

A KRIEGHOFF SPECIALIST

NICK SISLEY TALKS WITH ERNEST MARLETTE OF MARLETTE FINE ARMS

Marlette Fine Arms is based in Winston-Salem, North Carolina. The combination of selling Krieghoffs and gunsmithing keeps Ernest Marlette busy seven long days a week – such are the fortunes of a gunsmith who has learned all the intricacies of working on fine competition shotguns.

While the storefront is minimal, Marlette does have a sophisticated walk-in trailer that he takes to various sporting, skeet and trap Big Blasts. That walk-in trailer is outfitted with everything he needs to perform just about any magic to a Krieghoff or most any other competition shotgun.

Marlette started professional

gunsmithing 21 years ago, but he started as an amateur gunsmith at the ripe age of five! That's when an Uncle gave him a Winchester single shot rifle. The stock was in sorry shape, so the Uncle gave him all the information he needed to strip the stock, close the wood's pores and totally refinish it. "That project took months," Marlette told me, "but that single shot Winchester was the beginning of a lifelong passion."

Early Days

As he moved into adulthood Marlette became interested in rifles as a result of working with accomplished rifle smith, Richard Hunt. "From Richard I learned lots of the so-called tricks of the trade," he told me. Around 1988, Ernest Marlette started working on shotguns in earnest (yes, a play on words there). In 1990 he discovered competition skeet shooting – as did his wife Marnie – so regular competition was something the two enjoyed together. While he would love to compete more these days, he's simply too busy.

His first competition gun was a Perazzi MX8, but he switched to a Krieghoff K-80 in the early 1990s, eventually moving up to the K-80 he shoots today – a Plantation Grade with high rib and adjustable comb stock. Marnie started serious competition shooting with a Perazzi, and still shoots it today.



ERNEST AND HIS WIFE MARNIE WITH A HIGH GRADE K-80.

At the time of our conversation he had not been competing for about 20 months due to his work schedule – but he has his own private skeet field close by. His skeet gun has Briley standard weight sub-gauge tubes with fixed chokes. “I think fixed chokes can be more consistent and they aren’t as prone to plastic wad build up,” he suggested.

Annual Service

Marlette still works on Perazzi competition shotguns, but few others. “The majority of my work, about 80 percent, is fine tuning Krieghoffs, trigger work and annual services,” he explains. Much of the fine tuning referred to during our discussion centered around how he completely takes a Krieghoff apart for an annual service. “After examining everything, I put the gun back together – but without any springs. This is time

consuming but with this approach I can determine if anything else needs to be fine tuned. I do this for every K-80 annual that I’m doing for the first time. When that gun comes back in for its next annual, it doesn’t take quite as long.” The majority of these guns arrive by UPS or FedEx, so Marlette does work on Krieghoffs that have homes far from Winston-Salem.

It’s my guess that many shotgunners don’t know exactly what work is involved in a shotgun annual – so I asked Marlette to tell me more. “The first job is communicating with the customer, and often this conversation can be extensive. I need to know how much the gun has been shot, with what loads, if there are any squawks and are there factors

about the gun that the customer would like improved upon. Next, the stock is removed to check if anything might be amiss. All the parts of the receiver and fore-end iron are disassembled – every one – and then put into an ultrasonic cleaner. The cleaner does three things – cleans with the sonic fluid, cleans with heat and cleans with sound waves,” explains Marlette.

“Once out of the sonic cleaner every part is thoroughly dried and lubricated with Rem Oil. While doing this, each part is checked individually – to see if they need attention. During re-assembly I continually check tolerances – such as headspace, firing pin length and much, much more. All springs are replaced and lubricated.

Depending upon the Krieghoff’s use, I might use different strength springs – for example lighter springs on the ejectors if the customer doesn’t want fired shells thrown too far, maybe certain stronger springs if the customer is a live pigeon shooter using heavy loads. There are plenty of other reasons for inserting new, differing strength springs,” says Marlette.

