

SHOOTOUT!

.45 .44

By Ross Seyfried

This is the story of the finest hunting handgun cartridge in existence, a cartridge ready, willing and able to tackle Cape buffalo. This is the king, the ancient and misunderstood .45 Colt.

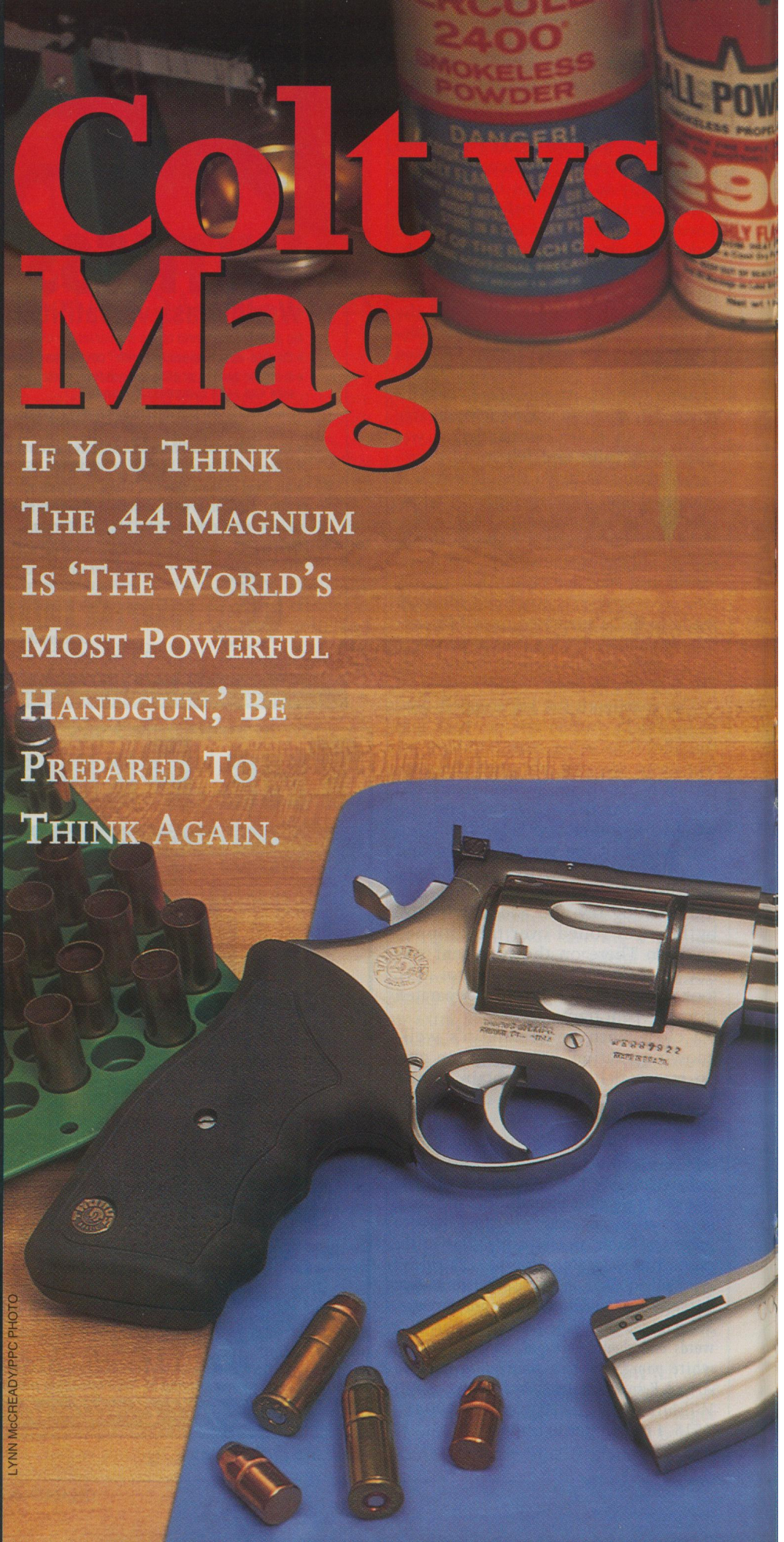
The Hodgdon Powder Company, with their latest 26th-edition loading manual, has opened the .45 Colt's horizons to 30,000 psi for "modern firearms designed to be used with high-pressure loads." Ah, but you say that our pet .44 Mag can use 40,000 psi loads—it must be better, right? Not necessarily. Let's flex their muscles for a moment and see what happens. The heaviest loads the manuals give us for the .44 drive 300-grain bullets at 1,300 fps and 34,800 cup, while Hodgdon offers us a 300-grain .45 at 1,330 with 30,000. Beyond this, where the .45 really shines, we have 325s at 1,260 fps. Admittedly the .44 will do more than the manuals show, but it is at full maximum with a 325-grain bullet in the 1,300 fps range. The factory .45 Colt guns can stand on their own, but when we break out the five-shooter .45s we have another 20,000 psi at our disposal and can cause the .44 to pall into insignificance. Also remember that velocity and bullet weight are only two of the three factors in terminal performance—the last is bore diameter, a dimension that adds to the .45's prowess.

