



Serious Leverage

Doug Turnbull tweaks, torques and transforms the 1886 platform, powering it up to .475 in the process.

By Skip Knowles

Vats of ink have been spilled by gunwriters over the decades praising the fast-handling characteristics of lever-action rifles, the rapid target acquisition iron sights provide and the quick follow-up shots the guns offer. Then, of course, there's the value of a big bullet to compensate for less than perfect shot placement in low light or thick brush.

But much of that has fallen by the wayside in recent years during this brave new era of long-range sniper-style "hunting," BDC reticles and shot-drop compensating laser range finders.

A TIMELESS APPEAL

Gunwriters still, on occasion, crow about the pragmatic virtues and sex appeal of lever guns, but you'll almost never catch a writer-type actually using one on an elk hunt. A bolt-action .300 WSM with a lot of glass on top is far more likely to be riding in that saddle scabbard.

Whisky vs. single malt, I suppose. But there is no denying the resonant nostalgic appeal of a great lever gun, the raw beauty and the balance in hand. Those of us who own enough bolt guns will eventually, inevitably, look back with yearning, read some story about how repeaters stopped the incredible Comanche rollback of the

frontier on the southern plains after the Civil War...and out comes the wallet.

Then what do you do with that beautiful, brand-new Winchester 1886 lever-action .45-70 you finally bought after raiding your piggy bank? If you're a gun freak, you send it straight to Doug Turnbull so he can chop it to pieces and throw most of it in the spare-parts bin.

Then, if you're very lucky, you take it to Texas with the man himself and blast your way through packs of roving wild hogs and big nilgai bulls, where you learn that for once, gunwriters were not completely full of it. And all that hooey about fast-handling lever guns and open sights is actually 100 percent true.

I was first mesmerized by the work of Turnbull Manufacturing at the SHOT Show a few years back, when Mike Schoby of "Petersen's Hunt-

ing" introduced me to a lean, bearded fellow wearing a black bowler hat. Doug showed us around his display, a modest one by SHOT standards. It didn't need dressing up. The wall was dripping with period-replicating color case-hardened big lever guns, Ruger No. 1s, better-than-new 1911s and custom-refurbished L.C. Smith side-by-side shotguns.

THE STARTING POINT

Doug said he'd work his magic on a .475 for me for a hunt, but first I had to beg, borrow or steal an 1886 action for him to start with. Even a used 1886 represents a big chunk of change for someone on a magazine salary, so I was unsure. So I called The Man. Craig Boddington had written a feature about blasting large holes in Africa's toughest customer, the Cape buffalo, with a .475 Turnbull. He'd fondly recounted the gun's performance after dropping big bulls with the huge Barnes bullets.

Boddington answered my "Is-this-a-smart-move?" question with his trademark candor; "I have too many guns, and anymore I just hate it when one comes along that I have to buy, but that .475 Turnbull was one I couldn't let go," he advised. There it was. And the biggest gun crush of my life ensued.

After failing miserably in my quest



A T.R. tribute in blued steel: The inscription on the author's .475 Turnbull recalls an earlier presidential lever action.

to find an affordable vintage Winchester 1886, I soon realized that the terms “affordable” and “vintage 1886” simply do not go together. So I gave up and bought a brand-new gun from a limited run of 86 “reissues” from Winchester in June. It was a beautiful dream rifle in its own right, in the eminently sensible .45-70 chambering—but I went and sent it off to Turnbull to have it turned into a one-of-a-kind supergun.

Curious friends had questions. “Why would you buy a .48-caliber lever action?”

“Because Turnbull doesn’t make anything bigger...yet.”

“What are you going to shoot with a gun that big?”

“Everything.”

“Why?”

“No tracking.”

The .475 Turnbull, incidentally, was built off the .50-110 case shortened .200 and necked down to .474. It pushes a 400-grain Barnes TSX at 2,050 fps for a whopping 4,104 ft-lbs of energy. And that’s really all you need to say about that. Except, maybe, for the 1:16 twist.

WORTH THE WAIT

The Summer of Lust began. The talented Tracy Halpin is marketing and sales manager for Turnbull and a tremendous photographer to boot. She started leaking tantalizing photos of the building of the rifle as it proceeded. Each week, the editors from “Guns & Ammo,” “Shoot-

ing Times” and “Petersen’s Hunting,” along with SIPs’ Eric Poole, were dragged into my office to see the latest gun-porn photos of the barrel being bored, firing pin being welded, walnut stock being turned on the lathe and hand checked, and so on.

