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FIVE .38S&W

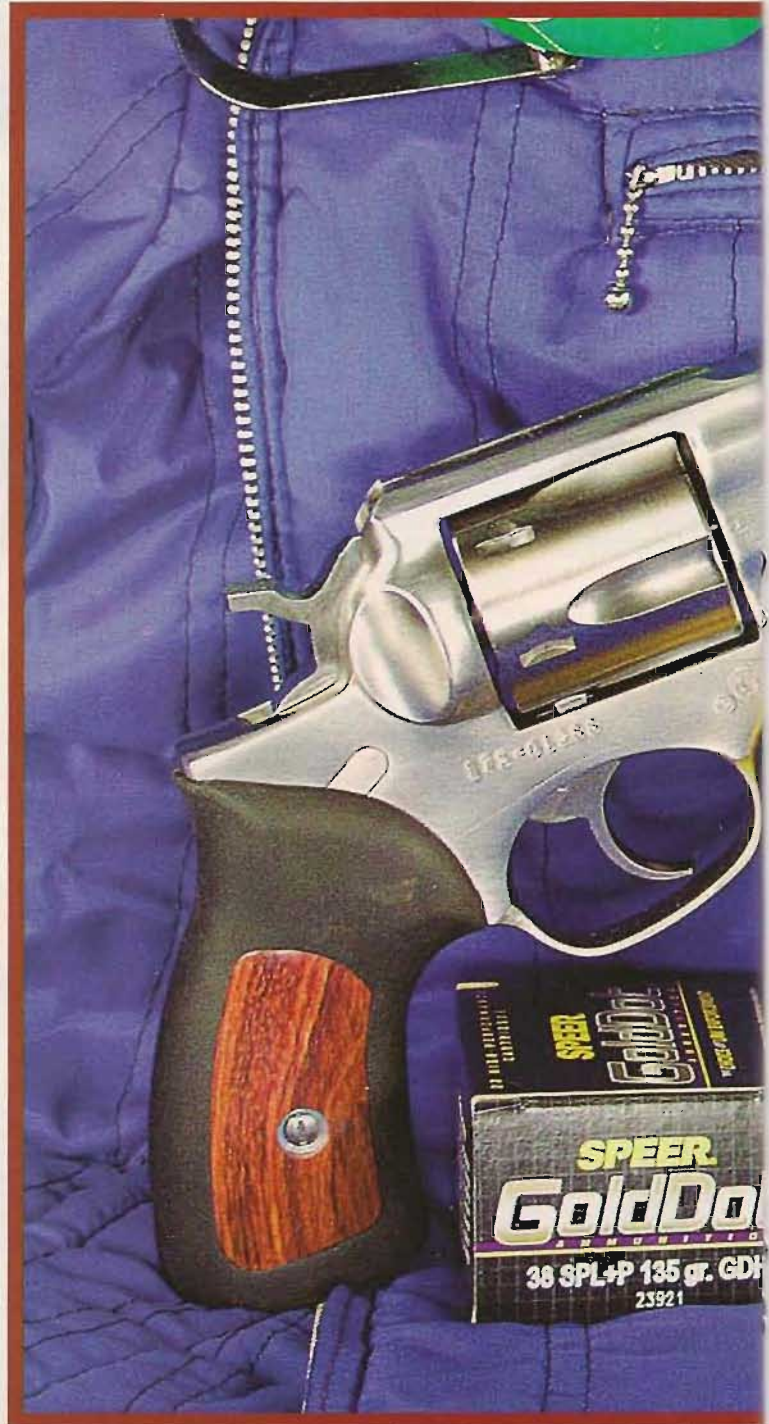
(Left) Buffalo Bore's hot .38S&W +P loads are do-able in the smaller snub, but more comfortable in the heavier 3" Ruger GP100. (Right) It doesn't have to be a hi-cap master blaster, a good short-barreled .38 can do the job, and better than ever with the right ammo!



