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Double-barrel or bolt-action rifles FOR DANGEROUS GAME?

Tony Sánchez-Ariño

From time to time I am quite surprised to read articles by “well-seasoned” professional hunters, discussing the eternal, and in my opinion absurd, question of double-barrel versus bolt-action rifles and vice versa for hunting dangerous game in Africa.

The answers to these two questions are in fact very simple. Without being dogmatic, I will do my best to present the facts as they are, in the most impartial way possible, and backed by my own personal experience as a professional hunter. I have hunted non-stop “under the African sun” for 62 solid years, going on safari all over Africa in diverse hunting areas such as the Congo rainforests, the Nile swamps, the open plains of East Africa and the bush of Southern Africa. My official hunting record is as follows: 1 317 elephant, 340 lion, 2 093 buffalo, 167 leopard and 127 black rhino. I took all these animals without a single accident or incident – not even a small scratch!

These two questions involve many old traditions, and we must admit that the double-barrel rifles have a “moral” superiority over the bolt-actions due to two reasons:

- ▶ Their “romantic” history since their creation in England around 1930, and their great hunting performance in Africa and Asia during the 19th century and early decades of the 20th century.
- ▶ These weapons were primarily designed as sporting rifles, as opposed to the bolt-action rifles that were originally intended as military weapons.

During my life and experiences in Africa, I have seen many people who, without proper criteria, made their choice of either a double-barrel or bolt-action rifle by looking at the experiences of famous hunters. This is a huge mistake – what is good for one person is not necessarily good for the next.



Tony with a big elephant, which was his last one, number 1 317



The author with a very big buffalo shot many years ago

Each one of us, when faced with the choice between a double-barrel or repeating rifle, must follow our own field experiences with each of the two systems and believe in our own convictions. We must by all means try to avoid being influenced by the statements or memories of other hunters. Do not forget that weapons are inanimate objects – their performance inevitably depends on the hands and mind of the person using them. Always remember that the responsibility for ensuring that the projectile hits the animal in the right place is that of the hunter alone, as weapons cannot take any action or initiative. Only the hunter can control his rifle and the man behind the rifle is just as important as the weapon itself.

Until 1905, only double-barrel powerful rifles were available for hunting dangerous game. However, in that same year the first big-game rifle calibres appeared in the repeating system: the .404 Jeffery in England and the 9,3x62 in Germany. They were soon followed by the German 11,2x72 Schüler in 1906, the British .425 Westley Richards in 1909, the .416 Rigby in 1912, and the .375 Holland & Holland Magnum, also in 1912. These calibres were marketed before the onset of the First World War in 1914. These new calibres were perfect for hunting dangerous game, except the 9,3x62 that had some limitations. The scene was completely changed by these calibres, resulting in two groups of hunters: the partisans of the traditional double-barrel, and those enchanted by the new system with the Mauser action.

The double-barrel remained the weapon of choice for many hunters, but this does not tip the balance as many others preferred the repeating rifles. The partisans of the

double-barrel cite a list of possible problems with repeating rifles. At the same time, however, fans of the bolt-action rifles also refer to a list of potential problems with the double-barrel. This controversy only involves low-quality weapons. The cheap ones can have serious shortcomings, especially those with two barrels or “express”. One has to be very careful with some of the double-barrels offered at low prices, because their performance may leave a lot to be desired, especially in the big calibres. Not even the greatest optimistic can expect to get a “Rolls Royce” for the price of a “Fiat 500” – this is just common sense, because the good weapons cost a lot of money!

The double-barrel rifle remained the traditional system of choice for many hunters for hunting dangerous game, especially when hunting in wooded areas with poor visibility, as it allows two consecutive shots without having to reload the gun. However, history clearly shows that many famous hunters, both professional and sporting, were extremely successful when using repeating rifles under all circumstances. This once again confirms that the most important factor is to be familiar with the weapon you choose, irrespective of the system.

