

MONSTER SIXGUNS

Today's handgunner can pick from a selection of truly
BIG-BORE revolvers. Guns & Ammo's resident
"Monster Gun" master, Ross Seyfried,
explains which may be best
for your shooting needs.

and .500 Linebaugh cartridges with both single and double-action revolvers to handle them. Here I will try to lay the cards on the table so you can pick the one, if any, of the supermagnums that is for you.

I am not going to include the .44 Magnum in this discussion for two reasons. First, so much is known and written about the .44s that with a little digging you can learn even its darkest secrets. The real reason, the .44's reputation of power notwith-

standing, is because it is a baby among the giants of revolver rounds. For similar reasons, plus my lack of experience with them, I am not going to include the "stretched" .44 Mag cases. They require long frames and quickly start to become specialized silhouette guns.

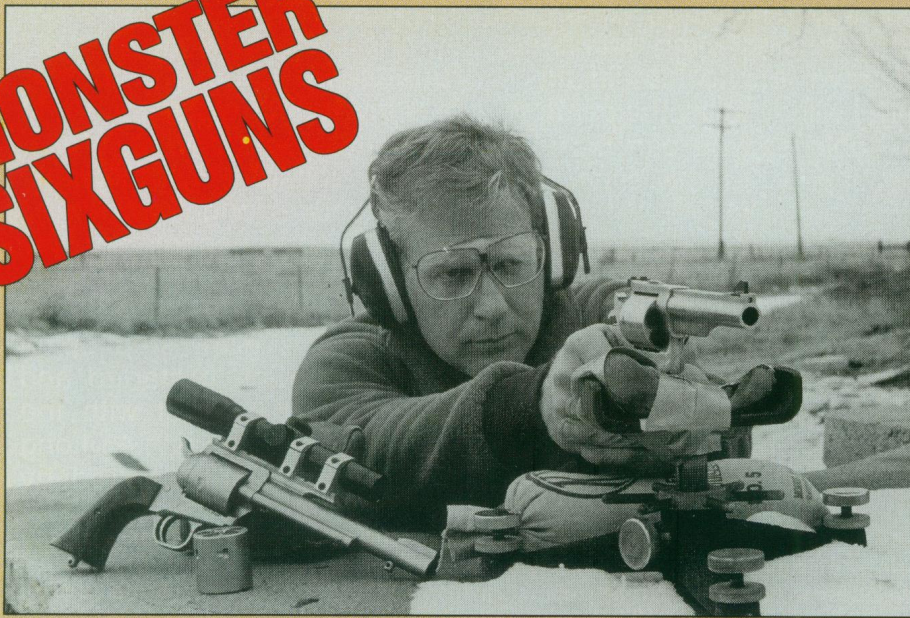
It is interesting to look at the roots of this giant step up in handgun power. It started and continues at its best with the very old, very "weak" .45 Long Colt. Dick Casull started by

Left: With a Freedom Arms .45 Colt single action, 325 and 360-gr. slugs roared at over 1,400 and 1,500 fps, respectively! Below: The author's "monster sixguns" include (top to bottom) Custom Freedom Arms made for dual .45 Colt and .454 Casull cylinders, Bowen's .45 conversion on Ruger Blackhawk frame, Linebaugh's Ruger Bisley in .475, and an early Linebaugh conversion on an El Dorado-frame, 5-shot .45 Colt.



During the last ten years we have seen the design and acceptance of four super-powered revolver cartridges. The power level starts where the .44 Magnum stops. Fortunately, the power increase did not require a corresponding increase in gun size or weight. The final results are pure handguns that fit in conventional holsters, with horsepower beyond Elmer Keith's wildest dreams. Now instead of wondering if it is possible to exceed the potential of the .44, I have difficulty deciding which I want out of the great selection of guns and loads. Before us today are the .45 Colt, .454 Casull, and .475

