

Oldies but Goodies

The hot new cartridges are great, but so are our old favorites.

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Photographs by Author

It isn't that I'm reactionary, or at least I don't think so. I believe in the fast new cartridges—short magnums, long magnums, unbelted, belted, fat-cased, long-cased, the works. They do what their makers say they will do, and do it well. Many of us are enthralled by new developments, and that's just fine. Many of us also have a need (or at least a desire) for greater capabilities—more energy, a bit more range, a more compact package. That's even better.

However, I have two issues with all the new cartridges. First, the array of factory hunting cartridges has been very large for many years. Now it's even larger. Shooters who hand-load are unaffected. Shooters who rely on factory loads must accept that, with any new cartridge, brand, bullet, and load selection will be very limited until the cartridge achieves some level of popularity—which may or may not ever happen. Also, there are so many cartridges out there that even very large gunshops are incapable of stocking everything. So, until some level of popularity is achieved, it may be difficult to feed a rifle chambered for a new cartridge, no matter how good it is.

The other issue is perhaps more significant. Okay, so you accept that the new cartridges offer some degree of enhanced capability. Do you really need it? I'm a rifle nut, so I accept that wanting and needing aren't the same things, and either is perfectly valid. But wants aside, have the country and game that you hunt changed so much that you

really require a rifle and cartridge with greater range, increased accuracy, or does your rifle need to be more compact and portable? Be honest, now! Our old favorite cartridges, the ones we've used all our lives—and the ones our fathers and even grandfathers might have used—are still perfectly adequate for almost all of the hunting most of us really do.

When I think about these old favorites I'm not thinking about short-range cartridges like the .30-30 Winchester and .35 Remington, nor am I thinking about popular belted magnums like the 7mm and .300 Winchester Magnum, nor about powerful cartridges like the .338 Winchester and .375 H&H Magnums. All of these cartridges truly



A selection of Federal's new Fusion bullets, fired from a .30-06 and recovered from both game and testing media. The moderate velocities of all the "oldies but goodies" tend to promote uniformly excellent bullet performance.

We spend a great deal of time and energy splitting hairs over cartridge performance. That's part of the fun, but don't take it too seriously.

Standard cartridges like these remain perfectly adequate for almost all North American hunting, doing their jobs effectively and efficiently without a lot of blast and recoil.



If you want to give up an old favorite in favor of a hot new cartridge, that's just fine with me. But if you still have confidence in your tried and true choice, maybe you should think twice before you trade it in.

have their purposes, and may be addressed in future issues. Rather, I'm thinking about versatile, powerful, light-recoiling, relatively flat-shooting non-magnum cartridges that have gotten the job done for generations—in some cases for a century and more.

To my thinking this group is epitomized by three cartridges based on the .30 Government, Model of 1906, cartridge case. These are the .270 Winchester, .280 Remington, and the grand old .30-06 Springfield itself. Other good cartridges based on the '06 case are the .25-06 and .35 Whelen, but by virtue of caliber and bullet weight, the first three are more versatile. Most of us prefer either the .270, .280, or .30-06 over the other two, which is what campfire arguments are all about. But given sensible bullet selection, all three are truly powerful enough for almost any North American game—and shoot flat enough to be used in almost any terrain.

Besides the '06-derived rounds, a number of other tried-and-true cartridges come to mind. One is the 7mm-08 Remington, a relative newcomer; another is the ancient but still effective 7x57 Mauser; and the .308 Winchester remains effective as well.

We all have our favorites, sometimes with good reason and sometimes not. I love the old 7x57, so I've never warmed up to its more modern, shorter-cased, and equally effective ballistic twin, the 7mm-08. I love the .30-06, so I've never been a fan of the .308 Winchester. This is totally irrational; ballistically, the .308 is at least 95 percent of the .30-06, yet it fits in a short action and has a tendency to be more accurate. Other than a bit of hunting with his old .30-30, the .308 Winchester is the only cartridge my father ever took big game with, including moose and bear. I know how good it is, but I love the old '06, so it's hard for me to also love the so-similar .308 Winchester!

