

# Steel Challenge 2008

BY ROBIN TAYLOR, FRONT SIGHT STAFF

“You’re headed to the WORLD CHAMPIONSHIPS?” marveled my neighbor.

“Yep, get on the plane in the morning.”

Fired on the Wes Thompson range complex in Piru, Calif., the Steel Challenge has been a major stop on the practical shooting “tour” for years. Its relative prominence has waxed and waned as different managers have run the show, but with its famed original match directors Mike Fichman and Mike Dalton presiding, the match is riding high.



2008 Steel Master, BJ Norris.



Match Directors Mike Dalton and Mike Fichman watch the action.

Last year Max Michel won the Challenge, setting the course record, and winning \$30,000 in contingency money put up by the Outdoor Channel and Sig Sauer for anyone who could break a total time of 80 seconds (with a 79.2). The cash purse, the contingency money, plus some stage money gave Michel a total payday of \$38,600. That huge prize put Michel and the Steel Challenge in the spotlight of the practical shooting world. \$38,000 might not impress other pro athletes, but that’s three-and-a-half times the size of the largest purse typically awarded in a given year (the Bianchi Cup’s \$10,000 purse).



This is one of few unabashedly prize-oriented matches. Agony of defeat. JJ Racaza eats a bad run on his last stage.



in practical shooting and it's managed in such a way that even the lowest-finishing competitor comes out pretty well. Cash award options extend down to 25th, which helps bump the more valuable merchandise prize packages down to folks like you and me. This was my first year at the big show for steel. I'd shot a few bush-league steel matches, but as I got out of the rental car and watched the uniformed Japanese delegation walking up the hill (accompanied by famed photographer Ichiro Nagata of Combat Handguns), I knew right away — I wasn't in Kansas anymore.



2008 Main Match winner and new world record holder, KC Eusebio.

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The shooting itself is simple. Stand in a box with your hands above your shoulders, on signal, draw and shoot five steel targets. Repeat four times. Discard the slowest run. Move to another arrangement of targets and repeat. Only one course, "Outer Limits," requires the shooter to move a few steps with a loaded gun – and that one is only shot four times.

Just because it's simple doesn't mean it's easy. Sure, doing it slowly is easy, but so is weightlifting if you take all the weights off the bar. As KABC Channel 7 news reporter Leo Stallworth pointed out, ". . . world class shooters can hit the targets faster than you can take your next breath." It's immensely cool, a made-for-TV practical shooting event.

Japan's Tatsuya Sakai. Note the past World Champion's bent-elbow "Weaver" stance.



Steel Challenge's Rodney Dangerfield? Limited winner Phil Strader.





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**Famed wheelgunner Vic Pickett on "Outer Limits."**

2008 had the inevitable misfortune of being the year AFTER the \$30,000 prize was won. You can't pass a milestone twice, so the buzz associated with the big purse had largely worn off. Coupled with that, USPSA had recently bought the Steel Challenge. Despite continuously beating a drum labeled "no changes this year" rumors abounded that not only was USPSA going to change the match, but that this would be "the last year in Piru." Previous owners of the match had brought unwelcome change, so the news that the match had sold awakened some painful memories. It took Michael Voigt standing up at the competitor's barbeque (hosted by NSSF) and announcing that the 2009 Steel Challenge would be held on the same weekend, in the same location, to finally put all that to rest.

No wonder Mr. Thompson might want to see what the new owners were up to!

**Returning To The Heartland of Practical Competition**

For me, shooting the Challenge meant a pilgrimage to the heartland of practical shooting. The ghosts of the Southwest Pistol League haunt Wes Thompson's range like the deer, quail, and cattle that drift across its 1,500 acres. Wes Thompson's range was the first to allow fast draw with live ammunition (catering to the likes of Thell Reed, circa 1955). It hosted the first IPSC club (SWPL at Big Bear), the second SASS club, one of the first Cowboy 3-Gun clubs, and continues to push the envelope in its present location. That club is gone, but Mike Dalton's ISI Shootists fills the void. With the possible exception of PASA Park in Illinois, one would be hard pressed to find a site – or a culture – more closely connected to the history of practical shooting.

On the first day of the match, an older cattleman walked into the range; white cowboy hat, fancy Western shirt, cowboy boots, waxed mustache and big belt buckle to match. This was no less than Mike Thompson, son of the original Wes, here to see that the Steel Challenge was being run properly.

**Steel Challenge Running Strong**

What much of the rumor mill failed to realize is that USPSA purchased the Steel Challenge and Steel Challenge Shooting Association with an eye toward expanding a proven idea – not changing it.