The handguns capable of this kind of performance are somewhat limited in number, but they do cover the spectrum of action kinds. In double-action six-shooters we have the big Colt Anaconda and to a lesser degree of strength the S&W Model 25. The single-action field is covered

Colt vs. Mag

IF YOU THINK
THE .44 MAGNUM
IS 'THE WORLD'S
MOST POWERFUL
HANDGUN,' BE
PREPARED TO
THINK AGAIN.

LYNN MCCREADY/IPPC PHOTO



.45 Colt vs. .44 Mag

as well as is possible with the Ruger Blackhawk and my all-time favorite handgun, the Bisley. These are inexpensive, out-of-the box revolvers capable of throwing 325 grains of lead over 1,200 fps with less than 30,000-psi chamber pressure. They are easily capable of handling any game animal in North America.

The last and ultimate realm of .45 revolvers are the five-shooters. These are handguns without normal limits that will drive bullets over 400 grains beyond 1,300 fps. These are limited to three guns. One is often referred to as the finest revolver made—a gun that in my book finishes in second place—the production Freedom Arms .454 Casull. It becomes a more practical piece with .45 Colt chambers. Next in line are the Bowen conversions of the Ruger Redhawk, giving superpower .45 performance to the shooter who prefers a double-action revolver. Finally there are in my opinion the finest hunting revolvers in existence. These are the Bowen-Ruger Bisleys.

Beyond the guns, the loads that fuel their engines are why we are here. If we

Top hunting bullets for the .45 Colt include, from left: 300-grain Speer plated jacket, 325-grain LBT-LFN, 325-grain jacketed Golden Bear, 360-grain LBT-LFN, 412-grain LBT-WLN. Dual crimping grooves on the 325- and 360-grain LBTs allow seating for standard revolvers and Casulls in the front groove or the longer length for maximum loading in the five-shot custom revolvers.

begin at the bottom, we have the commercial factory loads. These, for all intents and purposes, are useless except as a source of cases. The soft lead bullets at .45 ACP velocities and black-powder pressures

SELECTED LOADS FOR SIX-SHOT REVOLVERS			
BULLET	POWDER	WEIGHT (grains)	VELOCITY (fps) (7-inch bbl.)
185-gr.	Unique	13.5	1,418
200-gr.	Unique	13	1,349
230-gr.	Win. 231	11	1,222
260-gr.	Win. 296	26.5	1,421
300-gr.	H-110	23	1,330
325-gr.	H-110	22	1,260
350-gr.	H-110	20.5	1,061

Courtesy of Hodgdon Powder Co. All loads above are listed as maximum. Never exceed maximum loads. **WARNING:** These loads are for use in modern firearms designed to be used with high-pressure loads. Do not use in old weapons designed for use with black-powder or low-pressure loads.

game loads, loads that are normally considered "maximum" performance for the old Colt. These are held to the black-powder pressure limit of 16,000 psi and usually use bullets from 185 to 260 grains with velocities from 700 to 1,100 fps. There is absolutely nothing wrong with this kind of



Out-of-the-box .45 revolvers like the Ruger Bisley (top) and Colt Anaconda are exceptional performers with Hodgdon data or Gardner loads.

drop-in version and an oversize one that will require gunsmith fitting. The latter will eliminate all "play" associated with the variable and oversize rear sight recesses on the revolvers.

I carried two six-shooter .45 loads.



Both were 325-grain bullets driven by 22 grains of H-110 powder. These are, in my opinion, optimum-performance loadings for the .45. The difference between the two loads was that one bullet was a nonexpanding hard-cast bullet commercially loaded by Gardener

Ammunition. The other was an expanding-jacket soft nose by Golden Bear.

