Bowen Mods on Bisley Vaquero

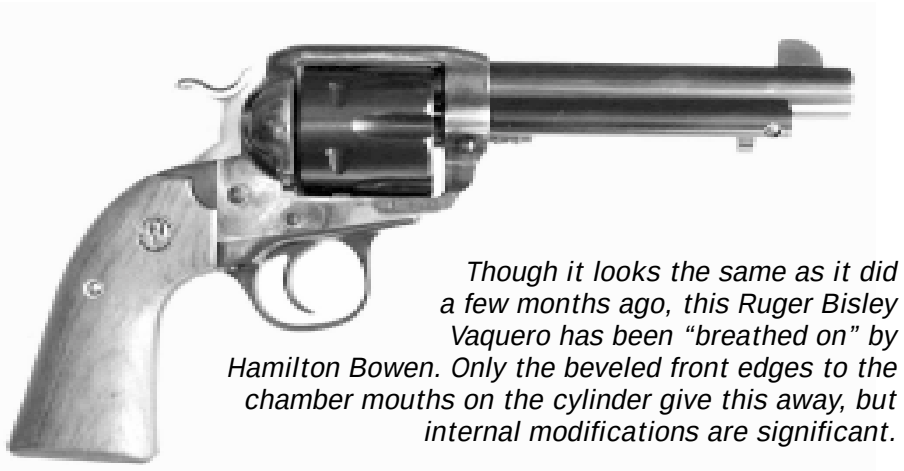
Better handling and slightly improved accuracy means happier shooting, but costs are high.

In the April 2001, issue of GUN TESTS we tested a Ruger Bisley Vaquero in .45 LC against an early Colt and a Cabela's Millennium. Along the way, we discovered that the Ruger was slow, and somewhat difficult, to reload. The reason was that when the cylinder was rotated back against its click-stop, the chamber didn't line up with the ejection port in the frame. Another pair of Ruger Bisleys we tested, modified by Hamilton Bowen and John Linebaugh, had free-wheeling cylinders, which made reloading a whole lot faster and more positive, if not quite as good as original Colts. Free-wheeling the cylinder seemed to be the logical solution to our Bisley Vaquero's problem.

We sent that Ruger Bisley to Hamilton Bowen, Bowen Classic Arms Corp., to have the freewheeling modification done, and to have the trigger tuned from 4.2 pounds down to an acceptable 2.5 to 3.0 pounds. We asked Bowen to install one of his oversize base pins and to ensure the chamber mouths were all the correct, uniform, size. These modifications are all included in one of Bowen's "packages."

We got the gun back with all the above work done to our satisfaction. In addition, Bowen had beveled the fronts of the chambers, making the cylinder resemble an early black-powder Colt, which both looks keen and is easier on the holster. It may have made a bit more room for black-powder residue, if that's your forte, but the gun functioned perfectly with black powder before we sent it off. Bowen had also reblued the cylinder.

The oversize base pin had a large, knurled head for easier pulling. The pin was secured into the gun by the original spring-loaded cross pin, and also by a screw threaded into the cross pin from the bottom. This screw had a stud that engaged a small hole Bowen had put into the bottom of the barrel. This is the same securing method used by Bowen and Linebaugh on their .475 and .500 Linebaugh conversions, and it ensures the base pin will never come loose from hot loads. That's the good part. The bad part is that you need a screwdriver to get the base pin out. If you are shooting light loads, there's no tremendous need for putting the screw into the pin, except to prevent its loss.



Though it looks the same as it did a few months ago, this Ruger Bisley Vaquero has been "breathed on" by Hamilton Bowen. Only the beveled front edges to the chamber mouths on the cylinder give this away, but internal modifications are significant.

After Bowen's mods, there was no discernible looseness of the cylinder within the frame. There had been, before we sent the Ruger off. All six chamber mouths showed signs of having had a reamer put through them. Where they had previously shown tool marks, they now were smooth. Our measurement of them showed the holes to be perfectly round, with a diameter of 0.455". We felt this was too big, and would have preferred the hole to be 0.452, but short of installing a new cylinder, there was no way to accomplish that. They're all the same size now. Before we sent Bowen the gun, they were at least one thousandth out of round, with an average size of approximately 0.453.

The new beveling on the fronts of the chambers was uniform, clean-edged, and very attractive. Except for the evidence of the bevels, it was impossible to tell the cylinder had been reblued.

