

TO RELOAD OR BUY: IS THAT THE QUESTION? BY MIKE WARE



CUSTOMERS COME into our shop continually asking us whether they should buy factory ammunition or build their own ammo. This choice is highly personal and can boil down to many factors. Those factors can include everything from finance, to performance, and even the joy of shooting and reloading themselves. There really is no wrong answer, but each option has many considerations, so let's walk through a few.

When I started shooting rifles 20 years ago it was widely understood that reloading was the only real way to feed a weapon in regard to accuracy or consistency. Factory barrels on weapons were pretty good and ammo was above average. But neither compared to what ammo makers and weapon builders produce now. The dedication to better methods and materials has resulted in dramatic improvements over the years and I'm tickled the major manufacturers have doubled down on us all as consumers.

Granted, ammo has gone for a wild ride in the last year and half, but like anything else in life, it'll settle with time and

become stable again. For the purposes of the discussion we'll put aside ammo and component costs and availability at the moment and look at this from a long-term perspective. What factors are relevant for our consideration? I try to consider how much I intend to shoot in terms of volume, what kind of accuracy I require, the amount of power or terminal ballistics I need, the time necessary for the purchase or reloading, and the costs associated for both. If I can identify those key items honestly and precisely, I'll have a good foundation to ponder with my questions.

It is important to put these considerations into each caliber or type of shooting as

well. A person may prefer to buy all their 12-gauge 8-shot low brass ammo for busting clays while they wouldn't dream of doing anything but rolling their own when it came to heading west for a prairie dog hunt. You may too find you're a blend of both, as it depends on a lot of factors.

The prairie dog hunt is a good example so let's use it. I shoot all kinds of rifles and calibers when heading west to smash prairie rats, but I use a huge volume of .223 in AR15 variant weapons. Many of my trips west have resulted in a week's sum of nearly 5,000 rounds expelled. With this kind of volume a few weeks a year you've got to really love reloading to keep up. Plus you need to have a lot of time to do so, as 15,000

rounds through the reloading process don't come easy. For this purpose I typically will pick out five to seven different kinds of factory built ammunition of price I can stomach, and accuracy test them through my rifles. I essentially balance

THE SINGLE SHOTSHELL PRESSES ARE PRETTY HANDY AND MOST PERFORM MULTIPLE FUNCTIONS WITH A SINGLE PULL OF THE HANDLE.

the performance through the weapons with the cost per round and decide which I like the best. I always record a second choice in case my primary choice can't be found easily. This group of benefits and tradeoffs is my compromise for this type and style of shooting. I do save all my brass as trading fodder or use it later for reloading

in some cases.

What about the 12-gauge busting of clays I mentioned earlier? This one for me is real simple. I don't have enough time to reload as I'd like, so when I shoot clays, skeet, or trap, I prefer to simply buy what

I need, practice up, and shoot as needed. The type of ammo I typically choose can be found easily and isn't costly, so it works for me. This again, is a highly personal choice as I see many folks that reload their shotshells and they enjoy every minute of it. They shoot as well or better than me, so it isn't a matter of 'better' so much as it is a matter of choice in some instances.

When I shoot precision rifles or hunt with rifles, the story is different for each.

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For years great rifle performance was marketing well by Roy Weatherby and his "1 1/2 inch 3 shot group guarantee." His Mark V rifles promised to deliver this level of accuracy straight out of the box. If you used Roy's guns and Roy's ammo you were supposed to be able to put them all in a paper plate at 500 yards. The accuracy probability today is far higher and you don't have to buy Roy's gun or ammo to do it. It isn't unrealistic for standard hunting grade rifles with quality hunting ammo to produce MOA (minute of angle) performance. The MOA equates to roughly 1" at each one hundred yards. So, MOA performance at 400 yards would roughly equate to a 4" group provided all the other aspects of proper shooting are being adhered to. You can literally pick up a \$600 rifle and a \$25 box of quality ammo at your favorite shop and potentially shoot that well. That performance is quite acceptable for me when I hunt so I find myself buying ammo for many hunting rifles rather than building it. There are exceptions of course. I have always reloaded for my 257 Wby Mag deer gun and probably always will. I've got a blistering load for it and the rifle itself holds sentimental value for me, so I won't change a thing. For my precision rifles things change a bit.