In the end, nothing remained of the original gun but the action, which was now case-hardened, hand polished, fitted with a new hammer and completely overhauled inside and out.

The Summer of Lust was followed by

the Fall of Big Love. Boxes of the enormous cartridges were stockpiled from Grizzly and Cor-Bon. Editors poured into my office, grabbed the huge cartridges and fiddled with them. “You could pour a goddamned cocktail in that thing,” said “G&A”’s Payton Miller after examining one of the giant Barnes TSX hollowpoints.

Everyone in the office was atwitter waiting on the rifle to arrive. Pulling it from its case was the most excited I’ve been about a gun since the .22-caliber Benjamin pellet rifle I got for Christmas



Exquisite color case-hardening is a Turnbull hallmark.



Means to an end: Installing iron sights and welding the firing pin are part of the process.



at age 5. For days, Big Medicine rarely left my desk. It got put away at quitting time and pulled out again every morning.

SHOTS FIRED

On a windy first day at the range, with a box of Doug Turnbull’s loads, the gun put three shots in a group of just over one inch at 50 yards. That’s about as good as I can shoot open sights. The gun is built to kill large animals at ranges no farther than 150 yards, 200 tops, and it’s plenty accurate for that.

Boddington called the recoil “a nothing” in his writeup of the gun, but Mr. Elephant Slayer is a lot tougher than most of us. After 10 shots I decided we were “running out of shooting light” (in truth, it was about 4 p.m.). The trigger is not light, and neither is the recoil, so I was pleased with my initial 1¼-inch 50-yard

group. I then managed some three- and four-inch groups at 100 yards and, jokes aside, would describe the recoil as comparable to shooting slugs through a 12-gauge pump.

And for what it is, a true monster big-bore rifle, and one of the most powerful lever guns ever, you could call the recoil almost mild for something heaving a 400-grain ballistic bowling ball down-range. The brass insert bead on the front sight did come loose, so I’ll probably slap a ghost-ring aperture on it and a flat-topped front blade.

I toted it around the family farm in Arkansas this year hoping to get a crack at a big riverbottom whitetail but never got a shot. Probably because I was too busy staring at my gun to hunt properly. Just carrying it afield was a neat experience. I’ll be chasing elk with it this fall.

And when I do I’ll be glad it’s a little lighter and handier than most of Turnbull’s ’86s. But I’m still torn about the barrel length. Doug built mine with a 22-inch barrel, shorter than the 26-inch pipe his personal takedown ’86 sports. Mine’s just as accurate, faster handling and a lot easier to deal with getting in and out of trucks and blinds and such. It might kick slightly harder, but that’s only a big deal



Steel meets walnut: The author’s rifle gets a heavy dose of 22-lpi hand-checkering.

when shooting from a rest. Shooting off-hand, as you often do when hunting with a lever gun, recoil is no big deal.

There is no denying the longer barrel simply looks cooler, has that wonderful weight-forward steadiness and no doubt makes the most out of that massive powder capacity. My 22-inch barrel seems just right to get good performance from “standard” .475 Turnbull ammo (standard for a custom small-batch rifle caliber, that is) clicking along at 2,050 fps. But when I shot the hotter Cor-Bon stuff, my gun turned into an ear-deafening flamethrower, and recoil was noticeably sharper—despite the rifle’s eight-pound weight. Unpleasant, even, with higher felt recoil than my Kimber Caprivi in .416



Lever load lineup (left to right): .475 Turnbull, .45-70, .30-30 Winchester, .308 Marlin.

Remington with the same-weight bullet at more than 2,300 fps. (I understand that Cor-Bon has since toned down this loading to Turnbull's guidelines.)

Stock design and gun weight all play a part, no doubt, but I will definitely stick with my standard .475 loads for my rifle, like those sold by Grizzly Ammo. Grizzly loads the .475 in the 400-grain Barnes load (2,050 fps) as well as a slower, flatnose lead loading, a 425-grainer that plods along at a more sedate 1,700 fps.



Benchmark: The author sights-in his long-awaited rifle.

