



Steel Challenge

Steel shooting is perhaps the most giggly fun of all the action disciplines out there. It's purely a game of no-limits, no power-factor super speed hosing. Or, at least that's what it looks like to the casual observer. In reality, you can only go as fast as you can hit; the faster you go the more accurate you must be! Mike Dalton (who with Mike Fichman invented the Steel Challenge format almost 30 years ago) once told the author that the "World Speed Shooting Championship" should really be called the "World Plate-Shooting Championship." This type of shooting demands smoothness, precision, and a relaxed but focused attitude. Steel shooting is fun as hell, but nothing if not difficult to master.

Because the targets seem big and the shooting fast, many steel shooters neglect accuracy as an important consideration in their ammo. This is a mistake. You cannot call your hits at speed unless your gun-load combination will keep all of your shots at least within half of the 8- or 10-minute area of your red dot at 40 yards. Outer Limits determines this match, and Outer Limits isn't won with mindless hosing from an inaccurate pistol. Those plates shrink when the pressure is on.

Something For Everyone

Steel shooters have many equipment categories to choose from at the Steel Challenge. Open, USPSA Limited, Revolver Open, Cowboy Single Action (costumes required) and IDPA categories are all represented. For any category of gun and holster the same basic loading imperatives apply: lighter is better but slower is not. The Steel Challenge course currently uses timing microswitches on stop plates to register a hit and stop the competitors' time. Muzzle to stop plate time adds up and could make a difference in a closely contested race. As well, really low velocity loads will slow you down by delaying the visual and aural feedback from hits on metal—or misses in the dirt. An optimal velocity for open guns in 38 Super or 9mm Para is around 1050 to 1100 fps with a 115 or 124 grain bullet. Such loads function reliably in lightened guns, develop enough pressure to work compensators and are not so fast as to mask the sound of bullet impacts with muzzle blast.

Our 115 grain 9mm round nose bullet, sized to .356", is an ideal steel bullet for open category guns. Because it's short and light, a fair amount of load experimentation may be required to find the most accurate combination for your particular pistol.

USPSA Limited and IDPA shooters have a home in Steel shooting, too. Stock, uncompensated pistols behave and handle radically differently with reduced loads, so some thought needs to go into load selection for steel with limited-type guns. With iron sights, you can only shoot as fast as the sights return from recoil and a stable sight picture



is obtained. The last thing you want is a light load that cycles your over-sprung slide sluggishly. If you're very used to the way major loads recoil from your limited pistol, the least disturbing loading choice for steel may be to simply substitute a light-weight bullet over your normal charge. This will yield a lighter-recoiling load, but one which shouldn't greatly alter timing or require respringing of your pistol.

Optimal performance with reduced loads will be enhanced by careful springing to achieve a balance of crisp action, light recoil and stable sight-picture return.

IDPA stock service shooters will likely be shooting Glock pistols or perhaps another 9mm service type. Glocks do not take well to reduced loads or respringing, so look to median loads with heavier bullets and faster powders to provide softer recoil with good sight return.

Revolver open shooters don't have such functional considerations to deal with. The author has seen everything that can be fired from a Smith & Wesson tried on steel, from round balls on up. For compensated space guns, try the 125 truncated cone with a fast to medium rate propellant like Unique or Red Dot. Severely reduced light bullet loads in 38 Special (as in all revolver cartridges) show wide velocity spreads due both to inconsistent powder burn rates at low pressure and simple aspect variation. Bulker powders such as 700X, Red Dot, or perhaps Clays should be used. Hodgdon's Titegroup powder shows promise as well, being formulated specifically to attenuate aspect variation in big revolver cases.

If you really need to weenie out, try the 9mm Laser-Cast 115grain round nose in .356" with 3.5 grains of Red Dot. This bullet requires a modest taper crimp. Our test M-686 grouped this load just well enough to be promising.

I Hear Your Pretty Fast, Kid

Cowboy Steel shooters are on a whole different trip. The classic Steel Challenge courses are acknowledged to be much more demanding of accuracy than stages typically encountered at Cowboy shoots. At the Steel Challenge, Cowboy single actions may be loaded (carefully!) with six rounds and a second six-gun may be drawn to finish a string. We can anticipate that future winners of this event will be the cowpokes who made the fewest draws, taking time to hit'em all in six shots or only five. Such a winning strategy will demand a load that is very accurate and prints exactly to point of aim from both blasters. Point or index shooting will get your score a pretty tombstone on Boot Hill; every shot in the match needs to be a sighted one! Accuracy thus is more important than recoil control per se, and your usual Cowboy Action load may not be your best bet. Zero and group your guns at 40 yards and be certain of what they will do!



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