

# An ideal match

*- the .44 Magnum and Handgun Metallic Silhouette*

by Ric Tester



The Smith & Wesson .44 Magnum 629 Classic with 8.25" barrel, top, Smith & Wesson .44 Magnum 629 with 8.25" barrel and Ruger Blackhawk in .44 Magnum.

The sport of Handgun Metallic Silhouette shooting is challenging, exciting and a great deal of fun. While not to take anything away from some of the more traditional paper target shooting sports, the practice of knocking down a distant target with the accompanying sound of the shot followed up by a satisfying 'clang!' certainly adds a touch of color that is so often absent in the clinical pursuit of drilling bullseyes to achieve that perfect score.

The sport had its origin in Mexico in the early 1900s, when Pancho Villa's troops used live game animals as targets in long-range rifle shooting contests. Live animals were replaced with metallic silhouette targets in about the late 1940s and since then, the targets have consisted of figures of game animals cut from 0.365" steel plate.

Metallic Silhouette shooting is fundamentally an outdoor sport as it requires a 200m range. The object is to knock down as many targets as possible with the allocated number of shots. There are four sets of targets, namely chickens, pigs, turkeys and rams. Each set consists of five individual targets placed at varying distances from the shooter. The size of the targets increases with distance, but from the shooter's viewpoint, all targets will appear somewhat similar in size. A typical set-up would see five chickens at 50m, five pigs at 100m, five turkeys at 150m and five rams at 200m. The distance between individual targets in any set needs to be at least one target width.

Usually, 10 shots can be taken at each type of target, giving a total of 40 shots per match. Targets must be shot in order - if a target is struck out of order, it is counted as a miss and any target that is struck but remains standing also constitutes a scoreless shot.

As with all shooting sports, there are many rules and regulations governing all manner of variables such as barrel length, weight of handgun, the use of visual aids such as telescopic sights and more. See [www.ssaa.org.au/handgunsilhouette.html](http://www.ssaa.org.au/handgunsilhouette.html) for more information.

The nature of the sport demands a handgun that is both accurate and sufficiently powerful to dislodge a piece of heavy iron plate from its standing position. Also, the shooter will require sufficient skill to accurately shoot a handgun with moderate to heavy recoil. While opinion varies



**A Handgun Metallic Silhouette range at the SSAA Canberra Sporting Shooters Pistol Club. Photo by John Harding.**

as to the minimum calibre that can be used effectively for Handgun Metallic Silhouette shooting, it is generally agreed that the .357 Magnum is about the minimum, albeit marginal, calibre that could be used effectively. A much more popular choice is the larger and more potent .44 Magnum.

The .44 Magnum cartridge was first developed as a joint venture by Smith & Wesson and Remington. The development was suggested in 1955 by noted hunter, journalist and experimenter Elmer Keith, who had used heavy loads in his .44 Special, which he used as a sidearm on hunting trips. The .44 Magnum was slightly longer than the .44 Special and it produced a much higher chamber pressure, necessitating the robust construction of all firearms that were to be chambered in this calibre. The original primary purpose of the .44 Magnum has always been as a hunting tool rather than a means of self-defence or law enforcement. However, the use of the .44 Magnum is strictly regulated in Australia these days.

The .44 Magnum has two characteristics that

make it ideal for the Handgun Metallic Silhouette discipline: it is both powerful and accurate. Factory ammunition would typically come loaded with a semi-jacketed 240-grain projectile that could develop a muzzle velocity of 1600 to 1700fps, with muzzle energy of approximately 1400 ft-lb.

The higher velocity is needed to reach out to the 200m-mark in a time period sufficiently brief as to avoid the bullet dropping too far under the influence of gravity. Remember, the longer the bullet takes to reach the target, the further it is going to drop, which would require excessive 'holdover' (aiming above the target) and would be detrimental to accuracy. The power is needed to deliver the necessary 'knockdown blow' to the target, which must be achieved through the greater momentum of the bullet. It would accomplish very little by having a lightweight bullet travelling at ultra-high velocity. The bullet would

simply disintegrate on impact and the target would fail to dislodge. What is required is a bullet that can transfer its momentum to the target to push it over. This can only be achieved by having a projectile of sufficient mass.

