



Blaser's entry into the shotgun market is sure to cause a stir. Richard Rawlingson has been testing one

This is turning out to be a vintage year for students of shotgun design. Hot on the heels of the Browning Cynergy we have another totally new gun and this time from a new contender for the hearts and wallets of competition shooters. Not that Blaser of Germany are novices at gunmaking; indeed if you are at all familiar with rifle shooting you will know the company as one of the biggest and most progressive in Europe. This is not some third division outfit with dreams of making it in the big league, but a serious player making an equally serious commitment to a new market sector. Blaser (it's pronounced Blah-zur by the way) means business.

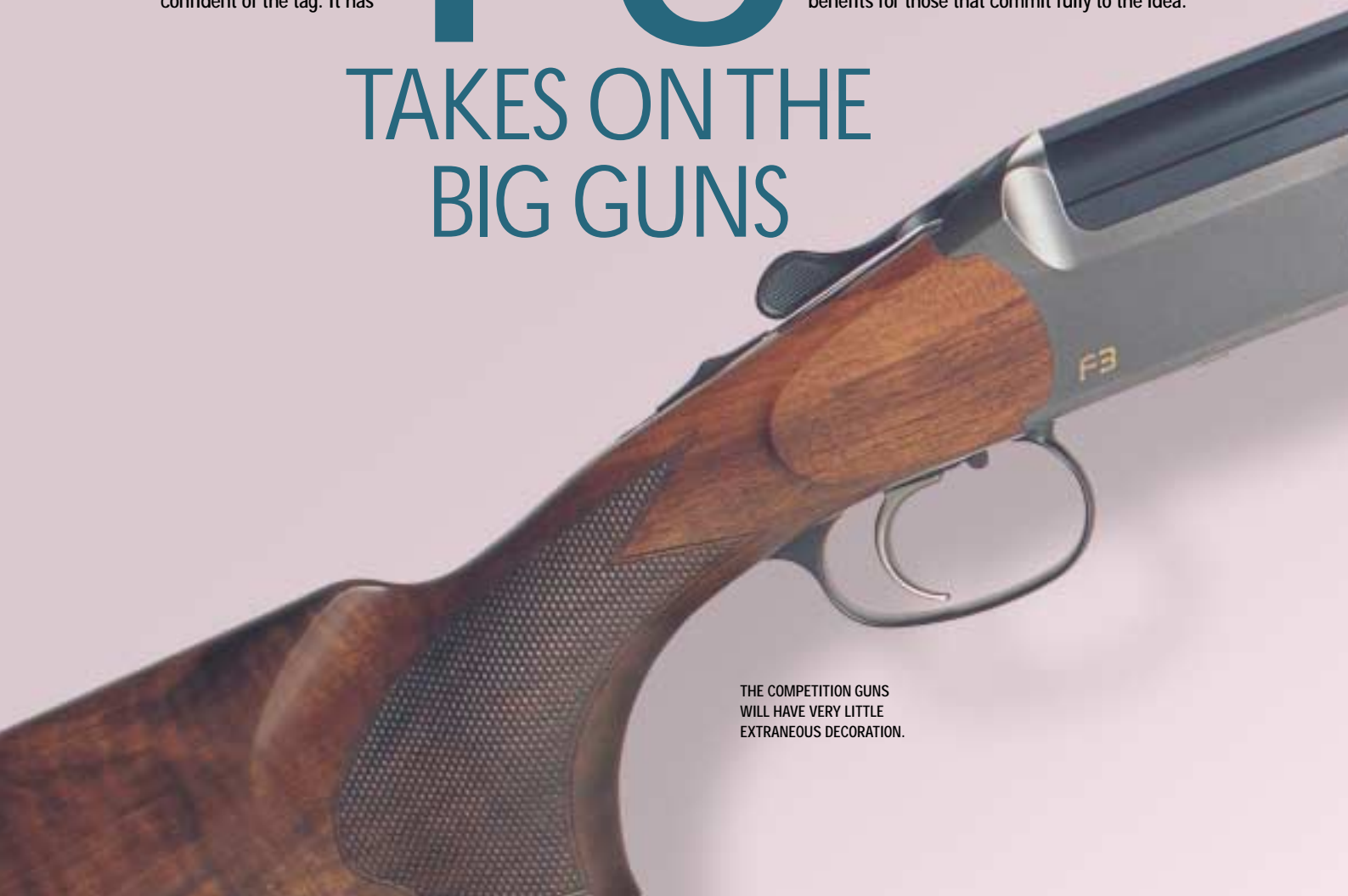
So how new is the F3? Well, it has nine separate patents covering aspects of its design, enough for the company to feel more than confident of the tag. It has

