

because unlike firing from the bench, the recoil was not wholly captured by the wrist joint. Of the super-light guns we've shot recently, only the Taurus 85ULTI ported .38 Special has been completely comfortable to shoot.

Some of the guns had trouble with point of aim even at 15 yards. Taurus's blue titanium gun (445TBC) was off as much as 6 inches low with 180-grain ammo. The Taurus UL was low by 4 inches with this same ammo and was 6 inches low even with the 210-grain lead bullet from Black Hills. Too bad, since the groups with Black Hills ammo varied only as much as 1.8 to 2.2 inches. Taurus's all-steel 445 fired this same ammo to point of aim and was the best of show with groups as little as 1.1 to 2.0 inches. The S&W titanium .44 Special was limited to bullets under 200 grains and liked the PMC 180-grain JHP, delivering all groups under 3 inches.

Here's how the guns performed in more detail.

Smith & Wesson 696

Our recommendation: Pass. This \$525 full-size L-frame stainless-steel revolver seems like a stranger next to the L-frame Centennial. Adjustable sights, target hammer, full-lug barrel, but only five shots of .44 Special in a heavy steel frame. It was the only gun to break during the test.

Why is this gun even in the test? Let's call it a control, a steel five-shooter for which nearly every serious shooter has a frame of reference. Smith went about shrinking the Model 629 .44 Magnum and its long-lost brother the 624 from an N frame to the mid-sized L. The result: It's too heavy to carry, but it may fit into the glove box. But then again, it's only a five-shooter.

With all-steel construction, a fully shrouded ejector rod, and the thickest forcing cone of any gun in this test (just shy of 0.040 inch) what could go wrong? How about a double-action trigger that sometimes cycles the cylinder but will

Smith & Wesson 696 .44 Special

Retail Price...\$525



SPECIFICATIONS

Warranty: 1 Year

METAL FINISH	Stainless	SIGHT RADIUS	7 in.
WEIGHT (EMPTY)	36 oz.	CAPACITY	5 rds.
OVERALL LENGTH	8 in.	GRIP MATERIAL	Rubber
OVERALL HEIGHT	6 in.	ACTION TYPE	SA/DA
MAX. WIDTH	1.5 in.	TRIGGER PULL Wt. SA	4.75 lbs.
BARREL LENGTH	3 in.	TRIGGER PULL Wt. DA	8+ lbs.

Our recommendation: Don't buy. This gun broke during the test. It's also too heavy and bulky for the power it brings to bear.

The 696's double-action trigger would sometimes cycle the cylinder but not pull back the hammer. Also, during some attempts at firing the gun single action, the hammer would drop but not detonate a round. It was out of action before we could complete accuracy testing on it.



not pull back the hammer? The first sign of a problem was a loss of trigger return. Attempts at firing single action resulted in getting the hammer to drop but not with sufficient force to detonate the rounds. It's ironic that such a heavily built gun wouldn't tolerate more than 10 shots of PMC's 180-grain jacketed hollow point.

Other quality points varied as well. The seam at the side plate is nearly invisible, but there is a noticeable gap between the barrel shroud and the frame. The crane lock-up has an uneasy feeling, and we judged the crane-to-frame gap to be excessive. The front sight is on its way to letting go, turning upward on its pin. The

ramped front sight has serrations interrupted by a plastic orange insert. We could never figure out the justification for this insert. Its smooth finish just creates glare and hinders the sight picture, especially from a sand-bag rest. Without clear definition of the front sight, accuracy is penalized. Ergonomically, the gun's round-butt design covered with an Uncle Mike's grip proved very comfortable. For the record this gun produced two five-shot groups of Winchester's 246-grain LRN measuring 2.0 and 2.1 inches with a very good point-of-aim before its demise.

Taurus 445

Our recommendation: Great gun.