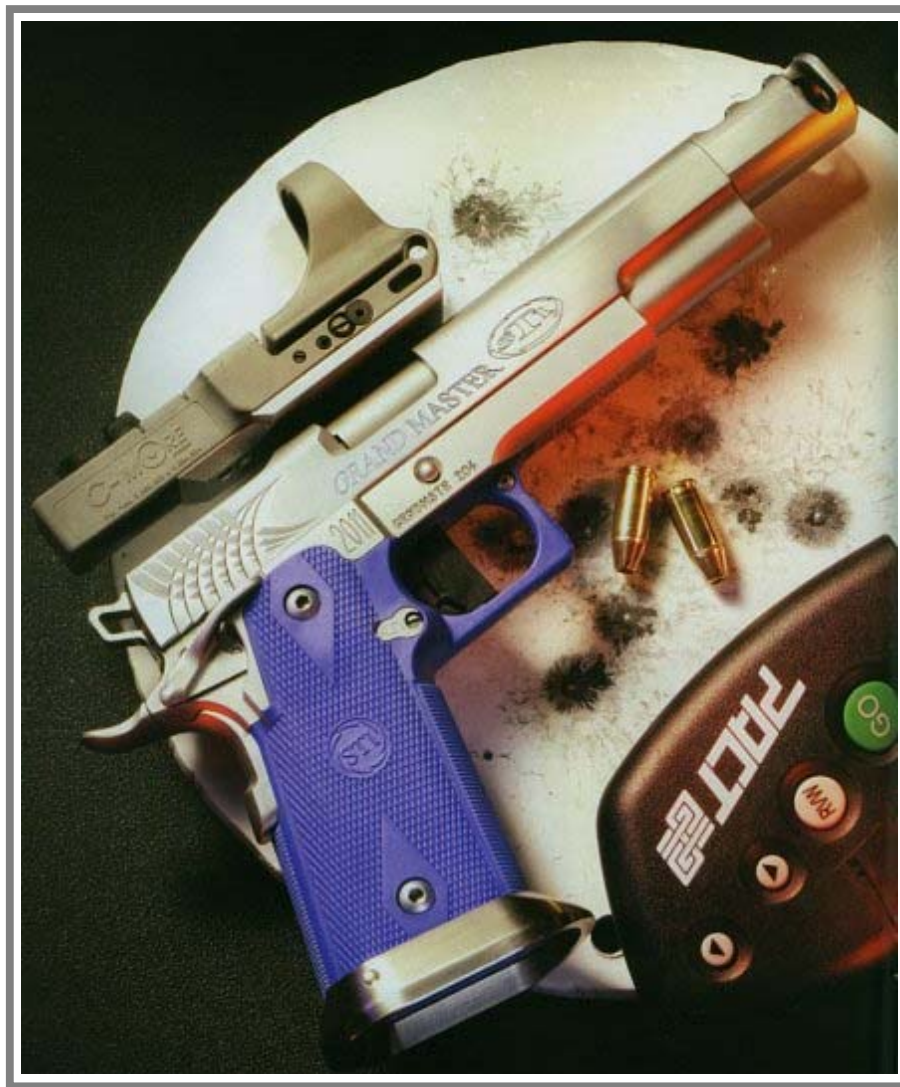


American Handgunner Sept. / Oct. 06 - STI GrandMaster

STI'S GRANDMASTER WONDERGUN



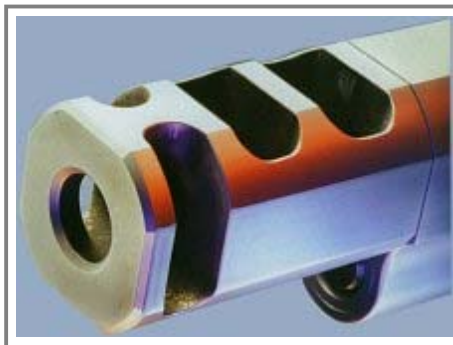
Competition's Demands Equals Tough Defensive Pistols!