In addition to the standard complement of SCSA folks, this year's challenge had a bumper crop of new staff with big-match experience floating around. Extra volunteers, a marketing consultant, prize coordinators, stats people, a computer person, Front Sight people, no activity lacked for helping hands. The "new" and the "old" SCSA people each tried hard to respect the



Molly Smith talking it over with the ABC Channel 7 News crew. Her interview appeared in the LA news market at 6:00 that night.



Ruger's Ken Jorgensen discussing the future of rimfire competition.

other's experience, helping to ease the inevitable glitches along the way.

The equipment used by shooters at a Steel Challenge event doesn't look like a USPSA event. Walking up the road to the ranges you were as likely to see someone wearing a scoped, 8-shot revolver as you were a Single Stack 1911, or a tricked-out Tactical Solutions Ruger .22. The competitors don't look the same either, with an unusually high index of women and girls competing. Channel 7's Stallworth zeroed





**New Records!**

Max Michel set a single-string record on “Smoke and Hope” with a blistering 1.69 second time. He also set the course record on “Pendulum” with a combined time of 10.03, beating Jerry Miculek’s record by more than half a second.

BJ Norris set the record on “Speed Option” with a time of 9.83 (ousting Michel’s record of 10.06).

Topping all comers, KC Eusebio set the course record, winning the main match with a time of 79.2 seconds.

in on that, interviewing 11 year-olds Molly Smith and Alicia Setting on the 6:00 news.

The Japanese delegation in particular caught my eye. According to Tomo Hasegawa, a full dozen Japanese nationals flew over from Japan to shoot the match, joining a number of Japanese expatriates like Teruhiko (Terry) Yano and Ichiro Nagata. Make no mistake, the Japanese delegates are not just tourists. Tatsuya Sakai has won the match in the past. He and

Shugo Maruyama, vice president of the Japanese practical shooting organization (The Japan Toy-Gun Shooting Association), were among the 12. Nagata and his friends form one team, and “Team Loaded” (some of them semi-pro Airsoft shooters sponsored by Western Arms) form another, with Maruyama and others looking on. In fact, Japanese was the second-most-common language used on the range — ahead of Spanish!



Jessie Abbate signs her scorecard.

Since Japan forbids handgun ownership, all 12 had very little time to make the transition from Airsoft to 9mm/.38 Super. Despite this, Team Loaded in particular did remarkably well, led by Kazunori Shoji (Open 20th, Limited 52nd),

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Western Arms' "Team Loaded" showed surprising skill given the difficulties laid on them by the Japanese government. Kazurori Shoji (above) is a Master Instructor with the Technical Shooting Schools Association (TSSA). He teaches firearms skills and helps shooters to attend overseas competitions through [www.tssa-japan.com](http://www.tssa-japan.com).

and Kozo Kobayashi (Open 36th, Limited 130th). The Nagata group did even better, led by Masashi Yada (Open 18th/Limited 133rd) and Tatsuya Sakai at Limited 29th/Open 33rd. (Nagata himself placed Open 65th/high distinguished senior.) Despite an abundance of interpreters, Japanese-to-English language barriers led to many an awkward

moment. If ever there was a good case for using standardized range commands, this was it!

To give you an idea of the equipment diversity, some 23 people competed in Optical Sight Revolver, including S&W's Jerry Miculek and ADCO's flamboyant Vic Pickett – an Open Revolver specialist well-known in the ICORE world. The California Wheelburners were here with him, wielding their flashy race-revolvers and sporting distinctive flame-patterned t-shirts. That doesn't count the Iron Sight Revolver folks, led by match winner David Olhasso. There were another 15 of them.

In terms of brute attendance this match almost matched record-setting 2007. The main match drew 240 registrations, 231 of which finished. (240 finished in 2007.) The rimfire pistol, rimfire rifle, and shotgun side events were also strong, with a handful of rimfire specialists coming in specifically to shoot it (junior Lena Miculek was surprisingly strong at 38th/2nd junior). David Sevigny won the rimfire title,

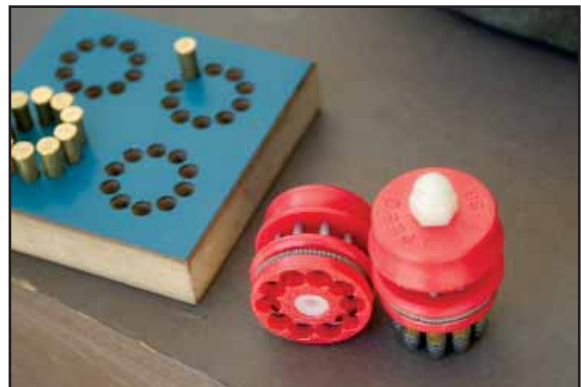


Angus Hobdell's CZ Champion, a compensated CZ 9mm with slide-riding optic.

but Rebecca Jones surprised many by finishing 4th overall and first woman – defeating Kay Miculek and Jessie Abate by more than six seconds!

