

HARD AND FAST

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Speed Steel. Two words brought together that take on an exciting new meaning, as well as make a great name for a sport involving accuracy, strategy and pace.

John Gosling at the home club is a Speed Steel aficionado. I once saw him play shave-and-a-haircut with a .45 pistol and five steel plates of varying sizes, set at varying distances. Once I'd picked my jaw off the range, I knew I had to have a go. My first thought, of course, was, "How hard can it be to hit five steel plates?" and I soon discovered that it's not very hard at all — if I took my time. But add a timer, and fellow shooters blazing away, hitting all five targets in five seconds or less — now THAT'S Speed Steel.

A couple of months ago, Mr Gosling casually asked if I'd be interested in the Speed Steel Nationals in Rotorua. I made polite listening noises and soon found an entry form in my hand. Never one to bow to peer pressure, I registered, and booked accommodation and travel. In sharp contrast to my early Action Pistol shooting 'career', I did a little research. A Google of "speed steel tips" with the Parental Controls on gave me results and advice that was almost unanimous: take my time, and practice, practice, practice.

I had a half-dozen range days in which to get some practice before the nationals. After the fourth range day, I ran out of projectiles and powder. (Lesson learned: have plentiful spares handy.) (Bonus lesson learned: if resources are limited, plan ahead with your reloading, working backward from the big day.) With two range days remaining, I sourced all-new projectiles and powder. I used my second-to-last day to test 50 rounds of varying dimensions and weights to find a load that grouped reasonably closely. My last range day was spent finding my zero from the holster. Fellow Action shooters Chris Skewes (Auckland) and Alan Hills (Whangarei) happened to be at the range that day — they were getting ready for Rotorua as well — and they kindly let me join their practice session for a little while.

It had been quite a while since my last visit to Rotorua. After a southward run from Auckland to Tirau that was uneventful and, frankly, boring, driving the Thermal Explorer Highway brought back hazy memories of a misspent youth. I arrived the day before the shoot in a warm buzz of nostalgia; the town is much more developed and geared towards tourism than I remember, but it still smells the same.

On the morning of the competition, the Lion Foundation Rotorua Marathon boxed me in the township. At first I fumed at the utter selfishness of these individual sportspeople but after a latte bowl and a slice of cheesecake, I calmed enough to recognise a spiritual sporting kinship with those wheezing, staggering runners.

The Rotorua Pistol Club is located in a forest valley 20 minutes east of Rotorua. With a remote control flying club and deerstalkers range for neighbours, it appears future-proofed against encroachment. I was awestruck at the facilities: 32 ranges, catering for IPSC, 3-gun, Speed Steel —

no Action, but — and it was sprawling enough that quad bikes were on hand to transport the less mobile competitors to their range or ranges of choice.

The briefing by match director Don Perry was short and to the point: numbers were down this year; don't do anything stupid; and because pistol shooters couldn't be counted on to write legibly or do sums correctly, USE THE FREAKING PRINTED STICKERS PROVIDED. I traded best wishes with practice mates Chris and Alan, and exchanged barbed pleasantries with fellow Whangarei members Mr Gosling, Cary Wilkinson and Fern Manning. I'd watched them train religiously for this competition, and I'd found their dedication and sense of sportsmanship quite sick-making.

I was squadded with veteran steel shooters: Rod Alley (Waiuku), IPSC section director Wally Cole (Whanganui), Buggs Foster (Whanganui), Jim Gauldie (Whanganui), and Aaron Thomason (Rotorua). They were unselfish with their tips and charitable with their encouragement — that's one of the things I love about this sport: at first glance a bunch of shooters looks like a closed shop but once you show them you're not a danger to them or yourself, they're approachable and open with advice and opinions. Ours was the smallest squad in the competition so we ripped through our matches in a fun and relaxed manner, the powder smoke in the air sometimes mixed with colourful epithets and friendly insults between the old salts amongst us.

Speed Steel is an interesting discipline. It's largely stationery like Action; it involves strategy like IPSC — but it is obviously its own thing. What I found most challenging was the combination of aimed and 'point' shooting. After a couple of years of having front-sight-front-sight-front-sight being drummed into me, it's quite a shift to make in the heat and smoke of the match. I suppose that's where the practice, practice, practice comes in.

I managed third place in my class and grade, behind Chris and Alan, their preparation paying off with placings in the top half of the field. Miss Manning and Messrs Gosling and Wilkinson dominated their categories, proving the value of practice and focus. For my part, I'd entered the competition wanting only to take my time to hit each plate, and to finish without endangering my endorsement or the sport itself. Objectives achieved, I squinted at the bronze medal I was awarded: third place Limited Rookie.

Limited Rookie. Two more words that, when put together, take on a new and unexpected meaning. Like Speed Steel, it has a certain ring. I rather like it.

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