I shoot a high volume of a couple of my favorite chamberings and those choices are based on performance and specifically the type of performance I prefer. There are a couple tactical precision rigs that I do actually use factory match ammo in. My 6.5 Creedmoor bolt gun is one of them.

The 140AMAX Match that Hornady puts forth has lent itself to .5MOA performance or better quite often in that rifle and that is fine with me. I scored a whole bunch of 705gr TTI Armory 50BMG ammo years ago and I love using it in my EDM Windrunner chambered in 50BMG. When it comes to my favorite 7mm and 30cal magnums I reload for nearly all of them. Why? Because I can build it better than I can buy it in those instances, and since my volume is low annually on them all, a few hundred rounds here and there lasts for a long time.

In the case of bench rest precision and competition from the bench you cannot perform without reloading or having a load made for you. The tiniest of alterations in these loads make quite an impact on performance so a fully developed and extremely thorough vetting of each step in the process can make the difference between 1st place and 18th... I have great admiration for the people who put that much time and effort into the refinement of their ammo building. It truly is impressive. I like to do that with the weapons I build for customers, so I can appreciate it.

Handguns fall into a common category for me. When I'm using a 9mm, 45, or many other mainstream chamberings, I'll buy factory ammo for the sake of convenience and time saved over the money I'll save instead. However, when it comes to chamberings like 10mm, 50GI, and 460S&W, I'll load them up on the press and smile all the way to the bank. Besides, anyone digging range session after range session shooting the 460S&W was probably kicked in the head by a calf

when little anyway. Some of these guns are brutal to shoot and it doesn't require 500 rounds down range to know it either.

So far all we've really discussed is the cost vs performance vs time considerations. That limited view might work with factory ammo, but there are costs to reloading not everyone thinks through. There needs to be a place to actually perform the reloading itself. A cluttered bench won't cut it. I like a clean and wide open space so no problems or congestion can present itself as a problem or mistake. Of course there are the costs of the equipment, dies, and extras you prefer. Most though, are truly one-time costs. You have to load a lot of ammo to wear out a set of dies. A quality press and good components will be something your kids and grandkids can utilize. I started on my dad's pale green RCBS Rock Chucker single stage press, and he'd had it since he was knee high on a grasshopper if that tells you anything. If you store your powder and primers properly, they'll last a good long while. By a long while, I mean years and even decades in some cases. If you take care of your stuff and store it well, this stuff will last and last folks.

I know many people that love reloading. They enjoy the practice itself and the search for that great load that does everything they want. It is rare that a hand load costs more than factory ammo. Granted, high dollar brass exists as do specialty bullets, but all things being equal the reloads almost always come at a lower cost after the equipment has been paid for. If you're reusing your brass or shotshells you've already fired and used, this becomes really easy and cheap. I've got friends that have tinkered with their hand loads and either accomplished the softest and sweetest 38 Special load ever or even morphed their off-the-shelf .22-250 bolt gun into a near benchrest accuracy status.

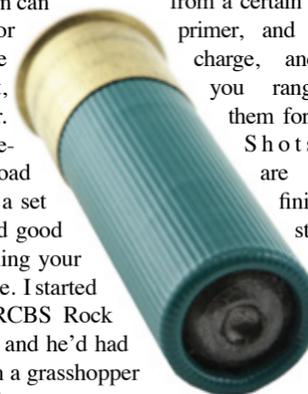
The single shotshell presses are pretty handy and most perform multiple functions with a single pull of the handle. You simply move the shell from slot to slot and add what you need at each stage, whether that is a primer, wad, powder, etc. Some are truly 'progressive' in that you put a shell into the press and it rotates around in a turret fashion by itself. These types of presses are more costly and complex, but really do a lot of work in a short amount of time. The set up on these can be tedious, but the results can't be denied. If you're going to do any high volume reloading, it is certainly worth your consideration to seriously look into a press like this.

