

TO DRY FIRE OR NOT

Dear Technoid:

I have two semi-automatic shotguns, a Browning A-5 and a Beretta AL-390.

I have always been told never dry fire a gun, that is don't click an empty gun since it can/will damage the firing pin. I wonder is it better to leave

the thing cocked all the time, or should I dry fire it, or get some of those snap caps that supposedly protect the firing pin, or is it no big deal to leave the gun cocked for months at a time??

John

Dear John,

Storing guns hammer down or cocked is an old question, but certainly deserves revisiting every now and again. The theory is that springs, older leaf springs in particular, lose their strength when stored in a compressed state.

My gun collector friends ALWAYS store with hammer down over a snap cap. Clearly, this is the most cautious and sensible approach. Being less cautious and sensible, I generally store my SxS and O/Us cocked and my autos open. I have been using the same 1926 Webley and Scott leaf spring box lock hunting gun for fifteen years. It is not shot that much and it spends most of its time cocked. I have had no leaf spring problems. That doesn't mean that the guy who stores with dropped hammers won't get 30 years between spring failures, but as for me- so far, so good.

Coil springs have never given me any problem, stored cocked or not. As a matter of course, I replace all springs on competition guns every 25,000 rounds or sooner. I replace the action and magazine springs on my gas guns every 10,000. Springs are cheap. I don't believe that I have ever replaced a coil spring on my O/U hunting guns.

One thing is for sure- if you are going to store your guns with the hammers down, make sure to use snap caps on the O/U's and SxS's. Do NOT be cheap and use an old hull. The old hull will take some of the strain off of the ejectors when the gun is opened, but it will provide no protection at all for the firing pin or breech face on dry firing. After being dry fired a time or two, the primer on the old hull is dented to the extent that it no longer provides any resistance to the firing pin. That is the whole point of a snap cap- resistance to firing pin strike. Use proper snap caps, the kind with spring loaded brass or nylon inserts. Change them when they look worn. Snap caps are not a good place to economize.

Some O/Us and SxS guns can be happily dry fired without snap caps, but I am not sure which ones those are. Maybe some of the more modern guns. The trouble is that few manufacturers will tell you that you can dry fire their guns.

On other O/U and SxS guns, dry firing puts real stress on the firing pin shoulder and back side of the breech face. The Rottweil Olympia target guns made by Gamba in the late '70s would break a firing pin almost every time that they were dry fired! Not surprisingly, Mauser shotguns of the same period (also made by Gamba) shared this problem. I am sure that there are many other brands that do not like to be dry fired without snap caps, but since I do not do it or recommend it, this has not been an area of concern for me.

Gas guns are different. I have always dry fired my Remington 1100s, B-80s, Super-Xs, Ithaca 51s and various Berettas without benefit of snap caps. There has never been a problem of any kind doing this, though it was hard to tell with the Ithaca 51 as it broke constantly regardless of how it was treated.

One last thought on dry firing: Before dry firing, make sure to open the gun and make sure that it is either empty or that those snap caps really ARE snap caps. I know, I know, but you would be amazed!

Finally, whether hammer down or cocked, I always store my shotguns muzzle DOWN in the gun safe. This does two things: 1) it keeps pressure off of the stocks so that they do not take a set, and 2) it keeps any errant oil from soaking down into the head of the stock. I think that this is a lot more important than whether or not the gun is stored cocked.

Regards,
Bruce Buck
Shotgun Report's Technoid