

VALUE MUZZLELOADER SHOOTOUT

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Today's inline muzzleloader designs put front-stuffers of the past to shame. Materials, construction, accuracy, and ease of cleaning have all made leaps and bounds in improvement. Nowadays, you can go into nearly any sporting goods store and pick yourself out a smoke pole for well under \$500. Many of the budget options can be found for under \$350. Below, I will compare two high value muzzleloaders I had the privilege of extensively testing at the range and think you should consider in a good 'ol old fashioned pros and cons showdown. Bullet statements in all pros and cons lists will descend in order of my prioritization of feature uniqueness and importance.



The first rifle up for consideration is the T/C Impact. Originally released in 2010, the Impact has found favor with many price conscious hunters and continues to earn its place in the T/C lineup.

What T/C Says:

MSRP \$325 for the model shown above
26" magnum barrel
Rate of twist 1:28"
Accepts loads up to 150 grains of FFg black powder/equivalent substitute
Adjustable fiber optic sights
Break-open hood design
Triple lead thread breech plug
209 primer ignition
Overall length 41.5"
Length of pull 12.5 - 13.5"
1" stock spacer
T/C Lifetime Warranty

What I Say:

T/C Impact! Pros:

- Recoil pad is super cushy
- Better recessed crown (Quick Load Accurizer) for easier loading
- Stock is "grippy" without being "grabby"
- Edges are more rounded for smoother transitions
- Darker, more muted stainless finish
- Deeper camo finish
- 1" stock spacer allows the gun to grow with young shooters
- Ramrod guide is the same stainless steel as the barrel (aesthetics)

T/C Impact! Cons:

- Possible long-term reliability issues
- Iron sights not adjustable enough to sight them in with my common, standard load
- Breech opened up several times upon firing without any indications of the cause
- Iron sights could improve with thinner fiber optic pipes
- Breech release hood is made of a cheap plastic

Refer to my article, *A Smoke Pole Saga: Part II - Irons & Optics*, for expanded explanations on the first three concerns:



The second rifle up for consideration is the CVA Optima V2. Introduced in 2013, the Optima V2 incorporates multiple high end features into a wallet-friendly package.

What CVA Says:

Price \$345 for the model shown above
26" fluted barrel
416 stainless steel
Bullet guiding muzzle
Reversible hammer spur
Quick Release Breech Plug (QRBP)
100% ambidextrous stock
CrushZone recoil pad
Solid aluminum PalmSaver ramrod
Overall length 41"
Length of pull 14"
6.65 lbs. total weight
Northwest Ignition System QRBP available from the factory
Lifetime warranty

What I Say:

CVA Optima V2 Pros:

- Trigger – lighter pull, crisper break, more ergonomic shape
- Tool-less QRBP simplifies both range and field use
- Breech lock/release mechanism feels tighter and more robust
- Breech plug easier to clean
- Reversible hammer – aggressively textured, the offset pairs well with my low scope mounts
- Breaks down further and more easily for cleaning
- Northwest Ignition System and Blackhorn breech plugs available from the factory
- Heavier duty ramrod less susceptible to flexing
- 2 piece ramrod guides
- Barrel fluting looks more upscale

CVA Optima V2 Cons:

- Rubber butt pad isn't horrible, but it's hard enough that it deserves a mention as a drawback
- CVA stock feels cheaper
- Brighter stainless finish gives off more glare in the field

Closing Points

My first thought when testing the Impact trigger was one of pleasant surprise. I was impressed with how light, smooth, and crisp the break was, and I'm still satisfied with it on a budget muzzleloader, but the CVA is noticeably better. Stock ergonomics are a toss-up for me and will likely come down to personal aesthetics preferences for others. The Impact features a one-piece stock appearance whereas the Optima V2 has a two-piece design.

For all the pluses and minuses of each gun, they both shoot very well with each rifle easily producing groups of 1.5" at 100 yards. The Impact even posted a few sub-MOA groups while the Optima V2 produced a couple 1" groups with only a fraction of the range time.

Even after the frustrations and confusion I have with figuring out why my particular Impact stopped shooting well I'd happily try another T/C muzzleloader to see if it's worthy of the deer woods. Heck, I would even try another Impact as I feel my situation was more of a one-time head-scratcher.

Shootout Winner

For me, the CVA Optima V2 is the unquestionable winner of this high value muzzleloader showdown. The minimally higher price tag rewards shooters with a noticeably better trigger and gun design as a whole. The Quick Release Breech Plug makes tool-less range and field operation a breeze. A simple swap to CVA's factory available Northwest Ignition System QRBP (\$21) allows hunters to be compliant in localities that only permit the most primitive muzzleloader designs and equipment. Similarly, switching over to CVA's Blackhorn Breechplug (\$36) allows shooters to make the most effective use of smokeless (muzzleloader) powders. The barrel fluting adds styling points as icing on the cake. In summary, the CVA Optima V2 raises the bar for what shooters should expect in budget smoke pole design and performance.

Stay tuned for a follow up story with the CVA Optima V2, *A Smoke Pole Saga: Part III - Dedicated.*