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LIVING ON THE EDGE

Running on the verge of control is the way to win at any sport. Push the envelope, dance on the ragged edge. Go for two when one will tie. Play hard, play to win, play like there's no tomorrow. Because there isn't.

Winning is what The Edge is all about. It's the hottest setup to win at USPSA Limited Class matches yet to come from STI. The Texas-based company first developed a polymer-lower, steel upper frame to accept 1911 style slides. Now they're out with a competition gun called The Edge 5.1, a radically weighted version of their Eagle 5.1.

In STI lingo, the number after the name refers to barrel length, so The Edge 5.1 has a 5.1" barrel, the Hawk 4.3 has a 4.3" barrel and so fourth. To translate that into standard Colt speak, the Edge is a Government length pistol while the Hawk is a Commander.

The Edge achieves its competitive advantage with a full-length dust cover and non-scalloped slide. By extending the dust cover of the frame out to the end of the slide, leaving a full profile on the slide and adding a tungsten guide rod, an extra 5 ounces is gained.

Five ounces doesn't sound like much, but that third of a pound is dangling out there at the muzzle where it does the most good. The felt recoil reduction was dramatically lessened. Close range hose-mode, in my testing, gave dramatic improvement in double-taps over a standard configuration STI Eagle 5.1 that I used as a control.

I found that shot-to-shot recovery time at 25 yards, as would be encountered in a Standard Exercise; was not a noticeable advantage over the Eagle 5.1. A pair of aimed shots fired about .5 seconds apart was sufficient to settle the front sight steadily into the rear notch regardless of whether I was firing an Edge or an Eagle.

But inside 15 yards-- where the vast majority of shots come in an IPSC match-- The Edge was clearly faster to double-tap and easier to control than an Eagle.

But what about The Edge's muzzle heavy heft slowing you down when you track from target to target? This was not a factor. In a series of El Presidente drills (three targets at 10 yards, two on each, reload, two on each), my times were slightly faster with The Edge, but more importantly, the quality of my hits were better with the recoil advantage.

With its bull barrel, tungsten guide rod, full-profile slide and heavy, extended frame, the test sample Edge weighed 40 ozs. The Eagle 5.1 weighed 35 ozs. (all weights are unloaded without a magazine). A standard Colt Government Model weighs 38 ozs.

The Edge is chambered only in .40 S&W since this is the cartridge of choice in USPSA Limited Class. Anything less than .40 caliber is prohibited by the rules. Anything more than .40 sacrifices magazine capacity, which relinquishes a competitive advantage. You don't live on the edge to surrender an advantage.

Lay an Eagle and an Edge on the table, and I'll pick the Edge every time.

The Uncustom Gun

The Edge is not a custom gun. Repeat: not a custom gun. It doesn't need to be. Thanks to a highly functional and yes, very Nineties- sort of quality control called Statistical Process Control, STI is able to give custom fit with off-the-shelf parts thanks to the sort of tolerances that the system produces.

High tech solutions are nothing new to STI owners Dave and Shirley Skinner, but convincing people that a gun so specialized- and with custom serial numbers, no less straight out of the box, is hard to do.





The Skinners have beaten their heads against the wall trying to get the word out that STI does not make any custom guns whatsoever. The Edge you see here is The Edge that comes out of the factory in Georgetown, Texas. (Footnote: the mag funnel is an add-on, from Dawson Precision.) The tab on The Edge is \$2047.91 in blue (hard chrome is an option).

"We are not a custom shop, we are not a repair shop, we are not a gadget place. We are a factory. We build guns," Skinner said in his laidback Texas drawl that belies his razor sharp business mind.

Before purchasing STI from company founder Virgil Tripp, Skinner and his wife Shirley were the owners of an electronics company named Tessco Inc. which had seven plants in four cities in two states with over 430 employees. He retired in 1990 but, as Dave put it, "Got bored as hell." Having been IPSC shooters with strong interests in firearms, the Skinners met Tripp at a match, and the rest is history.

"I had met Virgil on the range and seen his little Chip McCormick demo tape when he first came out with the polymer grip. I liked him and we both got along fine. Both being old farts, we shot against each other. Then in '94, he and [engineer Sandy] Strayer split up, and Virgil needed help. So I went over to STI to help Virgil. We just pumped in time and money until we got here," the affable Texan explained.

"Here" is a modern new factory in Georgetown where state-of-the-art CNC and wire EDM machines smoothly create what is truthfully the most sophisticated production handgun ever to come out of John Browning's basic 1911 design.

Unique Slide

Of course, the heart of The Edge is an STI wide extended frame that holds (pre-ban) high capacity magazines that are readily available on the gun show circuit. Mated to the precisely CNC machined upper is an STI slide, cut from 4140 steel bar stock on a CNC machine.

The slide, technically known as the "STI 2011 Unique slide," features a wire EDM cut breechface, an industry first. It also features an enlarged ejection port to facilitate ejection of live rounds. The rails are straight and smooth as is only possible with precise CNC machining "in the hard."

In all of its various guises over the years, STI has always been known for being on the cutting edge (pardon me) of technology. From computer-aided design to stereo lithographic fabrication, carbon fiber to titanium- this company has always epitomized technology. And it shows.

The STI 2011 Unique slide personifies the company's commitment to letting technology take care of the details.

Now This Is A Barrel

There are barrels, then there are barrels. STI has poured more research into the configuration of a 1911 (excuse me, 2011) barrel than NASA put into the Mars explorer. Well, maybe that's a bit of an exaggeration, but not much.