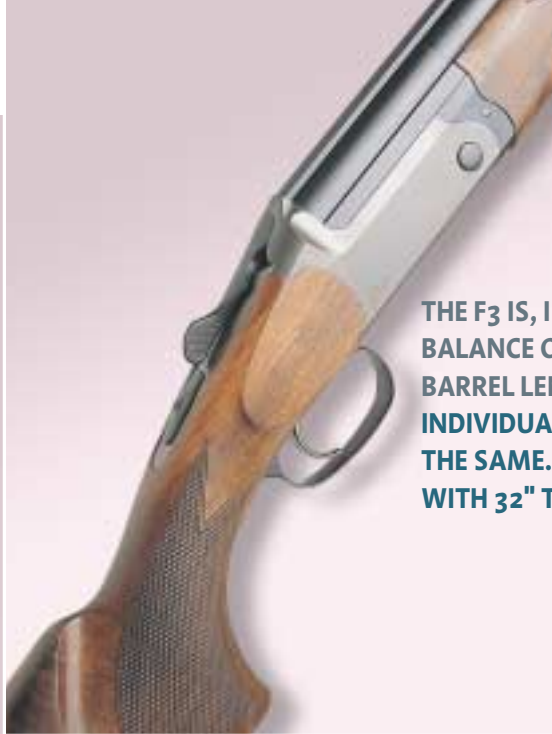
been several years in development, the final phase of which also included extensive input from John Bidwell, who has been retained as a consultant to help ensure that the gun is as dynamically competent as it is technically sound. With typical German thoroughness, Blaser has prepared the ground carefully before unveiling the F3 to a wider audience. Much of the design philosophy, and also production technology, used in the F3 can be traced back to the company's hugely successful R93 rifle. This is a modular

design in which barrels, magazines and woodwork can be swapped around, allowing one gun to be used for several different purposes. The same modular approach is being used on the F3 and it could change the way retailers and shooters alike think. For the trade it will certainly mean taking on board new ideas about stocking policies and selling systems not guns, but there could be huge benefits for those that commit fully to the idea.

F3 TAKES ON THE BIG GUNS

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MIX AND MATCH

Before I focus on the individual technical aspects of the F3, let's look in more detail at this modular system. At its heart you have the action (or receiver in American parlance) to which barrels, stock and fore end attach. This is the bit that does not change. To it you can add any barrel from the range (of which more later), any stock and any fore end, with absolutely no need for final fitting or attention by a gunsmith.

Let's say for example that you shoot both trap and skeet. You could buy your F3 with two barrels — say 28 and 32" — a standard sporting stock and a Monte Carlo trap stock, and, if you want, two different fore ends as well. Changing the gun from one set up to another will take just a few minutes, using only a stock wrench.

At this point I can hear you muttering that this is all very well, but won't changing everything around like that completely alter the balance and handling? Only if you want it to is the answer. The F3 is, I believe, unique in that the weight and balance of the barrels does not change as the barrel length changes. Each barrel length is individually contoured so that they all weigh the same. Your gun will therefore feel the same with 32" tubes as it does with 28". I told you they were thorough.

It is perfectly possible of course that

you do not want a 28" skeet or game version to balance and handle in the same way as a 32" trap gun. Enter clever idea number two. Each gun can be set up with precise balance using an ingenious system of stock weights. A threaded rod can be screwed into the back of the action, replacing the normal stock screw. This alone adds some extra weight and may be sufficient to fine tune the balance. If more is required, one or two weight cylinders can be screwed onto the rod and locked in position at any point along its length. This is important because the position of additional weight determines its effect on both balance and dynamic handling. Generally adding weight to the extremities of a gun is to be avoided and this system brings the weights much closer to the centre. Without any additions, the gun tips the scales at around 8lbs (3.63kg), rising



to a maximum of 8.5lbs (3.86kg).

Fine tuning a gun's weight and balance in standard form is just one use for this system. It can also compensate for differences in stock weight due to different wood density (much more common than you might think) or stock length. The F3 will also have the option of adjustable combs and recoil pads and again the weights can be used to compensate for changes these bring.

Buying a Blaser will not be about picking a complete gun, but instead be a question of assembling the components to your requirements. Although you will not have the full freedom that comes with a custom made gun, you will be able to go a long way down that road — and all for standard Browning or Beretta money.

THE TECHNICAL BITS

Let's turn now to the action and lock work. No new design can have any credibility in today's market unless it can claim to be 'low profile'. Beretta, and later Perazzi, have set the standards for action height in the past 50 years and, as we saw with the Browning Cynergy, others have had to fight



back. As always the fundamental dilemma remains — how to minimise bulk without compromising strength. The Beretta action is so clever because it delivers great strength in an elegant package and it is the benchmark for everyone else to match.

