

FRENCH MAS 36 SPORTING RIFLE

(SOW'S EAR INTO A SILK PURSE)

By Cousin Bongo



Quick background: After seeing my first MAS 36 at a gun show back in the 1980s, I could tell the rifle had potential and I decided I wanted to convert one into a hunting rifle. The MAS Modèle 1936 rifle (MAS 36) is as interesting as it is unique. It is one of the most reliable, rugged and least complex bolt action battle rifles ever fielded by a modern army. The design is solid and, as history has shown, the rifle acquitted itself very well in the harsh conditions of combat.

When I bought my first MAS 36, I quickly learned - cosmetics aside - it is fast handling and ergonomically solid. The bolt throw is short, the rifle compact, and feeding and cycling are smooth and sure. Plus, the rifle comes with one of the best sets of iron sights ever stuck on an issue bolt action rifle.

The French took great care with the manufacture of the MAS 36 and all the parts on the couple of dozen I've messed with were of good quality, fit, and finish. However, the stock leaves a lot to be desired, especially for a sporting arm.

While the 7.5x54mm MAS is every bit the equivalent of the .308 Winchester, I found brass and loaded ammunition were not readily available in the U.S.A. at the time. This necessitated a switch to a different chambering. The length and design of the magazine dictates a cartridge with dimensions close to those of the 7.5x54. The 308 Winchester would work and I could have just set the barrel back and rechambered to 308 Winchester, (bore dimensions of the MAS 36 barrels are virtually identical to those of American .30 caliber barrels) but I was spending a fair amount of my time in black bear and grizzly/brown bear country in those days, so I wanted something that fired a bigger, heavier bullet. In the end, I decided to go with the .308's big brother, the .358 Winchester. Were I to do it again, I would most likely opt for the 308 Winchester simply due to ammo and reloading component availability.



Figure 1 - French MAS 36 rifle as issued.



Figure 2 - .308 Winchester (L) shown with 165 grain Nosler Ballistic tip next to .358 Winchester (R) shown with 225 grain Barnes X-Bullet circa 1995.

I installed a Douglas chrome-moly .35 caliber barrel in #2 contour and set the length set at twenty inches and added a banded ramp with 3/8" dovetail for the front sight. The 3/8" dovetail in the ramp allows the use of common and readily available front sight inserts such as the Williams Fire Sight, etc. but, more importantly, it allows for windage adjustment.

The receiver didn't require modification since my plan from the outset was to forego a scope and utilize the original aperture sight. However, the "dog leg" bolt handle had to go as I found bolt manipulation with it a bit awkward and I occasionally hit my thumb on the rear sight during rapid cycling - enough that I decided to do something about it. I cut off the original bolt handle and welded on a new one with a straight shank. This arrangement works much better for me.



Figure 3 - Aft view of as issued bolt. Note "dog leg" bolt handle.

To obtain better bolt knob-to-trigger geometry, I moved the trigger 1/2" rearward. Original two-stage trigger function was retained. Trigger surfaces were stoned and polished. The first stage moves at 3.7 lbs./1.7 kg; the second stage releases at 4.75 lbs./2.2 kg. Heavy, but it seems lighter in actual use.



Figure 4 – Bushbuck was the first animal taken with the MAS 36 sporter. Barnes 225 grain original X Bullet. PH Danie van Graan.

Moving things aft has advantages, but it isn't necessary. If I were to do it again (and I have), I would leave things in their original configuration and either use the issue bolt handle or simply weld on a straight bolt handle adjusted to be clear of the hand when firing. This simplifies things considerably.

For the stock, I used a nice piece of "French" walnut (*Juglans regia*). Because I set the trigger back 1/2", the original MAS triggerguard would no longer work so I installed a triggerguard from an 1898 Krag. The original buttstock-to-receiver fitting was retained, but a steel tang was welded to the lower aft part of the receiver to enhance attachment integrity. (Extreme care and careful heat control were exercised during the TIG welding of the tang as it is attached near the receiver's lower locking lug.)

The forend stock was carved out of the same piece of walnut and is held in place at the receiver front by the original fitting. A threaded insert was soldered onto the barrel several inches forward of the receiver and a screw secures the forend to the barrel at this point. Accuracy, even with this arrangement, is excellent with many loads grouping an inch or slightly less at 100 yards.

The MAS 36, as issued, incorporated no safety. The French believed - and rightly so - that firearms safety is between



Figure 5 - Custom "Cross Bolt" Safety. Safety in "ON" position in this photo.

one's ears. However, for sporting use, a safety of some sort is a desirable feature. Therefore, I installed a custom "cross-bolt" safety onto the aft inner portion of the triggerguard. On safe, it blocks the trigger. Trigger blocking is not the ideal safety setup but reference my first sentence this paragraph. This safety arrangement works well and is fast into action.

For the rear sight, I used the issue aperture and I simply enlarged the hole to about .180" turning it into a "Ghost Ring" as "Uncle" Jeff (Jeff Cooper) used to say.



Figure 6 - Front of rifle showing barrel band sling swivel and front sight.

STATS:

- The rifle weighs 8.10 lbs. unloaded with sling attached.
- The overall length is 40.0".
- Finish is manganese Parkerizing with a topcoat of flat black polymer.
- Accuracy is right at the 1" or less mark with many loads.

The .358 Winchester proved an excellent choice and it has been a stellar performer in the field. However, ammo is not usually sitting on the shelf of most stores, so stocking up and/or handloading is really a requirement with this cartridge.

First blood was a bushbuck taken with a single shot at 35 yards with PH Danie van Graan of Engonyameni Safaris back in 1995. (Barnes 225 grain .358" X Bullet @ 2503 fps.) After that, it was warthog at about 50 yards, and a zebra stallion somewhere close to 300 yards. All were one shot DRT.



Figure 7 - Barnes 225 grain original X Bullet compared to today's 200 grain Tipped Triple Shock X Bullet.



Figure 8 - Warthog taken with .358 Winchester as described in text. PH Danie van Graan.

My MAS 36 sporter project turned out nicely and the rifle has proven to be reliable, accurate and tough. In addition to my South Africa hunt, I have used it on a couple of arduous hunts in Alaska where both rifle and cartridge performed flawlessly, easily taking game out to 300 yards (the maximum I will shoot at unwounded game). Originally, I used the 225 grain Barnes .358" X-Bullet right at 2500 fps for my load, but I later switch to the Barnes 200 grain TTSX at a bit over 2600 fps.

My MAS 36 sporter resides right at the top of the list of my all-time favorite rifles.