

Action stations!

Marlin lever and Leupold Freedom combo impressed Chris Redlich



Most modern firearms are based on designs enjoying decades of history and, for some, more than a century. Take for instance the model 1911 Pistol, which commenced manufacture in the year which gave it its name. Basic yet hailed as a breakthrough design of its time and, despite its age, still a platform which set the standard for so many pistols of today.

On top of that my son recently remarked on our RAAF's Hornet fighter jets and was surprised when I told him their original airframe was a design which started in the same era we were driving HZ model Holdens! My point is that some designs

are timeless and lever-action rifles fit that criteria. As levers have been with us as far back as the 1800s, they certainly don't need any further introduction and adhering to heritage, Marlin's 1895 lever model designation is a direct lineage of their original 1895 patent.

From the basic blueprint of a sliding bolt connected by linkages to a falling lever, some makers have done it better than others and through the generations, US brand Marlin is by reputation up there with the best. Marlin hasn't gone completely unscathed though and a few years back when it was a subsidiary to another company, its name was blemished

somewhat, thanks to poor tooling and manufacture.

Thankfully this setback was short-lived and it did restore its reputation with the old manufacturer before changing hands once more. Now owned by Ruger it's forging ahead again and with precision manufacture and quality control, doing its best to re-establish itself as a highly regarded brand.

My first experience with Marlin's new lever rifles was at last year's Nioa conference where, at their indoor range, I was able to test an SBL in .45-70 Government for the first time. Having never fired the rifle before and feeling the pressure of a very observant and learned audience, I was



Long Picatinny rail provides ample positioning for optics.

surprised to discover its accuracy off the shoulder and, with that in mind, was more than keen to accept an invitation to review.

The Marlin SBL rifle

Months passed before it was my turn to get up close with the rifle and I didn't waste any time familiarising myself. What's noticeable at first glance is how Marlin has taken a historic design and thrust it into the modern arena. Although not a new design to Marlin, gone is the sleek, non-existent pistol grip of yesteryear's lever, replaced with a modern and more vertical grip which reflects shotgun design, promoting responsive and accurate offhand

targeting without affecting the function of a smooth lever action.

SBL is an acronym for Stainless Big Loop and although there's an attraction to the deep bluing of the traditional 'lever', Marlin's SBL is designed as an all-weather field rifle that's more about practicality than looks. The stock is ambidextrous and designed to suit left and right-handed shooters. Both the fore wood and butt stock are laminated timber, enhancing durability further and, honestly, I don't mind the combination of stainless-steel components matched to grey laminate wood. Fine cut chequering with the inclusion of a diamond inlay on the pistol grip

adds to the appeal but more importantly overall, adds grip to the wood surfaces.

The 19" (482mm) hammer-forged barrel is one hell of a big tube, though not unexpected considering the large chambering of .45-70 Govt cartridge. The barrel's twist of one turn in 20" is the perfect rate for stabilising 'game-stopping' 300-grain projectiles accurately off the shoulder and on target. At 3.5kg (fully loaded and unscoped) the Marlin's not light. Its weight, however, is offset by a well-balanced compact 950mm overall length and the heft of the SBL proved perfect for taming recoil, as I later discovered during field testing. A subtle but handy inclusion is a barrel thread cap which

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Thread for muzzle brake attachment and tritium insert to fore sight aids open sight shooting in low light.



Rounds fed easily within the tubular magazine.



All rounds ejected well during fast follow-up shooting. Note compact sight alignment of the Pig-Plex scope. Inset: Deadly accuracy of the Marlin and 45.70 cartridge.

can be removed for fitment of a muzzle brake should recoil be a hindrance, though the large rubber recoil pad absorbed any kick and felt snug in the shoulder.

The tubular magazine running parallel to the barrel holds six of the big .45-70 Govt cartridges and each round finger-fed easily through the load gate thanks to the improved spring tension of the retainer. The centrepiece of any lever-action is the lever 'handle' and the SBL's big loop, while designed for the wearing of gloves (specifically US hunters), didn't affect functionality with bare hands.

The action is slick and smooth to cycle and rounds fed flawlessly. The bolt is spiral fluted and slides fore and aft, cocking the hammer with ease. For those with 'stumpy' thumbs Marlin supplies a hammer extension but I found it easy to cock manually without one. The cross-bolt safety ensures the firing pin stays clear of the hammer when a cartridge is chambered, while the

ability to half cock the rifle ensures the shooter is safe and 'at the ready' should wild game present.

If I had one complaint of the new 1895 SBL it's trigger pressure. I'm used to much lighter triggers on hunting rifles and was surprised when my trigger pull gauge 'maxed out' at 8.5lb pressure without release. The Marlin doesn't have an operator adjustable trigger but I'm reliably informed by a Nioa representative it can be modified for a lighter pull by a qualified gunsmith.