Dave Anderson

Photos: Ichiro Nagata

Time flies when you're having fun. Way back in January 1991 hordes of competitive shooters were crowding around a small booth at the SHOT Show, trying to get a glimpse of a handgun prototype incorporating the 1911 action, a synthetic grip frame, and high cap mags. It was designed and made with one purpose in mind — to be the ultimate winning tool in the demanding arena of practical pistol competition.

It was the product of brilliant thinking by some very smart people. Chip McCormick, one of the very best competitive shooters the sport has ever produced and a very astute businessman; Sandy Strayer, Fred and Virgil Tripp, design engineers, and computer experts; Steve Nastoff, still considered by many enthusiasts as maybe the finest custom gunsmith ever, put their heads together.



A key element of the new pistol was its modular design. In most autopistols the receiver and the grip are one piece. In the modular design the steel receiver and synthetic grip frame are separate parts. It didn't take long for the modular design to prove itself. A few months later, in the capable hands of Jerry Bamhart, the new design won its first of many national titles.

Several sets of initials appeared in those synthetic grip frames over the next few years. There was CMC (Chip McCormick Corp.), TRI (Tripp Research, Inc.) and SV (Strayer Voigt). The initials most often seen, though, are STI which originally stood for Strayer Tripp International. Today the initials STI are themselves the trademark, which is just as well since the company is called STI International. Sorta' makes more sense than Strayer Tripp International International.

STI Today

Currently STI International makes a wide range of superb 1911-style pistols, single stack and double stack, traditional and modular. There are models to meet most any handgun need; personal defense, home defense, police or military duty. But it was the practical pistol competition arena in which STI first earned its sterling reputation, and it's the competitive arena in which STI pistols (and custom pistols on STI frames) dominate. In the two biggest divisions, Open and Limited, at most any USPSA match there will be more STI frames than all others combined.

The Grandmaster is STI's top-of-the-line pistol for Open division competition. Originally a "custom shop only" item, it's now a standard production model. For its purpose it's as good, as well made and fitted a pistol as money can buy. I can remember when putting together a first class race gun meant rounding up various components (frame, optical sight, maybe a barrel and slide), getting in line to place an order with a custom pistoismith, and waiting several months. The Grandmaster is ready to go just as it comes, in the time it takes STI to ship one to your dealer.

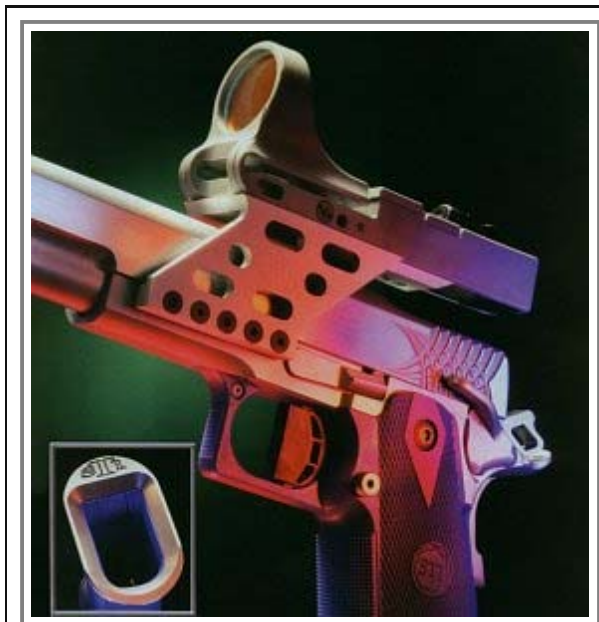


The Grand Master

The test pistol is in 9mm P (other calibers include .38 Super, 9x23, .40 S&W and .45 ACP). Back when the IPSC major power factor (bullet weight, times velocity, divided by 1,000) was 175, a few fearless shooters were reloading the 9mm to make major. Out of concern for the safety of competitors, range officials and spectators, USPSA would not allow 9mm major loads in competition. Subsequently the power factor has been lowered to 165 making 9mm major an option. Frankly with 9x23 and .38 Super options available, it's hard to make a convincing argument for 9mm major for IPSC competition. However the standard 9mm is a great choice for other action shooting events such as the Bianchi Cup or the Steel Challenge. If speedshooting is your primary interest — and IPSC only an occasional thing — the 9mm starts to look pretty good.