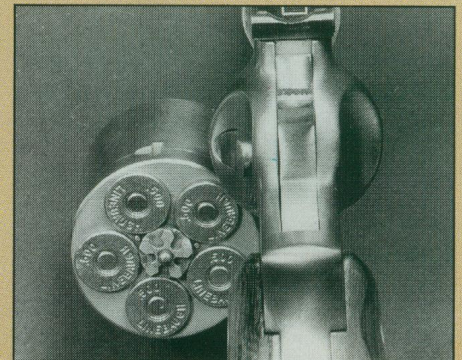
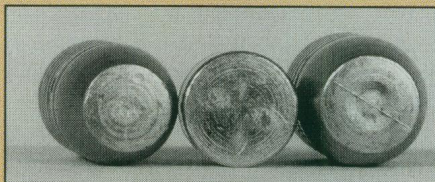
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strength and "Holland & Holland" quality have made the .454 Casull cartridge's reputation bigger and better than life. Yet as paradoxical as it may seem, the Freedom Arms revolver, built from the ground up around the .454, is less suited to the long case than some of the other conversions. The reason is simple: the Freedom has the shortest cylinder. The functional length of Ruger Redhawk or Black-

Left: Author fires Bowen .500 Ruger Redhawk; Freedom .45 Colt/.454 Casull sits to the side.

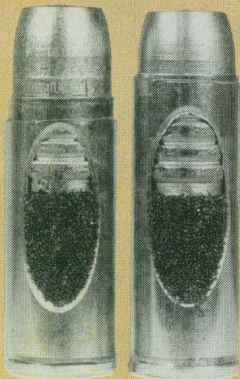
using very heavy to extreme loads in some modified Colts. He carried on with a 1/10-inch-longer ".45 Colt," the now-legendary .454 Casull round, fired from those magnificent Freedom Arms revolvers. The most visible Casull efforts continued toward tremendous powder charges with normal bullet weights. John Linebaugh taught us some realistic lessons by putting long, five-shot .45 Colt cylinders in El Dorado, Seville, and later Ruger single actions. John understood that in order to get a lot more out of a revolver it was



Above: Big .500 functions normally with swing-out cylinder. Above left: Frontal area of .45 (left) and .475 (right) compared with base of a .44. Their hitting areas are almost the size of the .44's bore.

COMPARISON OF CARTRIDGE PERFORMANCE

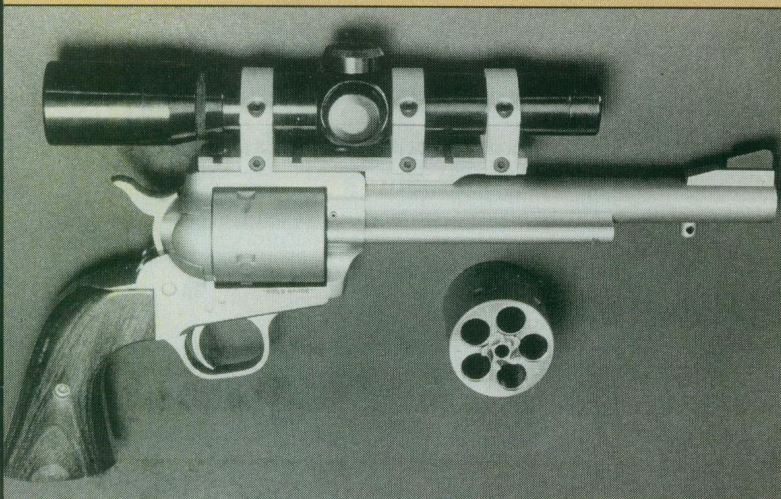
CARTRIDGE	BULLET WEIGHT	VELOCITY (fps)	BARREL LENGTH (in.)
.454 Casull	300-gr. JSP	1,650	7½
.45 Colt or .454	325 gr.	1,550	7½
.45 Colt	360 gr.	1,425	7½
.45 Colt	370 gr.	1,375	7½
.475	385 gr.	1,475	6
.475	400 gr.	1,400	6
.475	430 gr.	1,380	6
.500	385 gr.	1,350	6
.500	400 gr.	1,300	6
.500	440 gr.	1,275	6
.500	470 gr.	1,200	6



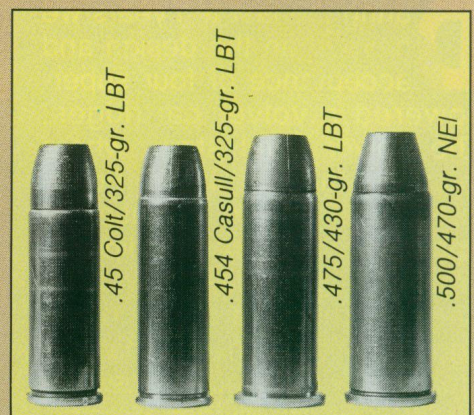
When heavy (360-grain) bullets are used, the powder capacity of the .454 Casull (right) equals that of the .45 Colt (left), when both are loaded to maximum overall length.

necessary to add more than powder—we needed more lead as well.

