

Pneumophilia

Not necessarily the most user-friendly of airgun designs, nevertheless multi-stroke pneumatics exude an allure that has captured the hearts and souls of generations. They've left indelible impressions on many an airgunner, this old throw-back included.

Classic Americana

An early 1960's Benjamin Pump seemed no less than spiritual rite of passage for a scrawny eight year-old that had to develop a convoluted pumping technique just to charge the period 'magnum'. However the effort required was well worth the power and gratification levels returned; that is, relative to the Daisys that came before. My big brother and I quarreled over that shared Christmas gift until it was totally worn out from use and abuse, but never disuse!

Come the mid-sixties, a little Crosman 760 also received an over-abundance of use and abuse in returning massive amounts of pneumatic fun. Its short, quick and easy pump strokes made the 25 stroke maximum seem less taxing than the numbers suggest. Optionally, a load of three BB's transformed the little carbine into a mini-shotgun capable of impressive shot patterns.



A 20 year anniversary commemorative Crosman 760.

An early-seventies vintage Sheridan Silver Streak proved excellent supplement to a wide assortment of big-bore handguns when small vermin presented targets unworthy of center-fire expenditure. That Silver Streak's impressive iron-sight accuracy never ceased to amaze. Unfortunately the classic Sheridan disappeared from the gun rack of an equally-classic Mazda rotary-powered pickup; a rocket-vehicle of many stories in itself.

In the late eighties a non-airgunner phoned who had heard I deal in old airguns. He had a clean old Sheridan to sell, but knew only to store it with a couple of pump strokes in the chamber... and, oh yeah, it was a 'B' model. My heart skipped more than a few beats, considering the Sheridan B Model is one of the rarest and most precious of all American airguns. Barely a thousand produced, I managed to suppress sky-rocketing adrenalin levels long enough to learn it was in mint condition and he wanted *eighty*

bucks for it! My \$100 counter-offer included the caveat he box it extra well and send it immediately. That episode pre-dates the internet; such deals now gone mostly extinct.

It was all he'd described. One of the most mint B models in existence and completely healthy, it shot like a house afire! Also the most powerful stock American pump in all this testing, on eight pumps it shot Sheridan Diablos at 776 FPS and Sheridan Bantam slugs 679 FPS (for 16 foot-pounds). It would keep all shots touching at 25 yards with its factory peep sights. Problem was, being such a fine example of such a precious collectable, it seemed a crime to use it! With that omnipresent concern, someone offered enough over market value to resist letting it go. Now it would bring thrice as much.

Two decades later the search for a less precious classic Sheridan uncovered an excellent '64 Blue Streak with a deep-blued finish, the likes of which I'd never seen on a Sheridan. It proved worthy of a stock refinish, Pachmayr butt-pad, trigger job, vintage Weaver 3-7X scope and 'Steroid' modification. The Steroid treatment endows Ol' Blue with the same power on six pump strokes as previously attained on eight, as well as a fourteen-stroke maximum. However, I haven't the need or wherewithal for more than eight pumps. With the smithed trigger breaking cleanly at a very predictable 24 ounces and wearing afore-mentioned 'classical glass', the sixties-vintage rig averages quarter-sized groups at fifty yards with 13.8 grain JSB Exact pellets at 685 FPS (on eight pumps). The Mannlicher-ish fore-end lends confidence-inspiring muzzle-steadiness for precision off-hand work beyond all reasonable expectations.

While my love of classic Crosman Co2 guns runs irrationally deep and wide, that obsession does not translate to most Crosman pump models. However the Crosman 1400 (and variants thereof) exhibit a combination of style, quality and performance that hits the spot (so to speak). The 1400 is of blued steel construction, and its barrel of heavier 'bull-barrel' configuration than any other American pump. Pumping effort also seems a bit less strenuous than other pump guns. Additionally, the 'pop-off' valve design imparts nano-second shot-time; unfortunately it also increases trigger weight as the number of pump strokes increase. Worse yet, every Crosman 1400 I've encountered exhibited excessive amounts of trigger creep.

