

## A Beginners Guide To Cowboy Action Shooting



### So You Want To Be A Cowboy (or Girl) Action Shooter?

Getting started with the Single Action Shooting Society (SASS) [www.sassnet.com](http://www.sassnet.com) can seem challenging. However, it's not as hard to get started as you think.

New shooters should attend a match just to watch before competing so that they know what to expect. They can also attend one of the open practices offered during the season. If you show up at a monthly match, you're likely to have guns and ammo placed in your hands and asked if you want to try to shoot, how can you say no? Trust us, You'll be hooked. We were.

Every cowboy you might shoot with will be glad to offer you their tips, guns, and gear. We're glad you are here, and know you'll have a blast once we get guns in your hands. For a complete guide on SASS, check out the handbook.

<https://www.sassnet.com/uploads/downloads/Shooters%20Handbooks%20-CAS/CAS%202025%20SHB%20-%20%20Vers%2027.9%20-%20May%202025%20-%20FINAL.pdf>

Starting at the most basic level, you need to get the guns to shoot a match and then worry about the rest of the gear later.

## Cowboy Action Shooting Pistols

To shoot a match, you need a pair of Single Action pistols. Cowboy action shooting (CAS) requires two pistols to be shot per stage, but only 5 rounds loaded per pistol. One thing about CAS is that there are so many categories and types of guns that you can use, there's something for everyone.

Cowboy Action Shooters are divided into two different categories:

- Open Age (Any Age)
- Age-Based (Specific Age Categories)

There are also three main shooting style categories:

- Standard – using a 2 handed grip
- Duelist Style – Single Fixed Sight Revolver or Double Duelist cocking and shooting with a gun in one hand.
- Gunfighter Style – Two Fixed Sight Revolvers, cocking and shooting with a gun in each hand.

Depending on what you're looking to shoot, you can choose .32 caliber or larger with non-adjustable sights, adjustable sights, use black powder, .36 caliber or larger percussion pistols, and many more depending on the category.

There are Colt 1873's and their clones made by Uberti [www.uberti-usa.com/cartridge-revolvers/1873-cattleman](http://www.uberti-usa.com/cartridge-revolvers/1873-cattleman) and Pietta [piettafirearms.com/revolvers/1873-great-western-ii-revolvers](http://piettafirearms.com/revolvers/1873-great-western-ii-revolvers) and imported by Taylors and Company [www.taylorsfirearms.com](http://www.taylorsfirearms.com) , and Cimarron [www.cimarron-firearms.com](http://www.cimarron-firearms.com) . Also popular are Ruger Vaqueros, and Blackhawks [ruger.com/products/vaquero/overview.html](http://ruger.com/products/vaquero/overview.html) . Some even shoot Remington 1858 clones and BP single actions and their conversions.



*Colt 1873 Peacemaker*



*Uberti 1873 Clone*



*Ruger Vaquero*



*Ruger Blackhawk*



*Remington 1858 Army*



*Colt 1851 Navy Conversion*

## Cowboy Action Shooting Rifles

The rules for the rifle are that it must be any lever or slide action, tubular fed, exposed hammer rifle or carbine manufactured between 1860 and 1899, or any reproduction thereof. The barrel must be over 16" in length and no box magazines or rifle calibers such as .30-30 or .38-55 are allowed. Only original or replica style open iron sights or tang mounted peep sights of the 1860 to 1899 period are allowed.

Probably the most popular are the Uberti 1873 clones. Along with these are the 1866 Yellowboy, and the 1860 Original Henry. These have large supplies of aftermarket parts for the gunsmith to short stroke, lighten, improve and make race ready (slick up) as you improve.



*1860 Henry Rifle Clone*



*1866 Yellowboy*



*1873 Winchester Clone*

Winchester still also imports their 1873 made under license by Miroku in Japan.

Rossi and others make Winchester 1892 clones. There are plenty of aftermarket parts to help slick up these rifles. Some Rossi's are particular to bullet shape and cartridge overall length (OAL). These are more economical to the newer shooter, but you might find yourself buying an 1873 quicker than you expect. <https://rossiusa.com/firearms/rifles/lever-action/>



*Rossi 92*

Marlin 94's are another good option for the cowboy action shooter. Their recent purchase and relaunch by Ruger has improved the product's quality. Action parts exist to slick up these too.  
[https://www.marlinfirearms.com/s/model\\_70410/](https://www.marlinfirearms.com/s/model_70410/)