Right here, for most shooters, is the question that isn't asked enough. Should I have .45 Colt or .454 Casull chambers in my gun? The Freedom Arms revolvers with their awesome



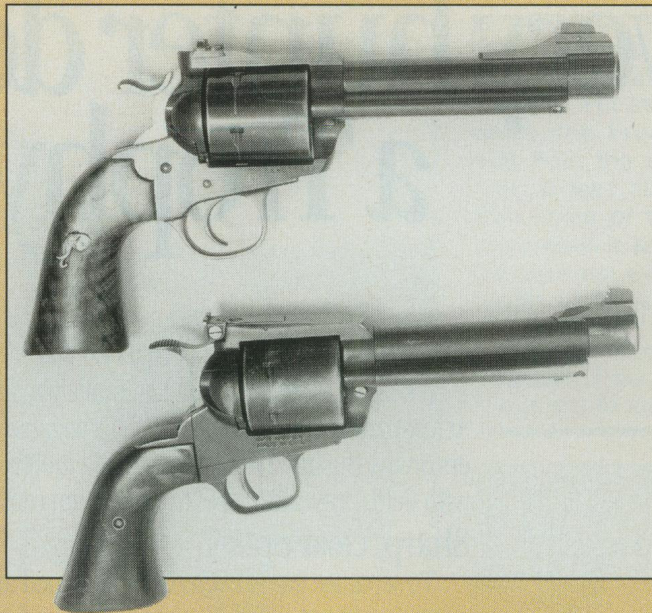
Left: For Ross' tests, he used this custom Freedom Arms made for an Alaskan guide for backup and hunting. It has dual .45 Colt and .454 Casull cylinders, sling swivels, scope, and iron sights. Right: Seyfried's favorite Supermagnum bullets.



hawk cylinders is 1.86 inches, while the Casull is 1.78 inches. The cylinders in both guns are the same length, but the Freedom has the rims recessed into the cylinder, where the Rugers do not. This makes the Ruger "window" from the breechface to the barrel longer, allowing a longer overall cartridge to fit into the gun.

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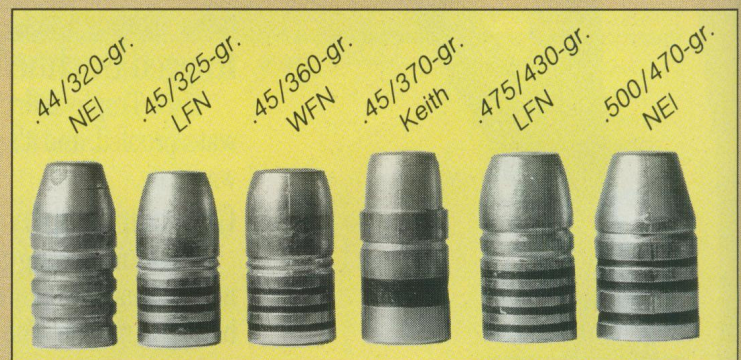
This total usable cylinder/maximum cartridge length is the crux of the .454 or .45 Colt question. Using the Freedom revolver and a .45 Colt case the bullet can stick out of the case .500 inch; if we use the .454 case the bullet can protrude only .400 inch. With the long, 300-grain-plus bullets, the working powder chamber (the distance from case web to the base of the bullet) is exactly the same. We simply have to push more of the bullet into the longer .454 case. If you are wanting maximum velocities out of light bullets the longer case has some advantage. But with the 325 to 370-grain bullets that maximize the game-taking potential of the big .45s, the .45 Colt makes the job easier



Seyfried's two "buffalo guns" are a Linebaugh Ruger Bisley in .475 with special sights and grips (top) and an early Linebaugh conversion on an El Dorado frame 5-shot .45 Colt. These revolvers have both taken African Cape and Australian water buffalo.

