

HI-POWER

Three pistolsmiths work over Browning's sleekest design!

By Rob Garrett

While the 1911 may have been John Browning's greatest design, the Browning Hi-Power is his sleekest. The Hi-Power radiates class, style, and elegance unlike any other pistol in the world. Years ahead of its time in both concept and design, it was the world's first compact high capacity 9mm pistol. It has great balance, a thin slide and grip that, despite being wide, fits most hands well. The Hi-Power has seen service with select units such as Britain's SAS and our own FBI HRT Unit. I have always had affection for Hi-Powers but seldom carried one, as the majority of past examples I have owned were factory stock. The small sights and "hard to find" thumb safety caused them to sit in the safe with the exception of a range day or two during the year.

The concept for this article started when I was visiting with Ted Yost at a SHOT Show gathering in Vegas. Ted mentioned that Hi-Powers continued to be very popular and a large part of his work. I promised Ted that when I was caught up, I would contact him about doing a Hi-Power article. In the meantime, I read an excellent book by Marcus Wynne entitled *No Other Option*. In the book the antagonist carries a custom Hi-Power worked over by Karl Sokol from Chestnut Mountain Sports in Vermont. The final straw to get me started was a recent visit to Cylinder & Slide in Fremont, Nebraska. Late in the afternoon, I was visiting with owner Bill Laughridge and his shop foreman, Ralph Gutekunst. When Ralph pulled out a full-blown C&S Hi-Power for me to drool over, the die was cast.

I sent a request to Bill, Karl and Ted



It is not often that one gets the chance to enjoy three Hi-Powers tricked by the best in the business. From left, the work of Ted Yost, Karl Sokol and Bill Laughridge.

for a workingman's Hi-Power. I was not looking for presentation grade "gunsafe queens" but rather a pistol that was reliable, accurate, and user friendly. My goal was to test the best of the three shops' work while keeping the cost of the modifications in the range of \$1000 to \$1500. I encouraged each shop to include one or two specialty modifications that they felt exhibited the best of their work. The pistol I received represents the style and personality quality

of each gunsmith. Quality was exceptional and all three pistols impressed the dozen or so shooters who had the privilege of handling and shooting these three fine pistols.

Custom Threesome

Ted Yost forwarded a Belgium Browning that had his SRT package of modifications. Karl Sokol's example was also a Belgium gun with his cata-

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logged package for a Hi-Power. Cylinder & Slide used an FN Hi-Power instead of a Browning. Based on my conversations with Bill and Ralph, they decided on the modifications and options for the article. The FN Browning is easily recognized by the new placement of the serial number on the right side of the frame, just over the grip instead of the traditional location on the front strap.

All three shops did a standard reli-

ability package that consisted of polishing the barrel throat and ramp, tuning the extractor, and polishing the internal parts where needed. Wolf springs were used in all three pistols with Yost installing a 16.5-pound recoil spring, and Laughridge and Sokol choosing an 18.5-pound spring. All three shops crowned the stock barrels with an 11-degree crown to improve accuracy. While Bar-Sto's are an option, all three shops advised that a factory barrel

provided the accuracy needed for a working gun.

The front and back straps were stippled on all three pistols. While the effects are similar, each stippling style has a unique pattern. Sokol trademarks his stippling by ending the pattern in an arrowhead. I can best describe his pattern as being like a fine treebark. Yost appropriately calls his stippling "sharkskin," and the appearance and feel are very similar. The C&S stippling

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is slightly coarser than the sharkskin and reminds one of soft bristle similar to Velcro. C&S and Yost also undercut the frame at the base of the trigger-guard to provide a "high grip front strap." This modification improves the feel in a subtle but significant way. Yost and Laughridge included Spiegel cocobolo grips that are both attractive and functional.

The old style factory safeties on the Hi-Power were small and easily missed under speed. All three shops addressed this issue in similar styles but different processes. C&S is known for their quality Hi-Power parts and they installed a C&S Extended Combat Safety and C&S Extended Slide Release. Both Yost and Sokol started with the factory safety and built it up to their specifications. All three safeties were comfortable, accessible, and as positive as any 1911.