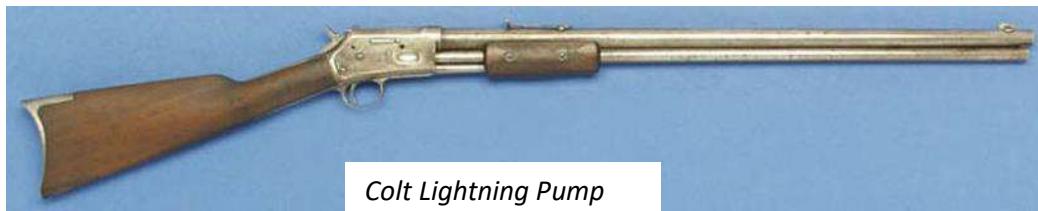
Also of Note is the "Original Henry Rifle" made by Henry USA. This is a toggle-link design like the imported clones, but the aftermarket parts are not interchangeable.  
<https://www.henryusa.com/firearm/the-original-henry-rifle/>



There are also New Henry USA guns out there. They make a fine 22 for practice, but their centerfire guns are not very suited to the speed of Cowboy Action Shooting. There are those who have made them racier, but you will be better suited buying a Rossi or a Marlin before a Henry if budget is a concern <https://www.henryusa.com/firearm/big-boy-brass-rifle-carbine/>.



Also allowed are Colt Lightning Pump Actions and their clones. These need a lot of gunsmithing work to make them run smoothly.



## Cowboy Action Shooting Shotguns

There are a lot of options out there you can use such as an 1897 pump-action, side by side, or even an 1887 lever-action shotgun.

Here are a few guidelines on choosing your shotgun:

Side by Side Shotguns typical of the period from approximately 1860 until 1899 without automatic ejectors, with or without external hammers.

Single or double triggers are allowed.



*Stoeger Side by Side*



*External Hammer Side by Side*



*SKB Side by Side*

Lever 1887 or 1897 Pump action single barrel tubular feed, exposed hammer shotguns of the period are allowed, whether original or replicas.



*1887 Lever Action  
High on Cool Factor*



*Winchester 1887 Pump Action  
If you shoot one, get a couple more there are  
a lot of parts in it that break.*

The bore must be no smaller than 20 gauge, but no bigger than 10 gauge. The barrel length for the shotgun must be over 18" in length.

There are other rules in the handbook on the type of ammo that can be used as well as a limit on only being able to load 2 rounds maximum at a time.

All Shotguns can benefit from the work of a cowboy gunsmith to help them run smoothly and quickly.

## Set Up Your Cart, Bring A Stool & Snack



*You're going to need a cart in order to haul all your gear around at a CAS match.*

There are way too many guns and too much gear at a CAS stage to be able to haul everything around in a backpack. Top of the Line are Rugged Gear carts. They are lightweight and collapsible. <https://ruggedgear.com/shooting-carts/>



*Rugged Gear Cart*

When you are at a match, you will see a large variety of gun carts. There are a lot of custom cart builders out there, or you can always build your own depending on what gear you need to carry around. There are many options, plan ahead and decide if you want a built-in seat, need to carry a small cooler, or want to build a take-off ammo box, etc.



*A Yul Lose Custom Cart: A work of Art*



*A Stagecoach Cart: You can be as extravagant as you want*



*Fairly Common Design Gun Cart*



*A Very Simple Gun Cart*

One thing you want to invest in before even going to a match is a stool to sit on. Cowboy matches are about working together to prep the stage after each shooter completes a stage, a slow-to-deploy folded armchair is not something people use. It's also extremely difficult to sit down on safely with all your gear and guns on.

The best thing to buy is a tall, lightweight folding bar stool.

Most monthly CAS matches do not break for lunch or snacks, so it's all about being prepared in the moment. You are going to need a snack or a drink while you are at the event. Plan on packing a light cooler with water and sports drinks. Don't forget to bring snacks like nuts, crackers, or whatever you need to keep your energy up.

## Choosing Your Leather Rig



*You're going to be wearing it at every match, so make sure to pick a leather rig that is comfortable.*

If you can afford it, the absolute best starter rigs are from Mernickle

<https://mernickleholsters.com/collections/cowboy-western-holsters-1> and Kirkpatrick leather <https://kirkpatrickleather.com/product-category/western-holsters/> belt and holsters sets. The leather you absolutely need for every match is a wide belt, two holsters for your pistols, and a shotgun belt (or slide to put on your wide belt). What's not necessary to have, you will eventually want to get, is a slide with loops to fit about 5 spare rounds of ammo on. This is for reloads on a stage or any rounds you miss, jack-out, or forget to load (yes, it happens).

You can start with budget leather, but you will look to upgrade as you start shooting better. Watch on the SASS Wire Classifieds for people selling their old gear. If you invest in a good belt, you can upgrade the holsters as funds allow. There are many great leatherworkers out there such as Doc Noper <https://www.facebook.com/people/Doc-Noper-Gun-Leather/100057429160914/>, Michigan Rattler <https://www.facebook.com/MichiganRattlerLeather/>, and many more.