Shown in the two photos below are some of the author's "standard" bullets (left) and a variety of what he considers as "maximum practical" bullet weights, shown on the right.

and less expensive. Easier, because most existing LBT and NEI bullets have crimp grooves set too far behind the bullet nose for use with the .454 case. The bullets have to be crimped over the front driving band, or in the case of the LBT flat noses there is no place to crimp the bullets at all. Yes, you could



Bowen conversions to 5-shot big-bores at left. Top: Redhawk rebored w/new cylinder. Center: Blackhawk with ovate barrel. Bottom: Redhawk "L" barrel. Below: 300-gr. Freedom Arms JFP (left) shown with 325-gr. NEI long flat-nose bullet.



design a mould for the .454 Casull case, specifying not more than .375 inch of nose in front of the crimp groove, but that makes a bullet with a very stubby nose. The .45 Colt is less expensive because even the extraordinary Federal .45 Colt brass is priced at about half what the .454s cost. You also need less powder to get the same ballistics out of the Colt case.

John Linebaugh talked me out of the .454-length chamber several years ago, saying that with my big bullets there was nothing to gain. Recently an Alaskan-guide friend of mine ordered a new Field Grade Freedom revolver complete with all whistles and bells...including dual cylinders. One was the standard .454 Casull, and its brother was chambered for .45 Colt. With this gun I was able to run velocity and accuracy tests with both cartridges through the same 7½-inch barrel. In the final outcome the only differences were

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conversational. With bullets ranging from 300 to 360 grains the .45 Colt velocities were within 10 to 40 feet per second (fps) of the same bullets fired out of the .454 cylinder, the .45 Colt loads using 2 grains less of 296 powder. In most loads there was enough case capacity and apparent pressure "room" to increase the .45 Colt loads, but with 325-grain bullets at 1,500 fps and 360s cooking at over 1,400 fps I had plenty of velocity. Accuracy was effectively equal, averaging under 3 inches at 50 yards. If the .454 lost an accuracy contest with a given bullet, it was because of the obscene way I had to crimp it in the long case.

Now, don't think for a moment that I have anything against those awesome Freedom revolvers. They are made like somebody melted a bank vault full of Swiss watches and poured the best of both into a mould shaped like a single-action revolver. My own Freedom re-

"For me the .475 and .500 are pure hunting tools for heavy game."

volver was made on special order with .45 Colt chambers and it is absolutely one of the finest revolvers I own. I just think that because they chose to make the gun with its relatively short cylinder length it is better fed with .45 Colt brass. The same holds true for the Linebaugh and Bowen conversions on Rugers. The Ruger frame can handle some .060 inch more cartridge length, but that's still not enough to justify the longer case.

One point of caution when you are loading for these high-intensity .45s is to avoid normal jacketed bullets. Freedom Arms has experienced some core/jacket separations...*in the barrel*. Regular jacketed handgun bullets just aren't designed to handle the pressure or velocity levels generated by these guns. Beyond the safety consideration, ordinary jacketed bullets are very apt to fly apart when they hit game at excessive speed, failing to penetrate to the vitals. If you want to use jacketed bullets in the .45s, I suggest the special Freedom Arms bullets. They have heavy jackets and very hard cores. Their 300-grain jacketed bullet is a very good choice if you don't want to cast your bullets for hunting. I know of two firms who specialize in making heavy, heat-treated bullets for the big-bores. Great Northern Casting and Dailey

Specialty are listed in the directory accompanying this article.

If the kind of performance you can get out of the Bowen, Freedom, or Linebaugh five-shot .45 Colts isn't enough, you need to step up to the big boys. For those who are setting their sights on very big game, guides who might need a small handgun to work as a backup against something toothy, or those who are fascinated by horsepower, the .475 and .500 will fill the bill. There is very real need for caution

"This is the kind of punch I have come to expect from my .416 rifles."

when you fire the .475 or .500. There is enough recoil to drive the rear sight into your forehead if you don't know how to manage it. Absolutely never hand one of these guns to anyone who is not thoroughly familiar with heavy handgun recoil. The results of the cruel joke can be very serious. I know of three incidents where unwitting shooters have been severely cut by .475s. There are also those who ask about making "maximum"-type .475s and .500s on the long-framed revolvers. My answer to that is no. Sort of like the fellow who thunders "*Mooooore???*" on the soup commercial. This time you don't want more. The guns, the way they are, are almost more than any normal human can handle.