Blaser have opted for the strong lock up and reliability of a full-width locking bolt engaging in a bite beneath the bottom barrel, just as on a Browning, with the barrels hinging on replaceable stub pins.

The clever bit has been to make this under lump engage in a cut out in the floor of the receiver so that it does not add height. It also securely positions the barrels to prevent the tendency of all guns to try to blow the barrels 'off the face' when fired.

Even more cunning is that this 'lock plate', as they call it, is interchangeable in no time, using just a hexagonal key,

so any eventual wear can be eliminated at very little cost. I measured the height of the F3 action at around 60mm, meaning that it is within a millimetre or two of the Beretta and Cynergy, quite an achievement.

The action itself has something of a Blaser family look to it, echoing the lines of the firm's break-action rifles. It is quite plain

and angular, with very clean lines that are accentuated by the choice of grey finish on the basic grade guns, with just the F3 motif in gold to break up the smooth sides. The minor furniture (top lever, trigger guard etc) is finished in a contrasting darker shade. There will be game scene engraved versions, with and

NINE NEW PATENTS IN ALL ARE INCORPORATED IN THE GUN AND THE LOCKWORK IS VERY DIFFERENT TO EXISTING DESIGNS.

without sideplates, but I suspect the gun as pictured here will be the main seller in our market. The quality of the machining is very high, matching the high standard of build quality throughout the gun.

Unbolt the stock and some of the other special features of the F3 are revealed, for this lockwork is completely new. The designers had speed and reliability as their main objectives. Only time will tell if they achieved the latter, but the lock time is impressively quick and the trigger quality outstanding. It is a totally mechanical system, ie it does not rely on recoil from the first shot to reset the trigger. There is an inertia system within the design however, called Blaser IBS (Inertial Block System), but its role is to prevent rapid double discharge, known commonly as fan-firing. This is the involuntary second pull of the trigger that occurs as a result of recoil and gun makers have been trying to find ways round it for over a century of single trigger designs.

The barrel selector is located just in front of the trigger blade. In the rear position the bottom barrel fires first; push it forward and the top barrel is selected. The trigger blade itself is adjustable for position to give the optimum angle in relation to the finger and it is ergonomically shaped. As you can see



THE INNOVATIVE EJECTOR WORK IS NEATLY CONTAINED IN THE MONOBLOC. ALSO CLEARLY VISIBLE IS THE LOCK PLATE BELOW THE BOTTOM BARREL.



from the photograph, the lockwork sits directly above the trigger, contributing to the fast lock time. The trigger pulls are very light — Blaser claim 1500g (3.3lbs) straight out of the box on every gun — as I found out the first time I fired the gun. The second shot went off almost as the thought entered my head and I would say this is as light as anyone would want a trigger to be. What cannot be denied is the pull quality; there is absolutely no creep or drag and I doubt it can be bettered at any price.

Students of gun design will already have noticed that the springs and hammers lie perfectly horizontally within the frame. This gives the optimum use of kinetic energy and is a key factor in the feel of the trigger. The springs run in steel 'tunnels', similar in concept to Renato Gamba's detachable design, the advantage being that in the unlikely event of a spring breaking, the gun would continue to function until a replacement could be fitted. Looking from the breech face, we see that it is removable, again using a hex key, allowing easy access to the firing pins and, I presume, also replacement, in time, should it wear around the holes.

The safety catch is in the conventional position on the top strap and is linked to an intercepting system. Even if the gun is not on 'safe' the hammers are intercepted should the gun be dropped or

jarred, preventing discharge.

More innovation can be found in the ejector work, designated Blaser EBS (Ejector Ball System). Each ejector is activated by separate pins and these can be seen emerging from the breech face. These trip the ejectors through matching holes in the face of the extractors, all the mechanism being contained neatly within the monobloc. The rods push a ball out of the ejector sear (hence the name) and all ejector parts are fully interchangeable.

Conventionally, shotguns cock the mainsprings when the action is opened and the ejector springs when the gun is closed. Some force is therefore required to close a gun. Because of the integrated nature of the F3 lockwork, both its systems are cocked on opening. This makes the gun a little harder to open than others, but exceptionally light to close. Blaser claim that this is an advantage for competition shooters, minimising the effort required at the moment of maximum focus on the next target. At the launch I dismissed this as rather more 'feature' than 'benefit', but the first shooter I handed the gun to immediately commented on it, so maybe they are on to something.

And finally, something truly innovative. Left handers have long complained that

THE CONCEALED LATCH GIVES THE FORE END A TOTALLY SMOOTH UNDER SURFACE

they are ignored in a right dominated shooting world — well no longer. Using no special tools and only one replacement part, any gunsmith can convert the F3 to true left handed operation — that is the top lever opening to the left — in about five minutes. Apart from a short-lived Marocchi from around ten years ago, I can't remember this feature ever being offered in an affordable competition gun.