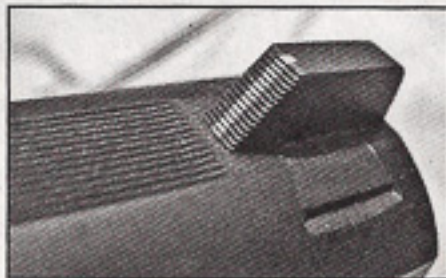
Hi-Powers have never been known for having a good trigger. The reason lies in the geometry. Instead of having a trigger bar that contacts the sear, as on a 1911, the trigger lever rises vertically and applies upward pressure up on the front of the sear lever that's located in the slide. The back of the sear lever pushes down on the sear, located in the rear of the frame, dropping the hammer. There are six individual points of movement in the trigger mechanism. This design provides a mechanism that does not add to the already wide body of the grip. In addition, the magazine safety contributes to an already complex system. All this makes it difficult to get a really good trigger on a Browning.

Each shop did an outstanding trigger job on their individual pistols. It should be noted that the guns from Chestnut Mountain and C&S both had a firing pin safety system. Sokol performed a trigger job utilizing existing parts that resulted in a clean 5.25-pound break with no noticeable creep, while retaining the magazine safety. The spur on the factory hammer was rounded and reshaped to prevent the Browning's well-known hammer bite.

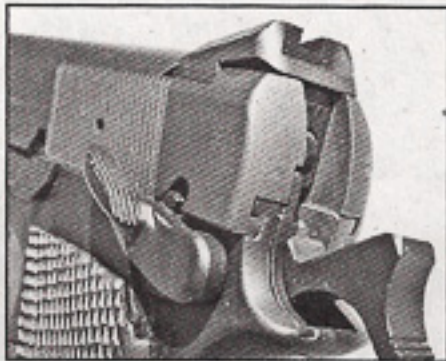
Cylinder & Slide installed their proprietary commander style hammer, machined sear and wide trigger. A detailed examination of the slide reveals a second hole where the pivot point for the sear lever was moved a quarter of an inch to the rear. This alone reduces the trigger pull significantly and the pistol measured a 4.5-pound trigger during the test. Several shooters were fond of the wider trigger. It should be



Ted Yost's SRT Package is based on the work a law enforcement customer requested



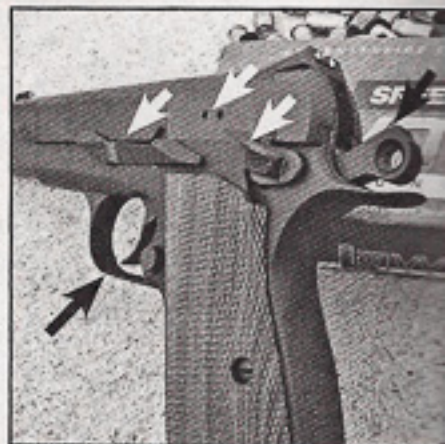
One of Yost's signature options is the 24-kt gold insert in the front sight. This is both esthetically pleasing and functional.



A closeup of Karl Sokol's custom made safety. Also note the solid black, low mounted Novak rear sight and the lack of sharp edges due to the carry bevel.

noted that both Sokol and Yost used C&S parts on their upgraded packages.

The trigger is one place that Yost added an option not found on the standard SRT package. The stock Hi-Power trigger has a long take-up as well and significant reset travel. Ted has developed an internal modification that reduces trigger travel by 50% and eliminates almost all of the overtravel after the shot. The result is a Hi-Power trigger that feels very close to that of a good 1911. After shooting this pistol, this is definitely an option I would



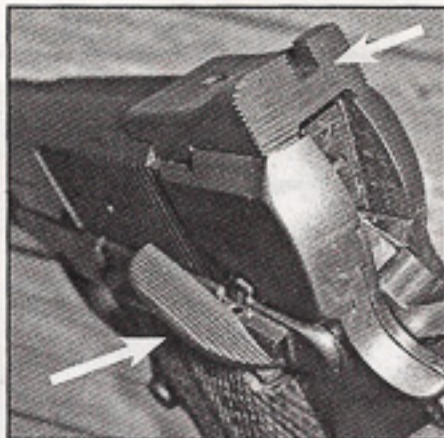
Cylinder & Slide chose to replace the hammer, sear, trigger, safety and slide stop with his own parts.



