

Peer Review

Peer Review presents an entirely new approach to shotgun reviews. We actually let real people, and not just the experts, get their hands on the guns we evaluate and share their opinions with Shotgun Life readers. The Peer Review participants are trusted, long-time shooting partners with the Shotgun Life staff. They are not affiliated with any gun manufacturer and take pride in presenting their objective, unbiased assessments to complement the introduction by Shotgun Life Publisher, Irwin Greenstein.

Peer Review: The Krieghoff Essencia

Written by Irwin Greenstein with the opinions of Jim Finkel, Jim "Bugsy" Graves, Owen Lanier and Lars Magnusson

Even though the Krieghoff Essencia took the Silver Award at the 2003 "Gold Medal Concourse d'Elegance of Fine Guns" and won the Shooting Sportsman Award for a contemporary, custom-fitted gun that best typifies the upland hunting ideal, our Peer Review group approached the Krieghoff Essencia with a measure of skepticism.

Everyone seemed to be wondering the same thing...

Had Germany's maker of premier over/under shotguns and hunting rifles finally over-reached with its British-style, side-by-side game gun that starts at nearly \$30,000?

At first glance, Krieghoff's Essencia is the epitome of British elegance. You'd expect the color case hardened receiver to bear the name of Holland & Holland, Purdey or Boss rather than the gentle arc of Krieghoff set in gold.

But as we were to discover, the Krieghoff Essencia held many more surprises that pushed the envelope of what we can expect from a "best gun" in the British school of bespoke game guns.



We spent two days with a 20-gauge Krieghoff Essencia at the Southern Side by Side Championship & Exhibition Spring Classic, held at the Deep River Sporting Clays and Shooting School in Sanford, North Carolina.

The Krieghoff Essencia was on loan to us from Griffin & Howe, an authorized Krieghoff dealer exhibiting at the event.

Of course it would have been ideal to use the Krieghoff Essencia on grouse, pheasants or chukars; but given it was out of season we put the shotgun through its paces in one of the most eclectic side-by-side events on the planet. There were shooters resplendent in their vintage accoutrements competing against a more casual set of participants in shorts and sandals acclimatized to the late-April heat wave.

The Southern Side by Side Championship & Exhibition Spring Classic gave us the opportunity to catch up with our Peer Review friends who were eager to see if the Essencia lived up to its mystique of a classic British best gun as rendered by the highly competent Krieghoff.

The Shotgun Life Peer Review column puts a fresh twist on evaluations by letting shotgun enthusiasts who we know and trust shoot the gun and express their opinion – giving our readers a valuable, multi-faceted composite of the gun. As we organized the schedule for the Essencia, one question remained clear: Could Krieghoff really pull this off?

We evaluated the Krieghoff Essencia just as it was approaching a celebrated milestone. Since shipments began in 2004, 94 bespoke Krieghoff Essencias have been completed and delivered – making it quite possible that as you read this production will surpass the magic 100 mark.

With an eye towards the future, the Krieghoff Essencia is obviously a success. But back in 2003, the very idea of a side-by-side from Krieghoff caught observers off guard. The company's sterling reputation was based on its world-class competition and hunting long guns of sturdy boxlock proportions. A sensuous, round-body, side-by-side was such a radical departure by the company it seemed that the Krieghoff name was gratuitously put in jeopardy.

From within Krieghoff, however, the Essencia made perfect sense. As Krieghoff General Manager, Alex Diehl explained, the Essencia was a "logical consequence" of the company's storied history in hunting guns. And he let the numbers speak for themselves in regards to the success of the Krieghoff Essencia; the 2003 production allocation of 8-10 guns per year has been increased to a maximum of 20 per year since 2006 and each year's allotment is spoken for in advance.

The Krieghoff Essencia is available in two round-body configurations: a sidelock and a boxlock. The sidelock is the standard action with the boxlock available on request. Having shot only a sidelock, we can report that the Krieghoff Essencia has near-perfect handling and balance (more on that in a moment).



While the sidelock is available in 12, 16, 20 and 28 gauge plus .410 bore, the boxlock can only be ordered 20, 16 or 28 gauge.

