

## Euro-Classics

Besides terms like cool, vintage and collectable that I often use to describe classic air pistols, when describing European airguns, terms like exotic and esoteric also enter the vernacular. Not out of snobbery (so much, anyway), but simply because they seem appropriate descriptors of a picture being painted in print.

To quote the Bee Gees, "It's only words; and words are all I have." But for some reason, everyone unfortunate enough to have heard me 'sing' blurts, "**DON'T SING!**" Thankfully, "one picture is worth a thousand words"; and I have a camera. So words are *not* all I have to describe some incredible air pistols. And who doesn't love eye-candy?

I often use the term vintage in reference to, or combination with, the term classic. However, not always. Vintage is certainly not a requisite qualifier for the term classic, as I consider many recent-manufacture airguns to be classics. Come to think of it, even some current guns as well. That being said, the terms vintage and classic might also be considered *relative* terms, defined in One's own opinion. With so many European-made air pistols qualifying as classics (in my opinion), perhaps we should again start with the vintage classic Euro-pistols I started with in the 1980s.

Even before getting into vintage airguns, I always found Hammerli and Walther target rifles and pistols *mouth-wateringly* exotic; be they firearm or airgun. My fetish for such shooting exotica began in catalogs and magazines, occasionally reinforced with in-the-flesh glimpses at gun shops or gun shows. Only when I got into collectable airguns in the early eighties did I discover vintage European **airguns** were/are considerably more affordable than their firearm relatives. I don't recall whether my first European air pistol was a Hammerli Master or Walther LP3, but both guns left indelible impressions.

Not surprisingly, vintage European ten-meter pistols built for paper punching are not as powerful as American air pistols of similar vintage. However ten-meter Euro-pistols require no trigger-smithing, virtue of superior adjustable triggers ranging from excellent to phenomenal. All vintage ten-meter pistols being .177, their power usually ranges from just enough to punch holes in paper to little more than that. However the ability to precisely place that meager pellet energy can make for some very interesting pesting. And as regards small-pesting, even the weakest ten-meter gun is magnitudes more powerful than airsoft guns I also often use for creepy-crawlie and rodent control.

Walther was ahead of their time with their single-stroke pneumatic target pistols. Even less powerful than most spring-piston target pistols, the Walther LP2 and LP3 models' wonderfully docile firing behaviors and phenomenal trigger actions rival today's most sophisticated ten-meter pistols. Unfortunately their anemic power came at relatively high cocking efforts, due to small compression chambers housed in the grip frame and short, grip-length cocking levers. Nevertheless the classic Walther single-stroke pneumatics are phenomenal shooting air pistols.



*The Walther LP2 was produced from around 1967 to around 1972 when it was replaced by the LP3. Both single-stroke pneumatics are pure pleasure to shoot; WELL!*



*Author considers Hammerli Co2 pistols Euro-exotica at its sexy best. The Master uses eight or twelve gram cartridges; the shorter Single (below) eight-gram cartridges.*



Interestingly, and contrary to other manufacturers, Walther switched from air power (with their LP2 and LP3 single-stroke pneumatics) to Co2 for several years, before returning to air again (with single-stroke and precharged pneumatics). From Walther's Co2 period, I consider my CP3 pistol not only the most highly evolved Co2 pistol ever, but possibly the most gorgeous, aesthetic and esoteric Co2 pistol ever built. Rather, with the possible exception of the nineteenth-century Giffards that I can only afford to dream and write about (and only a little, since I have no experience with them). The steel and walnut, old-school quality of the Walther CP3 really rings my bell; **loudly!**