I spent a lot of time rubbernecking at the fascinating variety of guns, from standard Ruger Mark IIs to Bondo-encrusted single-stack 1911s with tube scopes, to exotic Hogue blowback 1911s (no slide!).

Optics ran the gamut. Virtually every design and manufacturer of competition dot scopes could be found on the line somewhere. On the Open Super Squad alone we saw standard C-Mores (Eusebio, Michel), slide-riding Docter sights (Hobdell, Butler), 40mm tube scopes (Hasegawa, Sakai), and tiny Aimpoint micro-dots (Kirsch).



If you're going to shoot a revolver in rimfire, the 10-shot S&W 617 would be high on the list of choices. For 617 owners, a speed loader like this one speeds up the "load and make ready."

Jerry Miculek drove away with Ruger's rimfire rifle side event once again, defeating Mark Itzstein by a little over two seconds. Taran Butler came out on top on the Vang Comp pump shotgun event, winning both stages and outpacing Mark Hobbs and Miculek by more than two seconds.

### The Challenge

I've covered a lot of matches, but until now I've never heard members of the Super Squad tell each other "this is hard!"

As Todd Jarrett explained, "It's all about holding it on a fine line between 'on the edge' and 'out of control.'"

Go over that edge and your time



Dave Sevigny driving an SJC Open Glock through "Smoke and Hope."

balloons horribly. Back off that edge, and somebody will race past you.

Every stage at Steel Challenge has prize money associated with it. Win a stage, and you take home \$700, finish

second, \$500, third, \$300. That means every talented shooter has plenty of reason to do his best – even if they're no longer in contention to win. Max Michel and Dave Sevigny told me the stage money doesn't really play a large role in how they shoot each stage, but rest assured, even if their gun blew out, no one is going home early!

For the average guy like me, Steel Challenge is about the instant feedback, especially those moments where everything comes together perfectly. The fun and fellowship make it worthwhile, even when those moments aren't there (I shot very poorly). The comments made by the top shooters proved to me that this game stays a challenge from top to bottom.

Early in the match I asked Jerry Miculek how he was doing. "This year, I'm just trying to shoot my game," he said. "Not trying to go fast, just be steady."

That steady-shooting strategy paid off, as Miculek steadily rose in the rankings against the other top guns.



Weird gear: Neil Hogue shot with Hogue Inc.'s custom upper for the 1911. The slide doesn't reciprocate. Instead, a relatively small bolt inside the slide does all the work. Note the stylish Steel Challenge grip panels.

Many super-squad shooters would do well on one stage, then mess up the next, first gaining, then losing a second or two against the field. Miculek didn't set any stage records, but when all the scores were totaled, he pocketed fifth

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One to watch: the strong-shooting Lena Miculek.

overall (worth \$1,000), plus the prize gun for top Open Revolver.

Phil Strader seemed to be doing his best to play the Rodney Dangerfield

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### Steel Shooting Tip: Hammer the stop plate

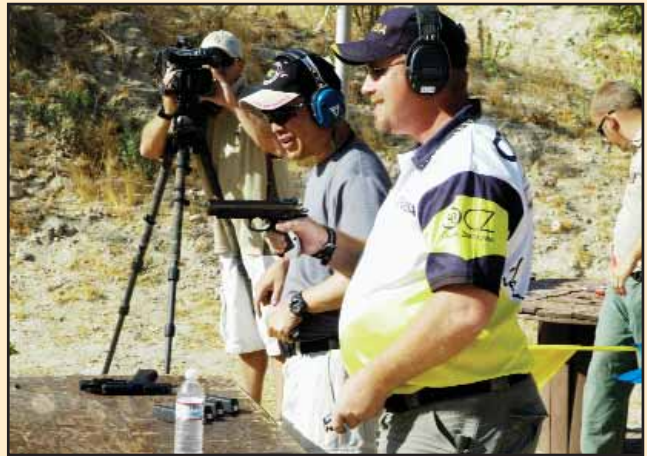
At the Steel Challenge, each stage is scored using a “wired” stop plate. Your time doesn’t stop until you hit the stop plate hard enough to move it – thereby breaking an electrical connection. To make sure that happens, many of the top shooters will fire at least two shots at the stop plate – even if they hit it the first time.

