



BERETTA UGB25 Xcel

*TIRED OF THE SAME
OLD, SAME OLD?*

*BERETTA'S LATEST
WILL REFRESH EVEN
THE MOST JADED
PALETTE AS **RICHARD
RAWLINGS**
FOUND OUT*

I thought things had been quiet at Beretta! While the world and his wife were bringing out a flood of new guns in 2004 there was little activity from Gardone, save the gorgeous new SO10 that is probably beyond the means of 99 percent of the shooting population. Given the usual steady stream of interesting stuff from this most innovative of gun makers, it had to be the lull before the storm.

Word of a totally new Beretta started to filter out after last year's Grand American, where the company showed early production samples of a model to be called the UGB25 Xcel. Pictures showed a tantalizing glimpse of a semi-automatic, but not one that bore any resemblance to the existing Beretta family.

Those who like to neatly pigeon hole things are going to have a problem with this new gun. Just what exactly is it? It only has one barrel so it is not an over-and-under; it automatically ejects the spent case and reloads, so it is a semi-automatic, but it breaks open just like a double gun. Most people,





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I suspect, will not have seen anything like it before but it is not a totally new concept. There has been a break-open auto on sale continuously since 1925, built by Cosmi. This beautifully engineered gun is, however, a very rare beast, not least because of the price tag,

which became part of the Beretta Holdings group some years ago. Like the Benelli, the UGB25 uses the 'short recoil' method to cycle the action. Recoil from firing the first shot sends the breech bolt backwards, re-cocking the lock and ejecting the spent case. It is a very

simple mechanism and, if the Benelli experience is a guide, very reliable. Without gas ports and valves, maintenance is also simpler and cleaner. No compensation is needed for changes in ammunition, Beretta claiming that the gun will handle everything without modification.

Let's examine the loading technique. Harking back to the late 19th century, the UGB25 has side lever operation. The lever is mounted on the left hand side of the receiver and can be operated – just – with the left thumb, although it is a bit of a stretch. This breaks the gun in the conventional way, allowing the first cartridge to be dropped into the chamber. With the gun closed, the second round is inserted into the cartridge carrier on the right hand side of the action, where the loading/ejection port is on a conventional auto. It is fed from here into the chamber automatically. If only one shot is fired, the gun can be broken just like an over-and-under so that the gun is visibly safe. You will have worked out from this that the UGB25 is a two-shot only gun, with



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If the Cosmi was the conceptual inspiration for the new Beretta, the similarities soon end when you start to look at the details, so let's get into the technical stuff.

SHORT RECOIL

Beretta has carved out its dominant position in the semi-auto market with its mastery of the gas-operated style of guns, refined over nearly 50 years of production. The UGB25 (which shares its initials with Beretta's President, Ugo Gussalli Beretta) is a move away from this technology and in fact owes rather more to the expertise of Benelli,



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visibility front bead. The barrel has Beretta's 'Optima Bore' profile – measuring exactly .730" on my bore gauge – with an extended forcing cone and it comes with a full set of matching chokes. A choice of 30 and 32" barrels is listed but of course you must factor in the extra length of the

handlers should note that the gun is fully ambidextrous. Not only can it be cast on for a left handed shooter, but the safety is reversible and there is no palm swell on the grip.

More comb height and cast adjustment is provided by the multi-adjustable stock. We have seen Beretta's version of an adjustable comb before with its memory system. Added to that we now have the facility to change the length of pull using the supplied tool to slide the recoil pad support posts in and out. The pad itself can of course be changed in seconds and finally both pad height and angle can be adjusted by changing its position on the plate. I think this is as much user

Their trademark touches are all here again – bold curves, two-tone finishes, flowing lines and all. It gives the gun dramatic and futuristic looks that are very much in keeping with the overall package. It is not just about looks either; form and function go together in areas such as the trigger plate, made entirely of a high-resistance, fiberglass-reinforced technopolymer. It is claimed this gives self-lubrication of the firing mechanism, good vibration absorption and thermal stability for improved 'feel' in cold weather.

In the midst of all this 21st century technology it comes as something of a surprise to find good old fashioned walnut used on the stock and fore end. It is real wood too, not the ersatz version, and it is given a semi-matte waterproof finish. Technology has a place here too though – the grip pattern on stock and fore end is not conventional checkering but a laser-cut design of interlocking ellipses. The fore end is a simple semi-beavertail shape.

no magazine.