IN THIS MODERN ERA

of whizbang hi-cap autos, lasers, lights, fiber optics, and glow-in-the-dark night sights, the little 'ol .38 snub has somehow become uncool. Exactly when the classic .38 snub became uncool, I'm not sure, probably back around the 1980s when revolvers in general were mostly relegated to old foggy status themselves and for those who still carried them. Okay, progress marches on. But, more than a few old fogies got to be old fogies solely because they had a .38 snub at just the right moment in time. Whether as a primary carry gun, or a backup, the classic short-barreled .38 snub has been there, done that, and has the ticket stubs to prove it.

Much maligned as underpowered and inaccurate, the humble snub nevertheless got carried, and still gets carried, simply because it was simple, reliable and carryable! It didn't win trophies, it didn't confer braggin' rights, it didn't get fancy leather, it didn't plink, and it didn't go hunting. It also didn't spend its life in the safe. It left home quite often, it wasn't babied, and it saw some tough places and times where no pretty Python or S&W M19 could do quite the same job. It was packed a lot, shot a little, put away without a thought till the next day, or shift, or the next trip to the wrong side of the tracks,

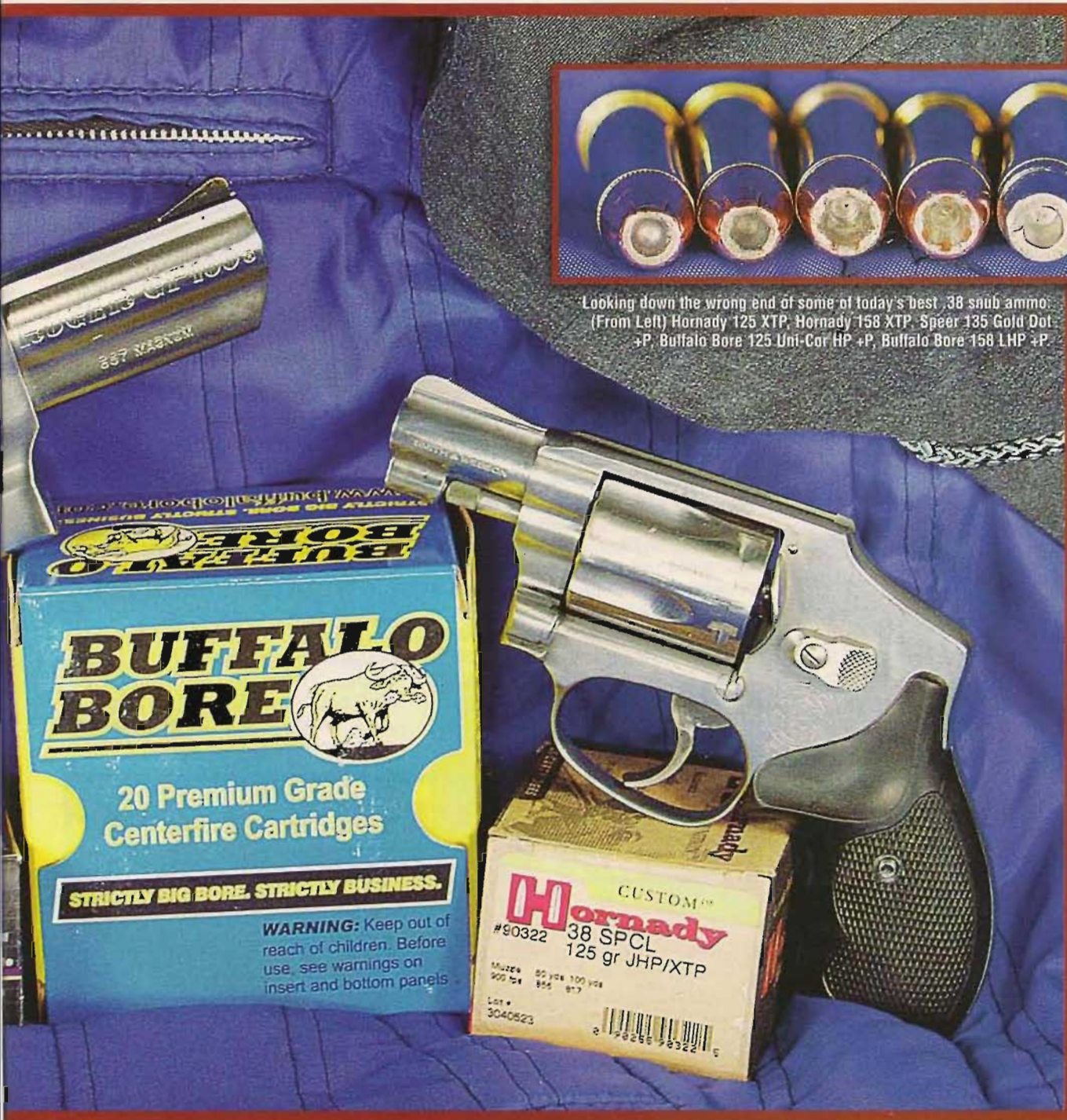


BEST OF THE BREED—21' defense loads for snubbies

MANSTOPPERS



Looking down the wrong end of some of today's best .38 snub ammo:
(From Left) Hornady 125 XTP, Hornady 158 XTP, Speer 135 Gold Dot
+P, Buffalo Bore 125 Uni-Cor HP +P, Buffalo Bore 158 LHP +P



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.38SPL MANSTOPPERS

and it came through when it was needed, because it was there. Bigger and shinier guns with more capacity, power, glitz, and glamour may or may not have been on board, but the little snub was. It rode along in places other guns couldn't, simply because it was small and handy, and it could. Toss it in a pocket, strap it in an ankle holster, stick it in the waistband, nobody notices the bulge. Often not so with a bigger, heavier gun.