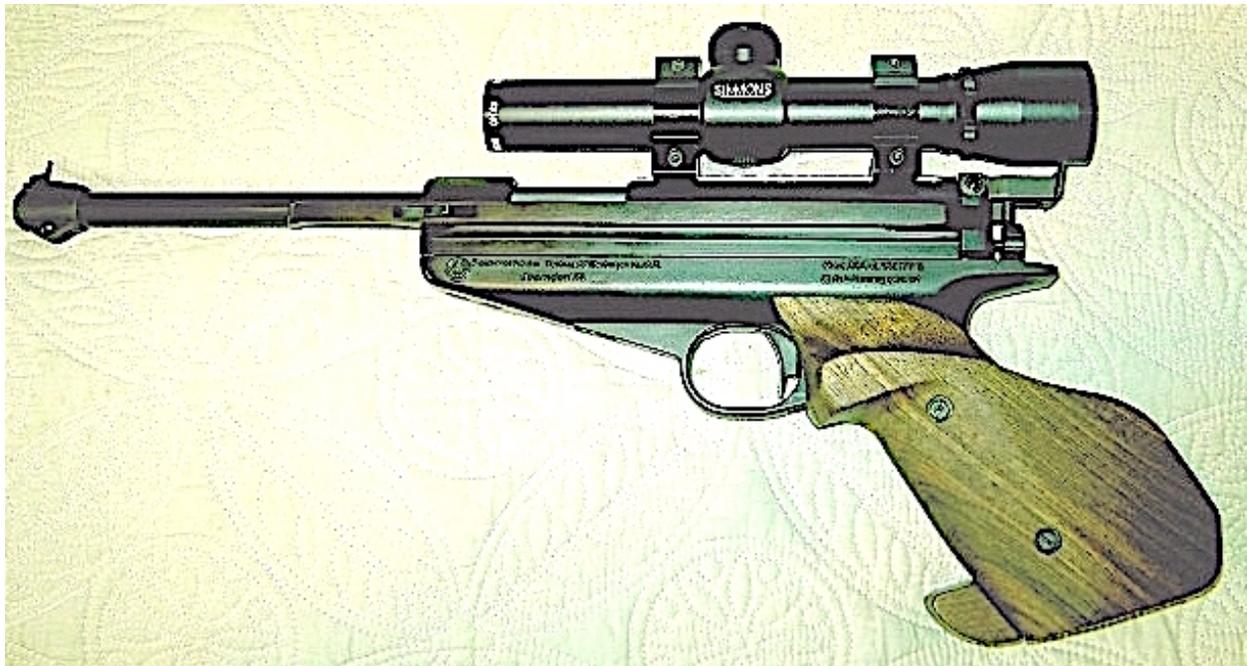
My need for speed overwhelming my fear of the unknown long enough to risk diving into the gorgeous thing, I found the CP3 also a phenomenal example of logical design. The fine, multi-adjustable trigger was not only easy to get into, but equally easy to understand, swap to a lighter trigger-spring, and consequently reduce the let-off from the requisite ten-meter competition minimum of 500 grams/18 ounces, to just **four** ounces; a two-ounce first stage, followed by two additional ounces to let-off. The hammer-spring was equally easily-accessed to swap with a stronger one, to soup-up the velocity to 560 FPS with 8.4 grain JSB pellets in hot temperatures. In my mind, my souped-up Walther CP3 represents the epitome of vintage Euro-exotica, retro-rodde!

Vintage Hammerlis are in the same league of classic airgun exotica virtue of their combination of 'old-world' European quality, sexy profiles, relative affordability, and the fact their vintage target guns are powered by my emotional-favorite propellant, carbon dioxide. Consequently Hammerlis were also among my first European collectables. Most of my Hammerlis have been the Master and Single models, due to their relative availability and affordability in the eighties; that being not long after the Hammerli airgun factory burned down, ending their airgun venture for a few decades. Vintage Hammerlis are not nearly as common nowadays as they were in the 1980s.

If I'm not mistaken, Hammerli had some early success in ten-meter competition. However, they were soon overshadowed on the podiums by guns using a less temperature sensitive propellant called 'air'. Enter Walther, Feinwerkbau, Diana, and others.

The only Walther air pistol I've owned but am not the least bit excited about is their LP53 model spring-piston pistol; the James Bond Agent 007 poster-pistol. Difficult as any recoiling spring-piston pistol is to shoot well, with it's spring and piston located in the grip and consequent even **more** bizarre firing behavior than any other springer, I can't shoot a Walther LP53 worth a tinker's damn! Though an interesting collectable and of Walther quality, I'm about as accurate with an LP53 as I am with an atlatl!

Which brings us to some springers worthy of mention in my book; even **praise**. Being an admirer of fine shooting implements and all things mechanical compels in me a fascination for the fine symphony of components, assemblies and mechanical goings-on that make any recoilless Feinwerkbau an absolute mechanical *wonderment!*



*Almost eerily recoilless, shooting this scoped FWB 65 was an other-worldly experience.*



*Virtue of their nicely-blued, firearms-quality steel construction, and despite the author's admitted prejudice against recoiling spring-piston guns, he occasionally enjoys shooting vintage Webley spring-piston pistols like this very vintage Junior model... in moderation.*

As if any airgun isn't fascinating enough for a student of physics, Feinwerkbau recoilless springers take that fascination to a whole 'nother level. From the ratcheting cocking stroke to the whole upper moving rearward on firing to counter the mechanical violence of the spring-piston firing cycle, their competition success suggests FWB subdued spring-piston firing-behavior weirdness better than any other manufacturer.

Though I've not owned a (later) FWB Model 80 or (electronic-trigger) Model 90, the Model 65s I have owned were wonderful shooting contraptions that left very positive impressions. The muted thud reminds that it's a springer; but the lack of recoil and buzz belie the fact there is even more stuff going on in there than the violent mechanical chain of events that take place when you trip the trigger on a recoiling springer. Experiencing the almost other-worldly mechanicalness of an FWB recoilless springer should be high on the must-do list of any self-respecting airgun freak.

