

BEGINNER'S GUIDE TO COWBOY ACTION SHOOTING

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Welcome to the great sport of Cowboy Action Shooting™. CAS is the fastest growing shooting sport in the United States, and probably the world. The Single Action Shooting Society™ (or SASS™) is growing by more than 400 new shooters a month! We have just passed the 50,000 mark and are still growing. Where else can you dress up like your favorite hero and shoot real guns? Cowboy targets are big and they are close, which makes it great for old fellows like me who can't see (or hear) like they use to.

CAS has been a great shot-in-the-arm for the shooting sports industry. More guns, ammo, holsters, and cloths. Many former shooters in other competitions, like me, have switched. After shooting bulls-eye in the army, PPC in law enforcement and many other styles through the years, I call CAS my "Shooters Male Menopause". But another asset of this style of shooting is the healthy percentage of new shooters entering the sport. I see many participants who are new to the shooting game, perhaps greater than any other shooting sport in history. And this is a wonderful addition to our sport. Maybe shooters aren't all redneck gun crazy bubbas after all.

I have undertaken this little manual for the new shooters in this sport. Those just starting out so they may avoid the pitfalls of a lack of knowledge. Maybe it will help you in getting your gear together more easily and to enjoy the sport a little better.

A few suggestions before you start shooting, or even buying.

GO WATCH A MATCH. Observing your first cowboy match is a steep learning curve. Watch how it is done. Ask questions. Cowboy shooters love to show off their gear and talk techniques. Bring eye and ear protection and take lots of notes. It will save you time and money in the long run.

JOIN SASS. *You* will have to eventually, as many matches require SASS membership. The hardest part finding your handle or alias. With more than 45,000 members they are getting harder to come by. Use your imagination. You can always get assistance from the great SASS folks in California on this. (714-694-1800)

JOIN THE NRA. I know they have their detractors, but without the efforts of the NRA you will quickly have no guns to shoot, and cowboy matches are hard to shoot without guns.

READ SOME BOOKS: There are several books on the subject. One of the best is “Beyond the Wild Bunch” from Dillon’s Blue Press. (Call 1-800-762-3844 to request their free catalog.) Borrow (or buy) some of the several videos on the subject. They are great references.

READ THE SASS HANDBOOK Study it. It is your new Bible, at least on the range. Then reread the part about safety.

EQUIPMENT:

When I decided to take up this sport. I made several decisions that turned out to be very beneficial. I already had a nice, 2nd generation Colt in .45 Colt caliber. I liked the caliber and, being an experienced reloader, knew I wanted a straight sided cartridge. (More on this later.) In addition, I wanted all my guns to be not only of the same caliber but to shoot the same load. I didn’t want to be fishing to the loading table trying to remember. “blue loads in the pistols, red loads in the rifle, or....?” The fact that the two most popular calibers in CAS are the .45 Colt and .38 Special is no accident. These calibers are very easy to load, and there is a nice selection of guns in both. Another good caliber is the .44 Special. but the selection of guns in this caliber is limited.

Bottle-necked calibers; .4440, .38-40, etc. are much harder to load for. Unless you already have more one gun in this caliber, or unless you are a diehard for authentic equipment, stick with the .45 Colt or .38 Special. Even if you don’t plan on reloading right away (you probably will eventually), these calibers make sense. Don’t make the mistake of adopting the .44-40 or .32-20 just because you happen to have on gun in that caliber. If you are just starting out, go ahead and use that gun until you can replace it. Remember. CAS is a wonderful excuse to buy more guns.

SHOOTING IRONS. You will need four, eventually. If you and your significant other, or son or daughter, are starting out together, one set of four can be shared, at least at first. And don’t decline to participate if you are, say, short one pistol. I have never been on a “posse” where a new shooter (or an experienced one whose gun broke down) wasn’t handled a gun, and ammo, by a fellow shooter.

You will need two pistols. The selection is great. Handle several and if possible, shoot them. It is best if the guns are so similar in operation and handling that you can shoot either without thinking about which one is in your hand.

Colts: Authentic, expensive, and in the case of the new ones, in much need of an “action job”. The new Colt “Cowboy” has been out for a couple years but for some reason, you don’t see many on the line.