Judging from the number of different models today, I'd guess that more people are still buying and actually carrying the little .38 snubs than many will admit. The increasing number of states that now issue concealed carry permits obviously hasn't hurt that situation any, either. I'd suspect that for every full-sized 1911 .45ACP and GLOCK .40 sold, there are quite probably at least ten .38 shorties sold. Many new permit holders find that the most recommended bigger defensive pistols turn out to be either too heavy or bulky for everyday carry. Some give up and leave the gun at home or in the car. The smart ones find something that does work for them, and a good little .38 snub fits a variety of life and clothing styles.

Is it the best choice for a defensive gun? No, but a .38 snub in the pocket is worth two .45s in the glovebox.

Snubs are nothing new. For over 200 years, knowledgeable people have depended on short-barreled handguns of all actions and types when concealment was needed. From the relatively primitive flintlocks of the 1700s, percussion single shots and cutback revolvers of the 1800s, factory models and gunsmith-modified revolvers both big and small bore in the 1900s, on down to the current century, the concept is time proven.

Still, they get no respect.

It all seems to be that "accuracy" thing.



Speer's new 135gr Short Barreled .38SPL +P Gold Dots are designed specifically for the shorter barrels, and they're an excellent choice for a snubbie.

Oh, and the power thing, too. They're just "belly guns," only good at contact distances, and the .38 Special cartridge is just too wimpy. Well—Maybe so, maybe no.

What kind of accuracy do you really need at typical confrontational distances? What are you carrying a gun to protect yourself from? Think about those confrontations. Muggings, assaults and rapes all happen up close. You don't get robbed from 25 yards out; you don't get punched, clubbed, or knifed from 25 yards out; you don't get raped from 25 yards out. All those require close-in proximities. Inside 7 yards, which is 21 feet, you don't need a gun that'll put six rounds in half an inch at 25 yards. Inside 7, if you can put five rounds into a paper plate, you're viable. Closer up,

PERFORMANCE

.38SPL SNUBBIES

	Ruger GP100		S&W M640	
	Velocity	Accuracy	Velocity	Accuracy
Buffalo Bore 158 LSWHC +P	1129	3.88	1042	4.56
Buffalo Bore 125 Uni-Cor HP +P	1180	4.13	1085	3.00
Speer 135 Gold Dot JHP +P	982	2.50	895	4.38
Hornady 158 XTP JHP	766	1.00	716	3.50
Hornady 125 XTP JHP	855	3.13	782	2.06

Bullet weight measured in grains, velocity in feet per second (fps) by Oehler Model 35 Chronograph, accuracy in inches for 5-shot groups from 25 yards. Ruger GP100 had 3-inch barrel and S&W M640 had a 2-inch barrel. Temperature high 90s, Elevation 4500 feet.