Built on the steel modular frame, the Grandmaster uses STI's classic slide, flat-topped and with visually-striking (and very effective) "saber tooth" rear cocking serrations. No one will win or lose a match based on a cocking serration pattern, but there's nothing wrong with looking good. The STI ramped, one-piece Trubor barrel has an integral compensator called the S-1, standard for the 9mm, .40 and .45 cartridges. The 9x23 and .38 Super in major loads use a larger powder charge, generate more powder gases, and can benefit from the additional expansion chamber of the S-2 compensator.



"STI GRANDMASTER COMPARES TO THE AVERAGE PRODUCTINO PISTOL MUCH THE WAY A FORMULA ONE RACECAR COMPARES TO A REGULAR PASSENGER SEDAN"

There is no barrel bushing in the slide; the barrel is cone-shaped to fit the front of the slide when the gun is in battery. The guide rod/recoil spring assembly is STI's Recoil Master unit, which is supposed to reduce recoil. Maybe it does, but the gun weighs 42.5 ounces empty, close to three pounds when fully loaded with 18 rounds, and in 9mm it just doesn't kick much anyway.

The Grandmaster came equipped with a C-More Railway sight (it can also be ordered from the factory with the OKO Red Dot Reflex sight). I can remember when the C-More first came out, just another among many optical sights fighting for supremacy in the competitive field. Today there is no doubt who the winner is. The C-More absolutely dominates Open division. At the USPSA Nationals you have to look hard to find an optical sight that's not a C-More. I read once that back in the WW I era a Spanish sports writer was interviewing the great bullfighter Belmonte, and asked him to rank the best bull fighters. According to legend, Belmonte replied, "First, Belmonte. Then no one. Then Joselito." That about describes C-More's ranking with practical shooting competitors. Why does it dominate? Chris Tilley, a USPSA Grand Master and currently the IPSC Junior World Champion, told me, "You literally can 'see more' with this sight. There's little to obstruct your view of the targets so it is very fast. It's light, helping keep gun weight down so it's faster to move. And the sight is extremely

tough. I'll occasionally get minor point of impact shifts if the gun is bounced around with airline baggage, but other than that the C-More just goes on and on."

Performance

Race guns, like race cars, are built to close tolerances and sometimes need a break-in period. A note in the carrying case suggested running 500 rounds through the Grandmaster to burnish moving parts for smooth operation. Nonetheless the test gun ran like a champ right out of the gate and functioned perfectly through the firing of some 500 rounds.

The trigger on the Grandmaster is polymer with a flat face, a style popular with a number of top shooters. It's readily interchangeable to suit different styles and hand sizes. Fifteen tries with my Lyman electronic trigger gauge gave an average pull of 3 pounds, 10 ounces, with a variation of only about two ounces. In terms of trigger feel there was a slight initial takeup, some barely discernible smooth creep and just enough over-travel to provide reliability as the gun got hot and dirty.





It's an outstanding pull by factory standards, though on the heavy side for competition. Most competition shooters in Open division like lighter trigger pulls, generally 2 pounds or less. Not so long ago a reliable, durable 1# to 2# pound pull in a 1911 would have been considered impossible, but with today's precision manufacturing techniques and hardened steel materials they are not at all uncommon. Wisely, STI tuned the trigger to be controllable by shooters just starting out in competition, while more advanced shooters can have their gunsmith tune it to meet their needs.

After unpacking the STI pistol I disassembled it and gave it a thorough cleaning and inspection, then lubed it using a new product I had on hand called Montana X-Treme gun grease. I like this stuff because it comes in a hypodermic style tube for precise application. That was all the lube the gun got through 500 rounds.