Colt Clones: Many varieties from Uberti and Armi San Marcos, as sold by Navy Anus, Cimmaron, Taylor’s, American Frontier Firearms (the new kid on the block) and others. Unless you strive for the ultimate in authentic guns, select the revolver with the spring loaded pin latch, instead of the original screw type. Easier to take apart and clean. Both these and the Ruger’s are available in either blue/case hardened finish as well as nickel. I personally don’t like the looks of nickel and there is a problem of glare with them. But that’s why cars come in different colors.

Rugers: You can use your old Ruger Blackhawk, but the adjustable sights put you in the modem class. Ruger’s Vaquero is a wonderful gun. built like a tank, accurate and you can get a very good action job on it. They work differently from the Colts and clones. Start off with Rugers and you won’t get into trouble. My problem is that I have owned Colts for more than forty years and the Ruger is just different enough to confuse me. They are a little bigger and heavier than the Colt/clone, so be sure to order leather (holsters) fit.

Your guns may or may not shoot to point of aim. After you decide on a load, acquire the assistance of an experienced friend or gunsmith to get them zeroed. You can probably zero your rifle yourself.

Rifles: Your rifle has to be in a pistol caliber and I would recommend the same caliber and load as your pistols. Remember the “KISS” principal. Like the revolvers, there is a great selection of rifles available. We could study the history of Winchester and Marlin based on the reproductions available.

Henry's were the first successful lever-action rifle. If you have a reproduction, go ahead and use it. But unless you are pushing for a certain look (post Civil War veteran, etc.) or are a masochist, don't otherwise start with one. They are heavy, slow to load and the open slot on the bottom of the magazine can slow you down or cause a malfunction. There are better models to use.

The Winchester model 1866 or “Yellow Boy” is a very good choice. Looks good, holds enough rounds, fast action. It is very popular with the top competitors.

The 1873 is also popular. It comes in a variety of finishes, barrel lengths and calibers. In this or any rifle, the magazine should hold at least ten rounds, otherwise, you will have to go a quick reload when everyone else is happily shooting away, when the course calls for ten.

The Winchester 92 (and 94) in its many makes and varieties is another popular gun. I haven't seen one that didn't need a good action job. All are accurate enough, and you even see a few original 92s on the line, still going strong. I have a Rossi that shoots very well, but went to a '73 because it looks more authentic. The Rossi started with an action that felt like a transmission without fluid. It took major work to get it smooth enough not to be distracting. Both the 92s and the 94s are more temperamental to bullet shape. A load that works well in other guns might not in these. Semi-wadcutters usually won't feed properly.

Remember the '92 that the Duke used? The one with the large lever loop? Don't get it. It may look neat but it is slow to use. There is too much area in the loop for quick shooting.

Marlins: Popular on the line, some are selective of the ammo they like. If you are looking to buy a used one, don't get one with “microgroove” rifling, as these do not shoot the required lead bullets very well.

No matter what rifle you select, practice with it, and dry fire it often. You will want to lever it quickly, keeping the gun to your shoulder, high on your shoulder.

SHOTGUN: Not many choices here, either a side by side or a Model 97 pump. I wouldn't suggest a '97 Winchester in 16 gauge, ammunition is just too hard to acquire. So that leaves a 12. They are very popular and very fast, I switched to one and enjoy shooting it. Acquire at least six dummy shells for loading practice. Remember to use them instead of live ones when practicing in your basement.

Doubles must not have automatic ejectors and have to be 20 ga. or larger. The IGA Stoeger doubles are very popular. Mine is in twenty. I had to have the hinges slicked down and the automatic safety altered so it did not activate when the gun was opened. In addition, I had the chambers polished so empty shells would drop free without pulling them out. Be sure to use slick case shells such as the AAs, so they drop free. Hammer guns look good but they are slower to shoot than hammerless. Although some leave old doubles (or 97s) with full length barrels, shorter barrels are handier and the resulting cylinder bore choke is not a handicap. Do not cut your barrels below 18 inches, or the BATF will come knocking on your door,

You can use an old double, but not one with twist barrels. They were designed for black powder and aren't that strong even with those loads. Better have a competent gunsmith look at it.