The single stage presses are widely known and easy to use. You can use a progressive press for everything you want to, but load development and work up is a real pain when you're only trying to work out a portion of the reloading sequence. Things like die set up, powder charge changes, etc. will dictate that you run maybe 20 or 50 rounds of ammo made from a certain powder, primer, and powder charge, and then you range test them for results. Shotshells are not as finicky about this, but metallic stuff is. Going back to the 'Ol' drawing board to change one variable, over and over, until you come up with the results you're looking for isn't uncommon. My friends and customers seem to be far better at this

than I. It usually takes me tons of load development and lots of time to duplicate the results all my buddies attain in just a few tries. And no, I don't gamble either. I'm the unluckiest person I know.

There are so many tricks and tools that speed up the process and make things easier now, that it has really made reloading a lot easier and much more consistent. After all, we're still building tiny little cases filled with gunpowder, so consistency and anything that lends itself to our pure concentration on safety is welcome. You can find yourself in real trouble or far worse if you're reloading isn't getting your full concentration. It only takes one double charged case or the wrong powder put into the wrong case to result in serious injury or worse. Be careful, go slow, have a plan, and stick to it. Be methodical and thorough. Not enough people do it,

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but wearing some safety gear and things as simple as a really great pair of safety glasses while reloading is a wise move. Double checking is standard procedure when reloading and nothing short of being safety focused will suffice.

Being aware of safety on every level is key when shooting and reloading. I still see people at the range that skip safety gear. While most are wearing hearing protection of some kind, a good majority skip eye protection, and nearly all skip gloves and long sleeves. Having had a few guns blow up on me in my time, which is pretty normal if you shoot long enough, you learn that eyeballs can't be replaced and even if it is a factory load or a hand load, safety comes first. A pair of nice gloves, good fitting safety glasses, and an old flannel shirt will run you \$30 total to supplement your range bag that already includes ear protection. Would you trade your vision or a finger for that? Me neither.

Using great factory ammo is just a matter of getting your hands on it and trying it out to see your results. Reloading and building your own ammo is tougher to begin, but the resources are available everywhere. I'm so glad Al Gore invented the internet (insert sarcasm heavily laden with contempt). The web gives us access to everything from manufactures specs on powder charges, suggestions of powder and primer types for various chamberings, to open discussion forums in which to read up on recipes and topics on all your subject matter. If you're new to the forum activity, you'll find no shortage of what I call 'internet commandos' so the best advice I can provide is to read more and post less for a while until you get the feel for the forum you like and can navigate it well. With great irony, in nearly all forums I've visited, there is a short list 'tacked' or 'pinned' threads and topics towards the top of each page. These are essentially required reading that too few read. Most all contain the answers to common questions and provide rules and suggestions for posting and navigating the forums and sites themselves. I highly recommend reading them, as they

contain the basics for why you came to that forum in the first place. Don't skip them.

I've seen Facebook groups, to websites, to reloading recipes pinned to Pinterest that had great reloading content for people, but don't overlook the face to face interaction. We've held reloading clinics in our shop so people could get started doing the job itself, learn about the basics, and get a bit of a foundation for a place to start. Those in attendance have shared their equipment, their processes, tips and tricks, and really helped the newbies grasp the whole picture much quicker and with much less learning curve. It can seem a daunting task, but I can promise you there are always a bunch of friends or neighbors you didn't know you had, that can help if you search for them. Some of these may manifest themselves via

relationships forged over the Internet, or you might just run into a guy you didn't know was a "gun guy" at the local gun shop. If you have a great local gun shop, that's the first place I'd go. Those guys are usually pretty knowledgeable and have the skinny on the guys that reload well and might be willing to visit with you or give you a helping hand.

For me the decision of buying ammo or building ammo boils down to patience, time, and money. Simply put, that is different for me in each situation and I make individual decisions for each scenario. The firearms community, as you all know, is widely accepting and you won't have to look far to find some people willing to help you out if you seek it. As always, think through your purchases, and put safety first. This winter has been long enough, so get out there and do some shooting!

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