

TRADITIONALISTS STICK TO THEIR GUNS

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Ted Smith has heard all the arguments on both sides of the great muzzleloading debate and, frankly, he's sick of it.

The blackpowder-weapons community has been splitting for nearly 20 years.

Traditionalists say their flintlocks are true to the original intent of muzzleloading deer-hunting season - a historical re-creation.

Modern muzzleloaders are drawn to the technologically superior in-line rifles. They aren't interested in being the next Daniel Boone. They want the best possible weapon to take advantage of an extra hunting season.

Ohio's muzzleloader season opened yesterday and runs through Wednesday.

Smith, the founder of the Ohio Muzzleloading Association, is making a Rodney King-like appeal:

Can't we all just get along?

"I think it's time to get beyond (the debate)," Smith said. "There are people out there who want to take all shooting sports away from us, and my message is that we need to get over it.

"As an organization, we represent all of them (traditionalists and in-liners) and we promote all of them."

That may be, but there is no denying the strong feelings in both camps.

Traditionalists enjoy the notion that they are walking in their forefathers' footsteps. They may dress in buckskins and carry powder horns, and their weapons are finely crafted by a gunsmith.

They can properly lay claim to being the "originals," and, indeed, most states' muzzleloading seasons were created with them in mind.

To them, the advent of stainless-steel-barreled, synthetic-stock, scope-mounted in-line rifles was a slap in the face to what muzzleloading stood for.

"What has happened is that the original intent of the season - to give a season to folks who hunt in a traditional old-time manner - has evolved into just one more week," said Mark Herman, a Gahanna resident and member of the Ohio Long Rifle Collectors and the Ohio Valley Muzzleloading Gun Club.

When blackpowder seasons were introduced, deer weren't nearly as numerous as they are today. As the deer population grew, so did the number of rifle or shotgun hunters who wanted to take advantage of the muzzleloader season.

That was how the in-line was born in 1977. Missouri gunsmith Tony Knight set about trying to make the most modern gun possible while still complying to muzzleloader regulations: front-loading and single-shot.

In-lines have boomed in popularity. Claire Marvin of the New Albany Shooting Range said he sells two in-lines for every flintlock; Larry Gleckler of Buckeye Outdoors said in-lines account for 90 percent of his muzzleloading sales.

"The biggest reasons are they're easy to clean and easy to put a scope on," Gleckler said.

Herman frets that all the new technology may seduce in-line users into overestimating their weapon.

"I object to the advertisers who claim these in-line guns are 200-yard guns," Herman said. "Some of these hunters may not be very knowledgeable about muzzleloaders, so they take the word of the advertisers.

"A muzzleloader has a limitation of about 100 to 125 yards. If you have a scope, you may be able to see a deer at 200 yards, but that doesn't mean you can hit it. And wounded deer isn't the name of the game."

Marvin and Gleckler agree that several companies may be exaggerating the in-lines' capabilities.

But that point may be moot in Ohio, where most hunters don't find many clear shots past about 100 yards.

The debate took a nasty turn in May when Colorado banned the use of in-lines for the muzzleloader season. The ban came after intense lobbying by the state's muzzleloading association.

"This season was intended to be a re-creation," Tom Simpson, the Colorado association's president, said in a recent *Field & Stream* story. "We decided it was time to clean our own house."

Pennsylvania's muzzleloader season always has been open to flintlocks only. West Virginia allows in-lines, but not telescopic sights.

A spokesperson for the Ohio Division of Wildlife said such a move here is unlikely because complaints have been minimal.

Amid all the rancor, muzzleloading organization leaders such as Smith are trying to find common ground.

"We're kind of like a brotherhood and we welcome all the numbers we can get," said Ray Bass, president of the Columbus Muzzleloading Gun Club. "The folks who buy the newer modern weapons, those are people, too, and people are what we're after."

• **Caption:** PhotoFred Squillante. Mark Herman of Gahanna, holding a flintlock muzzleloading gun, says what began as a special week of hunting has been spoiled.

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