AMMUNITION: As I mentioned before. I really wanted my two revolvers and my rifle to shoot the same loads interchangeably. I reload. In fact, I have been reloading for more than forty years. So when I acquired my two pistols and rifle, I worked on loads that grouped well in all three guns. I didn't say zeroed, that came later. I just wanted a load that wasn't too harsh (read recoil) and that gave reasonably good groups. I check my pistol loads at 15 yards and my rifle at 25. You will want a load that gives little recoil, reasonable accuracy and burns clean. Remember, the targets are big and they are close. You are not shooting bulls eye. If you do not reload, you must then rely on factory cowboy loads or have someone reload for you. Requirements as to a lead bullet (no plating, gas check or jacket) and the limits on velocity are listed in SASS rules. One problem with factory loads is that in .45 Colt, no manufacturer that I know of makes loads with bullets less than 250 grains. I can always tell someone who is using factory cowboy loads on the line from the recoil and slow recovery time they experience.

My load for .45 Colt is a 220 grain bullet with 5 grains of Clays. Other powders work well but I am not about to change. It is a very mild, clean burning load. Several reloading manuals are available that list cowboy loads. Be careful of bullet shape when you load. It is prudent to use flat nosed bullets, as a round nose in a tubular magazine can have exciting results. Semi-wadcutter do not seem to feed well in some rifles. Stay with a round nose, flat point bullet. If you are not reloading, you should be. It is less expensive, makes better ammunition tailored to your specific gun, and it's fun. For years I have used a single stage press. I found it relaxing to crank out cases and loads by the numbers. But I have finally switched to a progressive, in fact a Dillon. Once you use one you would never go back.

Watch out for overall cartridge length. In interior ballistics, the smaller the powder space in a load, the more efficient it is. So I once had the idea of seating my bullet deeper in the case. Unfortunately, I was shooting a '73 at the time and the cartridge was shorter than the brass lifter, resulting in an immediate jam. We pay for our education.

In shotgun ammunition, you can reload, but not many do. Just select a load that is mild in recoil, has shot size not larger than #6, and if you are using a double, has a slick case for easier extraction. A lot of shooters use the new reduced recoil loads.

LEATHER: Are you into leather? I am. I love good holsters and belts. I couldn't begin to list the large number of folks who make cowboy leather gear. You will require two holsters, a gun belt to hold them and something to hold your shotgun shells, at least six. The cartridge belt is a no brainer. A large number of loops is not required. Most reload drills don't involve over one or two rounds. When I first started, I obtained one strong side holster and a cross draw. They look neat.

It took me less than two years to switch to a left hand standard holster. I knew it was a matter of time before I was DQ'd (disqualified) for not twisting my body enough using the cross draw. And they are even harder to use while riding a saddled 55 gallon drum or sitting on a stage seat. So I switched... and I'm glad. When I draw my second handgun with my left hand, I quickly switch it to my right (strong) hand for shooting. No Chubby Checker Twist to slow me down.

I use a shotgun loop that holds six 12 or 20 gauge shells, that slips over my gun belt. I have considered acquiring a shotgun belt, but haven't as yet.

When using these holsters, it is OK to use the safety thong over your hammers while walking around, but after you load and holster, leave them off. It sure is hard to draw with them over the hammer. And you will forget.

When you first acquire your leather gear, you will sound like a new saddle. Lots of squeaks. You can so your holsters in water for a few minutes, then insert your revolvers into them. The guns should be well oiled and wrapped in Saran wrap. Leave them in for a couple hours, then remove the guns and let the holsters dry. This will form fit the holsters. You can then lube the holsters and belt with Olive Oil to soften them. (You can always hear a new shooter coming to the line.)

