

HANDGUNNER

AMERICAN

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It's really fun to tell a good custom gunsmith to "Do whatever you like" because the result is usually a surprise and often a learning experience. That's what happened when we told Bill Laughridge to build us a really tricked-out High Power. He did, and even the bells and whistles have bells and whistles.

This was their first shot at building a pistol on one of the new all-Belgian .40 S&W pistols being imported by FN in Columbia, South Carolina. Several years ago I tested one of the stock pistols and it was just, well — *stock*. It was plainly-finished, functioned

well, was suitably accurate and had the typically awful trigger we expect of HPs.

This one has been reborn into an elegant creature that really doesn't have too many of the original parts left other than the frame and slide. The High Power is one of Laughridge's specialties and he has more than a few parts of his own for them. So this one has new trigger guts, an ambi-safety, custom beavertail and a barrel bushing that provides stability at the muzzle end.

CHARLES E. PETTY • PHOTOS: ICHIRO NAGATA

HIGH POWER

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The bushing is something you won't find at the corner store. The front of the slide is threaded to accept the custom made bushing and a 1 1/8" socket with a "T" handle is included. There's also a small setscrew to prevent the bushing from turning during shooting. This work really makes it possible to get a precise fit on the muzzle and gives the pistol a good chance to live up to the potential of the BarSto barrel.

But First

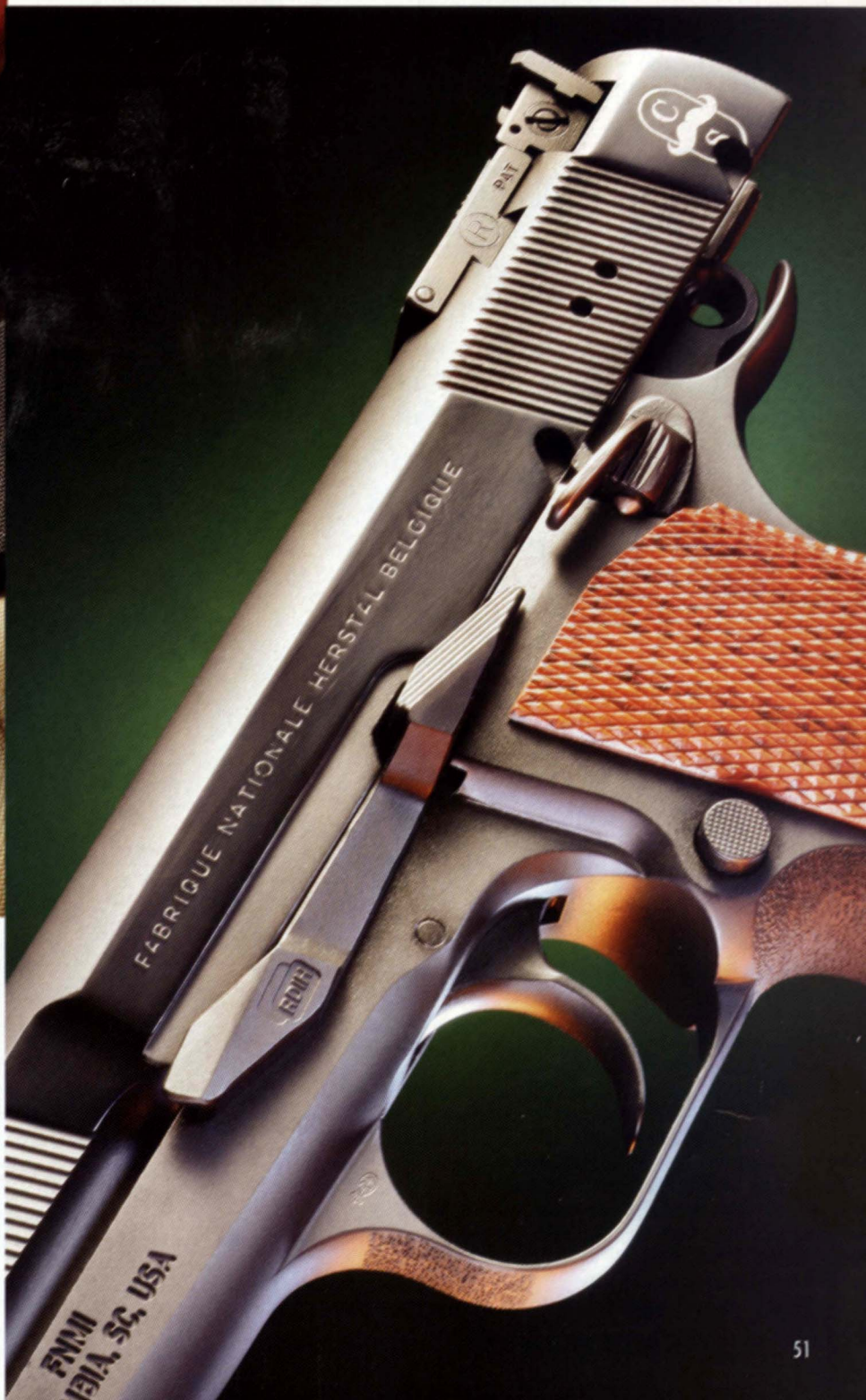
When the gun first came it had a pretty good trigger, but after less than