Accuracy in shooting is naturally a critical factor for success, given the distances involved. In order to estimate the accuracy you will require to hit the targets, consider the following example. The standard chicken target is 11" high and 13" wide and is set at a distance of 50m. Because of the irregular shape of the target, a hit could only be assured if the bullet were to strike somewhere within a circle of 6" diameter with its centre in the middle of the body. A 6" circle at 50m would correspond to a 3" circle at 25m. Of course, it would be possible to score a hit with somewhat less accuracy than this, but the greater the inaccuracy the less the overall chance of consistent scoring.

Accuracy depends upon three factors, namely the condition and inherent accuracy of the gun, the ammunition, and the ability and technique of the shooter. A good-quality gun, either one that is new or has been properly cared for, will be more likely to shoot well than one that is well worn. A longer barrel will give greater bullet stability and a longer sight radius - both good for accuracy.

The condition of the trigger mechanism is another important factor. Excessive release pressure or trigger creep will be deleterious to accuracy. Many serious shooters have a 'trigger job' done on their pistols and revolvers to ensure a clean break at around 3 to 5lb of trigger pres-

sure. It is also important that the gun be fitted with good-quality grips - the .44 is not known for mild recoil and it is important that movement between gun and hand is kept to an absolute minimum.

Most serious shooters spend a great deal of time sighting-in their gun, as it needs to shoot precisely and accurately at various distances. This is one of the key challenges of Handgun Metallic Silhouette. In order to understand the complexities involved in sighting, consider the following scenario: A gun is sighted-in to hit the centre of a target at 25 yards using a 240-grain projectile with muzzle velocity of 1600fps. This gun is aimed straight at a 200-yard target. The projectile's striking point will be about 28" low. The bullet not only loses horizontal velocity, but heads towards the ground at an ever-increasing rate.

Unfortunately, there is no great antidote for this, but there are some things that we can do to compensate. Firstly, it is possible to set the zero point at a range somewhere between our limits; usually about two-thirds of the total distance is okay because the falling bullet obeys Newton's second law - it accelerates towards the ground! Setting a 150-yard zero will help. The striking point at the closer ranges will be a few inches high, but the 200-yard target will still need to be held over by about 11". If you do not intend to adjust your sights during the match, you will have to hold over or under all your targets, except the one you have set at zero. Many shooters opt to adjust their sights for the various ranges, which makes a lot of sense. Some guns are sold with



**This is a target with five shots from a .44 Magnum at 25m. The shots are well within the 3" circle.**

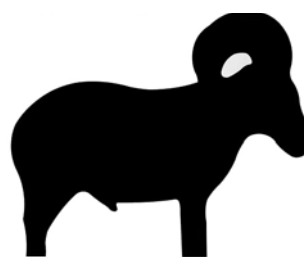
adjustable front sights, so a simple adjustment will re-zero the gun to the appropriate range.

Secondly, the chosen ammunition will influence the accuracy of the shot. Higher-velocity loads will reduce the amount of holdover for distant targets. Fortunately, the .44 Magnum has an interesting characteristic; it seems to reach its highest inherent accuracy when the loads are near-maximum. High-quality factory ammunition has excellent accuracy, but the assiduous handloader can generally achieve extremely high accuracy through experimentation within the load limits specified by the reloading data.

Finally, the shooter will need to develop full control over all of the environmental factors. Outdoor sports are influenced by varying conditions of light, wind and visibility. Some ranges run uphill, which will also have an effect on shooting.

#### Silhouette sizes for Handgun Metallic Silhouette

<b>Width</b>	33cm (13")	56cm (22")	48cm (19")	81cm (32")
<b>Height</b>	28cm (11")	36cm (14")	58cm (23")	69cm (27")



**The animal-shaped silhouette targets used in Handgun Metallic Silhouette.**



The Smith & Wesson 629 Classic, top, with Smith & Wesson 629.



A Smith & Wesson .44 Classic showing the cylinder, chambers, frame and rear-sight.

Basic shooting techniques such as shooting position, grip, sight alignment and follow-through are also critical to success.

The .44 Magnum is an excellent choice for Handgun Metallic Silhouette, even though it is not the biggest gun in the game any more. It is a powerful, accurate handgun that uses readily available and relatively inexpensive ammunition. It can also be handloaded easily.

Handgun Metallic Silhouette is a sport full of challenges and we enjoy our sport for the recreation it gives us and for the satisfaction that we achieve in meeting and overcoming those challenges. As with all endeavours, it is the journey that is paramount. The SSAA has Handgun Metallic Silhouette clubs in all states and for those among us who like to get out there and use the bigger guns, there is no better way to do it. ■