By the same token, I'm a huge fan of the .270 Winchester. The .270 uses a bullet of .277-inch diameter. The .280 Remington uses (with a considerably different neck) the

same case with a standard 7mm bullet measuring .284-inch in diameter. There is just .007-inch difference between the two, and with bullets of similar weight both produce similar velocities. Intellectually, I fully accept that the .280 is probably a slightly "better" (or at least more versatile) cartridge than the .270 by virtue of the heavier 7mm bullets commonly available. I've used the .280, and it's wonderful, but I'm a lifelong fan of the .270 Winchester, so, facts aside, I am unable to love it equally.

In all fairness, there are a number of other great old standard, non-magnum cartridges that are also wonderful. Some that come to mind are the 6.5x55 Swedish Mauser, the European 7x64, and the great old .300 Savage. These, too, and a number of others, are fully capable of doing everything most of us need a hunting cartridge to do. With apologies to the fans of cartridges that are left out, we can't cover them all in this space—or any of them in depth. We can spend a bit more time on the most popular numbers.

.270 WINCHESTER

Introduced in 1925 in Winchester's Model 54 bolt action (forerunner to the beloved Model 70), the .270 Winchester was (and is) flat-shooting, surprisingly powerful, light in recoil, and exceptionally effective. An English professor at the University of Arizona who also happened to be a budding outdoor writer latched onto it. This, of course, was Jack O'Connor, in my opinion the greatest outdoor writer in history. He and the .270 became inextricably linked. To some extent he was directly responsible for its popularity—and perhaps to a lesser degree the .270 was responsible for his own stardom.

O'Connor believed the .270 was just right for sheep and open-country deer and plenty of gun for elk. I agree on the former, but not on the latter. For elk-sized game I think the .270 is enough gun, but not a powerhouse. For larger game it is marginal, but it can still do the job. O'Connor took a number of grizzlies and moose with his .270's as well, but even O'Connor never wrote that the .270 was ideal for such game. He used it because he had opportunities while he was sheep hunting with his .270, and it worked just fine. I've seen it work on bigger animals, too. On a trip to the Yukon a few years ago my buddy, Mike Satran, took an unprovoked grizzly charge. He was carrying his sheep rifle, a Model 70 in .270. He stopped the bear and happily put his tag on it.

I haven't had that experience, but it's only fair to say that the longest shot I ever made on an elk—and perhaps the most dramatic one-shot kill—was made with a .270

Winchester. The shot was 410 yards, and my Dakota M76 was loaded with handloaded 150-grain Nosler Partitions. It was dead steady with no wind, and I had a good broadside presentation. With a hold just below the backline the bullet penetrated the on-shoulder, centered the heart, and lodged in the off-shoulder. The bull turned away, uphill, and I had just completed working the bolt when he went over backwards, all four feet in the air.

I will always hold that larger calibers with heavier bullets are more ideal for elk, but the .270 is enough gun. I guess we could argue endlessly about its use on elk and elk-sized game, but let's not even bother to argue about its suitability for pronghorns, sheep, any and all deer, and any game (worldwide) up to at least caribou in size. It's powerful enough, flat shooting enough, and easy to shoot. In my mind it is the lightest caliber that is truly suitable for all-around use in North America, excepting only the very largest bears. Mind you, this is my opinion; some might argue in favor of the .25's, and you can certainly make a case for the 6.5mm rounds. My reasoning is that .25-caliber bullets are a bit light for game larger than deer, and also don't hold up as well in the wind. I won't argue about the 6.5mm cartridges (bullet diameter .264-inch). With 125-grain and 129-grain bullets for deer and 140-grain bullets for larger game, they're just fine—but in North America the popularity of the .270 Winchester alone exceeds that of all the .25s and 6.5s put together.

