

FN's Frontline .45

The FNP-45 ranks high on the list of potential bigbore service-pistol candidates.

By Patrick Sweeney

We should thank the U.S. Army for being indecisive on sidearms. If not for its on-again, off-again approach to picking a new pistol, we wouldn't have the choices we now have. FNH-USA has been unveiling 9mm and .40 S&W pistols for defense and law enforcement for the last few years, getting designs out to replace the classic Hi Power. Had the Army simply said "We need new handguns" and gone through an undelayed test and selection process on the first go-around, FN would not have had the time to produce the FNP-45, a big blaster of a .45 whose slide is a big chunk of stainless steel and whose frame is molded polymer. The front and rear sights are pressed into dovetails, and the extractor is an external one, using a spring-and-plunger-powered system. It also has a lump on it for use as a loaded-chamber indicator.



Desirable features on the FNP-45 include three-dot combat sights (left) and an ambidextrous slide stop (right).

The frame is molded with a light rail out on the dustcover (and the serial-number plate recessed in there, along with a bar code for those of you who use scanners for inventory) with the non-gripping areas given a pebble-texture surface treatment. The trigger mechanism is a traditional double action/single action employing an ambidextrous decocking lever at the upper rear of the frame.

The slide stop is also ambidextrous, with the left-side lever nestled inside frame abutments, while the right-side lever is simply protected by a boss coming up out of the gripping area. The magazine catch is ambidextrous, placing the FNP-45 in nirvana for small-arms designers in the modern era: It doesn't matter which hand you grab it with, everything works the same regardless.

The gripping area is noteworthy. Usually, what we get on polymer frames is some arrangement of grooves or sandpaper-like surfaces but nothing that really gets into your skin and hangs on. The checkered texture of the FNP-45 does a very good job of keeping your hands in place. The checkering is part of the mold, and it is located on the frame where you'll grasp it and not elsewhere. Combined with the pebble texture of the rest of the frame surface, the FNP-45 is highly unlikely to be slipping around in your hand.

The FNP-45 is a hi-cap .45 made to withstand the expected standards of the new selection process. Back when HK offered the Mk 23 for the SOCOM requirements, the service standard was 30,000 rounds of +P .45 ACP. As a result, all likely candidates will be big guns, and we again benefit. All other things being equal, a bigger pistol (heavier slide, beefier frame sections) will be more durable than a smaller one. And have softer felt recoil, too.

The first impression I had of the FNP-45 was that it was big. The contour of the frame at the rear up under the slide is, at first grasp, a bit boxy. Coming from a 1911, with its sports car-like contour there, the FN is definitely larger. That's the downside, making the trigger reach a bit long but still quite manageable. The upside is that the larger area spreads felt recoil across a wider area, making the FN recoil feel softer, even though an all-steel 1911 is heavier.

The beefier frame and slide put the bore axis a bit higher over your hand, a difference likely to be noticed only by competition shooters. If you compare the FNP-45 to a 1911 (I hate to keep coming back to the old standby, but we need something most of us have all shot for comparison), the FNP-45 front sight is going to rise higher in recoil. But it won't do anything more than that, and the very effective texturing on the gripping area of the frame will keep the gun from squirming on you. As I've mentioned before, muzzle rise is not a problem. The front sight pops up when you shoot; it drops back down and you're back on target.



Using Magtech Guardian Gold and Cor-Bon 230-grain JHPs, accuracy results at 25 yards were well beyond "combat spec."

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I thought I'd have more trouble with the trigger reach than test-firing actually uncovered. When I first shot the FNP-45, I was at an industry gathering and couldn't do any real drills or timed shooting. At my home range I could shoot drills and see how the FN felt coming off a table or out of a holster. As for accuracy, you might think this is one of those legendary "gunwriter guns" that has been tuned just for us lucky stiff.



Takedown of the FNP-45 is a snap. Lock the slide back, remove the magazine, pivot the takedown lever, unlock the slide stop, and ease off the slide. You're done!

Think again. As the FNP-45 is brand new, the company is still wrangling with the Department of Defense over the test procedure. As of this writing, there were a grand total of two guns in the U.S. not in the hands of the DOD (and for one weekend they were both here at Gun Abuse Central).

FN is quite proud of the barrel, as it is hammer-forged and locked up like a bank vault on both guns. Combined with the stainless slide and its super-hard Melonite finish, I can't see wearing out this barrel or pistol even after winning the lottery. I only had a chance to shoot it with a couple of factory loads, but they were both good ones. I'm sure it will shoot as well with others, as both Cor-Bon Performance and Magtech Guardian Gold shoot enjoyably small groups. Over sandbags at 25 yards, I could easily do two inches with the Cor-Bon and under two with the Magtech, and that on a cold, rain-spitting day.