With the comment that I am not being paid by anyone for advertisements. I can recommend two (of many) leather makers. The famous El Paso Saddlerv (915-544-2233) has made great holsters and rigs for many years. I also use R. J. Makers, El Paso Texas, who makes very good holsters and belts, reasonable and with fast delivery times. ~P.O. Box 3565, zip 79923, phone 915-544-0664)

CLOTHING; Remember, it's not how you shoot, it's how you look. Some shooters go to great lengths to acquire a very authentic look. Others well, use your imagination. No tennis shoes, baseball caps, etc., please. You can start off with regular blue jeans, a long sleeved shirt (not button down) and a western hat of some kind. The progression, however, is natural. You will want to look better as you continue your participation. You don't have to buy stock in COWS, or other Western clothing stores to look good. Take a pair of jeans, brown or tan.. Etc. Remove the belt loops and sew on buttons for suspenders. Pick up a collarless shirt and a wide brimmed hat. (Or other if your costume calls for it.) Finish up with boots and you are ready to go, at least at first. If you continue to shoot, you will continue to acquire additional. cowboy duds. It's a natural progression.

Yes, it gets out of hand after a while. Shooting outfits, "go to town" outfits, summer clothes, winter duds (who shoots in winter?). Spurs, old fashioned pocket watches, neckerchiefs, belt knives, stove pipe boots.

What a great country! But the main thing is you don't have to start off with everything.

By the way, you might not want to wear the fancy gear while shooting. That old pocket watch chain has a habit of getting caught up with your shooting arm and your "back up" derringer that drops from your coat can still get you disqualified.

COWBOY CART: What the heck is a cowboy cart? Well, as we will describe in more detail below, you have accumulated a lot of gear for these matches. And you will be carrying it from the parking lot to your first stage or event and then to the other ranges in turn. and you will need something to carry **it** all in. This ~critical device is limited only by your imagination, or that of someone whose work you admire. You will eventually need something to hold your long guns, ammunition, container for empty brass, oil, screwdriver, maybe an ice chest (no beer please), etc. etc. One of the great things about attending a cowboy shoot is looking at the carts. The Academy Award for Carts is the one that is a miniature chuck wagon. But with old golf carts you won't have time for golf after you get into CAS anyhow), little red wagons, you name it. are all used. Start off easy, you are bound to change later. Note; the tendency is to buy or build one that is too big. Remember, you do not have to bring your reloading press, cowboy scrap books, and next

year's ammo supply with you. The rig has to fit in your car and you will have to be able to lift it in and out. And you are not getting any younger. I had been using one based on a two wheeled plastic cart, but recently built one based on a consensus of design from others. After my first match with it. I am already making some changes. A good one has a built in seat and I am adding a large umbrella. Don't laugh. Those who have them often have company, sharing the shade.

A TYPICAL MATCH: Welcome to your first match. Just what can you expect? Well, if you are smart, get there early. Register with the match officials and be sure to tell them you are a novice. A new shooter is always looked after. It is comforting. If you have friends shooting who are experienced CASers. ask to be put on a posse with them. How it works, the total number of shooters is divided by the number of events. Lets say there are sixty shooters and six events. There would be ten members on each posse. Did loose anyone yet? You will stay and shoot with that posse all day, in every event. A posse leader will direct all activities within the posse, making assignments to make the shoot run smoother, and giving the instructions on how to shoot each stage. It doesn't make any difference in what category you shoot, the course is still the same. (More on categories later.) As a new shooter, you will be identified to the others. which means everyone will be willing and able to assist you. If, for instance, you and your spouse are hot new shooters, you will most likely not shoot next to each other in order. That's so you can watch/help/critique/share guns/with each other. In addition, you will not be listed to shoot first in any event. It helps to watch others make fools of themselves first.

Important. Leave your ego at home. If you don't want to sing country songs, ride a 55 gallon barrel, yell funny expressions, or otherwise look weird, don't get into CAS. It ain't dignified.

Everyone helps out on a posse. The posse leader is in charge. He will run things, but he or she needs help. There will be someone watching the loading table, making sure guns are loaded properly. Another at the unloading table, making sure all guns are empty before putting them back on your cart. One or more will help score, watching for hits (actually misses) as well as procedural errors. And someone else will write down the scores. But things change and the persons assigned to these jobs will have to switch off, when it is getting closer to their time to shoot. As a new shooter, you will not be asked to do something complicated, but you can pick up the empty brass after the shooter has finished.

