting same, right? And with a two-position bolt-lock safety like those found on the Remington 700 and 788, the Sako, and the Ruger 77 to name but four, you can't. You must disengage the safety to chamber or extract a round. I stress "two-position" because rifles like the Winchester Model 70 have three-position safeties whereby an intermediate setting engages the safety but not the handle.

Personally, I think it's just a matter of time before we see all two-position safeties changed to where they will allow the action to be opened.