



# Draw of the Dead

Shooting-scenario games are growing fast, but in recent years zombie action has been spreading like a pandemic **By Larry Ahlman**

**W**hat's a zombie? If you think it's the creepy undead seen in horror movies walking disjointedly in search of a meal of fresh living flesh, well...you're right, sort of. But you'd also be right on target if you believe zombies are the basis of one of the fastest-growing shooting sports since Gertrude Hurlbutt invented skeet.



Alternate and scenario shooting games such as Cowboy Action and 3-Gun are gaining shooters across the country at an incredibly fast clip. Of particular note, these games tend to attract young shooters who find Five Stand, Skeet, and Trap far too sedentary. These shooters like the fast pace and action of 3-Gun or the ability to wear period dress and assume a character of the Old West in Cowboy Action. Zombie shooters are no different.

The good news for retailers is that the typical zombie shooter tends to be between 20 and 40. And though the sport is dominated by men, a lot

Zombie shooting enthusiasts often dress like survivors in an apocalyptic wasteland, taking precautions to prevent infection by the walking dead.

of women are entering the ranks. This is a huge new audience that deserves your attention.

One of the manufacturers spearheading the sport is Minnesota-based DPMS Firearms (Booth #14229). "A few years ago, we wanted to hold a fun shoot for our local fans," says DPMS product manager Adam Ballard. "We decided to incorporate zombies and named the event 'Outbreak Omega.' Just under 100 shooters and a handful of spectators showed up that first year. But it's grown quickly. By the third year, attendance was nearly 600. Now we're seeing between 700 and 800 shooters. It's unbelievable."

## Driving Factors

What's driving this market? Movies are one element. Remember what

DPMS Firearms began hosting its "Outbreak Omega" zombie shoot a few years ago. It incorporates various shooting scenarios, a costume contest, and more. As it grows in popularity, it has begun drawing a younger crowd more familiar with video games than traditional shooting.

Dirty Harry did for .44 Magnum handgun sales? Well, films such as *Zombieland*, *Zombie Apocalypse*, and *Dawn of the Dead*—and the surprising success of the cable TV show *The Walking Dead*—have spurred a huge interest in the undead—and the firearms needed to keep them under control. Noticeably absent from these films are big stars like Clint Eastwood, but what these movies lack in star power is offset by the sheer volume of releases. A recent search of Netflix showed more than 60 full-length zombie movies available for streaming or rental.

Adding to the popularity is that the violence seen in zombie movies doesn't seem to offend viewers. When it comes to shooting targets that feature "people," you'll always find a few purists who take offense. Some even object to Bin Laden and Hitler targets. But it seems most folks have a tough time finding a compassionate place in their heart for zombies. The prevailing attitude seems to be, "Shoot 'em all. They're dead anyway."

Another element pushing the pop-

ularity is family participation. Early events had few participants under the age of 18, but that's changing.

"Our first Outbreak Omega didn't have any shooters under the age of 18," says Ballard. "But this year, the 'Best Dressed' award went to a junior, a future shooter all decked out in his Nerf gear!"

Any activity that involves the family should not only be taken seriously, but seriously encouraged. And any activity that draws in the younger shooters should be welcomed with open arms.

"We live in a different world today," says John Trull, vice president of product management and marketing at Remington Arms. "Kids have so many options to pursue in their spare time. Like it or not, video games are a real element we deal with in terms of competing for their time. The positive element here is

to excel. People come simply for the pure joy of shooting."

That sentiment is echoed by Trull. "I believe people are drawn to a zombie event first and foremost because it's fun. And it's also an environment where they can participate in 3-Gun-type activity without the risk of feeling inferior in a competitive setting. I sincerely believe that these type of fun shoots will serve as a big draw for sanctioned 3-Gun events as more folks get a taste for the sport and want to take it to the next level. Zombie could evolve into one of the larger organized shooting events within our market space."

### Course of Action

Because the various stages used in zombie shoots require some degree of imagination, one could call it scenario shooting. Much like Cowboy

zombies. Now imagine shooting pop-up targets that are inside an abandoned car (Auto of the Undead), or attacking a zombie-infested island while floating in a johnboat. Like other scenario shooting, the more realism a range operator can add, the more shooters will enjoy it.

