

GENERALEQUIPMENT NOTES

The sport of Cowboy Action Shooting requires a certain amount of equipment. For guns the participant needs: two single-action revolvers; a pistol caliber lever action (or pump action) rifle; and a side-by-side, lever action, or pump action (Winchester Model 1897) shotgun in 10, 12, 16, or 20 gauge. The choice of manufacturer, finish, barrel length, sights, caliber, etc. is best left up to individual preferences. However, the shorter barreled guns in smaller calibers (shotgun is the exception on caliber), handle faster than the longer barrel and/or larger caliber guns. Each shooter will need to select his/her own firearms based on personal preference. For practicing, nothing beats a timer. It is the most important practice tool available.

In addition to firearms, the shooter will need a pair of holsters, a cartridge belt to hold holsters and store ammunition for reloads, and a shot shell belt or slide to hold shot shells. The shooter will need ammunition appropriate to the firearms that he/she has selected, their competitive desires, and that conform to rules laid down by the Single Action Shooting Society (SASS®).

Lastly, practice requires a timer. Not just to record the times of runs or practice sessions, but more importantly, to provide feedback on shooter improvement over time, and to teach the shooter to respond to the sound that is the start signal for every stage in a match.

TIMERS

The timer is the most important practice tool available. When you go to a match, the sound of the timer is your start signal. Your practice sessions should include the beep as your key to start the drill. Regardless of whether you need to record times or keep track of splits, the beep should be a constant key to start. Look for a timer with the following features:

- Instant start and a delayed start. For most practice sessions you will be alone. Having a timer that can be set for a 3 second delay will give you time to start the timer and then get ready to start the exercise.
- Splits. It is very helpful to review your split times. For example, if you are practicing transitions between revolvers, then you need to be able to check the split time between the fifth shot with the first revolver and the first shot with the second.
- Par time. The par time is the time between two beeps. If you are working on your draw and you know you can do it in three seconds if you concentrate, then it is helpful to set the par time for three seconds. When you start the timer, you'll hear the first beep. At this beep, draw and fire your first shot. After three seconds, you'll hear a second beep. This will let you know if you made your three second goal or not.



Regardless of whether you get a timer with all of these features or not, your practice sessions will not be as good as they can be without one.

AMMUNITION

The SASS rules for ammunition state that: revolver ammunition must have a muzzle velocity less than 1000 feet per second (fps) and rifle ammunition must have a muzzle velocity less than 1400 fps; revolver and rifle ammunition must be all lead and may not be jacketed, semi-jacketed, plated, gas-checked, or copper washed; revolver and rifle ammunition must be of “single projectile design;” and ammunition with the bullets recessed below the case mouth is illegal. Shot must be all lead and size 4 or smaller. However, there are many ranges that have additional restrictions on shot size. It would be best to check with the ranges where you shoot and buy or load your shot shells accordingly.

There are several companies that make off-the-shelf ammunition that meets these requirements. Black Hills, Winchester, and Ten-X are just a few. Most shooters quickly find that it is much more cost effective to reload their own ammunition. The cost savings can be tremendous, as much as a difference of \$30 per 100 rounds. If you would like to reload your own ammunition, there are several good reference books available. Contact your local gun shop for further information.

Most shooters load their own ammunition and use the same load in both revolvers and their rifle. There are competitive benefits in addition to cost benefits. Lighter bullets result in less recoil than heavier bullets; it takes less force to get a lighter bullet up to speed than a heavier one. Lighter charges produce lower velocities that also result in less recoil. With lighter recoil, the shooter can get the firearm back to target quicker, thereby shooting faster.

On the other hand, if the round doesn't group well, you have to aim much tighter to the center of each target. Look for a round with moderate velocity and groups well.

LEATHER

Gun leather is an often-overlooked aspect of Cowboy Action Shooting™. Each participant will need Two holsters, a cartridge belt, and either a shot shell belt or a shot shell slide that fits on the cartridge belt. The holsters must be worn on either side of the body. They should be either a straight drop configuration or a cross-draw. Cross-draw holsters must be within 30 degrees of vertical. Buscadero-style rigs (where the holster is suspended from a slot in the cartridge belt) are permitted. Look for holsters that are stiff around the mouth. These will not close up when the revolver is drawn, making reholstering easier.



Holsters should be designed to retain the revolvers through a normal range of motion, and allow for the revolver to be drawn with little or no resistance. The holster should retain the gun for a few moments, even if upside down. The holster should hold its shape during holstering and reholstering so the shooter doesn't need to hold the holster with one hand while drawing with the other. This is an inherently unsafe act as the shooter is sweeping him/herself. Many shooters prefer not to have a hammer thong tie-down. The tie down could get in the way of holstering or drawing, or get tangled up in the hammer spur.

The cartridge belt should fit around the hips snugly enough so that when the revolver is drawn, it doesn't ride up. There should be some loops on the belt to hold the correct caliber of ammunition for the firearms that have been selected.

Shot shell belts or slides should hold shot shells securely, while still allowing them to be pulled quickly from leather for loading the shotgun. SASS rules prohibit wearing a shot shell belt above the bellybutton.

There is a lot of room for individual expression with gun leather. There are many varieties of tooling, colors, and styles to choose from and every leather maker has their own individual style. Keep in mind that you may go through several different styles and configurations before you settle on your favorite and find what works best for you.

Competitive Note: The most competitive holsters will be very stiff and be made for the revolvers that will be used. They will stay open after the draw and the mouth of the holster will be flared to facilitate reholstering. They will retain the gun through a normal range of movement and at a full speed run. Shot shell belts are preferred over belt slides

as they bring the shells up a little higher, reducing the amount of movement required making loading the shotgun much easier.

ACTION WORK

Confidence in your equipment is the vitally important to a high level of performance. If you are not 100% confident in your firearms, you won't be able to shoot up to your potential. It doesn't matter what guns you buy, they will need some action work in order to perform at their best. There will be machine marks, burrs, timing issues, springs, and other things that may need to be modified in order to make the firearms work correctly, smoothly, and fast. In addition, a firearm that has had an action job will last longer.

There are amateur and professional gunsmiths all over the nation that do excellent work. Prices may range from \$50 for a basic action job on a shotgun, to \$200 or more for a revolver or rifle. Every gunsmith has a different rate scale depending on what needs doing. When you find a gunsmith that does work that you like, make sure to leave them some of your ammunition and let them know what primers you use. This way they can sight the guns in and tune them for your match ammunition. Most action jobs will have some or all of the following:

- Mating surfaces polished and deburred.
- Triggers improved and creep removed.
- Springs tuned.
- Timing adjusted.
- Forcing cone angles recut or forcing cones lengthened (revolver or shotgun).
- Stocks fit to the shooter.
- Ejectors and extractors recut or tuned to work better and more reliably.
- Internal parts hardened.
- Sighting in using your loads.
- Other modifications to improve the reliability and function of the firearm.

Authors Note, Added October 2007: I've found that many shooters like really light mainsprings in their guns. A light mainspring does not equal a smooth action, and if the spring is too light it's detrimental.

The guns we use have very long lock times. That's the time it takes the hammer to fall once the sear is tripped. If lock time is extensive (light springs), then it's quite possible to pull the gun off target before the bullet has left the barrel. I have had students outrunning the lock time of their revolvers and rifles. A stronger spring and a little follow-through fixed it.