

WHY HANDLOAD?

By Duane Thomas

Recently a friend asked me, “Why do you handload?” To me the reasons are so obvious, so much a part of the way I think, I rarely put them into words. By the time I’d gotten through answering his question, I thought, “Wow, that would make a great article for The Blue Press.” The classic answer is, “To save money.” And that’s part of the answer. These days the most popular, and affordable, centerfire handgun cartridge is 9mm hardball, dethroning even the former champ, reloaded .38 Special wadcutters. Having said that, even if we’re on the lookout for deals, we can’t buy 9mm cheaper than we can handload 9mm. But the cost is close enough, some people do say, “My time is worth more than the difference between buying and handloading.” My attitude, the difference is worth my time, because for me it’s not just about cost. Cost matters and rolling our own is more affordable than store bought, this is true. But even if we erased affordability as a consideration – even if handloading cost MORE, which it very much doesn’t – I’d still handload, for the following reasons.

POINT OF IMPACT/POINT OF AIM

These days my carry load is the Super Vel 115-gr. JHP +P. In my testing it’s accurate, and, despite a considerably more vigorous recoil impulse, hits to the same point of impact/point of aim as my practice/match load. There is the concern that, if a shooter practices with one load and carries another, if the carry load has more recoil than the practice load, they’ll be unused to the recoil level of the carry ammo, thus freak out when they have to use it for real. This made sense back when shooters were practicing with .38 wadcutters and carrying full-power .357 Magnums. One great thing about 9mm autopistols, the difference in recoil between standard pressure 9mm and the most rompin’ stompin’ +P or +P+ ammo we can stuff into the gun is relatively minor. Even 9mm +P and +P+ is, in the overall scheme of things, easily controllable.

Still, I do begin every practice session by running the Hackathorn Wizard Drill with my carry gun, loaded with Super Vel. According to Ken Hackathorn, if you can pass this drill, one rep, with your carry gun, loaded with your carry ammo, cold, no warm-up, you have the skill level with that gun/ammo to be using it for self-defense. As long as I can do that, at the beginning of every practice session, cold, no warm-up, this keeps me in touch with 115-gr. +P recoil and verifies I can shoot well with it, then I figure I’m good to do the rest of the practice session with ammo I can fire five digits-worth a year.

If you decide your practice/match load is going to be factory 9mm hardball, and your carry load something else, will they both hit to the same point of impact/point of aim? Maybe. Maybe not. There is a myth, and I assure you, it is a myth, that the same loads in a particular cartridge/bullet weight will hit to the same POI/POA. Thus the idea, “I’ll shoot 230gr. hardball in practice, and carry 230-gr. hollow

points, because they’ll hit to the same place.” It doesn’t really work that way. In my testing over the decades, I’ve seen significant differences in POI/POA between different loads, of the same bullet weight, in the same gun. Doesn’t matter if we’re saying, “I’ll shoot 124-gr. 9mm hardball and carry 124-gr. hollow points,” or whatnot either, still this is false knowledge. We need to get out on the range, and find out where our practice/match load and our carry load both hit, and if they’re not hitting to the same place, obviously of the two, if we handload, the practice match/load is the one we can adjust so they do.

NOISE

There are two basic approaches to running a cartridge at a particular power level, we can use light bullets with a medium-to-slow burning powder, or heavy bullets with a fast burning powder. The two approaches, even at the same power factor, give us very different sorts of recoil. The light bullet/medium-slow powder approach generates fast, snappy recoil. Heavy bullet/fast powder gives slow, pushy recoil, which is what people mean when they say a load feels “soft.” Which of these a person prefers is very much an individual choice. Fast, snappy recoil tends to give less muzzle rise, the gun cycles so fast it’s like the recoil is over before the gun can move very much, but the recoil is more violent. With slow, pushy, recoil the gun may seem more pleasant to shoot, but, in my experience, it’s a bit more “bouncy” so you have to be really grooved-in to get it tracking consistently.

We can make a case for either type of recoil impulse. But where the heavy/fast approach has a huge advantage is in the amount of muzzle blast, i.e. noise the gun generates. A heavy bullet (in 9mm that generally means 147-grain) loaded in front of a fast burning powder will be considerably quieter, and more pleasant to shoot, than 115-gr. or 124-gr. bullets at the same power factor. That might not seem to matter, until you’re up against a wall, firing around a barricade, the muzzle blast is bouncing off the barricade to your front, and the wall right next to you, and 115-gr. or 124-gr. 9mm is downright obnoxious.

“Well, I’ll just run factory 147-gr. 9mm hardball then.” No. Ammo companies have put a lot of effort into loading their ammo with a powder type/charge weight generating a particular velocity. How the ammo sounds is not even on their radar. There are two basic types of pistol powders available: single-base and double-base. Single-base powders are so called because they’re composed primarily of nitrocellulose. Double-base powders contain both nitrocellulose and nitroglycerin. Ammo loaded with a double-base powder is much louder, at the same power level, than ammo loaded with a single-base powder because the former contains nitroglycerin. You want to know a notably quiet, single-based 9mm powder? VihtaVuori N310. My ammo is so quiet that some people, at matches, have had the attitude I must be firing super downloaded wimp

ammo. If they were to run every 9mm and its ammo at the match over a chrono, they'd find my loads are generating just as much power as any other, and more than some, they're just doing it in a more efficient fashion. If they wanted to judge a load's power with something other than a chronograph, I would suggest their eyes instead of their ears. If the gun firing the notably quiet load is throwing its shell casings 20 feet, that probably means it's not "wimp ammo." It's handloaded ammo running a bullet/powder combination chosen in part for low muzzle blast.