The C&S performed their work on an FN Browning and mounted Novaks sights.

choose.

Cylinder & Slide mounted a low-profile Novak rear sight with white dots that were opened up the 0.150 of an inch with a dovetailed front sight that featured a Trijicon tritium insert. Sokol also chose low mounted Novaks, opened up to 0.155 of an inch with a single white dot in the front. The Novaks look very sleek and give both pistols an aerodynamic appearance. Yost installed a Heinie SlantPro rear



Yost installed a Heinie rear sight and also custom made the safety. All three safeties were positive and without the soft motion of a stock pistol.

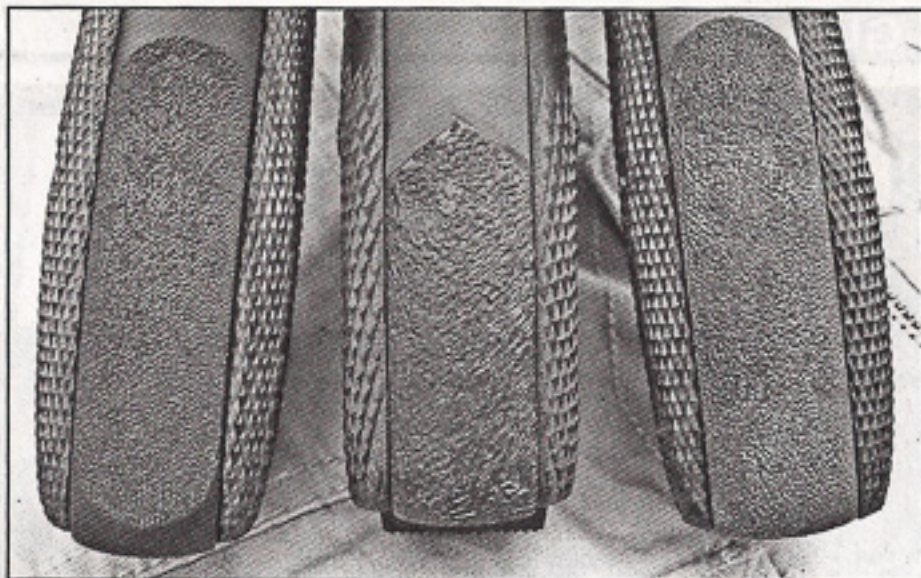


Note C&S extended beavertail.

sight that had been opened up to 0.140 of an inch. The dovetailed front sight features a 24-karat gold line insert that is unique to Yost. I found that the Heinie offered my middle-aged eyes a little cleaner sight picture than the Novaks.

A working gun generally needs a working finish. Sokol calls his finish Mountain Tuff. It is a spray-on resin that's applied over parkerizing and then heat cured. Karl's reasoning for parkerizing first is to provide rust protection in those "hard to reach" places that can't be sprayed effectively. Mountain Tuff does provide some lubrication qualities, but Sokol does not like running his guns dry and tends to use Lube 1 by Slick 50. C&S finished the pistol with an in-house ceramic coating, nicknamed HBS or "hard black stuff." I found both to be a tough finish that resisted significant wear from both holsters and general use. After some 400 rounds, finish wear on the slide rails was minimal. While not "pretty," these would be my finish of choice for a hard duty gun.

The Yost Hi-Power features an attractive matte bluing on the frame and top of the slide. The sides of the slide were polished for a gloss blue. The factory spur hammer was high cut, bobbed, and features polished sides. While it was the most attractive, the bluing did show some wear on the edges from multiple presentations from the new holsters. Yost offers finishing



All three shops stippled the front and back straps. Each has a slightly different and distinctive pattern. Left to right: Cylinder & Slide, Yost and Chestnut Mountain Sports.



Professional pistols demand professional leather. Two of the best are Bulman and Sparks. On the left is Josh Bulman's SDS and on the right is Sparks classic 55BN.



Note the front strap stippling of the CMS pistol. The dark finish is a spray-on resin that's heat cured. It proved very durable.

options that include hard chrome and Birdsong's Black-T.