Scary-Accurate

Accuracy testing was done at 25 yards from a sandbag rest, firing five-shot groups with a variety of factory ammunition from Black Hills, Federal and Winchester. The average of 20 groups was 1.42"; the largest group 1.90" and the smallest .95". Best groups were with Black Hills 124-grain +P HPs and Federal 147-grain subsonic HPs. Both averaged about 1.11".

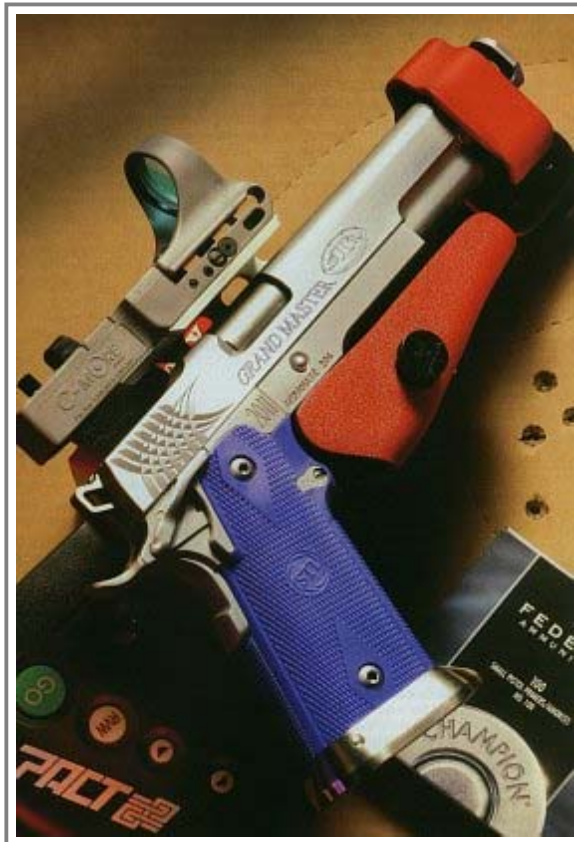
Back in 2002 Massad Ayoob and Charlie Petty conducted an interesting test comparing hand-held accuracy to Ransom Rest groups, using the same guns. Ayoob felt firing 5-shot hand-held groups and measuring the best three shots gave results similar to 5-shot groups from the Ransom Rest. With a couple of exceptions the results tended to support his view.

Long ago I had a job in which analyzing data was an important part of my work. I quickly learned not to go chucking out data just because it didn't seem to fit the pattern.



"No one will win or lose a match based on a cocking serration pattern, but there's nothing wrong with looking good."

In statistical analysis there is little enough data at best; you don't discard any of it unless you are certain it's anomalous. In accuracy testing the only time I'll discount a shot is if I know it was my fault, meaning I called it as a bad trigger break immediately after the shot. But for believers in the best-three- of-five method, the average three-best group size was .48", the largest group .90", and the smallest group .084". If you don't believe the last one, I don't either but fortunately I had a witness. My friend George McLaughlin, a fellow IPSC shooter, was watching with a binocular. After the first three shots I heard him say, "Wow!" The next two shots opened the group to average size, but those first three were virtually through the same hole.



Sometimes I think there should be a standard testing protocol used by Handgunner staffers, but I can just imagine "His Editorship's" reaction: "I wear out two pairs of boots a year kicking butts just to get these guys to be consistent in paragraph format and fonts. Now you want me to actually try to make them consistent in gun testing? I can hear the whining now — and you know how I hate whining."

A Racer

A full house pistol such as STI's Grandmaster compares to the average production pistol much the way a Formula One racecar compares to a regular passenger sedan. I'm perfectly content with my Honda Accord and Chevy 4x4 pickup, but dang, it would be fun to run a couple of hot laps in a true racecar. It sure is fun driving a true world-class racegun once in a while.

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