## Reloading Shotguns

Shotguns are loaded on the clock, so you need to carry your shotgun ammo with you. You have options for holding your shotgun shells at a CAS match. Many choose a separate ammo belt that goes below your belly button and above your shooting belt. Or a shotgun slide with at least 6-8 loops on it that you can slide onto your shooting belt with your holsters. A separate shotgun belt is most common. When you're shooting a competition, if you have a tall torso or are moving around, shotgun loads that are on your waist can fall out easier and they are further down to grab.

In larger matches, you can end up with a 6+ shotgun stage. At the minimum, you will need 6 rounds to clear all the plates. So a slide can get really wide breaking your pistol holsters up even further. You don't have to have anything super fancy or get something brand new to get started, but you do need something.

## Gunsmithing Work

Gunsmithing is where the fun really comes in, but if you don't know what you are doing, send it out to a knowledgeable Cowboy Gunsmith.

The first gun to send would be your shotgun. A cowboy action shotgun needs to be smooth enough that when you unlock the barrel, it opens quickly with only one hand on the gun. You want the chamber to have a bit of work done to it to allow for shotgun loads to fly out with a bump on the shoulder. You may want a newly upgraded trigger or lighter trigger pull added to your firearm, among other performance-related things. Nothing is worse than a stiff shotgun that fights you every step of the way.

If you are buying an 1873 rifle, purchase one with a short stroke kit already installed if you can. If you didn't and bought one stock, it can be added later. There are a lot of aftermarket parts to improve the rifle. If you are mechanically minded, you can fit and install a short stroke kit. Lighter springs are also easy to change. Also look for a larger brass sight for the rifle. It will make it quicker and easier to shoot. All these changes can be done by a shade tree gun mechanic, or your favorite Cowboy Gunsmith.

Pistols, short of short stroking are pretty easy to change springs on the hammer and the trigger. Wolff Gunsprings [www.gunsprings.com](http://www.gunsprings.com) have reduced power hammer and trigger spring kits for 1873's and Ruger revolvers. If shooting Uberti or the other Italian clones, buy yourself a set of hardened screws for the guns. The steel in their gun screws is as soft as bubble gum, and they were installed by gorillas. Invest in a set of gunsmith screwdrivers too. You'll probably destroy the stock screws even with the gunsmith screwdrivers, bugger them up and you'll be glad to have replacement screws. Don't touch your guns with your Craftsman screwdrivers.

Oh and watch those springs, they will launch across the room in a heartbeat.

## Ammo & Reloading Equipment



*A good strategy for choosing CAS ammo is to purchase pistols and rifles that use the same caliber.*

If you are already reloading, or are looking to get into it, a single press can do a lot. Especially if you're shooting the same caliber in your pistols and rifle. For shotgun ammo, You can start with Winchester AA low noise, low recoil 12-gauge shotgun rounds. Your shoulder will thank you. If you get lucky enough to find someone trustworthy to make affordable CAS ammo for you, consider that route.

Reloading takes a time commitment, however, if you start shooting a lot, you will find you will want to learn how to reload. With it you can tailor your load, bullet shape, and overall length (OAL) that best suits your guns. If that is not your thing, there are several vendors out there where you can buy your ammo. Bullets by Scarlett [bulletsbyscarlett.com](http://bulletsbyscarlett.com), and Cowboy Choice Ammunition <https://choiceammunition.com/cowboy-action/> are a couple of bullet and ammo vendors. Remember No Copper Jackets or Copper Plated bullets are allowed in Cowboy Action. Lead, Moly, and Polymer coated bullets are allowed.

You will learn about so many wonderful vendors and craftsmen as you're on the cowboy trail. It's a community that has an amazing amount of talented people in it.

## Clothing & Accoutrements

You don't need to spend a fortune on Cowboy Action Shooting clothing to start. As you begin shopping for cowboy shooting clothing and other items, Goodwill and other thrift stores are your best friends.

A good resource can be found on YouTube. Search "Arizona Ghostriders, Dressing the Part, getting started on the cheap" <https://www.youtube.com/c/ArizonaGhostriders/videos>. There are also Dressing the Part videos for various residents of the Old West. Also, keep in mind there

