

MAGNUM RESEARCH BFRS

by Lee Martin
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The Magnum Research line of BFRs (Biggest, Finest, Revolver) may just be the most overlooked single-action on the market today. For years, fans of the wheelgun have asked manufacturers to produce a reasonably priced 5-shot hand-cannon. Ruger sort of listened and responded with 6-shot Redhawks in .454 and .480, but these chamberings were never extended to the Blackhawk line (at least not as of 2003). Freedom Arms has always produced the .454 Casull and more recently the .475 Linebaugh in what could easily be the finest factory single-action built, the FA Model 83. Many find the list price to be out of reach though, with Field Grades at \$1,500 and Premieres around \$2,000. The other limitation is the backlog of orders for the Freedom Arms entries. Now I do want to clarify one thing: FA's are worth every penny of their sticker price and are more than worth the wait. Simply put, they're the Rolls Royce of single-actions. In spite of this, a lot of shooters are hampered by budgets and general impatience.

Alright, now everything I've said about Freedom Arms extends to the handful of pistolsmiths that do custom conversions. Their work is exceptional, but many can't afford the cost and turnaround times can be lengthy. Secondly, the accuracy and finish that dictates the high price of these customs may not be of upmost importance to the end user. In other words, many handgunners don't need a single-action to return sub-1" groups at 25 yards. Instead, a practical, well-built big bore that shoots consistently will suffice. Though the Ruger Blackhawk fits this bill, they fail to offer a single-action more potent than the .44 Magnum. Fortunately, Magnum Research has filled this void with their excellent line of BFRs.

The D-Max Corporation of Bagwell, Minnesota originated the BFR style pistol and marketed it as the Sidewinder. These guns initially sold in early to mid-1990s with the sole chamberings being .45 Colt/.410 shotshell and .45-70. Jim Skildum, President of Magnum Research, informed me that in those days only around 100 Sidewinders were produced per month. D-Max actually manufactured the early BFRs in 1998 for MRI, but demand soon out-stripped

supply. Mr. Skildum also stated that in the 1999 to 2000 timeframe, the BFR was re-engineered to allow for increased production levels and significant product/material enhancements. These BFRs all are designated with a serial prefix of "JT". A standard sized frame called the Little Maxine was also brought out to house the .45 Colt, .50 Action Express, .22 Hornet, etc. When I first spotted a Little Maxine it appeared to be a mirror image of a stainless Super Blackhawk. Cylinders are unfluted, the predominant barrel length is 7.5" (though a 6.5" is available), and the backstrap is pure Ruger (pure to the extent that Magnum Research purchases the grip frame from Sturm Ruger). In spite of these similarities, the BFR is not a complete Super Blackhawk clone.

The the BFR primarily stands apart from Ruger single-actions by: 1) The cartridges with which it's mated, 2) Stretch-framed guns are available, and 3) 5-shot cylinders are used on all except the .22 Hornet. The fit of the BFR is also improved over that of a factory Blackhawk. Lock-up is outstanding and none that I've handled exhibit any sort of cylinder endplay. The barrel gap is equally impressive with most running between 0.002" – 0.003"; my .450 Marlin BFR mics out under 0.002". Beyond the functional tolerances of the gun are two features that I wish Ruger would adopt. First, the base pin is oversized and locks with a setscrew much like those made by Belt Mountain. Secondly, the front sight is screwed to the barrel unlike Ruger's soldered version. Though I've never needed to, this makes its removal/replacement much easier. Another unique characteristic is the flattop frame, which is quite reminiscent of the early Blackhawks. I suspect that the BFR frame is actually purchased from Pine Tree Castings, which is a Sturm Ruger subsidiary. The bottom portion of the frame definitely has a Blackhawk profile, but is wider than Ruger's single-action. This dimensional difference though is really the result of Ruger tapering the lower section of the frame from back to front. Magnum Research on the other hand uses a straight contour. I do keep hearing people talk of how the BFR employs a heavier topstrap than a Ruger Blackhawk. This actually isn't true though in that both have a height that is within a couple thousandths of one another. Ruger does profile the topstrap to include rear sight humps, whereas the MRI is flat. Regardless, I wouldn't say that the BFR is any stronger than a Blackhawk when considering this component.