The 20-gauge frame serves as the basis for the 16-gauge gun. Plus the 20-gauge frame handles the 20/28 gauge combo

In 2007, Krieghoff unveiled the Essencia 28 Gauge Small-Frame sidelock. The scaled down frame dropped the weight from 6 pounds, 6 ounces to slightly under six pounds. The Small Frame sidelock was designed to accept the 28-inch .410 barrels. The Small Frame sidelock can also accommodate a single non-selective option.

Nearly everyone in the Peer Review group found it unacceptable that a \$30,000 game gun should have an optional single trigger priced at \$1,450 that is non-selective. After all, a side-by-side at one-tenth the price would come with a selective single trigger.

We asked best-gun expert, manufacturer and author Chris Batha about it, as we spent about 30-minutes together in his Boswell tent at the Southern Side by Side.

As Chris explained it, a sidelock has "the equivalent of a Swiss watch on each side of the action. With a barrel selector it becomes difficult to regulate the reliability. You'd also want to put the barrel selector on the wood, and you can't do that with a sidelock. Besides, the true purist would go for the double trigger anyway."

During our conversation, Chris extolled the virtues of the sidelock action in the Krieghoff Essencia, comparing it to the universally accepted gold-standard set by Holland and Holland.

The Krieghoff Essencia is built around a back-action sidelock wherein the mainspring is mounted rearward toward the stock versus the muzzle. Reorientation of the mainspring enables a slimmer profile befitting a game gun that demands lightning reflexes.

Anyone who has ever handled a round-body shotgun will immediately recognize the advantages of this remarkably organic shape versus the geometric proportions typical of a boxlock frame; it's more instinctive to drive the round body toward your quarry with its superior ergonomics.

Whether or not a sidelock is more reliable than a boxlock is the stuff of conversations over single-malt scotch and cigars. Originally, sidelocks came to prominence for their ease of maintenance in the far-off colonies of the Great Empire. You simply knocked out a few pins that held together the sideplates, revealing the action. By comparison, the stock must be removed on a boxlock in order to access the action.

Krieghoff helped ensure the reliability of the Essencia by hand-finishing the action to the closest possible tolerances and then applying a non-corrosive gold wash over the cocking indicators, springs and bridles. The other parts of the action are mostly case color hardened.



The stunning action of the Krieghoff Essencia.

Likewise, the automatic ejectors were perfectly machined and performed flawlessly during our test.

“The attention to detail is incredible,” Chris observed. “The Essencia is finished to a best level of quality.”

If you guessed by now that the Krieghoff Essencia is hand-built in a small shop by dedicated craftsmen you would be absolutely correct.

Krieghoff is working in partnership with master German gunsmith **Jens Ziegenhahn** to produce the Essencia.

Like Krieghoff, Ziegenhahn was started in Suhl, Germany. Suhl is the cradle of the German armaments industry, dating back to 1365 when the city's coat of arms bearing two hammers signified its prominence in metal working. Drawing upon the regional deposits of iron ores, copper and silver the gunsmiths of Suhl produced cannons beginning in the 17th century and arms critical to the German Army during World War II. Today, Suhl is home to Germany's only school for armor-making and features a well-respected weapons museum.

The Ziegenhahn clan has perfected the art of hand-made pistols and rifles for more than four generations. Many of their guns are considered highly collectible.

Krieghoff, meanwhile, has been operating in the region since 1886. Based in Ulm, the company initially focused on fine hunting rifles, expanding its offerings to competition shotguns in the late 1950s and early 1960s. Krieghoff continues to be a family owned and operated business, with the fourth-generation Dieter Krieghoff managing the U.S. subsidiary Krieghoff International in Ottsville, Pennsylvania.

Ziegenhahn and Krieghoff marry high-tech, computer-controlled machinery with hand finishing in the production of each Krieghoff Essencia. The frames are machined from of a block of steel. The barrels are cold hammer forged. In terms of assembly, the fitting of the parts is done by hand.