### Don't Hammer At Home:

In club-level Steel Challenge shooting, most clubs use timers that record sound. Shooting extra shots at the stop plate irritates the RO and slows the match down, since the scorekeeper has to watch closely to know how many shots you fired AFTER hitting the stop plate the first time, then back the timer up to find the correct score. It’s annoying enough that depending on the exact rules that are being used, the match director may decree that the ROs will record your last shot fired, no matter how many times you hit the stop plate. (The Steel Challenge started us-

role, theatrically groaning about how he would rarely place in the top three on a stage. Much of that was sarcasm (Strader would finish eighth Open, top Limited, and top Iron Sight Rimfire), but when BJ Norris nailed home a sub-two-second run to knock Strader to fourth on “Smoke and Hope,” Strader blurted “There goes my stage money.” He’ll be playing the Rodney again next year. Strader almost won the Steel Master title – with its \$1,000 purse supplied by Oregon Trail Bullets — but got nosed out by BJ Norris.

When I checked in on the ladies’ Super Squad around mid-day, I found a



While you don’t see it in the press as much, the side matches at Steel Challenge are a big part of the game. Above, Angus Hobdell sets up to win Action Target’s Dueling Tree shootoff.

ing wired stop plates in 1981 to end the arguments over how many shots had been fired.)

At a match where they’re using wired stop plates (like the World Championships), there’s no risk to shooting extra shots, so just plan on hitting the stop plate at least twice. Like a trap shooter shooting at the broken pieces of his target, if you hit it twice, all you’re giving up is an extra bullet. However, if your first shot missed, you’ve eliminated the time-consuming decision process over whether to shoot again.

It’s a trick that could save you time – and improve your follow-through as well.



lot of long faces. Jessie Abbate had fallen behind thanks to equipment problems, and everyone in contention seemed to be having a rough time of it.

“It’s not a matter of who’s shooting the best,” laughed Kay Miculek, “it’s a matter of who screws up the least!”

Miculek would eventually lay claim to her seventh ladies title later that day, scoring a 105.85 and fending off a strong challenge from a new face on the leader board, Lydia Cuyong (108.67). Abbate and a strong-shooting Rebecca Jones would finish neck-and-neck at 110.67 and 110.86.

When the Supers are shooting, the Steel Challenge maintains the Para Ordnance leader board, showing unofficial results for the top five. Troy McManus (one of the new guys) trailed the Supers, totaling each stage and keeping the leader board guy up to date. Going into the last few stages, KC Eusebio had a good lead, but two poor runs on Para Ordnance's "Accelerator" could lose it. There is no "safe harbor" effect in Steel Challenge. If your extractor starts to die, you will lose the

*Meet the Steel Challenge staff, Page 76.*

match in the last two strings. Equipment problems had strafed Todd Jarrett early, and caused trouble for BJ in the Limited match. KC needed everything to go smoothly.

Here on Accelerator Jarrett let fly, winning the stage with a blistering 9.60. He was no longer in position to win, but he set the bar high. Eusebio shot early in the squad and nailed his runs, setting a 79.16 total time (a new match record). BJ Norris was right on

his tail, but couldn't get the runs he needed, ending up roughly a second and a half behind Jarrett (total time, 80.84). Michel trailed too much to catch Eusebio, but JJ Racaza thought he had a shot. He slammed home two good strings, then two poor ones in a row. Under the Steel Challenge rules, you shoot each stage five times, dropping the slowest run. That means you can blow one run and not

damage your average. When Racaza blew the second run, he and the entire crowd groaned. Racaza arched his neck to look skyward, as if asking for another chance. He knew he'd lost the cup. Racaza would finish third at 83.19.

As the crowd filtered away, I hung around for a while, talking to the top shooters and waiting for Eusebio's trophy presentation. Perhaps the most telling comment came from Dave Sevigny as he was congratulating Eusebio,



Plagued by equipment problems, Todd Jarrett finished sixth at 89.64.

Racaza, and Michel.

"Man, this is hard. You guys are so strong, it takes an act of God to knock you guys out of the top three."

Was he exaggerating? Certainly, but there's no question that winning what can be the richest prize in practical shooting poses a difficult challenge, one might say, a Steel Challenge.





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