

By RICK MILLER

One five day period this past summer should go down as a red letter event in the history of U.S. shooting sports. From June 8th through June 12th, the first IPSC sponsored U.S. National Combat Pistol Championships were conducted near Denver, Colorado. One hundred twenty-five shooters from all over the United States gathered on the ranges of the Table Mountain Gun Club to shoot it out for \$15,500.00 in cash and merchandise awards, and a chance to represent the U.S. in the IPSC sponsored World Championships held during August of '77.

The match fired was designed to test the practical skills of the contestants under a variety of conditions. Multiple targets, speed loading, moving targets, and strong and weak hand firing were all part of the exercise. Very short time limits were the rule for each string, just to keep things realistic.

A good example of what was required in the match would be Stage One. This demanded six shots in five seconds on three separate targets at five, ten, and twenty meters, with the shooter starting from the leather and hands clasped. In order to do well in this match a contestant not only had to be sharp himself, he needed the very best in practical equipment as well.

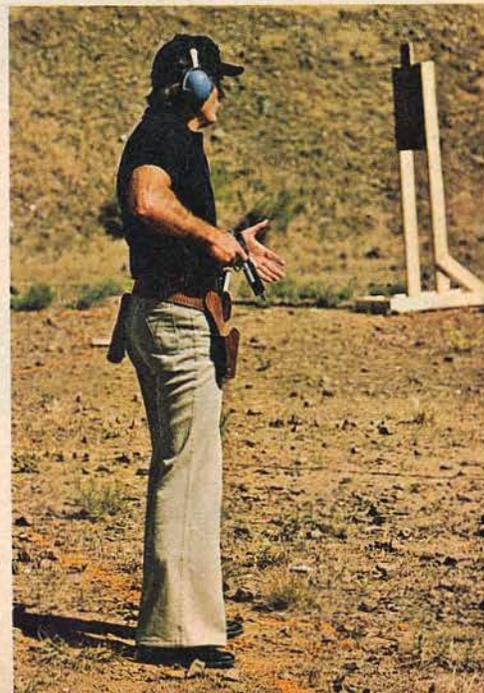
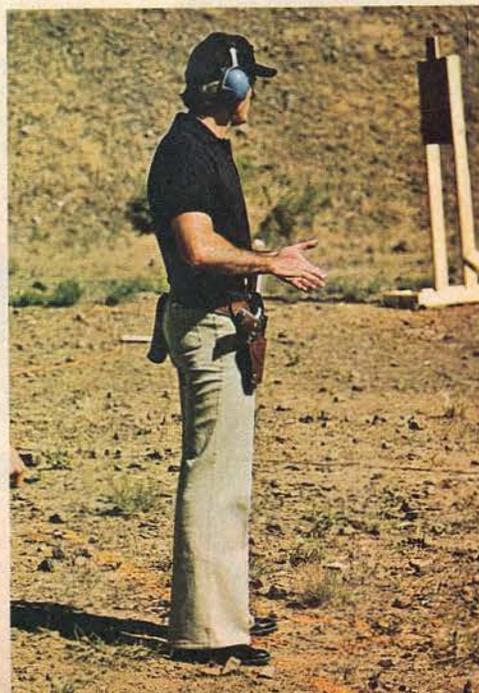
The equipment used at Denver (guns, holsters, speed loaders, etc.) is a fascinating subject in itself. From customized pistols to handcrafted leather gear, the practical equipment used in the IPSC Nationals was quite exotic by ordinary standards. All the gear we will be discussing has slowly evolved over the past twenty years and is a direct product of freestyle competition. In this unrestricted atmosphere a great deal of thought, experimentation, and testing has resulted in better and more efficient equipment for the police, military, and civilian shooter.

Perhaps the most logical and obvious place to begin our brief discussion would be in the area of the guns used. It should hardly come as a surprise to anyone that the favored weapon at Denver was the venerable Colt .45 Auto. John Browning's classic 1911 design always seems to come to the front in any open, unrestricted practical competition, and, at the

Above: Among the unusual rigs seen at the Nationals was the well-worn Yaqui Slide carried by IPSC president Jeff Cooper.

Right: Speed is an important factor in winning, and Raul Walters demonstrates his fast draw and shooting technique.

