

Will the straight-pull rifle ever be “American?”



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WHY NOT?

STRAIGHT-PULL RIFLES have been alive and well in Europe since the Mannlicher Model 1886. They are revered for their fast-cycling and -handling attributes, but until recently, these rifles have struggled to thrive in the American market.

Why? A few reasons. The three biggest are cost, weight, and the “Euro” aesthetic.

The oldest straight-pull rifle designed for specifically for hunting is the Blaser R93. The current R8 model has struggled for popularity in the U.S. due to its price, which starts north of \$4,000, and its limited exposure. Distribution of this rifle is limited, too, so it’s rare to see a Blaser in the field.

The Strasser RS-14 is the new kid on the block, which I reviewed for the June 2021 issue. I have high hopes for this rifle. It has a superior design and distribution is coming on-line. Still expensive (also starting at \$4,000), Strasser is more in tune with the American market, so it’ll be exciting to see what future models look like.

Finally, there is the new-for-2021 Savage Impulse. Reviewed by Joe Kurtenbach in the April 2021 issue, the Impulse is the first straight-pull that’s within financial reach of many — starting at \$1,377. And backed by an American company known for reliable and accurate rifles.

The reasons straight-pull rifles should do well in the U.S. market are due to their modularity and efficient, fast-action cycling. All three examples listed above use barrels with extensions attached to facilitate lock-up with the bolt. This allows for the use of aluminum when fabricating the receiver, which reduces weight. It also enables each to change calibers and barrels with minimal effort. Using a barrel extension adds cost, but it also sets headspace from the factory. (An “extension” is a metal sleeve attached to the barrel’s chamber that provides lug abutments against which the bolt’s locking lugs seat upon closing the action.) Since this is a small part, the tolerances can be tightly controlled. Headspace is set at the factory when the extension threads onto the barrel’s chamber.

STRASSER RS14 EVO TAHR, MSRP: \$4,273



SAVAGE IMPULSE HOG HUNTER, MSRP: \$1,377

Such a barrel can usually be purchased online, shipped to the customer’s house, and installed in minutes with zero doubt that headspace is correct. All that’s left is to load up and head out to the range.

All three of these rifles also have interchangeable bolt heads; anything from a .223 Remington to a .300 Winchester Short Magnum can be made to work on the same rifle with nothing more than a barrel, bolt head and magazine swap. Long-action

cartridges have similar modularity.

Another advantage offered by a straight-pull that should get the shooting community’s attention is efficient action-cycling movement. A traditional bolt-action rifle requires the shooter to first lift the bolt somewhere between 60 and 90 degrees before pulling it rearward for the length of its travel. Anyone who has poked around the internet (or hung out with rifle nerds) has likely participated in or at least heard the occasionally spirited debate about whether a 60-degree or 90-degree bolt lift is preferable, followed by the argument why.

It usually comes down to the 60-degree lift, which stays away from the scope’s ocular housing, and the easy-to-lift 90-degree bolt that can cause the firing hand to hit the scope while cycling the action.

A straight-pull action is easier to “lift” than either, and the handle come nowhere near the scope. From a pure bio-mechanical standpoint, the straight-pull receiver bests both 60- and 90-degree actions for ease of use. The end result is a rifle that disturbs the shooter’s position less when working the action because of the reduced



effort required to feed the chamber.

The counter-argument to straight-pull actions starts with tradition — and that's a biggie. Americans are not used to these types of rifles. Our bolt-actions fit a certain mold and have for decades. Why change now? The two most compelling arguments why we should accept the straight pull come from Savage and Strasser. As much as I'd like to say Blaser has something exciting to offer, I don't think they do. They make a fine rifle, but the R8 hasn't improved in many years, and it's unlikely to do so anytime soon.

Strasser is new and is closely tied into the U.S. shooting community. I've spoken with them in-depth and have expressed my desire to see more American-styled stocks and lighter weight rifles. Their current offerings are beautiful and exquisitely made, but some prefer more practical stock lines and lighter weight. I'm confident we'll see Strasser cater to guys like me at some point. The Strasser features that make me willing to spend my savings on their straight-pull rifle — other than the modularity and efficiency of cycling the action — are the tolerances to which they machine and the trigger. Strasser hold each barrel extension to .00003-inch on diameter



The short, linear movement involved in unlocking the bolt is what makes straight-pull rifles such as the Strasser RS Solo Evolution so fast (\$3,451, strasser-usa.com). Once the handle moves rearwards about 2 inches, the entire bolt assembly moves with it.

and headspace to within .0003-inch. Moving around the quick-change barrel is surreal because once it slides into the receiver it won't move, even before it's locked in place! It's the finest manufacturing I've ever observed on any rifle. The trigger is equally amazing. It slides out of the receiver with the press of a recessed button, and it can be adjusted without tools in the field. When used as a single-stage trigger, it adjusts between 2 pounds and 4½ pounds. When

used as a set trigger, it can be adjusted down to 1 ounce and still function safely.

The second reason straight-pull rifles have a future in the U.S. market is because Savage is making them more accessible than ever with the Impulse.

Unlike the R8 and RS14, Savage uses a traditional barreled action bolted into a stock. This leaves it open to possibilities such as a chassis and aftermarket support from fiberglass and carbon-fiber stock companies. However, the barrel extension used on the Impulse requires a larger-diameter action, so the Impulse does not share the same footprint as its 110. Savage is a big company with all the manufacturing and distribution that comes with it, so the Impulse is priced a lot lower than other straight-pull rifles



Savage's Impulse features "Hexlock." The removeable bolthead has six stainless-steel ball bearings that act as lugs to lock it into battery.

and will likely far surpass the other two in sales.

There's a lot riding on the shoulders of Strasser and Savage. If America is ever to accept a straight pull, it'll be because of them. Strasser will pull in those who can afford it, and Savage will attract those interested in sticking a toe in the water for a smaller investment.

Both companies are going to need to do a couple things to make the straight-pull successful. Strasser will need to lose some weight and enhance the stock. That's about all. Savage needs to make the Impulse an option for the precision rifle crowd by dropping the action in a chassis. And it needs a detachable magazines. European shooters want straight-pull receivers for the speed they offer hog hunters.



Strasser's bolt head features four radial locking lugs. Even one lug is strong enough to resist over-pressure proof loads.

American shooters want speed for competition.

Savage's hunting models also still need to lose a little weight. Barrel profiles on the current models are truck-axle heavy, and nobody wants to carry that up the hill. Weight is fine for stand hunters, but most place a premium on portability and light weight.

Straight-pull rifles won't take over the American market anytime soon, but they should be more prominent. New and innovative rifles like these push competing manufacturers to offer better products. Sooner or later, each and every one of us benefits from that innovation. 