The .38-55 Winchester

The .38-55 Winchester has always intrigued me as an all purpose cartridge. It has the reputation as a killer of big game from the old days as a black powder cartridge and was popular in schuetzen target shooting for years.

In my humble opinion, it is almost the perfect cast bullet caliber. Many good bullet designs are available, the case is not too big, and new cases are readily available. Cases can be easily formed from .30/30 cases and it’s very easy to load for. Recoil is mild and accuracy from a good barrel is great.

I researched .38-55s for years and finally decided that I’d forego the pleasure of owning a Model 94 Winchester as the barrel diameters varied too much, many of the old lever barrels are less than pristine due to corrosive primers and collectors have run the prices of a decent M94 out of my reach.

During this period, I was in love with Ruger Number 1s. Although the .38-55 was chambered in the Ruger Number 1A, specimens are few and far between and command collector prices.

I also looked at the .375 Winchester as a substitute and even went as far as getting a M94 Big Bore in .375 Winchester. About this time, Marlin put out the .38-55 in their Cowboy model and I latched on to one of them. Try as I might, I was never able to get the Marlin to shoot like I thought it should due to the larger diameter bore and I wasn’t about to introduce a different diameter bullet into my inventory as I also have a .375 Holland and Holland that loves .376” diameter bullets. The Model 94 shot fine but had no capabilities of mounting a scope that met my expectations and I have to have one due to failing eyesight. In due course, both of these were traded.

Finally, tiring of this searching nonsense, I ordered a new Number 1V Ruger in .220 Swift and directed my gun shop to ship it to Fred Smith at Bullberry Barrel Works with instructions to make a .38-55 on it with a 1V contour and a 1-16 twist Douglas Supreme barrel on it with a matte finish on all of the metal. One of the factors that influenced my decision is that the Number 1 action is designed and constructed like a bank vault and my intentions were to shoot .375 Winchester cases and ammo in it if the need ever came around that I needed a good woods rifle for hunting. Now in the Number 1, I can get away with this practice but be aware that this is a dangerous practice by owners of Marlins and Winchesters as they’re not designed for the pressure of the .375 Winchester. Don’t do it.

About this time, the Encore came out and Thompson Center’s barrel making shop burned. Bullberry was the only company that had the capability to make Encore barrels outside T/C so my project got put on the back burner.

Fourteen months later after threatening to come out there, I finally got my .38-55.
The wait was well worth it as they’d done a fantastic job on it.

Now, this was designed as a “mouse gun” as we call the dolled up shooting guns here that are used primarily off the bench so I proceeded to put a Keplinger set trigger and a Mould Speed Hammer kit in it. About this time, a Weaver 6-24X scope came into my possession and it was added to the rig. It’s not what I’d call a hunting rifle but it sure shot well off the bench.

**Cases**

Initially, I bought several hundred factory .38-55 cases as they’re readily available.

Then, I made a big batch out of .30-30 once fired cases. This is a fairly simple procedure. Occasionally you’ll lose one but for the most part, they turn out well. Choose clean, once fired cases. If the cases look old, anneal the necks or they’ll split.

Full length resize in a .38-55 die so that they will chamber all right.

Prime. Be sure and use large rifle primers here. I tried some junk large pistol primers and ignition wasn’t that reliable.

I loaded 11.0 grains of Unique in each case. Then ¼ sheet of toilet paper was wadded up and pushed in over the powder. The case was the filled up to the mouth with corn meal. A wooden dowel was used to gently tamp the corn meal. Then another ¼ sheet of toilet paper is used to seal the case mouth and hold the corn meal in.

In fire forming, I found that cases fired horizontally tended to stretch more on one side so I began firing vertically. The range safety guys really freaked at this until I explained what I was doing. About 95% of the cases will blow out nicely. The remainder will split and must be discarded and some will blow out only partially. These can be full length resized, then expanded with an expander and loaded and will blow out upon firing. As I was interested in a .375 Winchester length case (I still had the .375 Winchester), all cases were trimmed to 2.00” and chamfered.

These cases last well. I have had as many as 20 firings from some of them as .38-55 pressures are really gentle on cases.

Last year, a friend gave me batch of .38-55 cases that are tin plated proof cases. They are really fine and if you have a chance to obtain some, grab them.

**Bullets**

![Bullets Image](image)


I found that all plain base bullets gave better accuracy with a Dacron wad. I used sheet Dacron (polyester for quilting) from Wal-Mart. This was cut in squares ¾” X ¾”. It was inserted over the powder and expanded to take up all air space between the powder and bullet.
Use Dacron wads at your own risk due to rumors and reports of chamber ringing. I use them but it’s my rifles.

**Lever Guns**

You fellows with the Marlin Cowboy .38-55s and the old Winchester Model 94 .38-55s will have to modify my loading data some. Slug your barrel first and see what diameter bullet you need. You can get that diameter with almost any of these bullets by “beagling” the mould to increase the diameter and they’ll give you good accuracy.

