

Outdoors

Is handloading obsolete?

It's a fair question. When I loaded my first cartridge, back in the early '50s, properly assembled handloads beat factory ammo on every count. The homemade product was cheaper, more reliable, usually more accurate, commonly more powerful and flatter shooting, more versatile, and could use much superior bullets for whatever the task at hand. The only things going for factory ammo were convenience and savings of time.

For me, at least, reloads offered one more advantage: recreation. Assembling my own loads was and is one of my favorite pastimes. I enjoy the process itself, finding it both relaxing and mentally challenging. Over the years, I've made much of my livelihood writing about the subject, having published two books on reloading and served as handloading editor/columnist for SHOOTING TIMES, THE RIFLE, HANDLOADER, Petersen's HUNTING, GUNS & AMMO, GUN WEEK newspaper, and other publications.

But that was then, and this is now. Improvements made over the last two decades in commercial ammunition are mind-boggling. Factory bul-

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lets are much more uniform and consistent which, together with better rifle barrels, has at least doubled the accuracy potential of the combination.

Furthermore, handloaders no longer have a lock on premium game bullets; the same projectiles are available in factory loads these days. New gunpowders and loading techniques nowadays allow the ammo factories to turn out cartridges the handloader cannot match, much less exceed, in velocity and trajectory. Everything is better — brass, primers, propellants and projectiles.

So, is handloading ammo a dead issue?

Well, not quite. The factory stuff is good, but my handmade stuff is still a little better in several ways. One is precision. I can sit down and take all evening to assemble 20 rounds to the exact specifications required

by my particular rifle. Remington and Federal and Winchester can't do that. They have to load cartridges by the hundreds of thousands that will safely function and fire in any rifle of that caliber on the face of the earth. I can also experiment with different powders and vary powder charges up or down half a grain at a time until I ferret out my rifle's favorite combination.

I can do another thing that no factory can even dream of, which is to produce reduced loads. I can make a .30-06 into a quiet, light-kicking squirrel rifle, for example. I can make and shoot cast lead-alloy bullets in almost limitless variety, for practice, training and small-game and pest shooting, at a cost close to that of .22 Long Rifle ammo.

Then we come to antique or obsolete rifles, foreign rifles and "wildcats" (for which no factory ammo has ever been loaded). For these, handloading is the only source of ammunition. You can feed your great-grandfather's old buffalo rifle, or that European rifle of the odd metric caliber that your uncle brought back from the war, as easily with a reloading setup as the latest super-short magnum. That



John Wootters photo

Are handloads dependable? The author has trusted them to keep him alive versus some of the world's most dangerous game animals — Cape buffalo lion, African elephant, leopard, jaguar, this arctic grizzly, etc. — for more than 30 years.

leaves commercial ammo manufacturers out in the cold.

How about costs? Well, it's true that reloading component prices have gone up, but so has the cost of factory ammunition. I recently bought two 20-round boxes of new .30-40 Krag ammo for almost \$50. I can and do assemble Krag hunting rounds for about 35 cents apiece with jacketed bullets, perhaps one-third of that with cast bullets.

The big cost savings in

reloading, of course, are still the ammunition that's loaded in bulk, such as handgun and shotgun practice ammo or varminting stuff of which hundreds of rounds may be fired in a single day in a prairie-dog town.

No, the picture has changed in many ways, but I think it's safe to say that handloading isn't fading away forever. I still enjoy dropping a deer or a coyote with a cartridge I put together with my own hands ... and it's still fun to reload.

John Wootters is a semi-retired outdoors writer with more than 30 years experience. He was editor of Peterson's "Hunting" magazine and author of the monthly column "Buck Sense" and has written the all-time best selling book on deer hunting, "Hunting Trophy Deer." He has served on the Board of Directors of the National Rifle Association, and written for "Shooting Times," "Rifle," "Handloader," "Guns & Ammo" and Peterson's "Hunting."