They're also getting lots of help from the target makers. Using movie-quality photography, Champion Targets (Booth #14551) recently introduced Visi-color technology to make their zombie targets incredibly lifelike. Birchwood Casey (Booth #1210) recently unveiled a complete new line of full-color splattering zombie targets that retailers said simply flew off the shelves.

Brownell's, the giant shooting-sports parts supplier (Booth #805), recently got into the game when it launched "The Center For Zombie Awareness" on its website. Hosted by

time, they are naturally going to gravitate to the rifle platforms they are familiar with. Just as lever-action rifles grew in popularity in the early 1900s, and traditionally styled semi-autos were adapted to hunting purposes after World War II, so will the modern sporting rifle grow in popularity in the early 21st century."

In addition to the proper assortment of firearms, a retailer should also have a good supply of extra magazines, extended shotgun tubes, and other add-ons, such as holsters, tactical gloves and kneepads, knives, and lights. Zombie shooters go through a lot of ammo, so make sure to maintain a large stock at good prices to keep them coming back. (While you're at SHOT, check out Hornady's cleverly conceived and packaged Zombie Max rifle and handgun ammo. Booth #13145.) And don't forget targets. Some customers find the new zombie targets so attractive that they buy them just to hang in their den.

### Cash In on Clothing

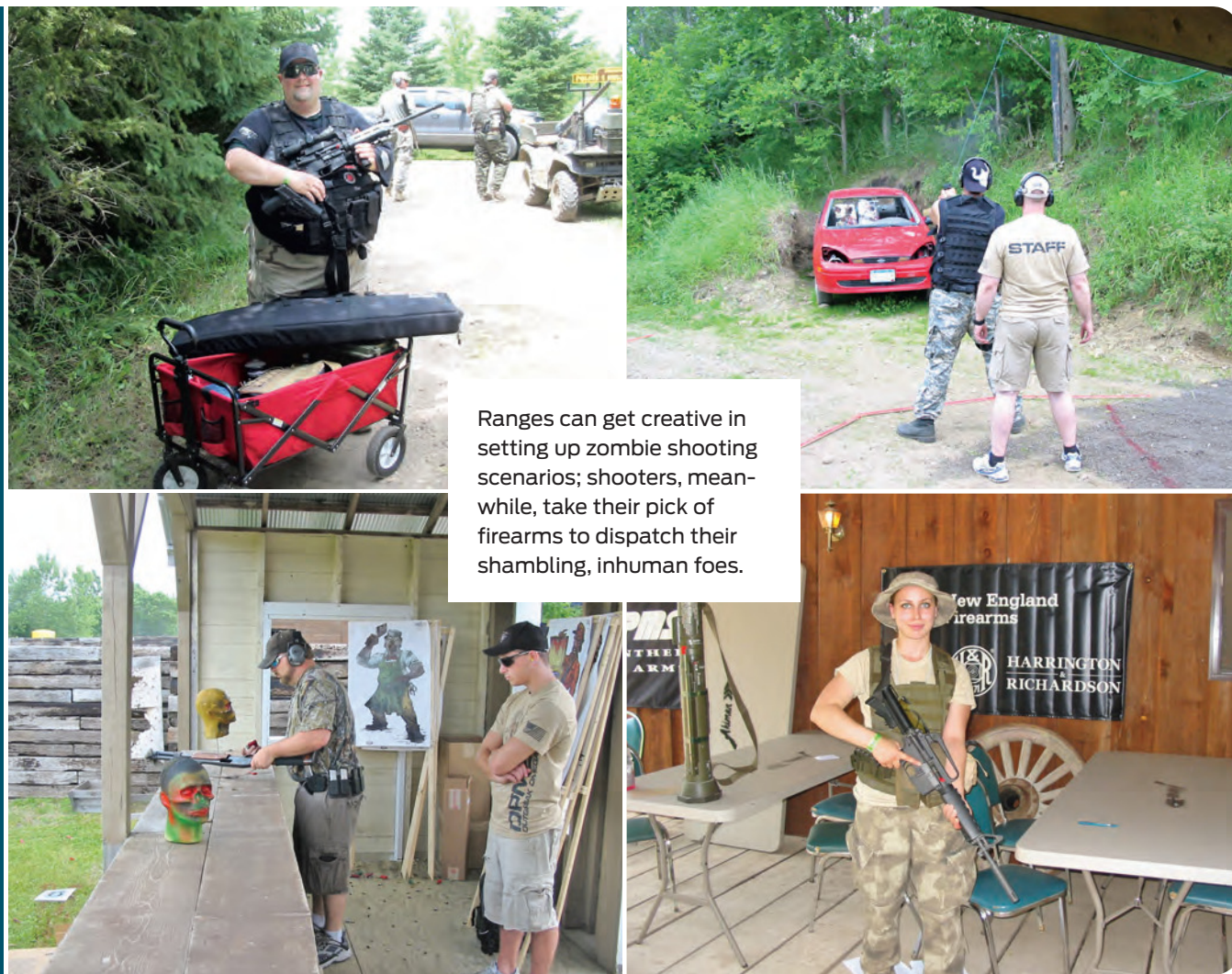
If you go to an Oakland Raiders game, you'll see fans dressed up like pirates. In Green Bay, you'll see "Cheeseheads" walking around with a block of cheese on their head. Ever been to a Star Wars convention? Tons of people are in character, whether it's Darth Vader, Leia, or Chewbacca. Zombie hunters don't get quite that carried away, but they do like to identify with their sport.