Velocities vary a bit from brand to brand and load to load (and there are dozens of good .270 loads), but a 130-grain bullet at about 3100 feet per second (fps); a 140-grain bullet at about 3000 fps; and a 150-grain bullet at about 2900 fps are standard. The classic "sheep/deer/antelope load" is the 130-grain bullet, while the standard "elk load" is the 150-grain bullet. That's just fine, but over the years I have come to prefer the compromise 140-grain load as my own all-around choice in the .270. Traditionally, my choices have been fast-opening bullets like Nosler Ballistic Tip and Sierra for sheep and deer-sized game, with tougher bullets like the Nosler Partition for heavier game.

Today, of course, the .270 is better than ever because it has the benefit of great new bullets that O'Connor never dreamed of. Bonded-core bullets like the Hornady Interbond, Nosler AccuBond, and Swift Scirocco take the .270 to unprecedented levels of versatility. For really big stuff, extra-tough bullets like the Barnes X (and new Triple Shock) and Winchester Fail Safe make it far more adequate. And yes, it shoots plenty far enough. The faster .270s—the .270 WSM and .270 Weatherby Magnum—deliver more energy,

so are definitely better for larger game. However, and this is important, the actual gain in trajectory is hardly worth worrying about. Bottom line: the .270 Winchester shoots farther than most of us need to shoot, and certainly as far as almost all of us have any business shooting. It's a true all-American classic, and although it has a lot of competition today, I don't see it fading away.

LIGHT SEVENS

As I said, I have a long-term love affair with the 7x57 Mauser, a mild, efficient, and effective cartridge that dates clear back to 1892. In fact, just this year Dallas gunsmith Todd Ramirez delivered a truly magnificent custom 7x57 that I'm taking hunting for the first time next week. The problem with the 7x57 is that, truthfully, it's a handloader's cartridge. Most factory 7x57 loads are mild because of (legitimate) concerns about the strength of the old 1893 Mauser actions still in use.