During my long hunting career I have seen many amateur hunters, including some new professionals, who were influenced by the old tales and romance behind the double-barrel rifles. They would buy one to take on safari without any previous experience with it, resulting in failure and frustration. They should rather have stuck with the repeating rifles they were accustomed to.

It is very difficult to change a hunter’s mind about his weapons, but generally the double-barrel rifles “in theory” are meant for the professional, although their uses are more limited, while repeating rifles can be used in a much wider range of conditions. We have often asked ourselves the eternal question: Which of the two systems allows the shooter to fire the first two shots quicker? In theory, again the double-barrel. But, frankly speaking, very few people can shoot a heavy, double-barrel rifle in a few seconds with complete accuracy due to the heavy recoil of the big calibres. This normally pushes the shooter back after the first shot, forcing him to aim again and losing a few seconds in the process. Of course more or less the same will happen with a heavy repeater. The advantage of one system over the other will always depend on the ability of the shooter, so here we are back to square one: It all depends on the individual’s experience with each system. There is no universal rule for this. The best system by far will be the one that you can use with the most skill, have the most confidence in and can trust – it really is that simple!

Do not be influenced by other people’s opinions and forget the “armchair experts” with their baseless theories.

Another question often asked is whether double-barrel rifles should have an automatic ejector or not. The answer is yes, because without an automatic ejector a double-barrel rifle is slow and difficult to reload, as you have to use your fingers to remove the empty cartridges. As my old friend, John A Hunter, one of the greatest hunters ever, put it: “A double-barrel rifle without automatic ejectors is just a piece of iron ...”

During my 62 years as full-time PH in Africa, I had the



This huge lion was hunted in Maasailand, northern Tanzania.

opportunity to use all kinds of calibres and systems. My hunts always focused on the Big Five, which were my favourite animals to track. For these hunts I used the following rifles:

Double-barrel rifles with automatic ejectors:

- ▶ .500/.465 Nitro Holland & Holland Royal Model
- ▶ best-quality .475 No 2 Nitro (480 gr bullet) by Joseph Lang
- ▶ .577 Nitro by Hollis & Son with Anson & Deeley action

Bolt-action rifles with Mauser action:

- ▶ .375 Holland & Holland Magnum
- ▶ .416 John Rigby
- ▶ .500 Jeffery

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This leopard was shot late in the evening.

I have used both systems in the most diverse kinds of terrain, such as rainforests, swamps and thick bush, with the greatest satisfaction. I never experienced a single problem, because from my very early days as a big-game hunter, I tried to get the maximum experience and skill by using both systems.

Practically all the famous professional hunters in Africa started off by using all kinds of systems, ultimately leading to their choice of favourite systems and calibres. The following will give readers a good idea of these hunters' preferences when hunting dangerous game in Africa:

Hunters who only used double-barrel rifles:

- ▶ FG Banks: .577 Nitro
- ▶ Phil Percival: A pair of .450 No 2 Nitro
- ▶ John Boyes: .400 Nitro
- ▶ Karl Larsen: .600 Nitro
- ▶ Nollt: .475 No 2 (480 gr bullet), Nitro
- ▶ Cannone: .475 No 2 Nitro by Jeffery with 500 gr bullet
- ▶ Bill Buckley: .500 Nitro, .577 Nitro
- ▶ Billy Pickering: .500/.450 Nitro, .577 Nitro
- ▶ Pretorius: .475 No 2 Nitro Jeffery with 500 gr bullet

Hunters who only used bolt-action rifles:

- ▶ "Karamojo" Bell: .275 Rigby, .303 British, .318 W.R., .416 Rigby
- ▶ Harry Manners: .375 Magnum
- ▶ Reggie Destro: .375 Magnum, .416 Rigby, .475 A&M Magnum
- ▶ Charlie White: .404 Jeffery, .416 Rigby
- ▶ Wally Johnson: .375 Magnum
- ▶ Von Alvensleben: 9,3x62, .375 Magnum, .404 Jeffery
- ▶ Beaumont: .416 Rigby
- ▶ "Samaki" Salmon: .416 Rigby
- ▶ Commander Blunt: .416 Rigby
- ▶ Marcus Daly: .416 Rigby
- ▶ Otto Krohnert: 9,3x62, 11,2x72 Schüller
- ▶ Hugo Seia: .375 Magnum, .460 Weatherby
- ▶ LP de Sá'e Mello: .416 Rigby, .500 Jeffery