The move up to the .475 is a big one. It's almost like the increase from a .30-06 to a .375 H&H or a standard 12 gauge to a 10-gauge Magnum. The .475 comes complete with a very intimidating recoil and game-taking potential to match. It follows a logical step in bullet-weight increase over the .45s, starting at 370 grains where the .45s quit. Like all four big guns, the .475 is most efficient and effective with bullet weights near the upper limit. While it is possible to push a 370-grain bullet at 1,500 fps, the .475 eagerly drives the long 430-grain bullets close to the 1,400-fps mark. This is in short 5½ or 6-inch barrels, with pressures that still allow the cases to pop easily out of the gun in the hot tropical sun. The .475 can be fired with reduced loads and lighter bullets that make shooting it far more pleasant. You just have to keep in mind that if you want it to do what it is made to do—take big game—you should use big bullets.

Loaded with the 430-grain bullet, the .475 becomes what I see as the ultimate *handgun* for big game. We have reached a level where we no longer

feel undergunned on the largest game animals, excluding elephant. When you hunt big game with any arm and especially with a handgun, bullet placement is paramount. No one can hold enough power to offset hitting in exactly the right place. But with the .475 and the right bullet we can wade right into shots outside the realm of normal handguns, such as the center shoulder shot on buffalo, moose, or the big bears. The .475 is enough gun to handle the job, plowing a big hole right through both sides. Using soft-nose bullets we can deliver a crushing blow to the lighter animals.

I don't want to overrate the power of this or any other handgun. It is still very small by heavy-rifle standards, but we no longer have to feel like we are sending a boy to do a man's job. The long heavy bullet, at modest velocity, is simply effective if you place it properly. I still hold a vision in my mind's eye of the big Australian buffalo I shot a year ago with the .475. That one shot undid years of handgun hunting experience. After shooting big, heavy animals with handguns you come to expect minimal reaction when the bullet hits. The

SUPERHEAVY REVOLVER SHOOTERS SOURCES

BOWEN CLASSIC ARMS

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

DAILEY SPECIALTY

Dept. GA, 6980 Camino Encimitas
Tucson, AZ 85715
(heat-treated cast hunting bullets, all calibers; catalog \$1)

BEN FORKIN

Dept. GA, Route 1
P.O. Box 353, Lowes Ferry Road
Louisville, TN 37777
(.475 and .500 brass)

FREEDOM ARMS

Dept. GA, P.O. Box 1776
Freedom, WY 83120

GREAT NORTHERN CASTING CO.

Dept. GA, 5412 76th Ave. E., #F
Puyallup, WA 98371
(heat-treated cast hunting bullets)

LBT

Dept. GA, P.O. Box 357
Cornville, AZ 86325
(bullet moulds)

JOHN LINEBAUGH

Dept. GA, P.O. Box 1263
Cody, WY 82414

NEI

Dept. GA, 9330 N.E. Halsey
Portland, OR 97220
(bullet moulds)

P.A.S.T.

Dept. GA, 200 Park Ave.
Columbia, MO 65203
(shooting gloves)

heavy .45s get results but rarely give the feeling of giving a ton of critter a heavy blow. I hit this buffalo $\frac{1}{3}$ of the way up on the center of his shoulders. When the bullet landed, he was finished—not flattened, but it was absolutely evident that the battle was over right there. He could neither run nor fight. This is the kind of punch I have come to expect from my .416 rifles. Not to imply that the .475 revolver is approaching the great .40s, but the buffalo thought so.

Beyond the .475 in caliber and probably just below it in real potential is the .50 or .500. About the only place that the .50 exceeds the .475 is in bore diameter and consequently in frontal area when the bullets hit. It is possible to use bullets all the way up to the 470-grain NEI truncated cone, but they are starting to feel sluggish. The .50s run at slightly lower pressures and velocities. It is at its best with 440 to 450 grains of lead traveling at 1,250 to 1,300 fps. This certainly doesn't qualify for white-mouse status. The .50 churns up awesome horsepower but falls slightly behind the .475 in terms of bullet sectional density and ultimate penetration. The increased bullet diameter probably makes it a bit more effective on critters in the 400 to 600-pound class—lions, elk—but that would be hard to prove.

If there is a real drawback to the .50, it would be its cases. The basic case, .348 Winchester, is difficult to obtain. When you get your hands on a supply, the case-forming operation is moderately difficult because the cases require either inside reaming or outside turning. This is needed to bring the case walls down to usable thickness. There is a good chance that the Australian firm Bertram, in conjunction with Huntington, may have some formed .500 cases in the not-too-distant future, but right now you have to wonder where the .500's next meal is going to come from.