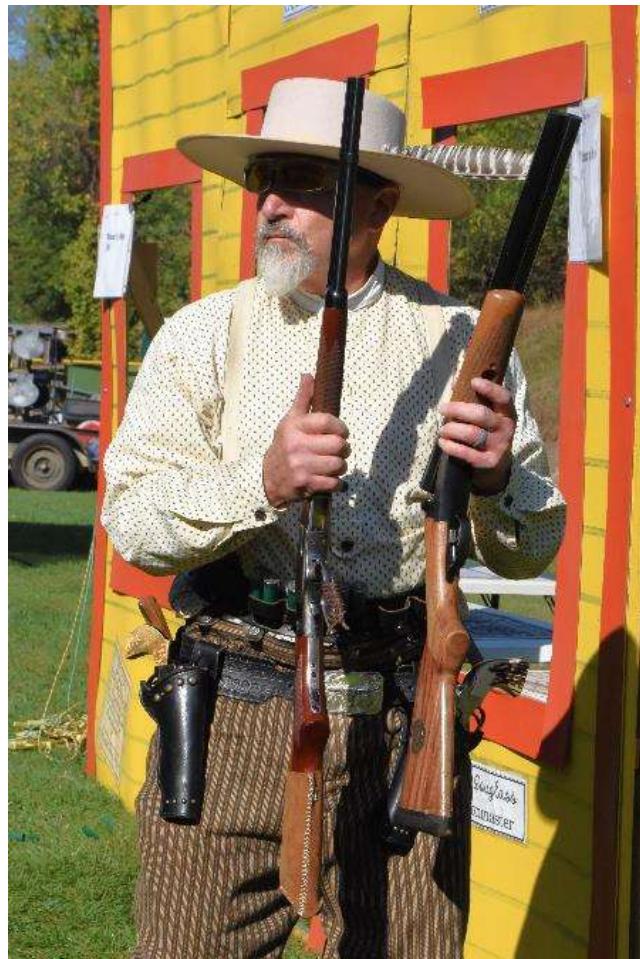
are always vendors that travel to state matches that sell cowboy clothes and gear. Watch for local club's swap meets too. Swap meets are places to get great deals on gear, clothes, and even guns.

Get yourself a good ole' cowboy hat and a pair of cowboy boots. The different CAS categories require different styles or accouterments. You'll pick up things along the way such as pins, bandana, spurs, roping cuffs, and more!

## SAFETY EQUIPMENT

Remember to bring your Eyes and Ears. Your hearing protection needs to be earplugs, some other sort of plugs, or a behind the ear headset because an over the head headset won't fit over or under your cowboy hat. Also don't forget eye protection that wraps around you face and has good side shields. We get hit by lead splatter at times from shooting steel. If you have prescription lenses, get some side shields to go on them.

## Are You Ready To Shoot CAS?



*Cowboy Action Shooting is all about having fun! It's a great community to be a part of, we can't wait to see you at the next match.*

It seems like a lot of items to get going. So plan ahead, start small, and borrow where you can. It can take a full year to find guns, get the ammo figured out, fix up a gun cart, find authentic clothing, get the gunsmithing done, and find the used leather. Don't worry if you have to borrow items for months from many different people, that's what the CAS culture is all about.

One thing to know about Cowboy Action Shooting, it's that almost everyone you meet is so excited you are there. We welcome you to this sport we all love so much. Those who have been shooting for a while, have back up guns, carts, leather, and more gear than they know what to do with. They are a generous bunch. They help pay it forward the same way others did for them when they started.

## Cowboy Action Shooting Needs You

Cowboy Action Shooting is still a growing sport. It's a great one that needs support from the larger community now more than ever. You'll meet and shoot matches with top shooters as young as 15, and as old as 82. It's a special community.

Your biggest resource other than the SASS Wire

Forum <https://forums.sassnet.com/index.php?/forum/14-sass-wire-classifieds/> is the S.A.S.S. and Cowboy Action Shooting Facebook page

<https://www.facebook.com/groups/247150769193328/>. If you are a female, there is a specific group called Ladies of Cowboy Action Shooting (LOCAS). The purpose of these groups is to ask as many questions as possible. You can also connect to some of the best folks in the world. Remember to have fun and enjoy the cowboy way!

## To Become A SASS Member

The SASS Wire Forum might be the best place to pick up just about everything you need to get started in Cowboy Action. Typically, you won't need membership to SASS right away, unless you are shooting a state competition or other large match. However, you do have to have a membership in order to buy and sell items on the Forum.

To apply for a SASS membership, go to the SASS website, click join now, and fill out the application. When you submit your application, you also submit your top three choices for a shooting alias name. Once you're approved, you will receive an email back with your approved alias. You can then create your account on the Forum and look for all of the guns and gear needed to shoot!

While you are at it, support our State organization the Wolverine Rangers and join them too. They run our State Championship (Range War) and support all our State clubs too. Find them at [www.wolverinerangers.org](http://www.wolverinerangers.org)

When you have questions, come on out to the club meetings on the second Wednesday of each month. We even have a video conference link too. We'd love to see you on the range with us.

Thanks for reading this and we'll see you on down the trail.

Not Dead Ed (Sheriff)