“Burrs are removed and parts are made smoother by

polishing. Trigger sear angles are also very important. When a Krieghoff is tuned properly you get a faster lock time and I can hear that difference. How the barrel fits the action and the forearm is also checked and tightened if needed. If I receive the barrels (not always), I clean and lube the ejectors. The inside of the bores are cleaned as well – it’s a very thorough process,” says Marlette.

One more word of warning from Marlette. Krieghoffs are complicated, so much so that special training is required to work on them. Taking one apart requires special tools. A gunsmith without those tools and experience is probably going to cause irreparable damage to the gun.

Marlette is also noted for refurbishing high grade Krieghoffs. In fact, he refurbishes more high grade guns than standard K-80s. He does all of his own bluing and nickeling – having designed and built the necessary equipment himself. He’s also well known for the high polish he puts on these guns before bluing or nickeling. Basically, the surface of the metal has to be perfect. He says it takes a lot of time going through many levels of grit sandpaper and still more with many levels of polishing.

Trigger Work

K-80s come out of Ulm with outstanding triggers – weight of pull around 4 pounds. Some of Marlette’s customers want a trigger with a slightly lighter pull weight. On average, he told me, he most often brings the K-80 trigger down to 3 1/2 pounds. His own K-80 has a 2 3/4 pound trigger pull. I told him that personally I didn’t like light shotgun triggers and had even sent my MX8 to Briley to



A MILLING MACHINE (ABOVE) AND LATHE (TOP) ARE ESSENTIAL FOR EVERY MASTER GUNSMITH.



DISASSEMBLING A K-80 IN PREPARATION FOR ANNUAL SERVICE.

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have that gun's trigger pull increased. Marlette came back with, "You know Nick, I've been increasing trigger pulls on a number of Perazzi and other guns over the last 12 to 18 months. Some shooting coaches are now suggesting this to their students because as a target moves upward, if there's any excess pressure on a gun with a light trigger, that upward moving gun can cause it to go off prematurely."

His best selling K-80 models currently would be the Pro Sporter – with the high adjustable rib and comb stock. The standard engraved K-80 is his best seller, but the company sells a substantial number of higher grade K-80s. Sometimes these sales are to customers wanting to upgrade, but not always. For sporting clays, those with 32-inch barrels sell best. Marlette cautioned that these high adjustable rib shotguns can cause those who cant their shotgun to cant the gun even more – and thus print patterns off center. So be wary of that possibility. According to Marlette, those who have canted their guns for years (shooting standard rib guns) can have a Pro Sporter with the adjustable comb stock properly adjusted for them. But getting the comb adjusted perfectly may take

several tries – and he's happy to help you with gun fitting at his shop.

When our interview took place, Marlette was just back from the first African Sporting Exposition (SCI) meeting in Charlotte – the first SCI convention held in the East. He was there with Alex Diehl who is currently Chief Operating Officer of Krieghoff International, and that conference was such a success that SCI will probably be going back to Charlotte next year. I mention this as SCI conferences in the East should be great for Marlette's business – as well as Krieghoff and other high-end gun companies.



ERNEST WITH A KRIEGHOFF DOUBLE RIFLE AT THE SCI SHOW IN JANUARY.

Questions Answered

"I'm a huge fan of the Krieghoff product," said Marlette. "From a gunsmith's point of view, the K-80 (and K-20) is the most 'rebuildable' shotgun around. The receivers simply don't wear out. I've taken measurements on K-80 receivers that have had who knows how many shells put through them, and there's no wear at all – or at least almost immeasurable wear. From a rebuild standpoint the trunnions are replaceable. I check all shotguns for headspace. The 'ears' on the K-80 barrels can be welded up, plus there is so much interchangeability – with stocks, fore-ends and barrels."

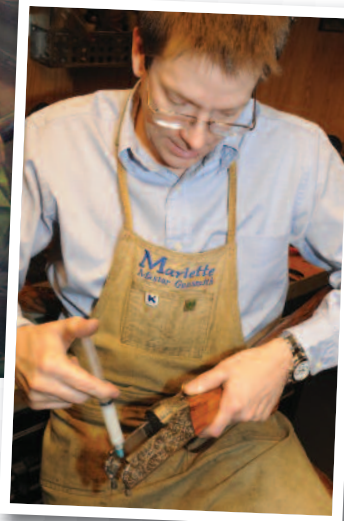
The most common questions from shooters, over and over, are: How do I lubricate my gun properly and what's the difference between a K-80 and a Krieghoff model 32?