Beginning with a Jarvis forged blank, the bore is gun drilled, button rifled and air gauged for an exacting size and smoothness. Made from 416R stainless-- the best barrel steel money can buy-- the STI barrels are vacuum heat treated and tempered to 40 Rockwell, then secondarily machined.

This is a key. Heat treating before machining assures that no warpage can occur. It's hell on tool life, but that's a secondary concern at STI. STI barrels are all bull configuration for maximum weight and "short chambered," leaving room for the chamber to be precisely cut to final depth during the assembly. Because of the bull



configuration, there is no conventional barrel bushing in any STI pistol; the barrel mates to the slide directly in a three point lockup.



The lower lugs, hood and upper lugs are all cut for minimum tolerances. The feedramp angle and pre-throat areas were meticulously researched and then configured for maximum reliability. "Failsafe feeding" as STI calls it.

STI also offers "Hybrid" barrels made by Wil Schuemann. However, these compensated barrels are not allowed in USPSA Limited Class. For a full racegun, they would be the hot ticket, especially when combined with STI's awesome eight-port compensator



Edge Features

Every component on The Edge is high tech, right down to the STI firing pin stop, which is oversize for a press fit. The strut and mainspring cap are made of titanium for a faster lock time.

Speaking of titanium, the jury is back with a verdict on this space shuttle material as it's used for the 1911. Guilty on the charge of premature wear. Guilty on the charge of reduced service life. Guilty on the charge of failing to hold a good trigger pull.



Titanium is okay for the firing pin, mainspring cap and the hammer strut, parts which do not take a precisely mated fitting, but every pistolsmith I've spoken to says thumbs down on titanium hammers. The trouble is that titanium is softer than steel and you quickly lose the edge (oops. no pun intended) on the hammer hooks. I've seen titanium hammer peened so badly from dry firing that it actually had a visible dent in it.

Not to worry on The Edge. The pistol comes with a steel hammer, although STI offers a titanium hammer as an option for those who don't mind paying for a new trigger job every 20,000 rounds or so.

But why? The STI A-6 tool steel hammer is superb when coupled with an STI 5.7 tool steel sear. Made with perfect geometry for a sharp, crisp trigger pull, the STI steel hammers are wire EDM cut for uniform inner and outer surfaces.

The guide rod is a one-piece tungsten unit with a half-through take-down hole, another original STI part designed to maximize weight. The grip safety is also an STI original, made to facilitate both engagement and take-down.

The sights consist of the unsurpassed Bo-Mar fully adjustable rear combat sight mated with an STI straight post dovetail front sight. There are both forward and rear cocking serrations.

Shooting The Edge

Accuracy was superb. I shot only handloads suitable for an IPSC match, i.e. loaded to major. The first load was my old favorite that seems to have fallen out of favor today. It consists of a Sierra 150 gr. stoked by Winchester Super Field and clocking over 1,200 fps for a 180+ factor. The second load also used a Sierra bullet, a 180 gr. flatpoint loaded to 1,000 fps for a 180 factor

Both loads shot really well in The Edge, but the 150 gr. load was the star. Five shot groups at 25 yards, hand held off a shooting bag rest, hovered consistently under 1" with the best five cutting a ragged hole of .726". The 180 gr. load shot 1.25" consistently at 25 yards. Not shabby by any means, and probably could be improved upon with more time to experiment with reloads.

Magazine capacity is 19 rounds with the standard (pre-ban) magazine and 24 rounds with a 170mm extended magazine. These are still legally available at gun shows or new to law enforcement and export customers.

Replacement magazine components, including the tube, are available in case you, um, damage your pre-ban magazines. I somehow rail over six pre-bans with my lawn mower. Mangled beyond recognition. Ruined. Tubes,

followers, springs, base pads, everything. Luckily, STI's distributors could sell me replacement parts.

Edgetravaganza

The Edge is the hot setup in Limited Class competition shooting. Does it have any application outside of a match? According to Skinner, some "Delta Force type guys" have purchased the gun. Why? Because it's the Timex of 1911's.

"It's as reliable as it can be and you can't get dirt in it. It just runs well," Skinner said.

In test firing The Edge, I noticed how straight the cartridges feed from the magazine into the chamber. STI has put extensive research into the feed ramp and pre-throat area of the barrel as well as the configuration of the magazine's feed lips. The research paid off in practice because The Edge is superbly reliable. I experienced zero malfunctions. I even ran "short" handloads, less than the recommended 1.150" OAL, to see if standard length .40 S&W rounds would feed. No problemo.



Think about it: 19+1 rounds of potent .40 caliber hollowpoints in a 40 oz. pistol with serious recoil dampening balance. For an "offensive handgun" for use as a SWAT entry weapon, that is a very attractive package. It would be moreso if STI did two things:

First, program their computer driven CNC machines to cut an HK-style flashlight mount onto that extended dust cover and couple that with the soon-to-be- released integral handgun light from SureFire. STI would have a serious entry pistol with an integral white light. Second, offer The Edge in .45 ACP-- 17 rounds of 230 grain attitude adjustment-- and you'd have a much more ergonomic pistol than the SOCOM behemoth.

(Skinner reports that a .45 ACP version of The Edge will be introduced in the first quarter of '98. Editor)

In the wake of the FBI's recent adoption of Springfield Armory's single stack .45 as a SWAT pistol, there will be considerable momentum in law enforcement circles for such a gun. The Edge could be the ultimate manifestation of an entry pistol.

Wouldn't it be ironic if a gamey IPSC racegun became a state-of-the-art law enforcement pistol? Life imitates art.