Shooter clothing runs the gamut from street clothes to actual zombie costumes. The most popular look seems to be military style, decked out with a wide array of gadgets and accessories. Seeking more than the standard military look, participants add swords, bayonets, tomahawks, and anything else that looks cool and will fend off the ravenous, brain-hungry undead.

While a few participants get a bit crazy with their outfits, most zombie hunters are serious about their choice of gear. They know what they want and talk it up online, telling fellow shooters where they found it.

Correct zombie-hunting attire has become important enough that an after-hours fashion show has become one of the highlights of Outbreak Omega. Competing for prizes, contestants walk a runway much like at a Miss America pageant, except they're decked out in full undead-apocalypse couture. The intensity of audience applause, measured by sound meter, determines the winners.

The other winners, of course, are the dealers that stock and sell this gear. It stands to reason that savvy retailers who attend the shoots, keep pace with the latest in equipment and gear, and learn the language of zombie hunters will soon find their store becoming the "in" place for consumers eager to spend their (un)dead presidents. ■



Ranges can get creative in setting up zombie shooting scenarios; shooters, meanwhile, take their pick of firearms to dispatch their shambling, inhuman foes.

that many of these games have unintentionally created a new awareness among young folks of the shooting sports and the products offered." Zombie shooting events tend to make a connection between these electronic, fantasy-based games and an actual outdoor activity.

Ballard agrees. "It's a great way for folks to experience shooting without pressure to compete," he says. "One of the things about Outbreak Omega that amazes people is that we don't keep score. Can you imagine attending a baseball or football game or a trap or rifle shoot where no one kept score? It's unheard of, but that's exactly what we do, and hardly anyone complains. There's no pressure

Action, participants dress the part and act out the scenes using real guns. The major difference is that zombie hunters tend to dress military-style, and their firearms of choice are handguns, shotguns, and modern sporting rifles (MSRs).

In all honesty, the scenarios acted out can be a bit bizarre to the uninitiated. Imagine getting locked in a zombie jail cell, your handgun just out of reach on a distant counter. When the range officer yells, "Go," you reach through the bars and grab a broom, which is used to hook the key ring on the wall. The keys slide down the handle, and once in your hands you're able to unlock the cell door, grab your gun, and take on the

two employees, the site features entertaining "zombie update" videos as well as information on the products needed to combat an outbreak.

### What to Stock

Typically, zombie shooters, like 3-Gun participants, end up with three firearms—an MSR, a semi-auto pistol, and a semi-auto tactical shotgun. The popularity of the MSR is no surprise to Trull.

"More men and women today, through their military experience and service to our country, are trained to the AR/MSR platform," says Trull. "As those folks fold recreational shooting and hunting into their free