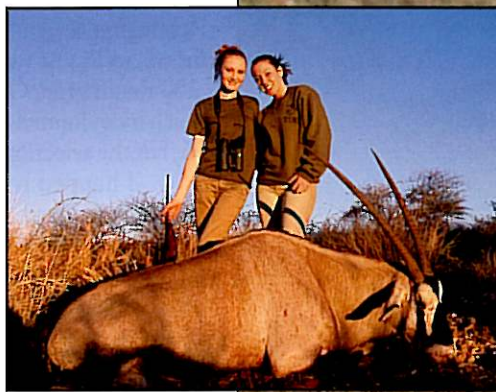
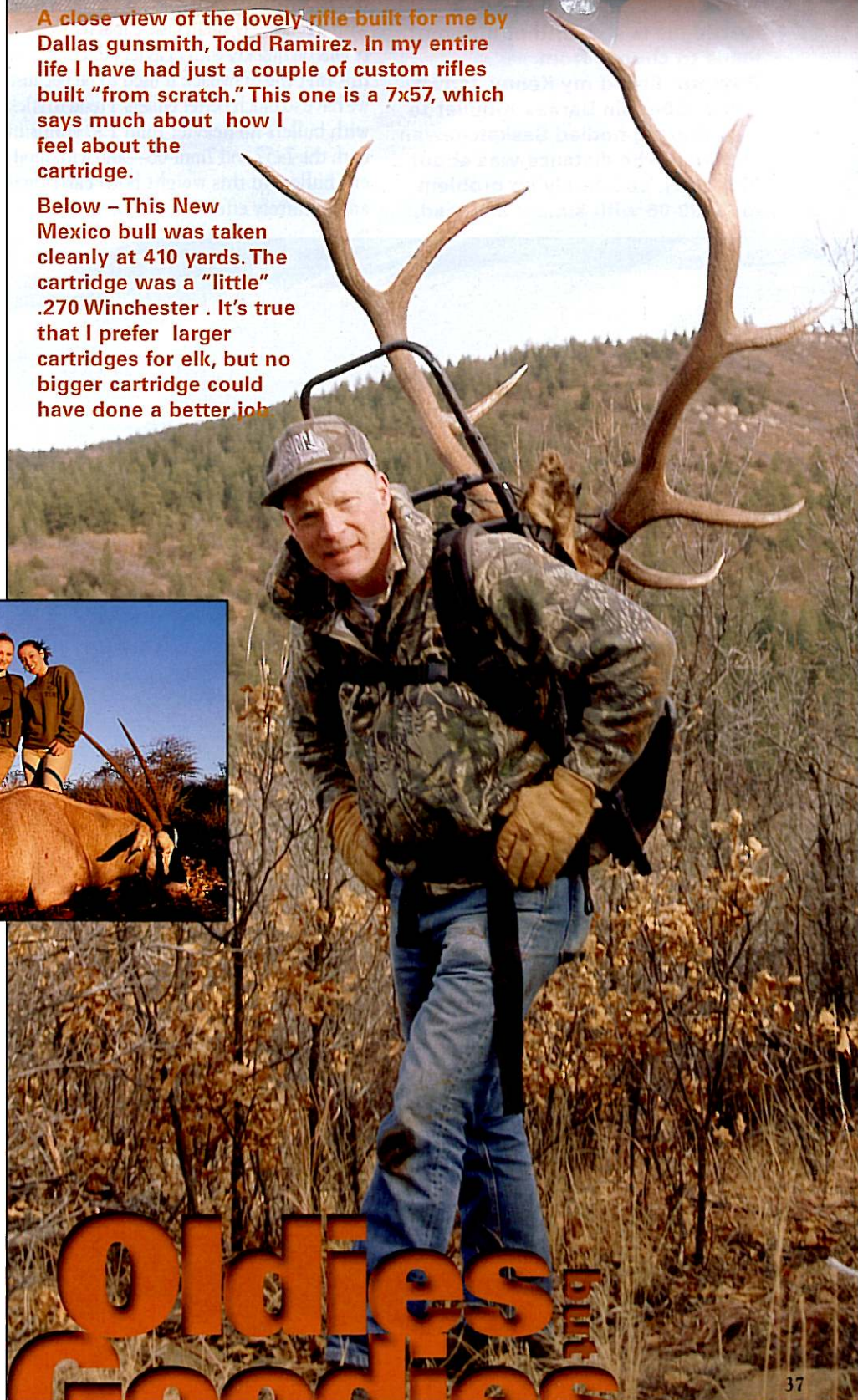
The shorter-cased 7mm-08 has no such problems. Introduced in 1980, the 7mm-08 has always been loaded to the gills. Also, it fits into a true short action, while the 7x57 will not. If you are handloading for a modern action, the 7x57 will exceed the performance of the 7mm-08 because it has greater case capacity. With factory loads the situation is reversed. Either way, both cartridges are ballistically similar and absolutely equal in effect on game.

I don't think of either cartridge as a particularly good long-range choice; neither are quite as fast or as flat as the .270 Winchester, nor as fast or as flat as larger-cased 7mm rounds (such as the .280). On the other hand, they are surprisingly fast. With 140-grain bullets, the 7mm-08 achieves a whopping 2860 fps, outstanding for so small a case. Though 140-grain factory loads for the 7x57 average an unimpressive 2700 fps or so, it's absolutely no trick to get handloads up to 2800 fps and more in modern actions. Sighted about two inches high at 100 yards, loads like this will be dead-on at 200 yards and just eight inches low at 300 yards. Thus it's fair to say



A close view of the lovely rifle built for me by Dallas gunsmith, Todd Ramirez. In my entire life I have had just a couple of custom rifles built "from scratch." This one is a 7x57, which says much about how I feel about the cartridge.

Below - This New Mexico bull was taken cleanly at 410 yards. The cartridge was a "little" .270 Winchester. It's true that I prefer larger cartridges for elk, but no bigger cartridge could have done a better job.