A finished rifle like mine costs about \$3,700, and basic .475 conversions for '86s start at \$800. Money aside, Big Medicine is more than a rifle to me, and my love for it is completely irrational. I feel better whenever I'm holding it, and I'd carry it everywhere, all the time, if I could. I suspect a lot of owners feel that way about Turnbull's guns. Take a look at his "before" and "after" gallery: (www.turnbullmfg.com/store.asp?pid=34630&catid=19872) &A

Messing With Texas

Somewhere in the heart of Texas, there are wild hogs on the King Ranch that are still having nightmares about the Man in the Black Hat. Doug Turnbull and I were down hunting nilgai in April, eager to test the new Big Medicine on some of Texas' toughest customers.

Dozens of images of kill shots run through my head after what turned out to be a wild hunt, but a few stand out. We shot some 17 hogs with no escapes, including three truly whopper trophy tuskers with long, curving stickers. But two highlights really illustrate what a lethal combination the .475 and a fast-handling, open-sighted lever gun is. Doug spotted some running pigs, leaped from the truck like a scalded cat and lit out after them, his tall black Derby hat bobbing toward them through the brush.

A few seconds later, he waded through that sounder of pigs like a bad-ass western gunslinger, flipping them right and left, killing five in six shots on the run, including a final porker that was running straight at him. Five hogs. Six shots. That pretty much tells you what you need to know about Doug's shooting.

I, on the other hand, fired a warning shot at 90 yards over the back of a monster boar I badly wanted to kill after an excruciating 400-yard stalk across open ground. I'd switched to the hotter Cor-Bon loads, and my gun shot them a full six inches higher at that range. The monster black pig bolted like a cutting horse, much faster than any of the other pigs I'd seen run. In a flash I leapt to my feet as I levered the .475 and swept it to my shoulder as the pig stretched the distance to 120 yards, just cresting a slight ridge to disappear for good. I swept through his shoulder to his head and hammered him,



A big bore for big boars: The author's best Texas hog.

the massive bullet entering his right shoulder at a steep angle, plowing the entire length of his neckbone, blowing through the back of his skull and lodging in his left cheek. Weight retention: 98 percent. Expansion: One inch. Talk about no tracking...

Nilgai, a massive antelope native to India and Pakistan and thriving in Texas, are among the most difficult big-game animals to bring down. I suppose it's because they evolved in tiger country; they're smaller than elk and even tougher, with a heart roughly twice as big. Exit wounds are rare.

To give you an idea, I watched Kelly McMillan use one of his custom .375s on a young bull standing broadside in front of him at 60 yards. He hit it perfectly through both shoulders, the bullet stopping under the hide on the off side, and the bull went 300 yards.

On my hunt with Doug, I made a long stalk to within about 65 yards and was finally standing nervously in an old fire road watching my bull. He started to get spooky when I cracked him in the center of the shoulder with the 400-grain Barnes. Incredibly, he buckled forward and pitched straight to the ground. Nilgai don't do that unless neck shot. He stumbled and leapt instantly, surging like a big blue horse to the mesquite thicket, but

made it just 15 yards before I'd levered the .475 and clobbered him again at a dead run, right behind the shoulder. Down he went.

Those open iron sights allowed me to shoot so quick I don't remember aiming at all; it seemed more like I'd shot at a clay pigeon on a skeet range. And oh, that bullet! One exited, the other we recovered. It, too, had expanded to a full inch and maintained 98 percent of its weight.

Doug had killed a huge nilgai in the 600-plus-pound range earlier and dropped his within 60 yards.

A wonderful thing about using "too much" gun like this is that the huge bullet is moving slowly enough so meat damage is minimal, and it's going to buy you some forgiveness if you don't place it perfectly on that running shot.

Shot that pig a little far back? Instead of now being forced to belly crawl after a wounded wild boar into the dense Texas brush, that porker is still parked right where you popped him instead of leaving a blood trail through the brush. All because that wonderful one-inch-wide wound channel bought you some time.

There is one problem with having a gun like this, then using it. Scratches are going to happen. In my case, I dinged the barrel badly on the right side on that Texas hunt. On the plus side, I no longer look like a rookie with a stiff new baseball glove, but have a lived-in rifle that has killed piles of critters.

But I won't lie. I still want to weep softly when I look at that ding, thinking about how I lied to my wife about what a great investment the gun would be. Yeah, an investment all right. A never-to-be-sold investment in my pleasure.



Packing his .475 Turnbull, the author goggles for nilgai.



Doug Turnbull and the author admire one of Doug's hogs.