Rounding out the team of German experts working on the Krieghoff Essencia is Jörg Schilling and his firm Schilling Spezialbeschichtungen GmbH. Jörg worked with scientists at the University of Chicago to develop a 20th century approach to the traditional bone-and-charcoal method of the case hardened finish on the Krieghoff Essencia.

As Alex said, “This level of wood-to-metal finish can't be done by machine.”

The 20-gauge Krieghoff Essencia at our disposal had a Prince of Wales stock and a forend that Krieghoff calls a “semi-beavertail,” although we would describe it as a hybrid Prince of Wales and splinter forend with an Anson pushbutton release. The nicely figured wood featured Krieghoff's Tru-oil finish.

A gorgeous checkered butt plate fit seamlessly against the stock. The length of pull was 14 7/8 inches. As we know, side by sides have a reputation for kicking you around, but it was a testament to the Essencia's engineering that recoil was negligible even with wood instead of rubber against our shoulder.

The 30-inch barrels were chambered for 3-inch shells and were choked IC/IM. They were topped by a concave rib.

When you pick up a Krieghoff Essencia it makes a wonderful first impression. Perhaps that sense of surprise came when the heft felt lighter than what you would expect from a Krieghoff over/under. At the same time, it conveyed an undeniable Teutonic competence – a touch more indomitable than a best-quality British game gun.

That favorable first impression was universally shared among the Peer Review group when they first laid hands on the gun – allaying the skepticism that accompanied the prospect of initially agreeing to shoot it.

Out on the sporting clays range, the Krieghoff Essencia came up with ease. It felt nimble, solid and eager. You never felt as though you had to over-compensate for creep or take-up anywhere in the gun. It readily hit the pocket, your face comfortably on the stock. The swing was effortless as you approached the break point of the target. The unobstructed view, graceful trigger and round-body contour coalesced into a delightful shooting experience.

Stepping into the cage, however, the automatic safety kept dogging us as we would forget to switch it off, but the gun can be ordered with a manual safety. If in fact you wanted to use the Krieghoff Essencia for sporting clays, the gun can be ordered with Briley interchangeable chokes directly from the factory.

The balance of the gun also made it very easy to carry between stations. Of course the ultimate test would be carrying the gun through the fields of Northamptonshire, but it would be hard to anticipate any undue strain.

Now let's hear from the Peer Review group.



Jim Finkel, Dentist

Gun of Choice: Krieghoff K-80, Beretta 687

"This is a handsome gun. There were no flaws in the finish. It worked great and handled very nicely. Having mostly tournament guns that are made for me, the Essencia fit just as good. I found that the recoil was negligible. The gun was just heavy enough to absorb most of it, but at the same time the gun was light enough to carry. When trying the gun, the only problem is that it has no way to select the barrel, which could easily be cured with a double trigger."



Jim "Bugsy" Graves, Residential Home Builder

Gun of Choice: Beretta BT10

"Even though the gun was too long for me, I found that it went to the target better than any other 20-gauge I've ever shot. It almost felt like a sporting clays gun. On long targets it was very smooth. It felt well-balanced and easy to handle."



Owen Lanier, Highway Contractor

Gun of Choice: Caesar Guerini 12 gauge

"This is a nice, little gun. It doesn't kick and seems to handle pretty well. I would need a little more cast to it, though. I liked shooting it. It was real responsive. I'm fine with the single, non-selective trigger."



Lars Magnusson, President, Blixt & Company

Gun of Choice: British game guns

"This is a very nice set-up. Measurement-wise, it's set more for driven shooting...a little higher than you'd see compared to U.S. measurements, which I think is nice to see because it's not very often you see these for measurements. The balance is very nice. It ran away from me a couple of times, but I'm used to shooting a heavier gun. The pointability is very nice. There's no barrel selector, but that was smart to ensure reliability and knowing Krieghoff I would think the trigger on this gun would be very reliable. The piece of wood is beautiful. I think they did a nice job with the engraving on the receiver. The gun feels very nice in your hand."

Irwin Greenstein is the Publisher of Shotgun Life. You can send your comments to letters@shotgunlife.com.