My daughter Brittany, left, and her friend, Kimberlee Miller, with a gemsbok taken in Namibia with a Kimber M84 in 7mm-08 Remington. Both girls took several good-sized African animals cleanly and effectively with the little 7mm-08.

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My Kenny Jarrett .30-06 with some groups fired with several different Federal loads. One attribute of most time-proven cartridges is a wealth of different loads to choose from.

Bottom: I used my Kenny Jarrett and a 150-grain Barnes X-bullet to take this big-bodied Saskatchewan whitetail. The distance was about 275 yards, absolutely no problem for a .30-06 with almost any load.

that these mild, light-recoiling 7mm's are at least 350-yard cartridges—which is all the range many of us need with a lot to spare.

One advantage all 7mm cartridges have is the ability to use bullets all the way up to 175 grains. Unfortunately, the catch with small-cased cartridges like these is that, with a relatively small case capacity, velocity falls off quickly with heavier bullets. Today this isn't the drawback it used to be because we have so much better bullets. I tend to stick with bullets no heavier than 150 grains in both the 7x57 and 7mm-08—and with modern bullets in this weight both cartridges are definitely effective on elk-sized game.

They are also a wonderfully effective low-recoil option for beginning hunters. When I took my daughter, Brittany (then 17) to Namibia in 2003 I outfitted her with a Kimber M84 in 7mm-08, firing 150-grain Swift Scirocco bullets pushed relatively fast. She and one of her girlfriends, also 17, racked up an incredible series of one-shot kills on game up to kudu, gemsbok, and zebra with this deadly little combination.

With its larger case the .280 Remington is in a slightly different class. It has the capability to use heavier bullets at significant velocity, with 140-grain bullets at up to 3000 fps, 150-grain bullets at 2900 fps, and 160-grain bullets at a bit more than 2800 fps. Technically, with its combination of bullet weight and velocity it may well be the best cartridge based on the .30-06 case, but it is not nearly as popular as either the .270 or .30-06.

This is probably due to its extremely checkered career. Introduced in 1957, it was originally intended to provide “.270-like” performance in Remington's Model 740 autoloader. Initial loads were fairly mild, and it became sort of a cult cartridge for serious handloaders (including Outdoor Life's Jim Carmichel, who has long been a staunch .280 fan). Many years later, in 1979, it was briefly renamed the 7mm Express Remington in an attempt to breathe new life into sales. This language proved too similar to the 7mm Remington Magnum and caused some confusion, so in just two years it was relabeled .280 Remington. Current factory loads are much more limited than for the .270 or .30-06, but the selection is plenty adequate.