What many don't realize is that when purchasing a Magnum Research, you're not buying the typical mass produced pistol. The BFR is really closer to a hand fit gun with the recent trend being quality over quantity. Examples of such include hand lapped barrels, recessed cylinders, and hardened hex-head screws for the grip frame. In terms of the materials used, I believe that the frames are 416 stainless steel and that the cylinder is 17-4 series. Regardless, the BFR is exceptionally strong and designed to withstand thousands of rounds of the heavy stuff. I also like the Millet sights used on the guns because they're simple to use and provide a crisp sight pattern.

Though the .45-70s, 500 S&W, and .450 Marlins are real thumpers in the BFR, the Little Maxine offerings are just as unique. While the .45 Colt has been dropped by MRI, the .454 Casull and .480/.475 have been added within recent years, and the .50 AE was re-introduced in 2004. Hands down, the first two chamberings would be great additions to Ruger's Bisley model. They're fine cartridges in the Super Redhawk, but are every bit as great in a strong five-shot single-action. Originally, the .480 BFR was only offered for the Ruger round, but this was later altered so that the .475 Linebaugh could be chambered. This is significant because it represents the first time that any Linebaugh cartridge could be had for under \$1,000 (at least in a new revolver). Secondly, the .22 Hornet is another neat addition and would be ideal for short-range varmit hunting. Recently, Magnum Research began offering to fit an auxiliary .218 Bee cylinder to their .22 BFRs and at \$150 per, it's a bargain. In terms of hunting, BFRs in .454 Casull (or .480) and .22 Hornet would make an excellent two-pistol combination. One advantage to this is that both guns are built on the same platform, and with 7.5" barrels, the only felt difference would be weight.

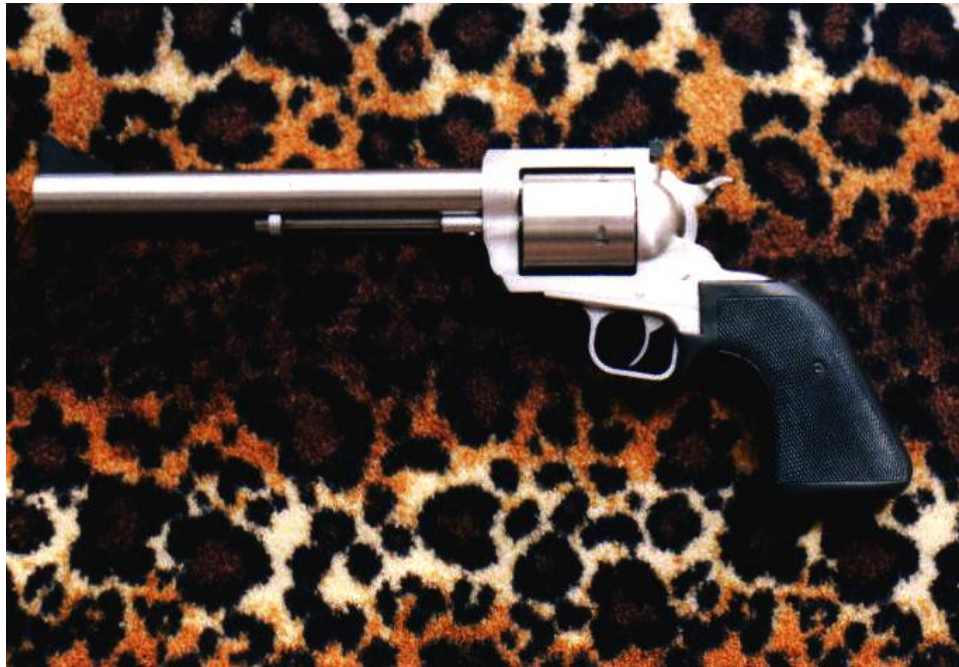
For really big game, the .444, 450 Marlin, .45-70, and .500 S&W BFRs produce rifle-type results. They are massive with respect to size and weight, but do offer the advantage of multiple rounds and quick follow-up shots. As an example, the .450 Marlin can push 350 grain bullets at 1,815 fps and 405s operate around 1,700 – 1,730 fps. Generally speaking, the same bullets are 250 – 300 fps faster out of an 18.5" Marlin Guide Gun. Numerous reports however, have pegged the .45-70 BFR as capable of reaching 1,750 fps with a 405 grain flat point (10.5" barrel). If this holds, muzzle energy would be 2,755 foot-pounds, or 100 fpe greater than factory .500 S&W. Now MRI does not advocate or advertise upping the .45-70 to pressures greater than 30,000 cup. Understandable I guess, but my .450 Marlin BFR safely handles factory loads that are in the 45,000 cup range. In any case, these stretched frame revolvers provide TC Contender type energies and five round capacities. When I first saw pictures of the gun back in 1998, it looked too large to accurately work with offhand. To my surprise, it balances well and the weight isn't as much of an issue as one would expect. Moreover, felt recoil is significantly reduced due to this size and weight factor. Even with maximum 405 grain reloads in my .450, the BFR is actually tamer than a .454 Casull. I will say that recoil becomes more of concern when the rubber grips are discarded. I upgraded from the Uncle Mike's that the factory provided to a set of Pau Ferro from Hogue. They look great and fit my hand well, but do little to cushion recoil. In spite of this, I'd say that the gun is still as manageable as a .454.