Still viable in the "Inside 7" despite its bright stainless sights and DAO trigger, the highly portable S&W 640 goes places bigger guns can't.



at ten feet, that same paper plate-sized group can more than get you home alive, and a good quality snub revolver has more than enough intrinsic accuracy to hold up its end of the fight. If you can handle the "Inside 7" you're good for probably 90% of the threatening slings and arrows that outrageous fortune may throw at you.

Wimpy? Not anymore. The traditional 158-grain roundnose lead bullet used as a standard for the .38 Special (SPL) for the first 60 years of its existence was relatively anemic, even in a full-sized revolver with a 4-inch barrel or longer. It tended to jog along sedately at around 800 feet per second (fps), and the round bullet nose was not particularly effective in living tissue as it passed through. Aggravating the situation even further, the velocity drop due to the 2-inch snub's barrel made the round even more questionable. But, beginning with the Super-Vel ammo of the 1960s, ammo makers started to ramp up the old round, and today we have, by far, the most



effective factory loads ever seen in the .38SPL caliber. We now have infinitely better-designed and more effective bullets, and we also have more energy behind them in the extra velocity P+ loads.

Using the right load, we can now actually get energy figures out of a 2-inch barrel with factory ammo that even a 6-incher couldn't pull off 40 years ago. And with bullets that are much more reliable in terminal performance.

Got a .38 snubie? Thinking of getting one? Take a look at five factory loads for consideration if you do.

SPEER GOLD DOT

Speer's Gold Dot line has put on a pretty good show since the company introduced it, good enough that some smaller ammo makers have taken to using the Dots in their own lineups.

This year, Speer introduced a new line of ammunition specifically designed for short-barreled handguns. What's available now is a .38SPL 135-grain +P load, a 9mm 124-grain P+ round, a .357MAG 135-grain load, a .40S&W 180-grain load, a .44MAG 200-grain load, and a .45ACP 230-grain offering. All will use Gold Dots specially designed to match up with the velocities selected for shorter than standard barrels in those calibers, and all are intended to maximize the performance in those short barrels. These are not just standard Dots re-packaged and re-marketed; they're a branch of their own within the Gold Dot family.



With a contrasting blue front sight blade, the bigger Ruger GP100 was easier to control and shoot out to 25 yards, but accuracy wasn't significantly better overall.

Drag Your Finger Down The Edge of The Page To Find Out!



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DECEMBER 2005

Dec. 12th - 16th: Pistol Instructor. Springfield, MA. A course designed for the firearms instructor involved in the transition from revolver to pistol. Concentrates on selecting proper support equipment, policy consideration, placing the pistol in perspective with other law enforcement weapons and tactics, and developing new motor skills necessary for a successful transition program. Course includes operational nomenclature; techniques for utilizing support equipment; safety considerations; properly defined fundamentals; immediate action; transitional fundamentals; loading/unloading procedures; marksmanship development; drawing techniques; weapon potential: multiple shots, multiple targets; student evaluations. Contact: Smith & Wesson Academy, 299 Page Blvd., Springfield, MA 01104; e-mail: swacademy1@aol.com; website: academy.smith-wesson.com.

FEBRUARY 2006

Feb. 27th - March 3rd: Range Master. Springfield, MA. A course designed for the firearms instructor involved in the transition from revolver to pistol. Concentrates on selecting proper support equipment, policy consideration, placing the pistol in perspective with other law enforcement weapons and tactics, and developing new motor skills necessary for a successful transition program. All major makes of pistols are acceptable. For greatest benefit, course should be attended before support or accessory equipment is selected, and while department policy is still flexible. Course includes operational nomenclature; techniques for utilizing support equipment; safety considerations; properly defined fundamentals; immediate action; transitional fundamentals; loading/unloading procedures; marksmanship development; drawing techniques, weapon potential: multiple shots, multiple targets; student evaluations. Contact: Smith & Wesson Academy, 299 Page Blvd., Springfield, MA 01104; e-mail: swacademy1@aol.com; website: academy.smith-wesson.com.