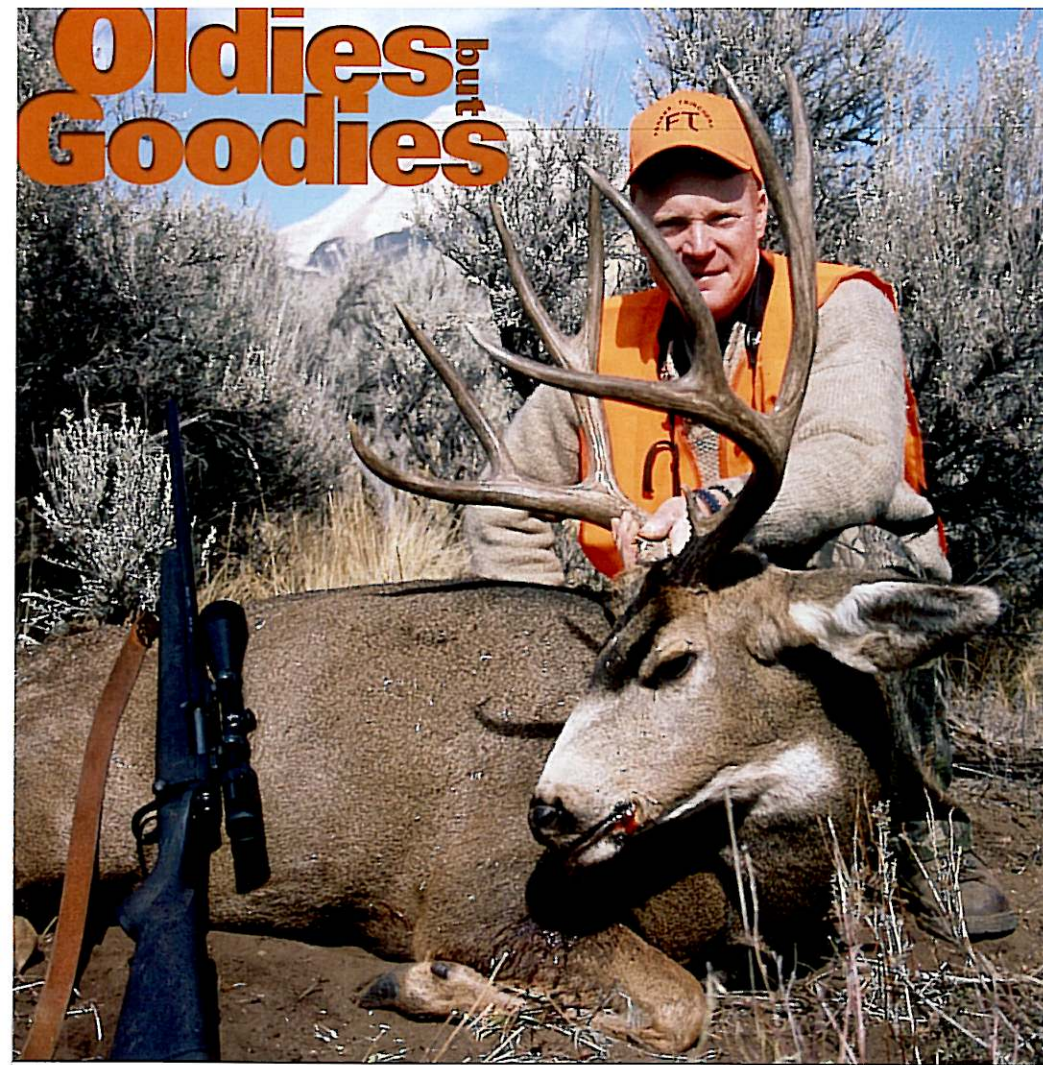
I happen to prefer the .270, with no apologies (and for no particularly good reason), but the .280 is a very fine cartridge that will handle anything in North America up to the big bears (as will the .270). Come to think of it, it is so close to the 7mm Remington Magnum in performance that there really isn't much to argue about!

.30-06 and .308 WINCHESTER

The .30-06 Springfield, 99 years old, is probably my favorite of all hunting cartridges. There are times when I want something that shoots a bit flatter, and there are times when I want something a bit more powerful, but that's really just a confidence issue with me. The .30-06 really is flat-shooting enough for any shooting I have any business doing. Standard loads clock a 150-grain bullet at 2920 fps, a 165-grain load at 2800 fps, and a 180-grain load at 2700 fps. These velocities are all adequate for both energy and flat-shooting capabilities, but all can be increased a bit either by judicious handloading or choos-



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A really nice mule deer, taken on the Forbes Ranch in Colorado with my Kenny Jarrett .30-06 loaded with Federal's brand-new Fusion bullet in 165-grain weight. The .270 and .280 both shoot flatter, but the .30-06 really does shoot flat enough for most hunting applications.

to make it, on average, more accurate than the .30-06, and of course it will fit into short bolt actions and strong lever actions like Browning's BLR and classics like the Winchester M88 and Savage M99. I love the .30-06, but I'll never argue against the .308.

