



THE ADJUSTABLE COMB

**“AH, THE ADJUSTABLE COMB – IS THERE ANY OTHER PIECE OF SHOOTING EQUIPMENT MORE IGNORED BY SOME AND LOVED BY OTHERS?” ASKS
DAVE HOLMES**

Bring up the topic of adjustable combs (ACs) and you can always find those who say they would never own one. About the heaviest argument in its defense is a simple “I like mine.” What generates such polarization?

There are those happy souls amongst us who happen to fit factory stocks, or at least fit them closely enough that a simple stock modification or two is all they need. They view ACs as something to tinker with when one shouldn’t be tinkering and wouldn’t have one on their gun at any price! It would not be unfair to summarize their sentiments as “I don’t need one, so why do you?”

There are others who need dimensions not offered by any off the shelf gun. “Get a custom stock!” reply the disbelievers. I suppose that is the ultimate answer – but it is an expensive answer and not a perfect one. There are a lot of custom stocks sitting in the closet

or in the safe that didn’t work out as planned. The success of a custom stock depends on the accuracy of the measurements. How are those measurements derived? By shooting a gun that adjusts. That certainly makes a case that there is some value in a stock that adjusts as an intermediary step in the quest for perfection.

FAR FROM FACTORY

Gun fittings are an interesting experience – not only for the ‘fittee,’ but the fitter. The ability of the shooter influences the accuracy of the resulting measurements. Some will say that a beginner needs to learn to shoot before he or she worries about the perfect gun fit. The truth is, that some beginners have stock needs that will keep them from ever being successful without some fitting accommodation to facilitate the learning process. A classic

example being a lady I worked with last fall. She was trim, strong and right-handed, quite capable of handling the gun she had, but was having problems hitting right to left targets. The reason was rather obvious with a peek at her mount from the muzzle end. She needed lots of cast off and was trying to shoot a stock that was slightly cast on with too much drop and the LOP was a bit long. Other than that, it was darn near perfect! Working on technique alone wasn’t going to be enough to accomplish her goals. It was a relatively simple matter to set her up with a gun with an AC that provided the needed cast. We made wonderful progress on her shooting after that – and had a great day. It would have never happened shooting with her existing stock. Her needs, although not extreme, were far enough from ‘factory’ to take all the satisfaction out of the game. She isn’t alone. It is entirely



▶
THIS LADY'S HUSBAND HAD DONE A CREDIBLE JOB CUTTING HER STOCK TO FIT, BUT THE STOCK DIDN'T OFFER ALL IT NEEDED TO GET ALL THE WAY WHERE SHE NEEDED TO GO. FIVE MINUTES TO SET UP THE AC AND SHE SHOT HER HIGHEST 5-STAND SCORE EVER (24) AND THE HIGH FOR THE DAY WITH A GUN SHE HAD NEVER SHOT BEFORE.



possible to work with a beginner and get a workable fit, so that technique improvement is a given. The AC makes it possible.

To evaluate the AC's potential, a shooter first has to have some idea where he or she is headed. AC's don't adjust lower than they are when they are bottomed out. ACs go up, they go sideways and, if the hardware permits, one end can adjust with some degree of

independence to the other. If you consider adding an AC to a fixed stock, make sure the hardware used has that 'wobble factor' – some don't and the accuracy of the fit derived from them may suffer. Fortunately, most hardware available today will wiggle. It is a simple matter to loosen the screws, raise the comb a bit and see if the comb has some wiggle room. If it does, then you'll be certain you can

adjust the incline of the comb to better match your face.

The second need that can be addressed with the AC is cast – sideways movement of the comb. Look at the base of the hardware in the stock body and see if there is provision made to slide it left and right, usually evidenced by a slot for the post to slide in. If there isn't, then your needs can't be addressed by that gun. Hardware needs to be strong enough that tightening the screws on the posts doesn't raise a burr. That burr may eventually limit the movement of the comb on the posts. There are plenty of systems that are properly hardened, so there's no sense in failing to check and ending up with a less than desirable outcome.

Cast isn't necessarily a free and easy street with an AC. As the comb is moved sideways, the edge of the body of the stock stays in the same place on your face. A 'ledge' is produced that can be less than comfortable during recoil. If cast needs are severe enough, that 'ledge' will actually hold the face away from the comb and force the head to roll to get the eye in position over the rib. The same comb movement can bury the nose of the comb in the ball of the grip hand thumb, a situation particularly noticeable during recoil. The comb overhangs the body of the stock on the off side, a rather clumsy looking arrangement.