As a new shooter, listen to the instructions for each event. Make sure you understand and then watch as the shooters before you fire. Make sure you understand **before** you get to the line. It really slows down a match if the posse leader has to explain the entire sequence of fire to you again. He or she is perfectly willing to do so, but don't make it a habit.

When you have about two shooters ahead of you, take your guns and ammo to the loading table. With the guns pointed downrange, always, load your rifle and handguns. Never your shotgun. That is always staged (placed) unloaded, action open. You will load the rifle with the required number of rounds in the magazine only. The chamber remains empty. You will have to close the action and lower the hammer before loading. Your six-guns are always loaded with only five rounds and the empty chamber is placed under the hammer. The technique for doing this varies between models, so be familiar with your guns. Never leave the loading table with loaded guns in your holsters until you have been called to the line to fire. You may, however, leave the loaded guns on the table to, for instance, bring your ammo box back to your cart. It is not a bad idea to place rounds in your ammo box in the number for each gun. that is, two — five round rows for your six-guns and the required number for your rifle (usually 9 or 10). This helps prevent loading too many or not enough rounds. Make sure you have the required number of shotgun rounds on your person (unless a stage specifies otherwise) and bring extra ammunition. Remember, any dropped ammunition is "dead" and cannot be used in that stage. So have an extra couple rounds in your gun belt and extra shotgun rounds somewhere.

When you are called to the line, take your guns, place them as the stage requires. and run over

the event in your mind. You will be most likely asked if you have any questions. This is the time. However, after you become more experienced, don't make a habit of it. Starting shooting at a pace that allows you to hit every target possible. Don't rush. Be deliberate, especially at first. As an old gunfighter said, "No one was ever killed by the first noise". You are much better off hitting more targets slowly and in the proper order, than to miss faster. Speed comes naturally with practice. **Be safe. Have fun.**

A "typical" stage might be as follows: Two pistols loaded with five rounds each, holstered. Rifle on hay bale, nine rounds in the magazine, shotgun leaning against the fence rail, unloaded, action open. On the signal (usually a buzzer on a timer), pick up the rifle and shoot three rounds at each red target (triple tap), left to right. Place the rifle back on the bale, action open, and draw your first revolver, shooting the closer targets left to right. Reholster. Draw your second revolver and shoot the same targets, right to left. Reholster. pick up the shotgun, load with two rounds and shoot the SG targets in any order, one shot each. Open and empty the shotgun. Your score is the time in seconds and fractions you took to fire, with five seconds added for each miss and usually ten seconds added if you shot out of order. (A procedural). That's why its more important to hit the targets than to shoot fast. I get confused easily, so I always shoot my right hand revolver first. This way I don't try to shoot the same gun twice. It happened.

This would be a good place to talk about classifications. You can shoot your six-guns using two hands (traditional) or one-handed (duelist). There are other classifications. For instance, if your revolver has adjustable sights, you will shoot Modern, whether you shoot one or two handed. If you are a new shooter, would strongly suggest you shoot two handed, that is. traditional. Get a firm grip on the gun in the holster and draw it out and toward the target. Bring your supporting hand up to aid the grip, "weak" thumb up and alongside the hammer, but not touching it. Then cock the hammer with your "weak" thumb. This is much faster and efficient than cocking the gun with your strong hand thumb or trying to start out shooting one handed. Walk before you run.

At the end of your firing, remove your guns from the line (always muzzle up for the long guns) and proceed directly to the unloading table. Do not stop to pick up the brass from your rifle. Someone else will get it for you. Your immediate duty is to proceed to the unloading table. Show the person there your empty shotgun and/or rifle, action open. Then unload your revolvers and let that person see them. Bring the guns back to your cart. Get your empty brass and put it away. Then you can relax for a minute. Critique yourself and listen to what others have to say. (No shortage of advice to a new shooter.)

Help out the posse, policing brass, watching for hits. Then your entire posse will move as a group to the next stage. At the end of the day, stay to help out putting the targets and other props away. The people who are putting this match on for you are not being paid. We all share in the workload.

Congratulations on firing your first match