#### Fine Quality Non-Recoilless

Long-historied British firearms manufacturer Webley & Scott started producing spring-piston pistols in the 1920s to the same high quality as their firearms. All Webley spring-piston air pistols evolved from the over-lever design of their original Mark 1, where the barrel doubles as a cocking-lever for a very simple, logical and compact design. Vintage Webley air pistols were also of blued, all machined-steel construction requiring hundreds of operations. Virtually bullet-proof; unfortunately not rust-proof!

As consumer goods devolved toward more economical materials and production methods, so eventually did Webley airguns. Though still of the same design as the original models, current Webley spring-piston pistols lack the machined-steel aesthetics of their vintage guns. And much as I mock maddeningly-challenging non-recoilless spring-piston pistols, my admiration for the old-school quality and mechanicals of old Webleys runs so deep that I actually enjoy shooting them. (In moderation.)

#### Millennial Classics

'Millennial' per Wikipedia, -*"Demographers and researchers typically use the early 1980s as starting birth years and the mid-1990s to early 2000s as ending birth years."*

A modern spin on Webley's over-lever barrel-cocking spring-piston design is the German Weihrauch HW45 pistol; better known in the U.S. as the Beeman P-1 Magnum. The "magnum" moniker wasn't inaccurate when compared to most air pistols of the era, assuming one hadn't experienced a vintage Crosman Co2 pistol (especially in .22 cal).

Still produced, the P-1 mimics a long-slide, 1911 Model Colt .45 semi-automatic firearm. Of **quality** alloy construction with an excellent trigger, good adjustable sights and factory scope grooves, there is a lot to like in a P-1 (despite it being a recoiling springer). Aforementioned features endow the P-1 with practical-accuracy potentials beyond that of other spring-piston pistols. However, that still leaves the P-1 at considerable disadvantage to recoilless designs (and propellants) in the hands of we humans.



*Though virtually identical looking, the P-1 and P-2 are polar opposites in firing behavior.*



Sporting all the fine features of the HW45/Beeman P-1, but a single-stroke pneumatic rather than spring-piston gun, the later HW75/Beeman P-2 shoots rings around the P-1 in every way but power. Of the same over-lever-cocking design as the P-1 and Webley springers, rather than cocking a mainspring on the opening stroke, the P-2 compresses air into a chamber on the closing stroke. Whereas the P-1 is small-game capable *if you can hit 'em*, the P-2 is silhouette competition capable *because you can hit 'em!* I consider these near twins of polar-opposite personalities both classics.

Also no doubt a classic in my opinion is the Italian-made FAS 604 single-stroke pneumatic. The 604 is a very light and compact ten-meter pistol; and like all SSPs, **wonderfully** recoilless. Mine had a nice trigger; though not in the same league as some I describe as “near telepathic”. Nevertheless and despite considerable power handicap to ten-meter PCP pistols dominating the shooting lines at the time, in the 1990s I managed to tie the air pistol silhouette national record by shooting the third-ever 39/40 posted in NRA sanctioned competition. Yeah, I know... “BFD, Old Geezer!”

That FAS 604 is another airgun I wish I hadn't parted with. Now dubbed the 6004 model, the FAS SSP pistols are again being imported and distributed in the U.S.

Some other Italian ten-meter pistols I've known bear mentioning in this chapter on classic European air pistols, my first being a Pardini K60 bulk-fill Co2 pistol. Powerful and very accurate, unfortunately it wasn't immune to temperature-related velocity ills. That wasn't a problem until the second day of a silhouette state championship, when it went so whack as to blow the hell out of my comfortable day-one lead!

A more-recent-vintage Pardini K2 **PCP** pistol I now own has all the fine qualities of the K60, but no temperature sensitivity issues. In fact the K2 shoots almost identically to the Benelli Kite of similar vintage that I used to capture a 2012 National Champion field target title. Though I can't quite decide whether or not I consider them classics, in my mind both the K2 and Kite are, without doubt, classic-**shooting** air pistols.

Still produced, the Czechoslovakian Tau 7 is a very impressive ten-meter Co2 pistol. I might have overlooked it completely had they not been offered not only in the usual .177 caliber, but also my favorite .22 caliber. Besides shooting as well as any Co2 pistol ever produced, .22 caliber can take a Tau 7 to places few other Co2 pistols should venture. With a near-telepathic trigger action and breaking 500 FPS with medium-weight pellets (after an easy hammer-spring swap), my Tau 7 can not only kick most target pistols' asses, but also take small-game and varmints to the size of jackrabbits! The fact it captured a Texas State Champion silhouette title over the largest field to ever contest Iron Sight class proves how impressive a Co2 pistol the Tau 7 really is. A gem!

This accounting of Euro-Classics is necessarily limited to one man's experiences and opinions. Nevertheless, here's hoping I've managed to convey some iota of the **wonderfulness** of some classic European air pistols I've known and loved. Ciao... Y'all!



*Ergonomically vastly superior to the P-2, the FAS 604 is of the same basic over-lever single-stroke pneumatic design and shoots similarly in accuracy and firing behavior.*



*The Premier was one of the last Webley air pistol models of all blued-steel construction.*