Because there are so many cooperative targets (feral donkeys), one can select the shot and bullet placement for uniformity.

load; in fact the ability to use the very light loads is one of the reasons that the .45 is superior to the .475. If one wishes to master his handgun techniques, light, quiet, target-type loads are ideal. They are also perfectly suited to squirrels, rabbits and other fine main courses. As good as these loads are, the really good news is that, even against conventional wisdom, we don't have to stop there.

This last summer I traveled to Northern Australia with three goals, one of which was to explore the full potential of the most modern .45 loads and bullets in hunting big game.

The gun I carried in Australia was a standard Bisley with a factory Ruger 7½-inch barrel and two custom additions. First it was fitted with a five-shot cylinder that elevated its ballistic capability to maximum. Possibly even more important, it carried the finest handgun sight I had ever



The .45 Colt (center) can be much more powerful than the .44 Magnum (left) and more versatile than the .475 (right) while reaching similar power levels in modern revolvers.

For most of the shooting I used the "perfect" shot that started on the point of the near shoulder with the animal facing $\frac{3}{4}$ toward me. The exits were on or about the last rib on the far side. I also used the opposite shot with the animals turned $\frac{3}{4}$ away. This hit purposely avoids the central nervous system but kills very quickly. Not once during the outings did a donkey fall instantly to this shot, an expected reality with these very tough animals. However, they would fall within a few seconds. The Gardener flat-nose bullet left a clean entrance and exit hole to leak.

The expanding Golden Bear bullets

PERFORMANCE DATA FOR FIVE-SHOT .45 COLTS	
BULLET WEIGHT	VELOCITY, 7½-INCH BARREL
300 grains	1,600 fps
325 grains	1,500 fps
360 grains	1,475 fps
412 grains	1,350

Specific powder charges are intentionally not included. If you have a gun, its maker will supply specific loading data. Use only Federal .45 Colt cases at this level.

demonstrated a more violent impact on the lighter-bodied females. The excellent design of the Golden Bear allows the frontal portion to expand rather quickly.



The author took a number of animals on an Australian hunt using this 7½-inch Bisley and hot .45 Colt loads. Performance on game was on a par with that of a .300 Winchester Magnum rifle.

Then if it meets bone or other heavy resistance the "mushroom" shears off at the crimp groove, leaving a solid base to carry on with penetration. This bullet never failed on either the females or males, but on the big, heavy, exceedingly tough males the solid had more authority. The higher retained velocity during penetration begins to show its stuff as critters get heavier and tougher.

With the same gun that did these things with standard loads I also shot



some real crushers. These were 360-grain bullets driven by maximum charges of Winchester 296, in Federal cases, to a velocity of 1,480 fps. There were three bullet variations: LFN solid, LFN cast soft nose and WFN (wide flat nose) solids. The solids and the base of the soft nose were water-quenched wheel weights, 22-24 Brinnell hardness. The nose of the soft nose (back to the crimp groove) was pure lead. I also explored the extreme limits of the .45 with a bullet that weighed 412 grains. It is an LBT shape called the LWN or long wide nose. Its purpose, aside from providing a large frontal meplat, is to offer maximum bullet weight in a functional shape (as opposed to a wadcutter)

with minimal length. To my pleasant surprise this behemoth easily achieved 1,348 fps in a hot-weather working load.

An important point to remember about these high-pressure loadings is that they are only suited to Freedom Arms and custom five-shot revolvers with the maker's recommendation. They are not intended for any other firearm. The bullets are expressly designed with crimp grooves that are .500 inch from the nose. Those for other loads (and for use in the Freedom) have .400-inch noses. This long nose offers maximum powder capacity in the case and an overall load length of 1.800 inches. This prevents the cartridges from functioning in most six-



LEFT: Maximum loads for the five-shot custom .45s are loaded to 1.8 inches overall and will not fit in the cylinders of most factory revolvers. ABOVE: This simple selection of powders—Hodgdon H110, Winchester 296 and Hercules Blue Dot—lets shooters load the .45 Colt cartridge to its full potential in modern revolvers like the Ruger and Anaconda.

DIRECTORY

Beartooth Bullets

(LBT-design cast bullets)
Dept. GA
P.O. Box 491
Dover, ID 83825

Bowen Arms Corp.

(Catalog \$3)
Dept. GA
P.O. Box 67
Louisville, TN 37777

Cast Performance Bullet Co.

