

UniqueTek "Tips" File #3: "12 Tips for 'Steel Challenge' Competition"

By Karl Rehn & Penny Riggs

Preface

The following was written by two friends, Karl Rehn and Penny Riggs. They are co-owners of KR Training, a firearms training school in central Texas. They gave me permission to publish it as one of our "Tips" files. Many thanks to both Karl and Penny.

Sight in

For the Steel Challenge, I like to sight in dead on to 1" high at 25 yards and note point of impact at 7, 15, and 35 yards. Get the best zero that you can, with a clean gun and the ammo you plan to shoot on match day. Shoot groups from a rest to sight in, and then check the zero by shoot a group consisting of one-shot draws from standing. Measure the group size of the "resting" groups and the "drawing" groups. Don't be surprised if your point of impact changes quite a bit when you switch from the rest to the draw. That's a signal that your trigger control needs work. The change in point of impact (usually low-left) should tell you what's going on.

Shoot the centers of the plates

Remember the group sizes you measured? That's the margin of error. If your group at 30 yards is 6" wide, that means that any shot you fire at that distance has a potential error of ± 3 ". If the sights are on the edge of the plate when you fire, and you do the best you can, there's still a chance you'll miss. Aiming for the centers guarantees that even if your shooting isn't perfect you've increased the odds of getting a hit. If you paint the steel before you start practicing, you'll be able to see patterns on the plates as you shoot. If the hits are all over the plates, instead of grouped together in the center, it means you are running on the ragged edge. Edge hits in practice become misses on match day.

One shot, one plate

Taking extra shots wastes time. It's always going to take less time to get a good sight picture and fire a good shot than it will take to fire a bad shot, and then have to go back, get a good sight picture and fire a good shot. Smoking and hoping is not a formula for success. The fastest you can shoot is the time it takes for one shot, one plate. Shooting faster and firing lots of extras may feel faster, but when the final scores are totaled, it's not faster.

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Set up on the most important shot

Steel Challenge course often require a lot of twisting and shooting at wide angles. Your body has a natural point of aim, and you shoot your best at targets in that direction. For each course, decide what shot is the most critical (the 4th plate on 5 to Go, for example, or the option plate on Speed Option) and set up on that plate.

Bend your knees

Bend your knees a little and take an aggressive forward stance. Punch the gun out to the target. Set up on the critical plate, then turn your hips to position yourself for the draw and other plates. Drive all the turning motion of your body from the hips, not your shoulder or waist. Bending the knees will help accomplish this action.

Before the buzzer, have the sight picture in your "mind's eye"

Trying to pick up speed on your draw on match day never works. Typically all that happens is that you get a bad grip on the gun, which leads to bad shooting. On match day, after you have gotten into the start position, look at the plate you are about to shoot, and see your sights (or your dot) on the plate. Then listen for the first hint of sound from the buzzer. As soon as you hear the tone begin, keep that sight picture in your head until you see the gun sights match up with that picture - sort of like an overlay on a "heads up" display. This may sound strange, but a common problem is getting fixated on the draw. Draw speed is a significant part of the time for each run, so it's important. Taking 0.1 sec off each run can save 2.8 seconds on the full 7 stage match, but a few extra shots due to missed/rushed draws and poor shooting wipe out that small advantage. The time to build draw speed is in practice, not on match day. On match day you want a relaxed draw to an optimal shooting grip, and a dead center hit on the first plate.

Prep the trigger

Taking up the slack in the trigger as the gun is moving between plates will improve your hits, because you've decreased the distance that the trigger has to move to fire the shot once you have the appropriate sight picture. Less distance means a lower chance that you'll pull the gun out of alignment before the bullet leaves the barrel.