BARRELS

Every F3, for whatever purpose, will be multichoked. Pressed on this, Blaser say that the barrels were designed from the outset with them in mind — in effect from the chokes back — so that there should be no need for fixed choke barrels as a means of fine tuning balance. Taken in context with the stock weights and the interchangeability of barrels, they have a point. John Bidwell himself has proved this, having opted on the gun he has used recently to win the World FITASC Veteran title to go for the lighter game barrels that suit his personal style. With a fully stocked dealer locked into the modular concept that is a decision you could make in the shop or test out side by side on the range, swapping from one to another to make instant comparisons. For the competition models the choices will be 28, 30 and 32 inches.

SPOT THE EXTRA HOLES — THE BREECH FACE IS REMOVABLE AND CARRIES ADDITIONAL HOLES FOR THE EJECTOR RODS.





The choke tubes themselves are supplied by Briley and there will be the option of flush and extended 'Spectrum' versions.

All barrels are chambered for 3" cases and proofed for steel shot. They are hard chromed internally and plasma nitrated on the outside for maximum protection against corrosion. A special steel is used in their construction that allows Blaser to make the changes to the profiles needed to maintain constant weights. They are being very coy about the exact details, while hinting heavily that it is a spin off from military technology. Following what now seems to be emerging as a new consensus, they are using a mild degree of 'overboring' to 18.65mm (.735"), with longish forcing cones of around 15mm according to my barrel gauge.

One of the design options pursued and rejected for the moment was Krieghoff-style free-floating tubes, although these have apparently not been totally ruled out in future. Instead there is a solid centre rib extending forward of the fore end. The base of the top rib is CNC laser welded for accuracy and extra strength, while the rib itself is interchangeable, sliding over the supports and being secured by a grub screw at the muzzle. The rib supplied as standard on sporting barrels, as in our pictures, tapers from 10 to 8.5mm. The surface of the rib has an interesting pattern milled onto it that gives the optical appearance of a centre channel. On the gun in front of me the bead is orange and quite obtrusive, if easily changed.

Fore end attachment is by means of another new patented system that is fully integrated with the barrel monobloc. It is said to totally overcome any problems resulting from heat expansion. A side benefit is that only a simple catch is needed to secure the fore end to the

barrels and this is almost totally concealed at the front, leaving the underside of the fore end completely smooth and free of metalwork.

STOCKS/WOODWORK

Two competition stocks will be available at launch, one sporting/skeet and a trap stock with parallel comb and Monte Carlo step. As noted, an adjustable comb and adjustable pads will be options. The sporting/game stock has no great surprises, with drop of 38mm at comb, 50mm at heel. It will appeal very much to British taste with its open radius grip, although opinion will, as ever, be divided over the provision of a palm swell. A good quality recoil pad is fitted with a 'non-stick' heel for smooth gun mounting.

The Monte Carlo stock has a tighter radius grip and double palm swell. It is also straight, with no cast, so it is not handed. It has a dished and grippy pad fitted as standard.

Fore end options are Schnabel and beavertail, which can of course be fitted with any barrel/stock configuration according to personal preference. All of the guns on show at the launch had attractive wood (as you would expect), with a traditional oil finish. There is nothing to suggest that the production guns will be inferior.

SHOOTING IMPRESSIONS

Because the handling characteristics of the gun can be tailored to such a degree, this is not an easy or straightforward subject. I have only had limited time with a sporter model fitted with 30" barrels, the

first guns being in great demand and also needed for display at the CLA Game Fair. Thus I have not had as much time as I would like to experiment with the stock weights and different barrel lengths, nor any chance to shoot the F3 in trap configuration. That said, the gun, as it comes straight out of the box, is very shootable, with neutral balance and handling and smooth control of recoil. It feels properly sorted, as you would expect given John Bidwell's part in its development and he clearly is getting on with his very nicely, thank you.

The basic handling of the gun is excellent in terms of smoothness of operation and functionality and the whole thing feels exceptionally well screwed together and certainly well up to the task of coping with high volume competition use. The build quality and feeling of precision outshines many guns costing twice as much and more. It is impressive, all the more so from a company with no previous history of shotgun production.

All of which brings us to the price, which I have deliberately left until last. The UK importers, Beechwood Equipment, have indicated that the F3 will retail around the £2000 mark. That makes it not much more expensive than market leaders such as the Beretta 682E and the new Browning Cynergy. To my eye that is a very sharp price indeed for a gun that packs so much innovative thought into one package. Moreover Blaser have both the will and the financial power to take on the established brands, together with a strong and long established distribution network worldwide. I believe this could mark the birth of a new force on the clay shooting scene.

...THE GRIP HAS A SUBSTANTIAL PALM SWELL



Further information: Beechwood Equipment
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