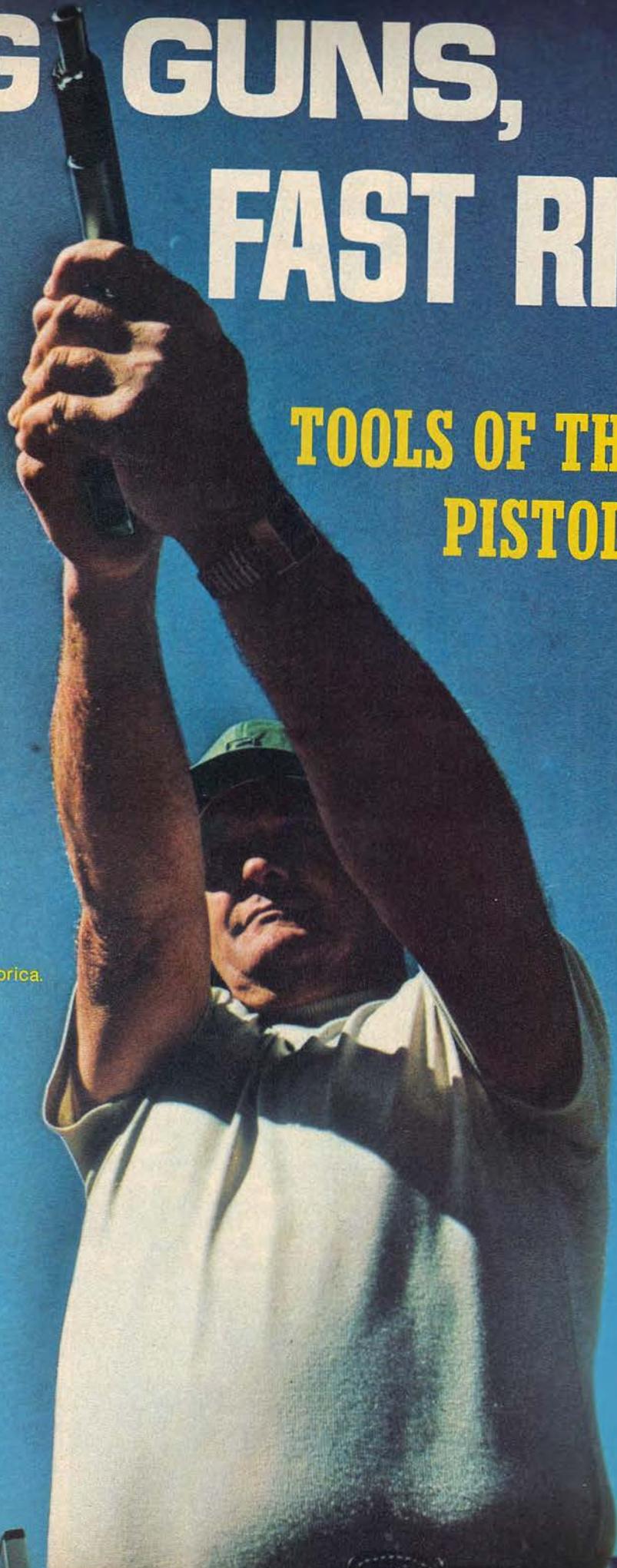
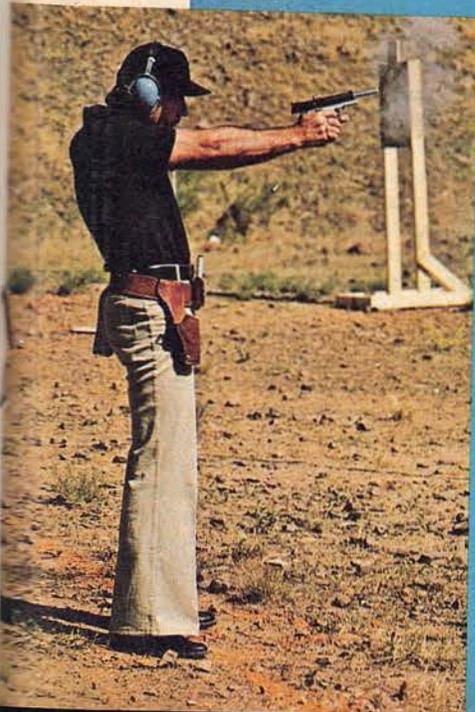
Far Right: Ray Chapman shoots his favorite, a Pachmayr .45. Note almost perfect execution of the 2-hand Weaver Stance.