Fixed stock guns offer three options to change dimensions – bend them, have the head of the stock refit or cut them to the desired dimension. Bends may not always be successful, but they are an option and sometimes options are needed. I haven't worked up the nerve to re-head a stock but the statements of those that do tell us this method can have some limitations. Cutting a stock is a pretty common occurrence at my

house. If it's feasible, it's accurate and permanent. The AC stock can also utilize those methods to add to its versatility.

MY STOCK

I'll take you through the 'journey' on my stock to give you an idea of what is possible. I need a fair amount of cast, $\frac{5}{16}$ by $\frac{7}{16}$ ths on the current stock (cast needs can vary a bit due to the change in the

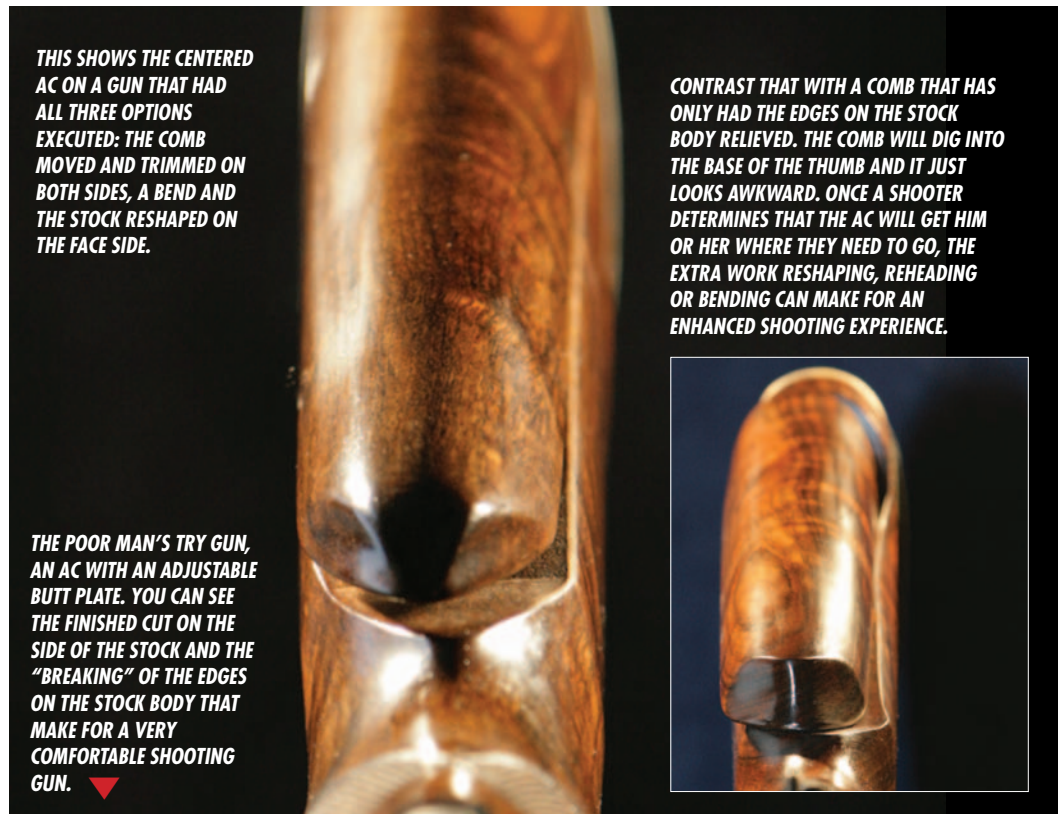
I can. In the case of the stock pictured, I got $\frac{1}{4}$ " at the face. Then the comb is reset to the center of the stock, eliminating the comb nose digging into my thumb. Many stocks, especially Italian, are thicker at the top and the profile doesn't suit my face so some sculpting is necessary to get to the ultimate comfort zone. The stock pictured overleaf is a case in point. With the bend to give the bulk of the cast and the comb recentered,

I have wood to 'play' with to reshaped the stock and contour it to my face. You can see the cut, from the comb to the lower part of the stock. Any offending wood is simply cut away until my face is perfectly comfortable on the stock and there are no 'hot points' from recoil. At the same time, I slightly round the cut edge of the comb and the stock so there is no sharp edge to dig into my face or thumb. Any AC comb should have the 'de-

THIS SHOWS THE CENTERED AC ON A GUN THAT HAD ALL THREE OPTIONS EXECUTED: THE COMB MOVED AND TRIMMED ON BOTH SIDES, A BEND AND THE STOCK RESHAPED ON THE FACE SIDE.

