

Field Target Pistol Shoot-out

Towards the end of this endeavor it became apparent certain guns were not represented that probably should be; a situation sure to create consternation with some readers, and consequently a like amount of angst for the author. Thankfully a bit of creative coercion secured loaner guns for testing of a couple of tasty pieces without which this work would have been something less.

Despite our frequent clashes of opinion, on several occasions Leo Duran has demonstrated the value of a true friend. However, asking to borrow his Zasadny customized Steyr LP1 'Wunder-Pistol' might be a breach of etiquette to tax even his forbearance. Though ever hesitant to borrow expensive equipment due to the inherent liability, in this case I felt the end justified the means. As usual, Leo came through like the champ he is; the 2009 Piston Class National Champion and 2009 AAFTA Grand Prix Piston Champion. I would have a couple of weeks to test one of the finest custom field-target pistols on Earth.

Now if another good friend (and tenacious PFT nemesis) could be cajoled into a loan of what may be the finest production field-target pistol available, two major omissions from this work might instead become attractions. Perhaps because he never bested me in a pistol FT match before I adjusted his trigger (and now he often does), Mike Vredenburg agreed to let me have my way with his FX Ranchero. I mean, to test it... you sick-o!

Mike regularly demonstrates the potentials of his stock Ranchero. His PFT exploits include second place at the 2009 National Championships, first place at the 2011 Cajun Spring Classic, the only shooter to ever clean a PFT course at Yegua Airgun Club, and last but not least (in the author's opinion), Mike often beats me! I know what you're thinking (as might he); but no, I harbor no nefarious intentions of sabotaging his FX.

Permission to test these two gems that would otherwise be beyond financial reach engendered a minor epiphany. The opportunity to test the finest custom field-target pistol in existence and one of the best production FT pistols available presents a golden opportunity for a head-to-head comparison to the best field-target pistol this airgun miscreant can cobble together from a fifty year-old Crosman Pellgun (in order to compete against such fine equipment). WHOA! This is the kind'a stuff airgun dreams are made of (at least the demented dreams of one airgun freak).

To allay understandable concerns about personal bias affecting the testing or results, only the most honest and objective evaluations would answer the questions in my own mind; perhaps the only place these questions really matter, but certainly the place they matter most. The reader can rest assured that all testing and evaluation of

these three vastly dissimilar FT pistols is as free of personal bias as humanly possible (for a Neanderthal, anyway).



An ambitious proposition- The author's custom sixties-vintage Crosman Pellgun (left) takes on the most elite heavy-weights in the PFT world in a head-to-head accuracy showdown.

As the accuracy testing would be done at the extremely demanding range of fifty yards, a sand-bagged bench-rest would be employed to remove as much human error as possible. And though the human variable is impossible to eliminate, it can be minimized.

When testing pistols capable of sub-minute-of-angle accuracy, scope magnification can influence results significantly. In order to minimize sighting advantages, the 4-12X Hawke riflescope of the Ranchero and the Steyr's 2.5-16X Bushnell Elite would be adjusted to match the maximum magnification of the 3-9X Leupold EFR scope on the Crosman 187 custom. Handicapping the home-made field-target rig to the elite outfits would be almost as fool-hardy as picking a fight with them in the first place!

Upon taking possession of the two loaner guns, I was chompin' at the bit to begin the accuracy testing. However, certain preliminaries seemed in order before commencing.

As the HPA-tank conversion of the Crosman 187 limits how short it can be, I was surprised to find it only a half-inch longer than the Steyr (20.5" vs. 20."). However the scoped 187 recoups more than that half-inch in the height comparison, its 8.5" height being the least of the three pistol rigs. The FX Ranchero has the shortest overall length of the three, but is also the tallest. Though none of these specialty guns is exactly a pocket pistol, I was surprised to find the 187 covers no more real estate than the other two.

Having raved about the sixties-vintage Crosman adjustable trigger elsewhere in this work, I hoped to not be embarrassed in the trigger comparison. I needn't worried.

The two exotics exhibit fine two-stage trigger actions. The Ranchero's trigger breaks at 14-15 ounces on the RCBS trigger scale, and the Steyr's at an incredible (and incredibly consistent) 6 ounces. Both guns' first stage pulls are close enough to their second stage breaks to require some vigilance to avoid inadvertently pulling through the second stage without sensing it. Such 'premature discharges' can be more than just embarrassing. Thankfully a bit of trigger time lent proper control of both triggers.

