

# GETTING STARTED IN COWBOY ACTION SHOOTING ★ SIXGUNS ★

By: Smith n' Jones

When I think about the Old West, cowboys, outlaws, lawmen, cattle drives, and the Western expansion of the United States, the image that immediately comes to mind is that of someone, a cowboy, outlaw, or sheriff, dressed in a bib-style shirt, chaps, and a slouch hat, holding a sixgun at arm's length. Now, this image may or may not be realistic but it is the one I have and I'm sure that more than a few of you see the same image, more or less. The single-action revolver, more than any other one tool seems to represent the American Old West.

My shooting career in CAS parallels, somewhat, my experience of shooting in general, in that like many of you, the first two guns that I bought all by myself, with my own money, were single-action revolvers. It was 1963 and my good friend Gordon Cooper and I decided we had to have sixguns to carry with us on our frequent horseback hunting trips in the mountains above Boise valley. At the time, about the only thing either of us could afford was a .22. Interestingly enough, we typified the two different directions that many CAS shooters take today in deciding what guns to purchase. At 16 years old I had recently discovered Sturm-Ruger & Co. due to my grandfather stocking their guns in his Western-Auto store in Meridian, Idaho. I bought a brand new .22 Single-Six while my friend listened to his older brother's advice and bought a Colt Frontier. Both guns had a second cylinder chambered in .22 rimfire magnum, and right up 'till the day in 1967 when Gordon died in a tragic car/train accident, we argued over who had made the best decision. The point was moot, but the debate was always lively.

In 1966, I was back at the Western-Auto store ordering a Ruger Blackhawk chambered in what I thought was the unbelievably powerful .357 Magnum caliber. That gun rode with me most of my early adult life on horseback, in my pickup, and hunting on foot and was a truly fine firearm that cost me all of \$89.00, new. No small amount when I was making \$300.00 a month and getting ready to marry the love of my life.

The point is that when I first started buying guns, it was the single-action revolver that I chose, and the only way I could make those purchases was to have patience and save what I could and look for a bargain. In my CAS experience I approached gun purchases in basically the same way. I bought the sixguns first by saving my money (and in some cases doing a little gun swapping), and looking for bargains. A lot of cowboy shooters that I talk to did pretty much the same thing when they started.

After the better part of a decade of CAS and five years with **SHOOT! MAGAZINE**, I look back and can honestly say that if I had it all to do over again I would most likely do it the same way. The only difference between now and then is that today there are a lot more options available as far as selecting guns and equipment, and sometimes more bargain opportunities are available because of the greater numbers of used guns, not to mention the fact that the kids are all grown and gone, and there is a little more loose change available for gun purchases. Following is some information that may be of help when deciding what, where, and how, when selecting your sixguns.

New or used? That is the key question. As with most of the more significant purchases we make, the fact is that generally speaking you are going to pay more for new sixguns than for used. And the reasons to go one way or the other can be as varied as the individuals who make the purchases. Let's take a look at both options.

New guns come with a number of advantages for the first time buyer. First is selection and second is a factory warranty that pretty well assures that you have a safe and reasonably well made product in your hands that, should anything malfunction or break, the manufacturer or importer



Entry level guns, clockwise from top left: Cimarron Lightning .38 Spl. approximately \$499, Cimarron P-Model .45 Colt approximately \$499, EMF Pietta G.W.II .45 Colt approximately \$435, Navy Arms "Replica Arms" .357 mag approximately \$299.



Bargains the author has found on used guns, top to bottom: Uberti SAA .357 paid \$135, Ruger Stainless Vaquero .44-40 paid \$200, early nickled Uberti SAA .44-40 paid \$175.



Mid to upper price range sixguns top to bottom: Navy Arms 1875 Schofield .45 Colt approximately \$825, Cimarron Evil Roy Competition .357 approximately \$719, Ruger Stainless Vaquero .45 Colt approximately \$583.



High end sixguns from top to bottom: 1st Generation Colt SAA .45 Colt U.S. marked approximately \$4000, 3rd Generation Colt SAA .45 Colt engraved approximately \$2500, Cimarron Model-P engraved approximately \$1000, Taylors SAA engraved with tulipwood grips approximately \$850.

will make it right. Additionally, you know that no one has taken it upon himself to test his gunsmithing skills on your gun. Third on the list of new gun advantages is the pride of ownership that comes with buying anything new. While often over emphasized, especially in the gun market, it is still very often an important consideration to the purchaser.