Tony with his wife Isabel and a fine black rhino from Zambia

Hunters who used both systems:

- ▶ John A. Hunter: .500 Nitro, .475 No 2 Nitro (480 gr bullet), .416 Rigby, .505 Gibbs
- ▶ Mickey Norton: .577 Nitro, .404 Jeffery
- ▶ George Rushby: .577 Nitro, .416 Rigby, .375 Magnum, .318 W.R.
- ▶ Pete Pearson: .577 Nitro, .416 Rigby, .375 Magnum
- ▶ Eric Rundgren: .450 No 2 Nitro, .416 Rigby
- ▶ James Sutherland: .577 Nitro, .318 Westley Richards
- ▶ Fletcher Jamieson: .577 Nitro, .500/450 Nitro, .500 Jeffery
- ▶ Adrian Canus: .475 No 2 Nitro (480 gr bullet), .500/465 Nitro, .404 Jeffery
- ▶ Wachernie: .500 Nitro, .404 Jeffery
- ▶ Paul Kespart: .475 No 2 Nitro (480 gr bullet), 9,3x62
- ▶ John "Pondoro" Taylor: .500/465 Nitro, .416 Rigby, .375 Magnum
- ▶ Tony Dyer: .577 Nitro, .458 Winchester, .416 Rigby
- ▶ "Andy" Anderson: .577 Nitro, .470 Nitro, .318 Westley Richards
- ▶ Robert Foran: .500/450 Nitro, .350 Magnum Rigby
- ▶ Quentin Grogan: .577 Nitro, .318 Westley Richards
- ▶ David Ommaney: .470 Nitro, .458 Winchester, .375 Magnum
- ▶ Robin Hurt: .500 Nitro, .470 Nitro, .375 Magnum
- ▶ Andrew Holmberg: .470 Nitro, 10,75x68 Mauser, .458 Winchester
- ▶ Bill Judd: .577 Nitro, .450 Nitro, .350 Magnum Rigby

The list could be much longer, but the above should serve as a good example for present and future hunters, both professional and sporting.

To conclude, I would like to explain why, during my 62 years as a professional hunter in Africa, I never had an accident, especially since I focused on hunting dangerous game like the Big Five. Maybe because I was a super hunter? No, not at all; I am actually a very normal hunter. The reason for my "good luck" was that I always used common sense. Below are a few simple guidelines that I have always followed:

- ▶ I have always believed in the motto of the East African Professional Hunter's Association, "*Nec timor nec temeritas*" – "Neither fear nor foolhardiness".
- ▶ **The first shot is the most important!** Always try to make 100% sure before pulling the trigger.
- ▶ Never try and hit your quarry "by sheer luck" – it will surely end in disaster and animals being wounded.
- ▶ If you are not sure that you can put the bullet in the right place, do not shoot.
- ▶ Use the right calibre and ammunition for the game species and the circumstances.
- ▶ Never be in a hurry to shoot; go slowly and take your time.
- ▶ Personally, I do not mind whether I use a double-barrel, bolt-action or single-shot rifle, because **I believe that only the first shot counts.** The shots after that are only good for "fixing up mistakes".
- ▶ I always try not to compete with anybody, which only causes problems. I do things my own way and will never run down another hunter.

I am afraid that the "old Africa" has gone for ever, but at least many members of my particular "fraternity" had the chance to enjoy it when we were much younger. I am now 88 years old and I am filled with great nostalgia for the happy hunting days that have "gone with the wind".

To the new generations of hunters, may you have many years of good hunting!



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