The new trigger pull measured 2.8 pounds. There was a barely discernible bit of creep. The overtravel was as Ruger had made it, which we have found to be perfectly acceptable. The hammer was much easier to cock after Bowen worked on the gun. It had significant drag about halfway back, and this was eliminated.

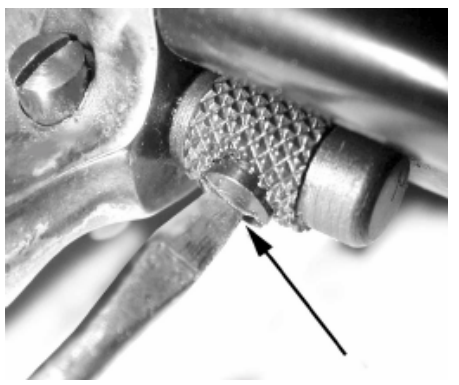
The freewheeling feature is exactly what is needed for these modern Ruger single-action revolvers. It makes the gun far more manageable, and we encourage all modern Ruger SA owners to have this work done. Brownells sells the part Bowen installed, which is called the Power Custom Ruger Free-Spin Pawl. Price is $35, and it requires gunsmith installation.

We shot the Ruger for accuracy with three loads before and after the modifications, and could not see a clear advantage to the cylinder clean-up operation, though some groups were slightly smaller. Bowen's work would not have corrected, for instance, a misaligned chamber, or other items built into the Ruger that might have had a detrimental effect on accuracy. His reamer followed the existing hole through the chamber. If the chamber was drilled incorrectly by Ruger, so it would remain.

We added a home remedy to the Ruger package in the form of cutting the forcing cone to 11 degrees. Our work did little more than clean up some machining burrs, but this give us a smooth and uniform entry for the bullet into the barrel. We used Brownell's forcing cone tool, available in several configurations, and we final-polished the forcing cone with emery paper wrapped around the cutting mandrel.

The fine work done by Hamilton Bowen rates a Conditional Buy. We thought the trigger job, freewheeling cylinder, and contouring of the cylinder to be very much worthwhile, though the latter did nothing for performance.

We thought the oversize base pin and the cylinder-mouth reaming to be needless for a revolver of this class. The new base pin was hard to get in and out of the cylinder because of the tight fit. If the pin was slightly rotated while all the way forward, out of the cylinder, the pin bound against the bottom of the barrel and refused to move rearward. As mentioned, the base pin now requires a screwdriver, making field inspection difficult at best. The uniforming of the chamber mouths did not improve accuracy to an extent worth the work on this ordinary-production revolver. If this revolver had a line-bored cylinder, perhaps the work would be of value. But line-bored cylinder openings are typically very uniform to begin with.



Arrow points to a screwdriver in the slot of a screw that positively holds the oversize base pin into the Ruger. The spring-loaded cross bolt is still functional. This pin will never shoot loose with any loads. Knurling helps get it out of the gun for cleaning, when needed.

Unfortunately, you can't get bits and pieces of a tune-up job done by Bowen. By the time he logs in your gun and inspects it, he may have $50 in time into it already. It's more efficient for him to do a modification "package" to your gun. His basic package is $295, which includes a trigger job, oversize base pin, cylinder reaming for uniformity, a new Bowen-made rear sight if your revolver has an adjustable rear – if not, you can specify either cylinder chamfering or free-wheeling — and rebluing the cylinder even if he only cleans up the chamber outlets. There are one or two other items included, depending on the specific gun you have, and Bowen can clarify this for you.

If you have a revolver you think needs work and you're serious about it, and don't plan to sell the gun any time soon, you many want to send it to Bowen. If you only want the free-wheeling task, any good local gunsmith ought to be able to install it for well under $75, short of rebluing, which may not be necessary. We'd pass on the big base pin and the chamber uniforming. Unless you've got a precision-made handgun and are a precision shooter who can take advantage of every little aid, the base pin and cylinder uniforming don't seem to be worth the cost.

Bowen's work is absolutely top-notch, about as good as it gets in the industry, in our experience. However, at a cost that approaches the original street price of the revolver, plus the fact that you'll never get your money back for custom work if you decide to sell the gun, we have to say this after-market modification is work that only the most serious handgunners ought to pursue. Bowen Classic Arms has a gorgeous catalog that sells for $5. Contact Hamilton Bowen at (865) 984-3583.

—Ray Ordorica