Have a stage strategy

Going for broke on every run is not a winning strategy. My stage strategy is to be relaxed and smooth, and let the first run be whatever time it takes for "one shot, one plate". A good first run gives me confidence, and there's a sort of natural acceleration from each run to the next as the confidence increases. If I've got 4 (or 3, for Outer Limits) clean runs "in the bank", I'll push on the last run, hoping for a better-than-average run to bump out that first conservative run. Shooting clean is the only thing on my mind when I'm in the box. Beyond a certain level of skill, mental state dramatically affects performance. I may be capable of faster runs in practice, on my home range, with no one around and nothing on the line. There's nothing to be gained by focusing on the time for the freshly-shot run and telling yourself "damn, that was SLOW" - because the truth is that the best you can do on match day is shoot clean and accept that if you want to shoot faster, practice harder. Never forget that in most cases the top shooters are just like you and their practice times are even faster than the ones they shot in the match.

Practice shooting the match itself

I like to practice in blocks of 4 or 5 runs, just like the match, so that I practice my mental stage strategy as well as the shooting. If I'm not shooting clean, I turn off the timer and work on shooting clean runs, until I'm ready to start paying attention to the timer again. As it gets close to match day a typical practice session is to shoot all 7 stages, shooting only the number of runs I'll get on match day. The stage that I think is my weakest goes first so I have to shoot it cold. Last year Flying M needed the most work. This year Outer Limits has my attention. After I've shot all 7 stages, I'll go back and spend more time on the stages I had trouble with. It's useful to take a copy of the previous year's scores and look at where your practice scores would place. If most of your stage scores fall within the 40-50th overall range, for example, but one stage puts you 17th and another 94th, spend less time on what you shoot well and more time on the stage that needs improvement.

Don't waste time practicing Smoke and Hope

Smoke and Hope is fun, but because the targets are so big and so close, they encourage trigger slapping and "point shooting" that will only get you in trouble on the other stages. By comparison, spending more time on the stages with hard shots (Outer Limits, Speed Option, Five to Go) will translate into faster scores on all the stages.

Have par times for each stage

Years ago I had the opportunity to practice with Chip McCormick. One trick he used in practice was that each person had to "call" their par time for the stage, and shoot their 5 runs. The person who was closest to the par time - not the fastest shooter - was the winner. Learning to shoot a specific pace, on demand, and knowing what your pace should be for 5 clean runs, is important. Once you have a par time for each stage, knock 10% off of it for a practice training goal. Put the timer in "par" mode and force yourself to move the gun and get all the shots off under that par time. This is a drill that should be done with plenty of time before the match, not in the 1-2 weeks before the match itself. Right before the match the practice goal should be clean runs in blocks of 5, over and over again, on demand, especially the first 5 runs of each session.

Preparation = Performance

I have found that when I go to a match and I feel prepared, I have more confidence, which allows me to be more relaxed when it's time to shoot. Usually that's coupled with disinterest in how my scores compared to others. Over the last few years I have made it a point not to look at scores until all the stages were shot, unless I think there's an error on my scorecard. Particularly with the Steel Challenge, performance is related to mental state, and the only thing that matters is hitting the plates. Practice shooting clean, don't worry about the clock, and things should work out just fine on match day.

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About the Authors

Karl Rehn is a Master class shooter in IPSC and IDPA who first started shooting Steel Challenge stages back in 1988. He's been a regular competitor at the Steel Challenge in the 1990's and 2000's, ran local steel matches in the mid-90's and regularly competes in local steel matches in the Austin/San Antonio area. He's also an NRA Training Counselor, IPSC Range Officer and a graduate of a long list of handgun schools and instructors, including Thunder Ranch, Lethal Force Institute, InSights, Tactical Defense Institute, Ron Avery, Todd Jarrett, Max Michel, Ted Bonnet and many others. He is co-owner of KR Training, a firearms training school in central Texas.

Penny Riggs is a longtime handgun and rifle competitor who has finished in the top 5 women at the Steel Challenge 5 years in a row. She also shoots IPSC and is a graduate of a long list of handgun schools and instructors, including Thunder Ranch, InSights, Max Michel, Travis Tomasi, Ted Bonnet, Kay Clark Miculek, Jerry Miculek and many others. She is co-owner of KR Training, a firearms training school in central Texas.

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