So what are the real differences? To quote Karl Sokol, "My Hi-Power package is everything you really need and nothing you don't need." I have to agree. Priced at just \$750, Sokol's package is really a quality bargain. Karl

did splurge and included a pair of black micarta grips that were thinner than the factory grips. It should also be noted that since the newer Hi-Powers come with extended safeties, his custom safety was also an option not included in his standard package. It is a utilitarian package that you can count on to be 100% reliable with just enough features to make it practical.

The SRT Package is a result of Yost building several pistols for a friend who is in full-time law enforcement in the Midwest. The customer's call sign is SRT and Ted coined the term for his basic Hi-Power build-up. The SRT includes several custom features not found in many basic packages. Yost reshapes the top of the slide by flattening it and then machines 50 lines

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per inch (lpi) serrations from the rear sight to the front sight. This is a nice custom touch normally found on more expensive pistols. He marks his pistol with block lettering on the right side of the slide, behind the cocking serrations. All this, with the exception of the trigger modifications, is included in the standard SRT package for \$995.

The Cylinder & Slide crew rang up the largest bill but with good reason. It is only natural that they would install their own internal parts as well as slide release and safety. They also chose to improve the barrel lockup by welding up the foot of the barrel and re-cutting it. This allows for improved lockup between the barrel and slide that improves accuracy and extends the life of the pistol. The 18.5-pound recoil also delays the locking time.

The last option that Bill included was his extended beavertail that is extremely popular. Hi-Powers are notorious for hammer bite. This is both a functional and attractive addition. While labor intensive, many find it a must for their carry guns. The work order for the C&S gun was around \$2000.

Holster Options

You can't have three super Hi-Powers in the vault and not carry them. I called two old friends, both exceptional gentlemen, and asked for a dress and casual concealment holster for the article. Tony Kanaley, from Milt Sparks, sent me his classic 55BN holster. The 55BN is based on Bruce Nelson's classic design that has become timeless. For dress wear, I contacted Josh Bulman for his SDS or Straight Drop Scabbard. The SDS is very similar to the 55BN but features a flap that extends between the rear of the pistol and the body. Both holsters were top quality and befitting these three pistols. I made use of these rigs during range sessions and both casual and dress occasions. I can recommend both Bulman and Sparks holsters without any reservations. BlackHawk needs no introduction to the reader. While not considered sexy, I utilized their Omega VI Assault holster for tactical exercises.

Shooting Impressions

How did they shoot? First, having spent the last several range trips



All three shops retained the factory barrel. Groups from 15 yards were well within acceptable accuracy with the major limitation being the author.

testing compact .45s, I had forgotten how pleasant Hi-Powers were to shoot. To no one's surprise, there were no malfunctions with any of the ten or so types of ammunition. There is one point that should be noted about Hi-Powers and ammunition. I do not recommend shooting any +P or +P+ ammunition in any Hi-Power. Bill Laughridge is also adamant about this. The shallow locking lugs, combined with a less than perfect fit from the factory, will not tolerate the hot 9mm loads. My personal preference in defense loads tends to be 124-grain standard velocity loads such as the Speer Gold Dot, Winchester Ranger and Remington Golden Saber. If you want a Hi-Power that will handle the hotter 9mm loads, Cylinder & Slide can build you one, based on the .40 caliber Hi-Power that will handle a djet of these loads.

In all, each pistol digested approximately 250 rounds or so with the majority being Speer 124-grain FMJ Lawman ammunition. My getting-old eyes had an easier time using the white dot front sights found on the Sokol and C&S pistol. I like the touch of the gold bar in the Yost pistol and my groups with this pistol improved toward the end of the day.

Final Notes

John M. Browning designed the prototypes for the Hi-Power but he died in 1927. FN's Chief of New Armament Development, Dieudonne Saive, took the prototypes and redesigned them to become what we know now as the P-35. History shows that the Browning P-35 is the most successful military pistol

ever produced. Even today, the Hi-Power is the pistol of choice of many professionals who intentionally go into harm's way. It also continues to remain a standard in the European community. Its popularity after seventy years is enough to make a father proud.

I would like to thank Bill Laughridge, Karl Sokol and Ted Yost for their patience and assistance with this article. The coordination to receive three highly sought-after pistols for a joint article is not easy. The graciousness of these three gentlemen is greatly appreciated and not taken lightly. ■

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