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.38SPL MANSTOPPERS

The first one out the door, is the 135-grain .38SPL +P. Developed for concealed carry, and to meet certain penetration and expansion parameters in FBI testing criteria, this .38SPL +P Dot load uses a wider and deeper cavity than Speer's standard .38SPL Dots. The company also uses a different flash-retardant powder. The combination puts out a zippy bullet that Speers says has penetrated 11 inches in ballistic gelatin and expanded to .576 caliber with 97%+ weight retention. And, that's from a S&W M640, with a 1.88-inch barrel. A bullet that's expanded to .57 caliber at the end of 11 inches of travel has done a lot of tissue damage along the way; this is light years beyond what your Grandpa was shooting in his .38.

BUFFALO BORE

A niche-based ammomaker, Buffalo Bore specializes in a relatively small lineup of loads that fall outside the norm, usually with hot numbers using heavy-for-caliber bullets. They've got two new +P rounds out that are also designed to give the .38SPL snub some real oomph. The heavy load uses a 158-grain soft lead semi-wadcutter hollowpoint made to Buffalo Bore specs by Mike Rogers at RimRock Bullets. It's not easy to mass produce a soft lead hollowpoint bullet, but Rogers is doing it, and the Buffalo Bore round uses a gas check to hold leading down as it blows out the barrel at 1,000 fps (again from a 1.88-inch S&W J-frame snub). That's an honest velocity claim, by the way; I got a slightly faster average through my own chronograph.

The second load is a low-velocity 125-grain Speer Uni-Cor HP bullet that's designed to expand reliably as low as 800 fps. Also a +P round, Buffalo Bore doesn't hold back on the throttle, and this one pushes out at about 1050 fps, according to company claims. I say "claims" because they were a little off here, too. I got about 35 fps faster in my tests. I've dealt with Buffalo Bore before; when they quote you a velocity on their stuff, they're usually either conservative or right on. I don't have gelatin figures for these loads, but I'd expect good results with the Uni-Cor HP, and the soft lead HP should open up very well.

Both loads use flash-retardant powders, and being specialty ammo, prices are high. Roughly a dollar a round, but what do you value your life at?

HORNADY

All three of the above loads are +P, which means higher velocity and stiffer

recoil. There's usually not much to hang onto with the abbreviated grips on most snubbies, and recoil in such small revolvers can be more than what some shooters want to deal with. As a contrasting example in standard velocity, premium ammo, you may consider Hornady's .38SPL 125-grain XTP and 158-grain XTP ammunition, both with XTP (Extreme Terminal Performance) jacketed hollow points.

Hornady's XTP line is built to provide just a bit more penetration than other JHPs, and in a .38SPL without specialized high-performance components and high velocities to boost terminal ballistics, more penetration, especially in a shorter barrel, is a good thing to have. Expansion in the XTPs is typically slightly less, as a factor in the penetration.

Hornady doesn't list velocities for 2-inches, and the company's published figures at 900 fps for the 125-grainer and 800 fps for the 158-grainer are both for 4-inch barrels. Actual velocities through shorter barrels can vary markedly. For velocity comparison, check the chart.

Since the Speer and Buffalo Bore performance figures were specifically quoted for S&W J-frame revolvers, and they're pretty much the standard for pocket revolv-

ers nowadays, I hauled out my old stainless M640 to use in testing ammo samples provided by all three companies. Mine is the older .38SPL version, not the current .357MAG 640, and it serves as a typical true .38 snub example.

Since many people buy a .357MAG

revolver for its strength, but end up carrying .38SPLs in it for recoil management, I also used a 3-inch stainless .357MAG Ruger GP100 to see how the .38SPL rounds handled and performed in a heavier short-barreled gun.

Starting out on a warm day in early August with the chronograph, the 3-inch Ruger brought in some very decent velocities with the two Buffalo Bore rounds. Five-shot averages were well above what standard velocity .38SPLs produce, even in 4-inch barrels. The Speer Gold Dots were next down on the ladder, still traveling well above standard 4-inch velocities. The Hornady standard velocity XTPs, no surprise, were at the

bottom of the totem pole, strolling along at about 50 fps below 4-inch speeds.

With the hotter +P rounds, the little S&W 640 snub was a feisty handful, still running well above the speeds normally produced by standard loads in 4-inch barrels. Also no surprise, the Hornady XTPs in the sub 2-incher were markedly slower than they would have been in a 4-inch barrel.