If the sixties-vintage Pellgun doesn't actually pre-date two-stage triggers, it certainly pre-dates popular use of them in the U.S. However the Crosman's adjustable single-stage trigger is a wonderment of mid-twentieth-century airgun manufacturing. Breaking as crisply as the other two triggers, the release comes slightly less consistently at 8-10 ounces.

As quantified by the trigger-pull scale, sensory perception confirms the Steyr trigger the clear winner... but the vintage Crosman a not-too-distant second. The Ranchero trigger, though not quite match grade, is a very good sporting trigger. Were the Ranchero or Steyr my guns (wishful thinking), I would lighten the first stage pulls to effect a more obvious transition between their first and second stages.

Thinking the preliminaries behind me, it took quite a bit of shooting to prepare the three pistols for the 50 yard shoot-out. Besides adjusting all to 9X and zeroing for 50 yards, ocular and objective focuses had to be fine-tuned on the loaner guns to achieve crisp sight pictures. Upon doing so, the optics seemed relatively equal; all capable of centering 1/2" aiming spots into small, discernable quadrants. The impression was there would be no more than 1/8" total sighting variance between the three scopes; as level playing field as possible given the different optics involved. However as testing progressed, it seemed as if the Hawke scope on the Ranchero had a slight sight-picture advantage; as if its 9X setting provided slightly more magnification than the other two.

Preliminary shooting provided one inescapable revelation- any wind conditions whatsoever would render the accuracy comparisons absolutely moot. When attempting to approach (as nearly as possible) the suspected half-inch-at-fifty-yards capabilities of

the pistols involved, it immediately became obvious the slightest perceived whisper of wind can blow a 12 foot-pound pellet more than a half-inch off course.

Ever hopeful the airgun gods might show mercy on this shameless night-owl by banishing all winds an hour before sunset, as the deadline to return the borrowed guns loomed ever larger, it became apparent the only window of windless opportunity in my neck of the woods occurs just after day-break. In order to complete the shoot-out, I would have to alter my (ab)normal routine, re-program my biological (dys)functions, and disrupt my (un)natural bio-rhythms to venture forth during this mysterious time of 'day'.

Rising at 7:45... that's **AM**, I completed only two five-shot groups before the wind came up enough to put an unceremonious end to the proceedings. At least a precursor of what could be expected, it was obvious the next attempt must commence an hour **earlier** if there be any chance of completing fifteen five-shot groups before the wind awakens. Furthermore, all preparations would have to be completely in order, so as to not waste a single minute of the precious window of windless opportunity.

Finally the stars aligned just long enough. This time actually shooting by 7:00... that's **AM**, the bench-rest testing proceeded with nary a hitch. As if attempting to wring every iota of accuracy out of a pistol isn't tedious enough, doing so times three while 'under the gun' of imminent wind conditions proved quite a challenge. Thankfully all fifteen groups were completed in absolutely still air.

As seen below, there were some surprises. Though minor for the author, the surprises may not be so minor for some readers... or the owners of the borrowed guns.

Let me disclaim right up front that this one exercise is by no means presented as conclusive. Re-testing might yield completely different results, and certainly would with different pellets. The choice of (JSB Exact) pellets for each gun was based on not only the author's experience that nothing is more accurate in such guns for such applications, but the pistol owners' own ammo preferences. Also, the testing may not be as scientific as some might like; admittedly not scientific enough to draw hard conclusions. Consequently the reader is free to take from this exercise whatever he or she likes.

That said, I proclaim a level of honesty best described as nothing less than a curse. Having learned at an early age of my complete lack of talent in the art of deceit, and of my dad's unhesitant willingness to correct fraud and impropriety in a most enthusiastic and effective manner, I adopted an "honesty is the best policy" credo. Better to tell the awful truth and take my lumps immediately, than to attempt deceit I have absolutely no talent for and take bigger lumps later. This resolution has cost me nothing less than: opportunities to add notches to the ol' love gun, a few relationships, a bicycle race 'win', a National Champion trophy and a business. But who's counting?

Presenting the results of this shootout could cost me some credibility in airgun circles. However, after the tolls my obtuse personal credo has extracted in the past, such a loss pales in comparison. Enough disclaimers.

Read 'em and weep, Boys!



And the winner is... Top row of groups shot by the AZ custom Steyr LP1 measured (left to right) .70", .59", .86", .72" and .70" for an average of .714". Middle row shot by the custom Crosman 187 measures .51", .90", .66", .55" and .68" for an average of .66". Bottom row shot by the FX Ranchero measures .83", 1.36", 1.15", 1.06" and .80" for an average of 1.04". So lynch me.