



Classic African Cartridges

Part VI: The 6.5 x 54 Mannlicher-Schoenauer

By Ganyana

If there was ever a cartridge whose popularity was almost instantaneous it was the 6.5x54 Mannlicher-Schoenauer becoming one of those "all the rage" rifles within a year of its release to the civilian market in 1903.



.243 Win, 6.5 M-5, 7 x 57 Mauser, 30-06, .375 H & H.

The professional hunters in Africa, prior to the first world war, sang its praises loudly. "Karamojo" Bell and Captain Stigand were two professional ivory hunters who used it with some success on elephant and wrote about their successes, whilst Banks (elephant control officer -Uganda) and Blaney Percival (first game warden-Kenya) were also enthusiastic proponents. The long 160 grain bullets had a very high sectional density, and in solid form penetrated adequately for brain

shots on elephant or 'through the shoulder' shot on buffalo, whilst the frangible soft points gave lightning quick kills on small buck like impala or gazelles. Perhaps the greatest selling point though was the rifle.

The model 1903 Mannlicher has to be one of the sweetest handling rifles ever produced. Weighing only 6½ lbs and only 38" (97cm) long, it was the original "scout" rifle. In addition to its very portability and handiness, three other

features endeared it to hunters: firstly the Mannlicher rifles (models 1903-1910) easily have the smoothest, slickest bolt action ever produced. Not even the high grade Mauser actioned rifles from makers such as Rigby or Holland & Holland ever equalled the smoothness of the Mannlichers; Secondly, almost all the civilian models came fitted with an excellent double set trigger mechanism giving a wonderful crisp 8 ounce pull when set and a tolerable 5lb pull unset;



*Standard Model-A Mauser
and 6.5 Mannlicher-
Schoenauer.*

Thirdly, a perfectly servicable telescopic sight and mount were supplied with the rifle for only £3 (in 1910, £5 by 1939), and consequently many men gained their introduction to a 'scope sight in conjunction with the 6,5 Mannlicher rifle.

It was the provision of the 'scope, combined with minimal recoil and tolerable muzzle blast that ensured the little carbine's reputation as a 'deadly' killer. This was particularly true of working men who simply wanted a rifle as a 'meat getter'. A small bullet of good sectional density is quickly lethal if accurately placed, and amongst men who are not particularly interested in marksmanship, light recoil, a light, crisp trigger pull and a 'scope are very, very significant aids to accurate shot placement.

There were of course men who really 'over did it' with regard to the cartridge's capability. Men like Percival and Banks used them on lion and were lucky to survive the encounters, particularly as the softpoint bullets of the day could not be relied upon to penetrate the chest muscles, forcing the hunter to use solids. Stigand was badly injured by both an elephant and a rhino that he failed to stop at close range, whereupon he reverted (as did Bell) to a 7mm Mauser which had greater penetration. "Pondoro" Taylor summed the 6.5 up very well, as being a dandy rifle for a man out after plains game for meat or sport, but not as a big game calibre. Another disconcerting feature was the propensity for the case necks to split, and so jamb the case in the breech

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upon firing. This applied not only to the cheap military ball ammo (it was the Greek military cartridge from 1900 to 1940) but also to both Ely and Kynock brands. None of this mattered if the rifle was used as a small bore rifle on appropriate plains game. For every hunter who wrote about his success on dangerous game with the 6.5 there were several who died proving it wasn't really suitable.

As a small bore though, the 6,5 excelled. By 1920 the problem with splitting cases had been largely resolved, whilst bullet quality slowly improved. Improvements in powders also enabled manufacturers to increase velocity slightly from the original 2230fps to 2330fps (in a 17" barrel). In short, on game up to the size of wildebeest or kudu, the 6,5 worked reliably and did so from a rifle that still captivates anyone who handles one.

World War II ensured that the 6,5 M-S relinquished its place as one of the most common small bore cartridges in Africa. Basically only Mannlicher had produced rifles chambered for it, and following the war, Mannlicher rifles with their complex ('though beautifully smooth) rotary magazines and trigger mechanisms and exquisitely machined actions ceased abruptly to be budget priced sporters that appealed to the ordinary man in an African street. Secondly, Kynock ceased manufacturing ammunition in the 1960's, leaving only the very expensive European brands. Mannlicher, however, continue to produce rifles in 6,5 M-S which are top grade weapons and thousands of old rifles are found across the continent. Sadly many of the old rifles have ruined bores resulting from not being properly cleaned after using British ammunition, which retained its corrosive primers until the 1960's. None-the-less, the little 6,5 continues to put the venison on the table, and, largely due to the excellent sectional density of its 160grain bullets, seems to perform much more reliably on Kudu sized game than many of its more modern and more powerful counterparts, and do so without the bruising normally associated with the high velocity numbers. 🐾

About The Author

Ganyana is a gun and ballistics fanatic, actively involved in Zimbabwe's hunting industry. His years spent in the field, both as a wildlife management researcher and hunter, have resulted in volumes of data collected, which through this magazine he shares with like interested individuals.