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A PH's thoughts on HUNTING AFRICA'S "HORNED DEATH"

John Oosthuizen

Calibres for Cape buffalo

Just over 30 years ago, when I started in this business, I believed that the .375 H&H was the best all-round calibre for African hunting. I still do. The .416 Rigby was the Holy Grail for a professional hunter – a harder-hitting .375.

Both these calibres will do the job adequately on any dangerous game, provided the following points are covered:

- ▶ quality of bullet
- ▶ bullet placement

As a professional hunter, I have always been a believer in bigger is better, particularly when it comes to hunting buffalo. The reason for this is margin for error – the bigger the bullet, the more margin it gives you. That is the theory, which in practice works most of the time.

The buffalo, however, has scant respect for theory. As long as blood is pumping to his brain, he is a danger to you and those around you, and the more pumped up he is, the greater danger he becomes. On occasion, bullets just appear to be shots of adrenalin into his bloodstream.

Nevertheless, the more cards you can hold in your hand as a hunter, the better. Without doubt a "big stick" in the hand goes a long way to building confidence, particularly when after the first shot he spins round and disappears from view.

No PH I know, if given the choice of following a wounded buffalo with either a .375 or .500, is going to take the peashooter! It is for this reason and my love for hunting "grumpy old men" that I gradually progressed through the .400 calibres to my calibre of choice, the .505 Gibbs. 6 000+ foot-pound/s (ft-lbs) of energy is a very good way of getting an incoming buffalo's attention!

My rifle is not pretty. Built on a Brno 602 action, it has a 23" barrel, a fibreglass stock with four rounds fully charged, a ghost ring sight and an ivory bead. But it does the job and that is what a big stick is all about.

The most critical points for any dangerous-game rifle are that it must hit the point of aim and it must cycle the rounds faultlessly. More you need not ask.

Bullet placement and backup shots

When hunting buffalo, setting up to make that first shot is probably the most critical point of the hunt. It is important to know where the vital areas are for the greatest effect. I would strongly advise any amateur to take the time to study these areas and where they are, from whichever position the buffalo may present itself.

I could count on one hand the number of buffalo I have hunted with clients that have collapsed on the first shot and died there.



Bob Bledsoe with his Niassa bull, killed with a single shot with a .375 H&H solid

Stand by – he is going to run, so plan for it! How far? That will largely depend on shot placement.

I have witnessed clients watch their trophy bull disappear over the horizon after expecting him to collapse on the first shot like "all the white-tailed deer they have shot". This is Africa and these are Cape buffalo. If you like shooting your big-calibre rifle, this is your opportunity!

Take heed of the words from the buffalo hunter's handbook: **"As long as he is on his feet, keep shooting!"**

Over the past 25 years, giant strides have been made in the quality of bullets and ammunition. This fact has resulted in a change of thinking in what bullet, soft or solid, should be used for the first shot on a buffalo – a subject that has been the reason for many a campfire debate.

Nowadays, with safari-grade ammunition for the .400 calibres or bigger, there is no need to use a solid on buffalo. Bullets like Barnes TSX, Swift A-Frame and numerous others, have incredible vital statistics in their weight reten-

tion and penetration ability. To my mind, a good-quality soft on an incoming buffalo is infinitely more effective than a solid. It has far more shocking power and will feasibly turn a buffalo off course from his charge. The bigger bullet will without doubt give you that additional margin you may need for being slightly off target.

From bitter experience I can tell you that the bull that ran all over the top of me sucked up 500 gr of full metal jacket with 5 870 ft-lbs of energy at 2 m from my .458 Lott. The bullet entered just above his right eye, on target, and exited out the back of his head, missing the brain. He didn't even check stride! There is no doubt in my mind that, had I used a soft, I would have either knocked him down or turned the charge.

The .375 is more of a topic for debate. Having been a believer in solids in all calibres for buffalo up until the development of high-grade bullets, I am still of the belief that a solid in a .375 would be my bullet of choice.



My "big stick" – a .505 Gibbs



The author at the "office" after a hard day of buffalo hunting



Kelly Keithly with a Nile buffalo from Uganda, shot with a .375 H&H

Probably 75 per cent of the buffalo I have taken with clients have either been chest on or quartering towards the hunter, head up, looking in his direction. There is a lot of skin with folds in the chest area; a soft-nosed bullet in .300 gr can fail to reach the vitals. These shots require accurate shooting – there is no margin for error in the .375. The trump card for the .375 is penetration. With a solid you will hit the vitals (either the heart, lung or spine) where it dips down between the shoulders. The problem arises when, in a herd situation, a solid may exit on a



Team 505. Tony Bucolo took this fine old dagga boy with a custom D'Arcy Echols .505.

broadside shot. It is then advisable to use a soft for the first shot, but only with high-quality ammunition. Otherwise use a solid, but wait for a clear shot.

Before hunting buffalo, I have always taken the time to cover the points of bullet placement, verbally and with the aid of pictures, with clients. I don't care how many buffalo you have hunted – your heart rate will go up and the adrenaline will seep into your veins as you close in. I make it blatantly clear to clients that communication is the key. **If the set-up is not good, DO NOT under any circumstances take the shot because you feel under pressure to do so.** Things do go wrong, agreed, that is part of hunting. Telling your PH after the shot that you "really weren't all that comfortable", however, will get very little sympathy. This obviously is not ideal for the spirit of the hunt.

It is for this very reason that I will always discuss the option of taking a backup shot. There are good reasons for this. I do not want to kill any client's buffalo, but insurance at no additional cost has a lot of merit.

Bear in mind that, as a client, you should have every opportunity to make a killing shot first off. Your bull is dead but he just doesn't know it. Any shot thereafter is insurance. As a PH, I will not fire if I believe that it is unnecessary, but only if I believe the situation is good and my client gets busy with the follow-up shots.

If the first shot is off the mark and the buffalo is still very much alive, there are a number of scenarios that could develop, most of which are not good. He may run off a little way and go down, which is good. But then again he may not, and it is this aspect that needs serious consideration by the client.

As a client, having said you do not want a backup shot taken by your PH, and now that you are following a wounded buffalo, it is okay for him to shoot (and believe me, he is going to!), makes no sense to me at all. It is rather like a bowhunter sticking an arrow into a buffalo and when wounded, knows full well that an arrow on a charging buffalo won't quite do the trick! So let's pick up the "big stick" (which should have been used in the first place!).

Fortunately, the vast majority of clients are in agreement with my sentiments. Nobody wants to lose their trophy or put others in danger. So, the logic is, "back me up" if necessary. And trust your PH to make that call.



PH Ross Johnston in a situation where backup is not a debate

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The moment when penetration is vital to success.

Clients should never forget that it is all about the hunt, and a dead buffalo is a cartload better than one wounded or lost.

Fitness and practice make it fun

Hunting buffalo is what hunting is all about: the challenge, excitement and thrill of hunting an extremely dangerous

General Walter Boomer
hunted this buffalo in
Zambia, a single-shot
kill with a .416
Remington soft-nose.



animal. It embodies all the facets of why we love to hunt.

My advice to all prospective hunters: There are two basic exercises to follow. Firstly, practise your shooting, preferably with shooting sticks and offhand, to build confidence with your rifle. Secondly, get yourself in shape. This will without doubt enhance your experience.

The hunt could involve hours of tracking, crawling or waiting patiently for long periods of time for the right opportunity. Your position for the shot may not be a textbook example, so be prepared!

Opportunities are there to be seized. Do not let "I wish I had taken more time to practise or get into shape" be the reason for the loss of that opportunity.

A final word

Be patient, wait for the shot, and squееееее the trigger!