ACCURACY TEST RESULTS*

Load	Velocity	1	2	3	Avg.
Federal 165 Hydra-shok	983	1.83	1.90	1.79	1.84
Speer 180 Gold Dot HP	1,015	2.50	1.53	2.09	2.04
Winchester 165 FMJ	1,044	2.16	1.98	1.76	1.97
Average	1.95				

* Shown in inches.



100 rounds it developed a distracting habit. Sometimes you could pull until you were blue in the face before it finally fired — sometimes it was good as could be. Long distance diagnosis suggested a simple adjustment of the internal overtravel stop would put things in order. So, after certain administrations were applied, the gun simply had the best trigger pull I've ever felt on a High Power. It's right at 3½ lbs. and helps make this one real fun to shoot. The lesson being that trigger stops are excellent things, but you must pay attention that they are

adjusted correctly, especially on a self-defense gun.

Loves to Shoot

With the trigger restored, the serious shooting began. There were no stoppages of any kind and the accuracy was sparkling. Any High Power that shoots under 2" leaves little room for doubt. After something close to 500 rounds I cleaned the gun and carefully inspected the internal surfaces for unusual wear. Of course there was none.

Ergo Magic

There has been lots of cosmetic work that is really well done. The slide is brightly polished over a matte frame. The top of the slide is nicely grooved and the back surface is

checkered. Bill also cut grasping grooves at the front of the slide. He does a gentle stippling that looks neat and provides a great gripping surface at less cost than checkering. The front and back straps are stippled as is the front of the trigger guard. They have also carefully removed a little metal right behind the trigger guard to let your hand ride just a bit higher on the grip. This is one of those things that makes quite a difference in the feel but unless you compare with a stock gun it may not be too obvious.

There is also a big magwell that should make it really hard to fumble a reload. The .40 magazines have a spring that sticks out the back and is compressed when the magazine is seated. When you push the mag catch the magazine departs with some vigor and won't be in the way when you get there with the new one.

One of the most notable additions is the extended beavertail grafted to the frame with silver solder. You can actually see a faint line of solder at the joint. To me this is a really great improvement. Obviously it eliminates the hammer bite that can be a problem for some shooters but it really changes how the pistol feels too. Shooters often debate over which gun really *feels* best but the top two contenders are Browning designs anyhow.

The High Power is the first real wide body and is still one

of the most comfortable grips there is. As is the case with 1911s, the beavertail spreads recoil over the web of your hand and, at least to me, greatly improves the feel and recoil management ability. The Craig Spigel grips help too and are elegant.

Shootability

Bill also installed a Bo-mar adjustable rear sight deeply set into the slide. The .40 S&W cartridge, with the wide variety of bullet weights available, can benefit from adjustable sights and probably best suits what most shooters would do with a gun like this — shoot it a lot. To be sure, it would be a classy carry gun, but I really enjoyed plinking with it, and the 70 yard gong I talk about all the time was in grave jeopardy when the High Power went to the range with me. With the exceptionally good 3½ lb. trigger and fitted BarSto barrel, accuracy just wasn't a concern.

Of course there's another thing: much of this work is tedious and a-la-carte, meaning each bit is priced separately. This kind of work isn't done in a jig, but is virtually all done free-hand by an experienced pistolsmith/artisan and not only does it take a great deal of time, you don't get that kind of talent for free — or even K-Mart prices. We asked for everything but the kitchen sink on this handsome handgun and the total tab was \$3,937.51. But think about how many handguns you own that are "almost" right. If you'd taken all that money and invested in one that was "just right" I'll bet you'd have spent less.



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