The trigger is not exactly a match Bullseye or PPC-level trigger, but it is clean enough and smooth enough in the DA stroke that misses are your fault, not the pistol's. As a carry gun it is very nice indeed. The whole DA-to-SA trigger-stroke transition is overblown, in my opinion, and there are plenty of good gunsmiths who can tune any pistol to be as nice as you want it to be.

The backstrap of the FN is changeable, provided you have a simple tool. A 3/16- or 5/32-inch punch is all you need. In a pinch, in a dusty little village in Iraq, you could probably manage with a paperclip or M16 firing pin. Push the pin into the hole in the back of the backstrap to depress the locking latch. Then slide the old backstrap down and off. Slide the new one up until it locks into place, and you're done.



A plus for big pistols: The author found the FNP-45 remarkably soft-shooting and controllable.

And even if you have large or larger hands, you'll want the flat, not the arched. I thought I'd prefer the arched. It was on the gun when it arrived, and that's what I shot it with. After shooting a bunch of ammo, I figured I had to at least try the flat backstrap to be able to report on it. Good thing I did. I found the FNP was even more comfortable, manageable and easy to shoot with the flat one on. Try it; you'll probably like it. I now figure that when my FNP arrives, if I lose the arched backstrap I'll never miss it--because I'll never look for it. Down on the bottom of each of the backstraps is the modern obligatory service accessory: a lanyard loop.

The magazine is a hi-cap because that is what the services insist on. Like the DA-to-SA transition, I think the whole capacity thing is overblown. (Then again, I've never had to go mano a mano with handguns in a mud hut in Afghanistan either.) The magazines hold 14 rounds of .45 ACP, and the FNP ate everything I had on hand to feed it. I managed to do a limited amount of terminal testing and found that its 4 1/2-inch barrel produced plenty of velocity to expand hollowpoints.

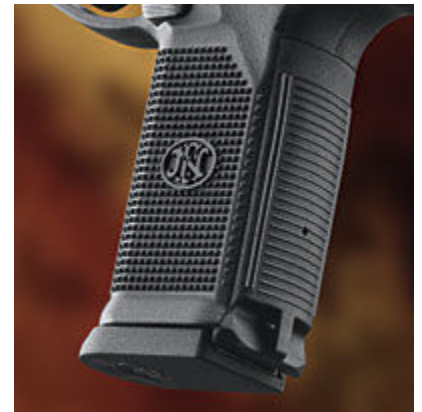
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Accuracy, soft recoil, high capacity, easy to shoot and non-slip. Stainless slide and an impervious- to-solvents polymer frame. Is there anything missing? If there is, it isn't in takedown. Simply lock back the slide, and make sure it is empty. Remove the magazine. Pivot the takedown lever, unlock the slide stop, and ease off the slide. If you've done it with any of a dozen other pistols, you can figure out how to do it with the FNP.

So, what place is there for the FNP-45? Unless you're built like some of my Chicago-area law enforcement friends (I'm 6'4", and I'm seen as the small guy), carrying it concealed is going to be problematic. Not that it can't be done, but it will be more work than a more compact pistol would be. As an open-carry, law enforcement or military sidearm, it has all the right stuff. For someone looking for an accurate, reliable, easy-to-shoot .45, the FNP-45 has to rank high on any list.

As a competition gun, it might have some problems. Not because of the pistol but because of the competition rules. As a .45 it would get tossed in against the highly tuned single-stack and hi-cap 1911s. As a DA pistol the other option would be to go up against a slew of light-recoiling 9mms. So if you're planning on cutting a swath through the USPSA/IPSC or IDPA competitions with the FNP-45, think again. No, it isn't meant for competition, it is meant for dealing with miscreants in 230-grain doses. For the comfort of shooting it delivers, I'm really interested in searching for comfortable holsters.

I have been accused of having entirely too much fun at the expense of those in the armed forces tasked with acquiring new small arms. Perhaps that's true, and if so, the armed forces haven't been the first in such a position. The big questions they keep addressing are not "Is the 9mm inadequate?" or "Just how many rounds do we need?" but "How do we satisfy the .45 fanatics without actually giving them a .45?" and "Are you kidding me? Of course a cocked hammer is dangerous."



Author's option: Sweeney much preferred the flat backstrap, finding it more comfortable than the arched one.



As high-capacity .45s go, the FNP-45 has a short trigger reach.

Until the various factions in the armed forces come to grips with the desire of guys kicking doors to have a .45 and let the users decide what kind of safety they want, the M9 will be with us. But each time a Request for Proposal floats into public view, those of us who know what we want will have a never-ending supply of high-capacity .45 pistols to choose from. Pick this one and you won't be sorry.