So why isn't the Magnum Research BFR a more recognized and sought after single-action? I would suspect that it has to do with people's perception of the gun's quality and cost. Specifically, I've read a lot of opinion on how the fit and finish of these doesn't warrant a price that's twice as high as a

Ruger. For one, people continually try to compare the BFR to the Freedom Arms product line, and to me that makes no sense. The FA 83 and 97 are essentially custom pistols that are hand-fit to the tightest of tolerances. It's precisely this degree of quality that dictates a \$1,500 - \$2,000 price. The MRI offerings can be had for around \$800 - \$850 even though they retail for \$1000; thus they're half the price of a Freedom Arms and their fit is probably half as good. Conversely, the BFR is twice as expensive as a Blackhawk, but I would submit that the recent quality is twice that of a Ruger. The key word in the last sentence is "recent". A few years ago, the "Biggest, Finest, Revolver" was essentially a Super Blackhawk that returned similar levels of accuracy. The cylinder fit was sound, but not exceptionally good and the 25 yard groups were only respectable. Secondly, some of the early BFRs did have timing issues to the extent that the cylinder sometimes over-shot the bolt upon cycling. What many fail to realize is that the BFR underwent a face-lift within the past year or two to address some of these issues. First, cylinder fit is much improved with barrel gaps of around 0.002", whereas my Ruger's are 0.004" on average. Also, the last two Blackhawks that I purchased had a small degree of front-to-back cylinder end-shake. None of my recently produced BFRs exhibit this quality. In terms of how they shoot, many MRIs can cut 1" or less groups at 25 yards and the stretch-frames often return 2" at 50 yards. Of those I talked to that shoot a lot of BFRs, this appears to more of the norm rather than the exception. While some out of box Blackhawks can equal this performance, they more commonly group around 2" at 25. Functionally, my Magnum Researches have never had base pin jump under recoil, largely due to the setscrew feature. I can't say the same about heavy loaded .44s/.45s in the Blackhawk counterpart.

Now I want to stress that I'm not saying that the Ruger is a low quality single and that the BFR is on par with Freedom Arms (or custom revolvers for that matter). That simply isn't the case. In my opinion though, the Magnum Research has enough to offer over a Ruger that the price is more justified than many may realize. Also, a lot of folks argue that the pistol looks and feels too much like a Super Blackhawk.....my answer to that is, "yes, and that's bad because?". Personally, after shooting Blackhawks for years, I can easily adjust to the BFR. Secondly, the functional aspects of the Magnum Research are identical to the proven design of the Ruger. Transfer bar operation is used and many of the parts are interchangeable to include hammers, triggers, pawls, mainsprings, etc. With that in mind, when buying a BFR you're really purchasing a Super Blackhawk with slightly better fit, a couple of design improvements (base pins, front sight, lapped barrels), and the option of powerhouse cartridges.