When you drop into your friendly neighborhood gun shop, hopefully you will find a variety of CAS appropriate sixguns from several different makers/importers, in any of a dozen different calibers, three or more barrel lengths, three or four design variations, different finishes, and on and on. So, what to choose? Well, hopefully you have attended a few CAS matches and/or talked with friends or other shooters to find out what they are using and what is most popular with the general CAS populous. And better yet, they have let you shoot a few different guns and calibers, which will help mold your choice. If you haven't done that, then put your purchasing dreams on hold and go see what's out there and being used by most of the shooters in your area. Once that is done and you have a pretty clear idea of what you think you want, then head back to the gun shop and see what is there in your price range. If you are going the new gun route, your options are much wider than in the used department. Typically, the entry level guns from companies like Taylor's and Co., Cimarron, Navy Arms, and Cabela's will run somewhere in the \$299.00 - \$400.00 range for each gun. If your pocket is a little deeper, your choices expand considerably both in Italian imports from the above companies as well as the full line of traditional and modern category guns from Ruger. Now you are starting to look at the \$450.00-\$600.00 per gun range. There are even greater cash exterminators out there but we will hold here for now because until you know what you want for sure, there is no reason to break the piggy bank and perhaps suffer from a case of buyers regret. When you are talking to other shooters and doing your homework, you should come to some determination as to what caliber interests you most. This may be a result of many things, including the category you are planning on entering, your level of competitiveness, sensitivity to recoil, or the burning desire to shoot good ol' black powder. At most matches and particularly the larger shoots you will find the .38 special to be the most popular caliber with the .45 Colt a distant second. Again, category, competitiveness, and shooting style will all impact your caliber choice. The .38s are fast on recovery time and cheap to shoot, but the bark and buck of a .44-40 or .45 Colt holds a lot of magic for the traditional romantic and black powder crowd. Whatever the motivation, by now you should have a pretty good idea of what caliber you want. Closely connected to caliber is the barrel length you think will best serve your needs. The shorter guns (3-1/2" - 4-3/4") are probably the most popular and usually a little quicker coming out of a holster. On the other hand, nothing looks better on the firing line than a full 7-1/2 inches of single-action furry. Whatever you like, figure that into the equation. Typically, the length of barrel and caliber choice does not affect the cost of a single-action revolver.

Finish is another consideration that may play an important part in your decision making process. To most shooters, the blued and case-colored revolver is the standard, but to many there is a deep and abiding need to show a little flash and awe and therefore must have a nickel or polished stainless steel, pistol to feel completely fulfilled on the firing line. From a practical point, the stainless is really hard to beat due to its inherent resistance to rust and corrosion. Polished stainless is also remarkably easy to keep looking near-new when those inevitable scratches and rub marks show up. Just a little 600-grit emery paper and some polishing compound on a buffing wheel and voila, new gun. In keeping with the traditions of the real Old West where most guns were blued steel these are what you will see most at the range, but they have the additional liability of needing more rust preventative maintenance and the showing of normal wear. Whatever brand, caliber, finish, and barrel length you choose, the one constant that you will encounter is that most if not all of these guns come out of the box in

need of a quality action-job. That's not to say that they can't be safely used just as they are, but to get the most out of them and receive the highest level of shooting satisfaction, action work is just about a necessity. This is getting somewhat off topic so keep that under your hat for now.

Used guns should be selected with all of the above criteria followed, with the added concern for the internal condition and serviceability of the gun. Despite any number of horror stories about bent or bulged barrels, broken parts, and timing problems, it has been my experience that most used guns are just that, used, and in some cases in need of some TLC, but typically, very serviceable. Small problems like finish wear, minor timing problems, and perceived accuracy issues can usually be overcome with a minimum of work and/or cost. Significant problems like bulges in the barrel and actions that are locked up may be a little more costly to repair, but if the initial price is good enough, the gun may still be a bargain. Accuracy problems in a pistol from a well-known manufacturer/importer, if the seller is honest enough to let you know about them, are usually an ammunition and/or maintenance problem. A dirty, leaded barrel can destroy accuracy, but that is a problem that is easily fixed with some judicious scrubbing with a quality solvent. Ammo problems are always an easy fix, especially if you are a reloader. The big up side of purchasing a used gun is, of course, lower prices. This is not always true, but is usually the case. Just like a car, there is a significant depreciation in value of a new gun once it is taken home and fired. Additionally, CAS guns, even if shot a lot, usually have very little internal wear due to the fact that most cowboy loads are low pressure/low velocity rounds that just don't put that much wear and tear on a gun. On the down side, you may have a real difficult time finding a used pistol of the type, barrel length, and caliber you are looking for. In this day of instant Internet access, the chore is much easier than it was even ten years ago.

Once you find the used gun(s) you have been looking for, you need to clean them, and if you feel it necessary, have a competent gunsmith look them over. Then it's off to the range to see how they shoot.

Prices vary significantly from region to region and by manufacturer. Some brands have a better reputation than others and therefore command higher resale values than less popular ones. Good functional, shootable single-actions should cost from \$225.00 to \$400.00 depending on the manufacturer, model, and grip material. Whatever you end up considering when purchasing your first sixguns, just don't get in a hurry. Now, there may be times when, due to the situation, a quick decision may be necessary, but usually, there is time to weigh the situation and if possible get a little coaching from a more knowledgeable shooting pard. Keep in mind also, that if you are dealing with a reputable gun dealer he/she will normally allow you to have a friend or gunsmith take a look before you slap down your hard earned cash. If the seller won't allow that kind of consideration you are best advised to walk away.

Whatever you decide upon just remember that the first set of sixguns is most likely that, just the first set. Very few CAS shooters have used only one set of revolvers during their shooting career. That is the beauty of this sport. Once you have purchased your initial set of equipment you can make changes in your gear to meet your personal needs without expending a huge amount of cash. When I finally got my wife to start shooting, I set her up with a pair of pretty fancy engraved custom Ruger 3-screw .357s thinking that those guns would be all she would ever need. Well, to date she has an additional three sets of sixguns, all in .357 magnum and all very special to her. So, remember that the set of sixguns you start with will most likely not be the last you buy.





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*Unfortunately for the James Gang, several of the local citizens were armed with the new lever-action rifle from Winchester – the Model 1873. The James Gang was shot to pieces and the guns used in the “Great Northfield Minnesota Raid” were forever etched in history.*

*Whether you prefer the original 1858 New Army black powder revolver, Frank’s 1875 Outlaw or the Northfield citizens’ 1873 Rifle – when you pick up an Uberti you’re holding history in your hands.*



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