You will also have to adjust the seating depth on my loads as I made up these loads to shoot in the Number 1 where overall length is not a consideration. In levers, you’ll probably not be able to use the 375167 and the 378-312-BPS on account of the nose length. The 37583 will have to be loaded one in the chamber and one in the magazine as the nose is too sharp for multiple loadings in the magazine.

As with any loading data, approach the loads with caution. I detected no pressure signs with any of these loads and I shot most of them in the Number 1, a Cowboy Marlin and a .375 Winchester “Big Bore” .375 Winchester (note – all my cases were trimmed to 2.00”). All of these loads were loaded in fire formed .30/30 brass. Just be careful with old Model 94s and old Marlins due to their age.

### .38/55 Loads

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Bullet</th>
<th>Weight</th>
<th>Sized</th>
<th>Powder</th>
<th>Weight</th>
<th>Primer</th>
<th>Average Velocity</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>Overall Length</th>
<th>Accuracy/ Comments</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>37583</td>
<td>144.5</td>
<td>.378</td>
<td>Unique</td>
<td>9.0</td>
<td>CCI LR</td>
<td>1253</td>
<td>19.2</td>
<td>2.525</td>
<td>2” @ 100</td>
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<tr>
<td>37-214-FN</td>
<td>238.5</td>
<td>.376</td>
<td>AA 2200</td>
<td>24.0</td>
<td>WLR</td>
<td>1334</td>
<td>52.3</td>
<td>2.475</td>
<td>1” @ 100 Dacron Wad</td>
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<td>.376</td>
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<td>28.0</td>
<td>WLR</td>
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<td>2.475</td>
<td>1.25” @ 100</td>
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<tr>
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<td>American Select</td>
<td>12.5</td>
<td>WLR</td>
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<td>83.2</td>
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<td>Crimp Groove</td>
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<td>.378</td>
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<td>375248</td>
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<td>.376</td>
<td>AA 2200</td>
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<td>WLR</td>
<td>1334</td>
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<tr>
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<td>WLR</td>
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<tr>
<td>375248</td>
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<td>American Select</td>
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<td>WLR</td>
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<tr>
<td>37-250-FN</td>
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<td>2015</td>
<td>25.0</td>
<td>WLR</td>
<td>1338</td>
<td>41.6</td>
<td>2.468</td>
<td>2” @ 100 yards</td>
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As you can see by these loads, we were heavily into milsurp powders when I received this rifle. A bunch of AA 2200 went downrange in those first couple of years before the well ran dry. It doesn’t burn well in the .38/55 but the accuracy is there with a Dacron wad so we kept on blazing away and cleaned dirty necks.

Most of these loads are the equivalent of the old black powder loads. I’ve had no use so far for my .375 Winchester capability. I have loads developed for it but they’re not published here as this is about the .38/55.

I’ve just started trying WC820 in the .38/55 but it also promises good accuracy and cheap shooting.

37583 Loads These are really nice little plinking loads and economical to put together. I “beagled” the mould to get added diameter as it normally drops the bullets at just less than .376”. It’s designed for the old black powder revolvers and I once picked up a handful of bullets of almost the same design on a Virginia civil war battlefield with “string impressions” on them where they had been loaded in paper cartridges.

375167 This old mould is from a bygone era. I had one in great shape and had to try it. Originally designed for the .38-72 (probably in the Model 95 Winchester), it shot pretty well in the Number 1 but the small nose lacked the diameter for really good accuracy.

Round Balls

While playing with some round ball loads several years ago, I had a .375 Round Ball mould I had received and cast a few out of whatever alloy was in the pot. I rolled a bunch in Lee’s Liquid Alox lube cut with lighter fluid and allowed them to dry.

I loaded about 10 cases I had primed for the .38-55 with two balls (79.2 grains each)over 8.0 grains of Unique (no wad) and a Winchester Large Rifle primer. I figured these would go all over the place.

To my pleasant surprise, 5 shots grouped all of the balls in a 6” diameter pattern just above the bull at 50 yards and centered.
I chronographed another batch of the same loads the next week at 1244 feet per second.

What a sweet pest, small game and varmint load at short ranges.

With the good accuracy with a variety of loads and powders, mild recoil and wide selection of great cast designs available, what more could a bullet caster ask for in a rifle?

It was a long wait for me to finally get one that I liked but I know that one of these days when I’m able to leave this city life and get back in the country where I belong, that old .38-55 will be with me and I’ll enjoy many more pleasant hours of punching paper and maybe I’ll be able to tote it up to a deer stand on my old gimpy foot and bag a nice buck with it. I know the .38-55 will do its part as it has for over 100 years if I can just do mine.

John Goins /beagle