What does that tell us? A couple things: One is that you don't automatically drop



(Above) The traditional factory wood grips that came on author's 640 were replaced long ago by these Uncle Mike's Boot

Grips. Much better control. (Left) A well-designed grip, like this Santoprene/walnut combo on the Ruger, makes a short revolver much easier on the hand with hot & heavy .38 +P loads.

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.38SPL MANSTOPPERS

down to mousegun levels when you go with a short-barreled revolver; the other is that carefully chosen ammo can still keep you very much in the ballgame even in a much smaller package. Plus P loads post a huge boost in energy over standard velocity rounds. The old argument that you lose too much velocity to be effective in a 2-inch gun is no longer valid with today's ammo choices, and even with the slower Hornady loads the XTP bullet design is still a major gain over older bullet types.

Shooting from the bench at 25 yards as a worst-case distance, the little Smith was handicapped more by its double-action trigger and stainless sights than by its short barrel. On my old 640, it's possible to stack the trigger during its long and stiff DA pull by bringing it back slowly till it clicks about 0.13 of an inch from let-off, and then treating it something like a single-action pull. Line up the sights, stage the trigger, final sight picture, and boom. (This is for target use only, by the way; under stress you won't be able to work the trigger that precisely and shouldn't count on it.) Using that method, I didn't manage to stay under the 4-inch "Combat Standard" with every group fired, but did pull off several groups that were small enough to handle 25-yard problems, and if a gun and ammo combination will handle a 25-yard threat, it'll certainly handle a 7-yard threat. The little "hammerless" belly gun preferred the two standard velocity Hornady rounds. It's quite possible to empty a 5-shot Smith J-frame with +P loads at speed into a torso-sized target at ten feet, but control may be difficult for some, (*Please turn to page 80*)

Hornady's XTP line is built
to provide just a bit more
penetration than other
JHPs, and in a .38SPL
without specialized high-
performance components
and high velocities to
boost terminal ballistics,
is a good thing to have.

.38S&P MANSTOPPERS

Continued From Page 56

and a standard velocity load could be a wise choice if it is. Better grips, like the Uncle Mike's Boot Grips my 640 has worn for ten years, are highly recommended either way.

The size, black front sight blade, and single-action trigger capability of the Ruger made the 3-inch GP100 easier to work



Five of these Speer +P Gold Dots is a very potent package, wimpy they are not.

with and its groups reflected that. Many .357MAG revolvers don't shoot .38s as accurately as a straight .38 revolver, and I'd expect at least slightly better results in a dedicated three-inch .38, but as you can see in the chart, the Ruger was good to 25 yards. It didn't do as well with the Buffalo Bore loads, but it did like the Speer Gold Dots and the Hornady 158s. Of the two guns, the Ruger is much easier to control with the hotter Buffalo Bores.

With better sights and trigger, a medium-framed 3-incher is a no-brainer in longer range shooting, but for the Inside 7, where you're shooting close-in and dou-

ble-action, the advantage in either power or intrinsic accuracy isn't all that great. Nor do the shorter barreled snubs necessarily give up much to the longer barrels. Probably the heavier gun's best value during close-up rapid fire lies in better recoil control. These +P loads do tend to make a snubbe stand up and take notice.

Still, both are quite controllable if you've got reasonably normal strength in your grip.

FINAL NOTES

Should you find it hard or impractical to carry a full-sized handgun, for whatever reason, or just happen to have a personal preference for a good little concealable revolver, you don't have to apologize for a short-barreled .38. If your needs dictate a smaller gun, you may not be able to increase the size of the gun in the fight, but with the right ammo choices you certainly can increase the size of the fight in the gun.

Buffalo Bore sells directly to customers. Speer and Hornady sell through regular distribution channels; check your local dealer.

A final note: It's best not to run these hotter loads through an older steel gun not rated for +P ammo, and even though the current alloy Smith J-frames are so rated, please don't run them through an older aluminum-framed gun. You risk damage, and worse.

For more information:

Buffalo Bore

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www.buffalobore.com

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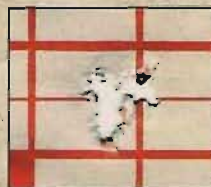
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