Smitten with the positive attributes of the 1400 and wondering about accuracy potentials, I set about correcting the hideous trigger action. A sear-engagement plate was fashioned, resulting in a wonderfully crisp trigger-break. Though little could be done to lighten the trigger pull, the resulting super-crisp let-off is preferable to a light, creepy trigger. The (now) crisp trigger and instant shot-time (inherent to the pop-off valve) make for a very gratifying pellet 'launch' and sharp muzzle report. No other pump-gun fires with as authoritatively sharp a **"POW!"** as a healthy Crosman 1400. The sharp report, bull-barrel and instant shot-time endow the 1400 with a pugnacious appeal all its own.



Vintage Americana- Top gun is a 1964 Sheridan Blue Streak with period Weaver scope, Pachmayr butt-pad, trigger job and Steroid modification. Bottom gun is a 'slim-line' Crosman 1400 with sear engagement mod and J.C. Higgins barrel. Both shoot sub-1" groups at 50 yards.

A deal was struck for two Sears J.C. Higgins variants of the Crosman 1400; one a disassembled basket-case, and both leakers. The J.C. Higgins variants sport heftier blonde stocks, white barrel spacers (instead of black), and most importantly, scope-grooved breeches. Installing the scope-grooved barrel from the basket-case rifle onto my slim-line 1400 finally allowed more serious accuracy testing, virtue of optical sights. The scoped 1400 shoots just about as well as the classic Sheridan Blue Streak; averaging 3/4" to 1" groups at fifty yards with JSB Express pellets at 650 FPS on ten pumps.

The two Sears 1400's were subsequently sent to Alan Schweitzer at AB Airguns for resealing with what he terms a 'power re-seal'. The essence of this work is adjustment of the pump linkage to bottom-out the pump cup with every stroke and drilling of a small hole in the pump tube for slightly better air intake. So tuned, the Sears guns returned a worthwhile performance improvement of about 30 FPS more velocity on ten pumps than a stock 1400.



Top rifle is a Sears J.C. Higgins variant of the Crosman 1400. The Sears model uses a heftier stock left 'in the white', an angle-cut fore-end, raised comb and scope grooves. Bottom gun is a 'slim-line' Crosman 1400 upgraded with a scope-grooved J.C. Higgins barrel.

The heavier stock of the Sears J.C. Higgins gun compliments the relatively 'bull' barrel of a 1400 for enhanced heft, and also allows better grip purchase for heavy pump charges. Altogether the Sears J.C. Higgins variants have a heftier feel than other American pumps, but still need help in the trigger department. Ever the glutton for punishment in the quest for performance, I couldn't resist performing the sear-engagement modification to one of the hopped-up Sears guns.

That exercise was a reminder not only of how tedious and time-consuming the trigger modification is, but also how well it returns an incredibly crisp trigger break. The modified J.C. Higgins gun groups the same as the slim-line 1400, but with a bit extra 'punch' (virtue of the power re-seal). Approaching 700 FPS on ten pumps with 14.3 grain JSB Express pellets puts it over fifteen foot-pounds; a right respectable power level for a handy, 35" pump carbine.

Japanese Multi-Pumps

Japan has produced some very impressive pump rifles; none very common on the American airgun scene. The Sharp brand of airguns is somewhat familiar to American collectors, as a smattering of interesting Sharp pneumatic and Co2 guns having found their way to these shores (and my hands). About the time you think you've seen them all, another Sharp model or variant surfaces.

Probably the most well-known of the Sharp pneumatics is the Ace model. Less familiar is the variant referred to as the Ace Target. The standard Ace model is an under-lever multi-pump capable of some 1,000 FPS on 12 pump strokes in .177 and 900 FPS

in .22. The pop-off valve design produces instantaneous shot time, but with increasing trigger weight with increased number of pump strokes (like a Crosman 1400). The Ace Target model features side-lever pumping and a finer adjustable trigger that manages considerably lighter let-offs, but still suffers from the increasing trigger-weight-to-pump-strokes relationship. Both models are of quality comparable to the classic American pumps, and both were found capable of averaging 3/4" bench-rest groups at 50 yards.