"Never use oil to lubricate the hinge pins of a gun – or the parts where metal touches metal – the receiver marrying with the monobloc," says Marlette. "Use a medium viscosity grease. If the viscosity of a particular type of grease is too thin it will turn to oil with the heat of competition firing. If the viscosity of a grease is too heavy it is too tough to wipe off. That said, I recommend that every time a competition over and under

is fired, bring it home and remove all the grease. Get everything as clean as you possibly can – and then re-lubricate right then or before you shoot the shotgun again. The biggest wear problems I see in Krieghoffs, or any other high-end competition over and under, would be as a result of using oil instead of medium viscosity grease – or using no lubrication at all. Removing the grease after firing a hundred or more rounds after a day of shooting removes the dirt and other crud that causes premature wear. So I suggest removing grease and re-greasing with a medium viscosity grease becomes every competition shooter's mantra."

How about the difference between K-80s and Model 32. Here's what Ernest Marlette says. "The main difference is that K-80 receivers are hardened. That's why K-80s cannot be engraved aftermarket. Model 32s are not hardened, so they can be engraved aftermarket. Consequently, 32s will wear more quickly. Since 32s are much older (none produced since 1980) and many of them have been shot a great deal – you just don't know what you're getting inside – like headspace, tolerances between the barrels and the receiver, wear on all and any of the gun parts. Finally, with such old guns, who knows how many times they've been fooled with. If you're considering the purchase of a 32, have it checked out by an experienced Krieghoff gunsmith."

Back to K-80s – there have been continual improvements in the 30 plus years since their introduction. Of course, most any model 32 can be updated with K-80 parts. This again goes back to



PROPER LUBRICATION OF PARTS THAT FIT METAL TO METAL IS CRITICAL. ERNEST IS PERFORMING PROPER LUBRICATION HERE – WITH HIS OWN FORMULA OF MEDIUM VISCOSITY GREASE.

Marlette's comments about 'rebuilability'. There are other factors that take the K-80 several steps above the model 32, including coil spring triggers in the K-80, leaf spring triggers in the 32.

Then there's the K-20. Marlette was amazed that the K-20 is simply a miniature K-80. He figured when he first heard about the K-20 that there would be compromises – by scaling down to a 20 gauge frame. Not true. The wear qualities are equally as good since the K-20 is also hardened and the metallurgy of the parts are of such high quality. Marlette suggested extra barrel sets instead of sub-gauge tubes for the K-20. (The K-20 is available with 20, 28 and .410 barrels – all in 30 and 32-inch barrel lengths.) Many of Marlette's customers are shooting the K-20 in competition – as well as taking them to high-volume shooting in Argentina and Uruguay. He thinks older shooters appreciate the lighter weight of the K-20.

Another facet of Marlette's business is rebuilding Winchester Super X One semi-autos. The Model One was discontinued because all the machined parts simply made construction



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too expensive. However, this Winchester is very popular in sporting clays circles. While there have been a number of professional gunsmiths who have specialized in re-building the Super X One, some have died and others have retired. Marlette can re-build a Super X One and even has the capability to make parts that are no longer available.

So, in conclusion, if you're in the market for a new Krieghoff, want your existing Krieghoff fine tuned or serviced or need some speciality trigger work done, you now know who to call. The contact is Marlette Fine Arms, 1410 Irving Street, Winston-Salem, NC 27103 – Phone 336-456-1818 and 336-761-0433. www.marlettefinearms.com ■

Nick Sisley has been writing full time since 1969 and has had somewhere between 4000 and 5000 articles published as well as eight books. An NSSA and NSCA Level One and NRA Shotgun Instructor, he has traveled worldwide in search of story material, usually with a shotgun. He can be reached at nicksisley@hotmail.com