I sold my own .50 a few weeks after I took delivery on a .475. Both of the big guns are highly specialized. For my frail being they are not all that much fun to shoot. I do know a couple of hardy iron men who actually think full loads are pure entertainment, but I quickly concede that they are made of different stuff than I am. I don't need a selection of them around to play with, or to take care of the ones I have worn out. Yes, lots of shooting (I don't have a definitive number) will wear out the guns. They are like race cars—a turbo screamer will wear out more quickly than a stock Chevy. Don't expect one to be as tight and solid after several thousand full-power rounds as it was when it was new.

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For me the .475 and .500 are pure hunting tools for heavy game. I feel that the .475 has a slight edge in that department and have invested my dollars and energy in that caliber. The cases for the .475 are easier both to obtain and to make. Olin WW .45-70s require only expanding and trimming to length. This brass is available and should be for a long time.

The guns that go with the cartridges are a functional part of your choice. There is considerable latitude in .45 caliber. The recoil level is still moderate enough to be manageable with a standard single-action grip frame. The .475 and .500 require the Ruger Bisley or Redhawk grip configuration. With these cartridges and a standard single-action grip the recoil level is so high that the "roll" built into the design can

"There is enough recoil to drive the rear sight into your forehead if you don't know how to manage it."

and will bury the hammer in your wrist. The big guns need the additional "braking" action offered by the Bisley or double-action handles.

The Freedom Arms revolvers are the only over-the-counter arms in this superhorsepower level. The new Field Grade is in my opinion a bargain by any description. With adjustable sights (as every hunting revolver should have) in either .45 Colt or .454 the guns are \$929. The guns are so good that I will never understand how they can make them so inexpensively. For another \$200 you can have their Premier grade, which features a hand-stoned finish, wood grips, and an all-steel rear sight. The fit and tolerances are identical for the Field or Premier grade.

The .45 selection continues with several Bowen and Linebaugh custom versions. Linebaugh continues to make his original five-shot workhorses on the Ruger single actions. These have new, beefed-up cylinders, barrels, and fitted lockwork for \$900. Bowen makes a similar basic conversion using the Ruger .45 barrel. He adds his five-shot cylinder and supertuned lockwork for \$695. With the Bowen guns you have many more options, including several barrel styles: round, ovate, and octagon. Bowen also makes his conversions on the double-action Ruger Redhawk. These range from simple re-

bored barrels and new cylinders to exotic barrels that look like S&W L-frames...milled entirely out of a solid bar of steel.

The selection of .475 and .500 guns is rather limited. They are made by Bowen and Linebaugh. The Linebaughs come on Ruger Bisleys. Bowen will convert Bisleys or Redhawks, again with his extensive list of custom options that will take you from a basic conversion at \$1,125 all the way to a "best quality" revolver for several thousand dollars. Keep in mind that none of the conversions include the gun. The prices are for parts and labor on your revolver.

When we boil it all down, absolutely the best gun for almost everyone is one version or another of the five-shot .45 Colt. I have taken game with them ranging from rabbits to buffalo. They are easy to feed and pleasant to shoot, certainly the most versatile of all hunting handguns. They range from the stainless-steel Freedom guns to the exotic Best Quality Bowens with color case-hardening, fire blue, and French walnut.

If you have to have more gun than the .45 and are a pure big-game hunter with Cape buffalo and similar beasties in your future, the .475 gets the call. It has it all: sectional density, frontal area, penetration, and velocity. Few men will have the skill to master it, but master it you must if you are going to shoot at live critters. The recoil level of this and the .50s at full power gets the attention of your nervous system. You must use the power of your mind to overcome your sensory system's logical fear of the next round. Also, the muscle tension necessary to control the big guns detracts from some necessary aspects of fine shooting. You can beat the big guns, but not without some conscious effort and practice. There is one "indispensable" accessory that goes with any of these power-merchants. This is a P.A.S.T. glove. The fine-leather glove, with thin padding strategically placed, takes a lot of the bite out of the recoil. The "tacky" surface of the leather also gives you a little more traction and control. This is a big help on the road to mastering the power. I highly recommend one of these for anyone shooting heavy-recoiling handguns.

Of course there are those of you who want the big guns just for the sheer pleasure and pride of ownership. They are indeed special. When you light the fuse of 400-plus grains of bullet and a case full of H-110, you are part of a very short list of people who have had that much fun! If you just "want" one, why not? That's why they call this country America. 