If you have any questions or comments I can be reached at sc429@yahoo.com



Magnum Research BFR in .480 Ruger/.475 Linebaugh



Top: .450 Marlin BFR, Bottom: .500 S&W BFR

BFR technical specs as provided by the Magnum Research website:

"THE BFR FACTOIDS"

SPECIAL FEATURES

- 100% made in the USA.
- Handmade by gun people for gun people. Each BFR is meticulously inspected and hand polished, hand fit and hand assembled.
- Nominated for handgun of the year 2002.
- Chambered for cartridges that provide heart-stopping power for the serious handgun hunter.
- Interchangeable cylinders in calibers that utilize the same bullet diameters. The .450 Marlin and .45/70 are fully interchangeable and the .22 Hornet and .218 BEE is also fully interchangeable, cylinders to be fitted by MRI gunsmiths.
- Free wheeling cylinder allows the shooter the ability spin the cylinder either clockwise or counter clockwise to load or unload the revolver.

ACCURACY

- Barrel cylinder alignment is held to under .002 concentricity.
- All barrels are precision cut rifled.
- Barrel cylinder gap is held to less than .005.
- All barrels are hand lapped.
- All barrels are precision recessed crowned.
- Cylinder tolerances are so tight that best accuracy is available with all chambers.
- Tolerances between the cylinder throat and internal barrel dimensions are matched to each caliber.
- Many of the BFR's calibers will shoot groups of well under 2" at 50 yards with mechanical sights.
- All calibers feature twist rates specifically matched to the ammunition available and barrel lengths offered.

QUALITY

- The BFR utilizes state of the art tough stainless alloys through out. We use five different types of stainless steel in each revolver so that we can produce the strongest, most weather resistant handgun available. Some of these alloys are extremely hard to machine but the end result is worth it. Each part is made from the best stainless alloy that will give it the strength and hardness necessary to hold up for the powerful loads it is chambered for.
- The BFR is hand finished to a beautiful soft-brushed finish, which is more weather resistant and practical than vapor honed or satin finished guns. This soft-brushed finish is also very easily restored by the gun-owner.
- Fully adjustable rear sights and a full complement of different front sight heights allow guaranteed point of impact for all individual shooting styles.
- All grip frame screws are specially hardened and plated hex head screws that WILL hold up under continuous repeated firing of heavy loads.
- Frames, grip frames and cylinders are machined in precision CNC equipment with a proprietary process developed specifically for the BFR. This process insures the dimensional integrity of ALL of our parts. The frame alone has over 70 features that are measured after machining to insure quality.

- All guns are proof fired after assembly to insure integrity of the entire revolver and its total function.

THE ONLY'S

- Only .450 Marlin revolver.
- Only .45/70 revolver that is not a joke. This gun really works and shoots like a laser.
- Only .45 Long Colt/.410 revolver
- The one .480 Ruger/.475 Linebaugh under \$1,000 retail.
- Only serious heavy caliber handgun that is designed from the floor up to eat up the powerful cartridges that it is chambered for. The BFR is NOT a standard revolver "converted" to a heavy caliber. It is designed and built as a heavy caliber handgun and will hold up to the test of repeated and sustained firing.

RECOIL

- The BFR in 45/70 recoils less than any .44 Magnum that weighs under 3-pounds.
- Recoil is a factor of bullet weight, velocity and gun weight.
- Remember recoil is not a factor of size, just because it is physically large does not mean that it recoils large. The BFR simply weighs a little more than other revolvers because of its heavy design for powerful ammunition. The added weight makes the gun balance better, makes it easier to hold steady and makes it recoil less...Period.
- The 45/70 will produce the same velocity as the 454 Casull with 2/3 less pressure, and a lot less noise and muzzle flash. This is because the 45/70 case is longer so it allows for different types of gunpowder to be used and the case has more room for the burning and expanding gases to expand. The end result is less pressure, less wear and tear on the gun, less noise and less recoil.

SAFETY

- The BFR uses a transfer bar that will not allow the gun to fire unless the trigger is pulled back to release the hammer only after it has been fully cocked. There is no need to carry the gun with an empty chamber while hunting. The BFR will not fire if it has been accidentally dropped.
- Special processes are used for heat treating critical parts.
- All guns are proof fired after assembly to insure integrity of the entire revolver and its total function.