All too often in my business I'm obligated to write about this or that, so it's a fairly rare opportunity when I get to hunt with rifles and cartridges that are completely of my choosing. This past fall I went on an elk/mule deer combo hunt with Federal's Mark De Young, and it was one of those times. I took not one but two .30-06 rifles: A wonderfully accurate, well-scoped Kenny Jarrett .30-06 on a left-hand Remington action; and a 1930-vintage left-hand-converted Sedgely Springfield with aperture sight. Of course, I couldn't orchestrate exactly what would happen, but I hoped to take a mule deer with the scoped rifle, using Federal's new Fusion bullet in 165 grains, then use the old Springfield with 180-grain Fusions on an elk.

That's exactly the way it happened. The shot on my mule deer was steeply downhill at about 250 yards, not a problem for a scoped .30-06. Penetrated from the top of one shoulder to the bottom of the other, the buck turned into tall sagebrush and went maybe 30 yards. With the open-sighted rifle I hoped to get a wee bit closer shot on an elk, and I did. The bull was bedded at exactly 100 yards; the 180-grain bullet took him through the heaviest part of one shoulder and through the heart, exiting behind the off shoulder. He stood momentarily, but was essentially down in his tracks.

Now, truthfully, with the right bullets any of the cartridges discussed in this article—plus any of the magnums, old or new—would have done just as well on either of these shots. We spend a great deal of time and energy splitting hairs over cartridge performance. That's part of the fun, but don't take it too seriously. There are literally dozens of great cartridges that will handle, more or less, the full range of North American hunting. If you want to give up an old favorite in favor of a hot new cartridge, that's just fine with me. But if you still have confidence in your tried and true choice, maybe you should think twice before you trade it in. ■

ing one of the "extra fast" factory loads like Hornady's Light Magnum or Federal's High Energy.

Generally speaking, I think of the 150-grain load as the "deer load" in the .30-06—and this would probably be my choice if I carried a .30-06 for sheep or goat. The 165-grain load will be a wee bit slower, but the heavier bullet has better sectional density (SD) and thus holds its velocity a bit better. Take your pick. I like the 165-grain load for versatility—but I've had a couple of .30-06's that shot this bullet weight better than anything else, so I've used it quite a bit. The 180-grain load is the "elk load." And it really is a fine elk load. This will drive 7mm fans crazy, but on elk I'd rather have a .30-06 with a 180-grain bullet than any 7mm load, including the 175-grain heavyweight. This is because I believe frontal area matters, not just in the size of the hole, but also in energy transfer. You're right, you don't have to agree, but I rate the "slow old .30-06" as a better elk cartridge than any 7mm cartridge with any load. Period.

Now, as to the heavier bullets, Theodore Roosevelt loved the 220-grain bullets in his Springfield (which was actually the earlier .30-03 version, never a .30-06 as has long been reported). In years gone by I have recommend-

ed 200-grain bullets for heavier game. Not today. The .30-06 starts to get a bit slow with bullets heavier than 180-grains—and, again, modern bullets are so good that greater weight really isn't needed.

Another advantage of the .30-06 (and the .270, and the light 7mm's, and the .308) is that most hunting bullets in these calibers were designed for the velocities of these cartridges. Bullet performance is uniformly magnificent, and with nearly 100 years of history this is especially true of the .30-06. Honest, I would take on anything in North America with a .30-06 and a 180-grain Nosler Partition—but if, for some odd reason, I felt this wouldn't be enough penetration I think I'd go to a tougher 180-grain bullet like a Swift A-Frame, Barnes X, or Fail Safe before I'd go to a 200-grain bullet and sacrifice the velocity.

Even though I already stated my preference, everything said about the .30-06 applies to the .308 Winchester. Historically, the velocity gap between the two (with standard loads) has been about 100 fps, hardly enough to worry about. Modern propellants have shrunk this a bit, at least in factory loads. With handloads the gap can be opened a bit, but there really isn't a significant difference. The short, fat case of the .308 tends