MAKING POWER FACTOR

Certain factory 9mm hardball loads will not make Minor power factor. While some might say, "Who cares? They never check ammo at a match," the truth is cheaters never prosper. And that "Who cares?" attitude is going to last right up until they run into a match that does have a chrono set up. Which, by the way, is going to be the case at every match at the state level and above. It's really gonna suck when they get to that state/area/national match and have their score not count because their ammo's not legal. When handloading, we can load our ammo to exactly the power level we want.

There is the idea of "power factor plus 5," that we want enough of a velocity cushion we can be sure of making the chrono at a match, but we don't want so much extra velocity we pick up a lot more recoil. Thus, if the rules say we need 125 pf, load to 130; if the rules say 165, load to 170. I base how hot I load my ammo on how the gun tracks in recoil, not on trying to just slip by the chrono. For me, in 9mm that seems to be the 135-140 pf range. Believe me, if it worked better for me, I'd be 130ing it along with everyone else.

CONSISTENT VELOCITY

When we fire a gun fast, so much of being able to shoot accurately at speed is built around getting the gun tracking consistently. Our neuromuscular control, our muscle memory (and – before someone points it out – yes, I know muscles don't have memories) needs to be built around doing the same thing every time. We want the ammo giving us, as much as possible, the same recoil impulse, we want the gun moving in the same fashion, the same amount, the same way, every time. The vast majority of factory ammo is notoriously variable, velocity-wise. My 147-gr. 9mm handloads have given me standard deviations of down to 5 feet per second for a 20round string. That's pretty darn consistent.

MUZZLE FLASH

The vast majority of self-defense shootings take place at night, or otherwise in low light. Ammunition with a lot of muzzle flash has been known to blind the person using it. They pulled the trigger, there was a huge flash of white light, suddenly their night vision was gone, all they could see was a black afterimage while someone else kept trying to kill them. Assuming they survived, afterward those folks were not shy about telling anyone who'd listen just how much that experience sucked. Ammo companies responded by loading their premium defense ammo with flash-retardant powders. The cheap generic stuff, not so much.

Part of the Firearms Academy of Seattle's Handgun Master Testis low-light shooting inside the FAS dark house. During certain run-throughs of the FAS Advanced Course containing the Handgun Master Test, I've been the only person in the class to pass the dark house. I've also been the only person in the class without night sights, just plain black. The way I hit in low light with non-illuminated sights is Jim Cirillo's Silhouette Point technique, in which we use the shape of the slide as, in essence, one big sight. With light so low I can barely see the target, and certainly can't see the sights, I put the shape of the gun in the middle of the target and smoothly pull the trigger. Obviously this approach is not going to work if we don't have a solid index, but, assuming we do, it's possible to do some surprisingly fast and accurate shooting in light that dim.

Recently I was doing low-light training with a friend. We were both shooting GLOCK 9mms, he was using factory 9mm ball, I was running my handloads. It was obvious his ammo generated considerably more muzzle flash than mine. One of the really neat things about using ammo with a tiny flash signature: while it's wonderfully non-disturbing to night vision, there's just enough muzzle flash that, assuming we have a solid index, in that brief lick of light we can see our sight picture, at the instant the gun fires, we KNOW we hit, even in dim light. You know a powder giving me that "very little, just enough" level of muzzle flash for low-light shooting? VihtaVuori N310.

SUMMARY

So, that's why I handload. Cost (the obvious answer, and still valid, though for me the least important factor), the ability to bring my practice/match load's point of impact/point of aim in line with my carry load, low muzzle blast/noise, knowing my ammo will make power factor at matches, consistency of velocity leading to consistency of recoil impulse leading to better accuracy at speed, and the ability to put together practice/match ammo with as little muzzle flash as premium factory self-defense loads with flash retardant powders. Believe me, if there existed low-cost factory 9mm hardball that gave me all those qualities, I'd be buying it. Until then, I'll just keep pulling the handle on my Dillon XL 650, thank you very much.

Oh, and in case you missed it, recently California passed two laws affecting ammunition sales. As of January 2018, ammo may no longer be mailed directly to a person's home; it must first go to a licensed vendor who can charge a processing fee. Effective June 2019, buying ammo requires a background check! Neither law applies to reloading components: gunpowder, primers, bullets, and cartridge cases. This is a pristine example of a law having the opposite effect of what was intended. As attempts to regulate the AR-15 made it the best-selling firearm in America for a solid decade, attempts at ammo regulation have caused a huge number of Californians to buy reloading machines and stock up on components. So, in addition to the other reasons to handload, California has given its residents another reason: to thumb their noses at an overbearing government.