THE POOR MAN'S TRY GUN, AN AC WITH AN ADJUSTABLE BUTT PLATE. YOU CAN SEE THE FINISHED CUT ON THE SIDE OF THE STOCK AND THE "BREAKING" OF THE EDGES ON THE STOCK BODY THAT MAKE FOR A VERY COMFORTABLE SHOOTING GUN. ▼

CONTRAST THAT WITH A COMB THAT HAS ONLY HAD THE EDGES ON THE STOCK BODY RELIEVED. THE COMB WILL DIG INTO THE BASE OF THE THUMB AND IT JUST LOOKS AWKWARD. ONCE A SHOOTER DETERMINES THAT THE AC WILL GET HIM OR HER WHERE THEY NEED TO GO, THE EXTRA WORK RESHAPING, REHEADING OR BENDING CAN MAKE FOR AN ENHANCED SHOOTING EXPERIENCE.



thickness of the combs from gun to gun). I have to have it. If I fudge, the arthritis in my jaw makes eating a cracker a less than pleasant experience. I don't shoot guns without the necessary cast. I also have to get the comb and stock profile right or my neck protests!

So, here's my approach. There isn't much experimenting with cast – I just put it on with the AC. I end up with a 'ledge' on the stock since I'm moving the comb a fair ways. When I have the cast figured out, I'll bend the stock to get as close as





THIS SHOWS THE AREA RESHAPED ON THE STOCK TO GET THE CONTOURS NEEDED.



edging' treatment – but few do from the factory.

The outcome is that I have a comb that fits my face, the cast I need and still have the utility of the AC to make small tweaks to the cast. The slight overhang on the off side is trimmed away. The combination of these three

techniques results in functional perfection – even if it doesn't quite add up to the aesthetic perfection of a custom stock.

GUN MOUNT

There are three mounts. The 'scrunch' mount slams the face

into the gun with some flesh compression required to get the eye position. The 'touch' mount means the face is lightly on the comb. The third is the 'feel it' mount. The scrunch is gone, but it is more firm than the touch – this seems to be the most common mount.

These three mounts have to be paired with a parallel comb or an inclined comb approach for evaluation. Scrunch mounts can feel pretty good in the basement, but may not work so well when a target is cruising the sky. Touch mounts can feel pretty good in the basement too, and work reasonably well in practice. But when you are paying a buck a target and trying to win, that bit of adrenaline may make it hard to keep up the soft approach. The AC gives one the opportunity to evaluate these approaches at the range (shooting targets) instead of in the shop or at the pattern board. There is a significant difference in a mount at the gun shop compared with on the range.

While some have distain for the AC because one can tinker with it, the comb line that works

wonderfully on relatively flat targets may hold the face out of the gun on high or low targets. If the front of the comb is a bit low, the head can roll forward and the eye gets below the rib. If the back of the comb is too low, the head can roll over the stock on some presentations, all resulting in inconsistency. A few afternoons on the range shooting targets with an AC equipped gun gives you the chance to work out the intensity of your mount, the incline of the comb and the cast and the drop. It only takes a few seconds to undue any overages.

We shouldn't leave out those who prefer the custom stock approach. Stockers who use duplicators to cut a new stock have to have a pattern. The best of the stockers will have you shoot that pattern stock to make sure it is

perfect. Then they will cut the new stock, fit it to the action and have you shoot it to make sure it is perfect before finishing it. A custom stock well done is a process, not an event. However, beware! A custom stock is a great way to go but over time it may not fit quite so well as you add or lose weight or age – not only in height and cast but in length also.

On the other hand, the AC stock with the treatment I have described simply becomes a pattern stock that you can shoot and adjust until it is perfect. An adjustable butt plate on a well done AC gun is literally a poor man's try gun – but it works!

GOOD EXAMPLE

Which brings me back to the lady I mentioned earlier. The day we

worked, I laid out the options I felt she had to work with in her pursuit of a gun that would actually help her hit targets. A custom stock was at the bottom of the list. While I was quite comfortable with the measurements we had, she needed to work on her technique before investing in a custom stock. I could have worked on a 391 stock and gotten the measurements she needed with the addition of an adjustable butt plate to imitate the Monte Carlo stock that would suit her best. But the obvious choice was to work with the gun she had, which she quite liked other than the stock issue. Luckily, the retailer swapped a right-handed stock for the left-handed one that shouldn't have come on the gun in the first place! That was a start. She is having an adjustable butt plate and an AC installed, another

sensible step. Will she need more? Probably. But the significant part of the story is that the flexibility of the adjustable comb, coupled with the other changes, will allow her to become a successful shooter before she needs and understands what she will require from a custom stock. The AC has been the basis of the changes needed for a lot of other shooters to enjoy that same success.

Can you tinker with an AC too much? Perhaps, but many tinker with a fixed stock too. Useful? Beyond argument. Ugly? Beauty is in the eye of the beholder – I think they are gorgeous in a functional sort of way. The average shooter's best friend? The AC is on a pretty short list that has a place in that discussion. You too might find a few targets on the score card if you team up with one. ■