(LBT-design cast bullets)
Dept. GA
12441 U.S. Hwy. 26
Riverton, WY 82501

Gardner Ammunition

(Loaded ammo)
Dept. GA
3973 Vanstone
Milford, MI 48382

Golden Bear Bullets

(Jacketed bullets)
Dept. GA
3065 Fairfax Ave.
San Jose, CA 95148

Hodgdon Powder Co.

(Reloading manual)
Dept. GA
P.O. Box 2932
Shawnee Mission, KS 66201

Hunt Australia Pty. Ltd.

(Hunting in Australia)
Dept. GA
72 Blanch Street
Shortland, NSW
Australia

LBT

(Bullet molds; catalog \$2)
Dept. GA
HCR 62
P.O. Box 130C
Moyie Springs, ID 83845

Mac's Bullets

(LBT-design cast bullets)
Dept. GA
HCR 62
P.O. Box 130C
Moyie Springs, ID 83845

.45 COLT vs .44 MAG

shot revolvers not intended for their use. The cartridges will fit in the Colt Anaconda, but they should not be used in this firearm. If you own both five- and six-shot .45 Colts, great care must be exercised not to fire the high-pressure loads in a six-shot gun.

I shot several donkeys with the heavy loads. As with all dynamic things it is very difficult to draw solid conclusions as to the



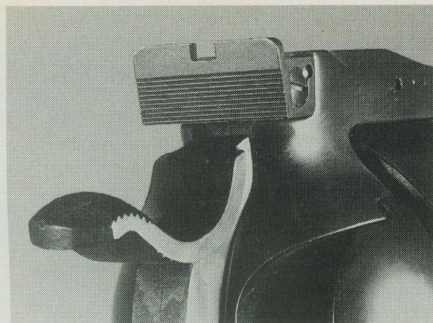
This Bowen five-shot Bisley conversion with 5 1/2-inch Pac-Nor match barrel is the author's candidate for the finest hunting revolver made. The caliber is, of course, .45 Colt.



These .45 Colt bullets were all recovered from big game. From left: 325-grain Golden Bear, 360-grain LBT WFN heat-treated solid, 325-grain LBT LFN cast soft nose after hitting only soft tissue and a 360-grain LBT LFN soft nose recovered from the hog in the accompanying photo.

superiority of the heavy loads over the standard. The wide flat-nose and soft-nose loads are very effective, often killing visibly more quickly than the .300 Winchester. The 360 LFN would actually be more at home on huge animals like big bull elk, moose and brown bear where it could demonstrate its full potential. For deer-size game, a 300- to 325-grain soft nose at the same velocity would have less recoil and therefore be easier to place precisely.

My final goal for the .45 was to try to prove that with its 412-grain bullets it was fully equal to the great .475 on buffalo-size game. We have the same nose meplat diameter due to the WLN shape, 412 versus 430 grains (close enough for argument) and the same 1,300- to 1,350-fps velocity. I had hoped, as I had in the



This prototype Bowen rear sight replaces the existing sight on Ruger Blackhawks and Bisleys, and production versions should be available in June. The author was very impressed with this design during his Australian hunt.



This boar was among the animals that fell to the author's 7 1/2-inch .45 Bisley on a recent hunt in Australia. Performance of all of the loads tried was exceptional.

past, to be able to hunt multiple buffalo, but I fear the good days when one could shoot several at a very reasonable price are over. Now bulls are few and far between and when you find them they cost \$1,000 each. The one I could shoot was reserved for my four-bore. After I flattened it with the cannon, I did try the .45 loads on the dead bull. Here I failed to shoot through both shoulders with the .45 where, five years previously, the .475 had whistled through with room to spare. There are differences, not the least of

which is that a dead buffalo lying down does not present the same skeletal position as a living, standing one. However, the most likely explanation for the .45's lesser penetration may lie in a mental error on my part. I felt the same meplat, same weight, same velocity and a longer bullet with greater sectional density should penetrate equally or better. Examining bullet length combined with rifling twist may answer the question. The .45 barrel had a 20-inch twist; the .475s have 18-inch-twist barrels. I had fired

longer bullets with less twist out of the .45, and while they stabilized perfectly in air, I fear they wobbled more after they hit, reducing penetration.

Now we experiment with two changes: faster twist barrels and maybe a more ideal "sledgehammer" bullet weight in the .45, possibly 390 grains. I don't consider the shortfall the cartridge's fault and believe it can be explained and cured mechanically. If you don't reload, the .44 is a better choice than the .45. But for a reloader who wants the very best, the grand old Colt is it.