The gun's ejection port is on the underside, where normal autos have the latch for loading cartridges into the magazine. Just ahead of this is a raised portion to indicate the position of the front hand to avoid fouling the port. Spent cases are thrown downwards and away from the shooter, not sideways.

To lock the barrel and receiver together Beretta have borrowed from the cross-bolt principle of the SO/DT10 guns. Two projections above the barrel mate with a cut-out in the receiver and are held by the small bolt that emerges from the left hand side when the gun is opened. Unlike a conventional over-and-under, the barrel and fore end cannot be easily removed in the field.

COMFORT AND FIT

All the launch publicity material plays heavily on the claimed low recoil characteristics of the gun. Without the ability of a gas system to smooth out perceived recoil, they have had to work quite hard in this area. The barrel is set very low in the action to get as close as possible to the optimum theoretical straight line backwards for recoil, hence the distinctive and exaggerated raised alloy rib, which is interchangeable. Also interchangeable is the high

receiver. My sample had the 30" tube but was nearer to 34" compared to an o/u. The 32" must be a real monster!

In the receiver, two technopolymer dampers cushion the rearward bolt travel and kill vibration, while the stock contains the spring-mass recoil reduction system seen already on the Teknys range. Completing the package is the now familiar Gel-Tek recoil pad. Doing most of all to soften the kick however is, I suspect, the sheer weight of the gun. The web site quotes 9lbs as the maximum weight but my sample was about 5.3 ounces heavier than that. That's a lot of bulk to soak up the pain.

The test gun was at the top end of the weight range because it had all the extras fitted in terms of adjustability. If you can't get the UGB25 to fit you, you must be a very odd shape indeed! Firstly there are the normal spacers between stock and receiver to change both drop and cast. Left

adjustment as I have ever seen in an off-the-peg gun and it certainly boosts the aspirations of Beretta for it to be seen as a serious competition tool.

STYLING

The gun bears the unmistakable mark of Giugiaro Design, whose work has done so much to transform the look of Beretta's competition guns in recent years.

ON TEST

The UGB25 is a daunting prospect on first acquaintance. It looks big and it feels heavy. Like all thoroughbred competition guns though, it feels much lighter in the shoulder. Because of all the assorted hardware in the stock the weight distribution is biased towards the rear, keeping the strain off the front hand. Don't get me wrong – it is still a big lump of a gun but it is manageable.

very much though – several times these got lodged in the ejection port, but only after the second shot. Others reported the same problem but as it does not affect performance it is a minor niggle.

Handling the gun takes a bit of getting used to. After years of loading from my left pocket I struggled with the need to use the right hand. You need to use the right thumb to break the gun, then switch hands to load – a not entirely ergonomic procedure – but this is a

skeet and sporting clays versions. Being of an enquiring mind I felt compelled of course to try it out on some tough sporting clays targets, not expecting a great deal from a 9lb gun with the equivalent of a 34" barrel. That will teach me not to prejudge because I scarcely missed with it and that long barrel really picked out some very testing edge-on crossers at about 40 yards range. It would not surprise me to see a few of these guns out on the sporting grounds in the months to come.



In action it is remarkably lithe and agile and on test I had an initial tendency to overswing until I adopted a less aggressive technique. What was interesting was the stability and lack of muzzle jump. When I missed I had a very clear picture of the target/barrel relationship.

Recoil was indeed very well controlled, particularly on normal competition loads. I tried both light and heavy loads and the gun soaked them up with no problem.

The gun handled this mixed diet with just a single instance of failing to chamber the second round. It didn't seem to like high brass cases

small point that would probably become second nature in a few weeks.

Regular readers will know that I am a stickler for good trigger pulls and they will also know that my first rule of automatics is that even the best rarely match a half decent double gun in this department. This gun almost made me tear up the rule book because it is much, much better than the run of the mill auto. Yes, there is a bit of creep but the trigger is light enough that you don't have time to notice it.

Although the trap layouts will probably be the natural habitat of the UGB25, the manual does talk of

Now we come to the crunch – the price. Beretta have been steadily pushing at the boundaries of pricing on semi-automatics in recent years. The cheap and cheerful guns of yesteryear are long gone and top spec autos now match entry level over-and-unders. Whether market perception is elastic enough to accept an auto selling at just over \$3,000 is open to debate. Purely on design, build quality and specification I have no problem with it – and I think sheer novelty value will keep them flying off the shelves. It is a bold and innovative design and for the most part it is innovation with a purpose. ■

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