A similar .177 side-lever-pump Sharp Pan Target model I tested would audibly bleed pressure with every stroke beyond six. Apparently it was originally built for sale in more restrictive countries than the U.S., only to later find itself exiled to the Land of Opportunity... and power freaks! It didn't hold my interest for long.

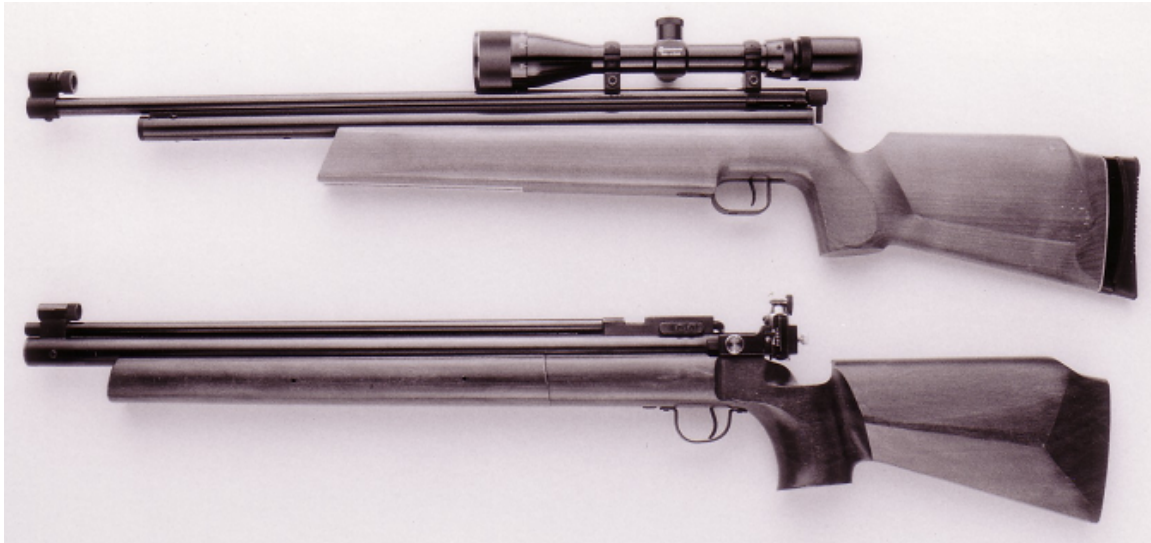
The Sharp Victory model was produced in more than one variation. The Victory pictured below was a very short carbine that sported a nice, crisp trigger, good power and excellent accuracy. It shot 1" groups at fifty yards with the little 3/4" tube Sharp 4X scope it came to me with. No doubt capable of better accuracy with higher magnification optics, it was too cool and handy a hunting rig as-is... or rather, as-was, to change a thing. Now long gone, that little .22 Sharp Victory is sorely missed. Thankfully the custom J.C. Higgins 1400 duplicates the performance of the little Sharp that got away.



Ever missing the Victory, another Sharp came my way described as a Victory but marked 648 Deluxe. It got a nice make-over, but did not possess the magic of the previous Victory. With a bit of tweaking the striker-valved .22 model 648 exhibited an excellent trigger action. While more impressively powerful than the Victory that came before, the cumbersome 648 Deluxe lacked the excellent accuracy of that first Victory.



Few American airgunners are familiar with the extremely rare Heirenkan pneumatics. Even information on them is rare. At least four models were produced (sporters and target guns) before the Japanese government purportedly shut down production due to the rifles' excellent power. I have owned one Heirenkan; the finest multi-stroke pneumatic I've tested. That rifle sported robust quality construction in its wood and metal-work, fine micrometer peep sights, an excellent trigger and magnum power. It routinely shot 1" groups at fifty yards from bench-rest with the factory sights, launching .177 Kodiaks over 800 feet-per-second and Superdomes almost 900 FPS. No doubt it would have grouped even better with the benefit of optical sights.