Despite that heavy trigger pressure it did break crisply during testing once I became used to it, empty shell cases extracted without fault and thrown well clear via the right-hand ejection port. One of my biggest gripes of other lever rifles I'd used was the awful razor-sharp edges of machined steel. Marlin has done a brilliant job of polishing off all machined surfaces likely to come into contact with the operator's hands and I applaud them for this attention to detail.

The SBL comes standard with a Ruger-designed rear-folding peep sight which enables rapid target acquisition for fast-running game, while the illuminated tritium insert of the front sight adds an ingenious touch to open-sight shooting in low light. Additionally, the Picatinny rail runs the full length of the receiver and at least one-third the length of the barrel, providing ample positions for a multitude of optics including red-dot sights. That inclusion is a real bonus which caters to shooters of varying scenarios, reinforcing the SBL's hunting credentials.

Leupold VX-Freedom scope

Along with the Marlin, Nioa provided a 1.5-4x20 VX-Freedom scope with Pig-Plex reticle. With a weekend hunting trip planned soon after receiving the rifle, I promptly mounted it for sighting to the Picatinny rail using the supplied Leupold cross-slot rings. The popular 1.5-4x20



Large boar removed thanks to Chris' brother's sharp shooting and Leupold Pig-Plex scope.



Second wild dog taken cleanly at 80m.

Superb results on paper and out bush where it really mattered

Pig-Plex reticle needs no formal presentation and is a sensible mate for the SBL. It's perfect for fast follow-up shooting, designed purely for rapid acquisition of feral pigs with the inclusion of various holdover sub-tensions relevant to game of their size.

Additionally, Leupold supply a reticle sub-tension value chart in MOA for ease of reference. The 20mm objective doesn't have a large field of view compared to popular 40mm objectives, though the lever rifle is purposed for close-quarters shooting and the compact VX-Freedom provides ample field of view at shorter distances.

Range and field

Further reinforcing my positive experience at Nioa HQ previously, the Marlin was on target and sighted within a few shots

at both 50m and 100m using Federal Premium 300-grain Hammer Down hollow points. The Pig-Plex reticle provided a clear sight picture and as you'll see in the accompanying target photo, results speak for themselves.

That three-shot group was achieved in less than 10 rounds after 'zeroing' shots and proved Nioa know what works as they'd supplied a winning combination of rifle, cartridge and scope. Needless to say I had all the confidence required for hunting at my brother's property a few weeks later.

Before stepping out for an early morning hunt, I fitted one of my favourite slings to the front and rear studs on the stock. The compact Marlin sat snug across my back when slung and was also a pleasure to carry in the hand. The freezing cold morning

began to heat up though not because of sunrise. Wild dogs acknowledged my brother's howls and before long we had choirs of response calls all around us.

The first wild dog that presented after a tense stalk fell instantly but not surprisingly to a single round off the shoulder from the .45-70. I was rapt with the 'pointability' of the SBL and although a second shot wasn't required, a quick 'action' of the lever had a single round fed and ready as smooth as muscle memory. If only the ferals had presented as readily during trips for other reviews as this one, because as far as field testing goes it was a dream run. Within the next 24 hours we'd taken another large wild dog and a monster wild boar thanks to my brother's sharp shooting.

Conclusion

For a design with age on its side, the new Ruger-made Marlin 1895 SBL has reinforced once again its place in today's hunting market. And on a lighter note, Hollywood considered the SBL in .45-70 Govt to be Owen Grady's (actor Chris Pratt) preferred rifle of choice for tackling man-eating dinosaurs in the movie *Jurassic World*.

I thoroughly enjoyed my time with the rifle and if anyone has any doubts over the historic .45-70 Govt cartridge, think again. Make no mistake though, the Marlin lever in .45-70 Govt is no pussy-cat rifle but despite its mild aggression on the bench, all sins were forgiven when it produced superb results on paper and out bush where it really mattered.

I was most impressed by the accuracy of the Federal 300-grain loads in combination with the SBL rifle, both of which I highly recommend for feral pig and wild dog destruction based on my experience. Furthermore, for traditionalists who love the look of blued steel and dark timber, you'll have to wait for the Marlin Guide Gun, available here at some point.

The Ruger-made Marlin 1895 SBL lever rifle comes with a lifetime defect warranty and, at time of writing, a recommended retail price around \$2570. Following the field test my brother, although a left-hander, enjoyed using the flexible SBL so much he inquired about buying the review rifle for pest control on his farm. Additionally, Leupold has been around long enough to enjoy a good rap and the VX-Freedom 1.5-4x20 Pig-Plex priced at around \$600 is a fair price for a no-nonsense scope with lifetime guarantee. Check with your local retailer on both items for store price and availability. More at nioa.com.au