The Sharp Ace Target (top) and Heirenkan (bottom) were fine multi-pumps of similar power and accuracy. Both averaged 3/4" to 1" groups at 50 yards; the Heirenkan with factory peep sights!

The Heirenkans too-short length of pull begged for a nice butt-pad, however such a functional customization would have detracted greatly from the originality of this extremely rare collectable. That fact and an irresistible offer are my lame-ass excuses for parting with this incredible rifle. The Heirenkan ranks as one of my greatest loves lost. Should we ever be reunited, this awesome collectable will be modified to its full functional potential with optics, an adjustable butt-pad and stock refinish; hang the collector value. Little comfort to know it probably resides safe and secure to this day in someone's collection. I often wonder if that incredible shooting machine ever gets shot.

I have encountered only two other Heirenkans in my thirty years of airgun wheeling, dealing and collecting, and yes, they were for sale! Unfortunately both were priced above market value, I was under-funded as usual, and could not shoot them before committing. Consequently, they did not change hands.

British Pumps

In the quest for my dream Sporter Class rifle for NRA silhouette competition and being un-enamored of spring guns, I decided to throw the silhouette rules a curve by ordering a .177 Titan Mohawk single-stroke pneumatic directly from England. Exhibiting all the quality expected of British airgun art, what a nice side-lever pneumatic it was!



Unfortunately the Mohawk had two disadvantages to offset its advantage of recoilless firing behavior. Charging effort was extreme, and it produced only 10.5 foot-pounds (at a time when my competitors were shooting 15 foot-pounds). In a competition hugely affected by wind conditions, the power handicap was very real. Even so, the Titan captured a Texas State Championship in 1993 and tied the NRA national record for Sporter Rifle in 1994 (with a score of 32/40). Thinking I'd never part with it, unfortunately a Houston oilman heard about it, paid the asking price I thought was too high, and the Mohawk went away. I still mourn the loss.

Titan also produced multi-stroke versions of the Mohawk. Having always lusted for one, I eventually managed to obtain one in .22 caliber. Outwardly identical to the single-stroke version, the multi-stroke .22 was capable of over 20 foot-pounds on four pump strokes. Unfortunately charging effort proved extreme beyond two strokes, making three strokes the practical maximum. Even so, every shooting session produced several days of stiff neck syndrome. Points-of-impact showed not only the expected vertical dispersion with varying numbers of pump strokes, but diagonal as well. Apparently this diagonal point-of-impact situation is typical of the model; a function of the pump pivot-nut serving also as a barrel-band (near the muzzle). Varying amounts of pump strokes exert varying amounts of pressure against the pivot-nut/barrel-band in the muzzle area of the pencil-thin barrel, causing diagonal shot dispersions. The Mohawk also invariably threw slight fliers from otherwise excellent groups. It seemed to want to keep all shots almost touching at 50 yards, but five-shot groups would invariably throw a shot or two 1/2" to 1" out of the cluster. Bench-rest sessions with this beautiful airgun proved too frustrating and physically-debilitating to keep it. Little grieving is associated with the loss of this uniquely rare, fine quality, but *maddening* side-lever pneumatic.

So chronicles the heart-ache of too many awesome pump-guns lost to misplaced priorities, financial calamity and unadulterated ignorance. Most of the more impressive

and exotic pumps have become too rare and expensive to replace. However if ever replaced, such treasures will never again be taken for granted.

Lately there seems to be some resurgence of interest in, and appreciation of pump guns. Thankfully many fine-performing, classic American pump-rifles are still available at relatively reasonable prices. Many benefit greatly from simple modifications; returning the love and charging effort invested with impressive performance. For some pneumo-philes, what a good pump-gun lacks in user-friendliness is made up for with character and nostalgia. However like many aesthetic pursuits nowadays, especially those requiring a little physical effort or appreciation of simpler times, pump-guns ain't for ever'body!

Ya' know... I kind'a like it that way.