BIG GUNS, FAST RIGS

TOOLS OF THE IPC
PISTOLERS

Color photos by Ray Ordorica.





The top ten shooters in the first IPSC sponsored U.S. Combat Pistol Championships. Back row, from left: Kirk Kirkham, Leonard Knight, Jerry Kay, Ray Chapman and Jerry Usher. Front row, from left: Raul Walters, Tom Campbell, Mike Dalton, author Rick Miller and John Davis. While holsters and holster positions may vary, note that all used a .45.

IPSC Nationals, this truism was carried to its ultimate and logical conclusion. Almost every one of the shooters present carried a .45 Colt Auto when he stepped up to the firing line. Only two or three individuals elected to enter the match using revolvers, and a like number shot 9mm autos.

The reasons for this heavy dependence on the big Colt selfloader are many, varied, and ultimately, overwhelming. For many years the Colt 1911 in .45 caliber was the only truly powerful autoloading pistol on the market. There are now several other modern and rather innovative .45 ACP pistols offered by other makers, but the consensus of opinion among experienced pistoleros is that the Colt is still king.

The Colt's continued supremacy may be traced to several outstanding qualities. It is quite compact for its power, as well as very reliable, and durable. In addition, it is easily manipulated with only a few well thought out controls. By contrast, most of the newer pistols are bulkier and more complicated mechanically, and hence, more difficult to use well in a hurry.

By way of final endorsement, all of the

top ten shooters at Denver used .45 Colt Autos in one form or another. All of them had been customized by various pistolsmiths, but they were Colts, none the less.

A complete list of combat pistolsmiths who's work was used in the match would be quite extensive, however, we can list a few of the better ones. Such top smiths as Armand Swenson, Jim Hoag, Chuck Ries, and Jim Clark were well represented, as were the shops of the King Gun Works and Pachmayr Gun Works. The products of other good gunsmiths were in evidence, but they are too numerous to mention here.

Many people apparently fail to understand why the .45 Auto needs a variety of custom modifications if it is really as good a pistol as it is cracked up to be. The explanation is really quite simple. While the 1911 pistol is the best basic defensive handgun design on the market, it is still a mass produced item intended to fill a general need.

By way of comparison, a championship team on the NASCAR auto racing circuit starts out with a standard car, and then completely rebuilds it from the ground up for better performance. In like fashion the

practical handgunner has his 1911 modified to further enhance performance.

Probably the two most important alterations are improved sights and a good trigger. Many of the pistols now leaving the factory already have satisfactory triggers, but this is not always the case. A good crisp trigger release of around three and one half to four pounds is difficult to do without, and pistols that fall short in this critical area need the attention of a good gunsmith.

Good sights are equally important. This sport calls for fast shooting and the issue sights on all Colt autos, save the Gold Cup, are just too small for quick pick up. Most of the top shooters at Denver utilized high visibility sights of either the fixed or adjustable variety. The most popular set up consists of a ramp front in conjunction with a Smith & Wesson K-38 rear sight. This combination is adjustable, attractive, streamlined, and quite functional.

The second most popular sight system in evidence was the Bo-Mar recessed into the rear of the slide top, with a ramp in front. In the opinion of many this set up is very rugged, and the flat rear surface of

the Bo-Mar sight blade makes for good sight definition. Ray Chapman's Combat Special from the Pachmayr Gun Works wears Bo-Mar sights, and that is a pretty good endorsement.

Other sights with some popular backing were low mount Micros, and the fixed high visibility King-Tappan Combat Sights. Regardless of make, all these sights have several things in common. They are generous in size, square cut, and easy for the eye to pick up. All essential qualities when the shooter is striving to achieve what is known as the "flash sight picture," an important speed shooting technique.

In addition to improved sights and trigger, many of the pistols at Denver had quite a few other custom touches. Full accuracy jobs, lowered ejection ports, beveled magazine wells, checkered or stippled frames, square trigger guards, ambidextrous speed safeties, fancy stocks, and hard chrome finishes were just some of the more popular features in evidence.

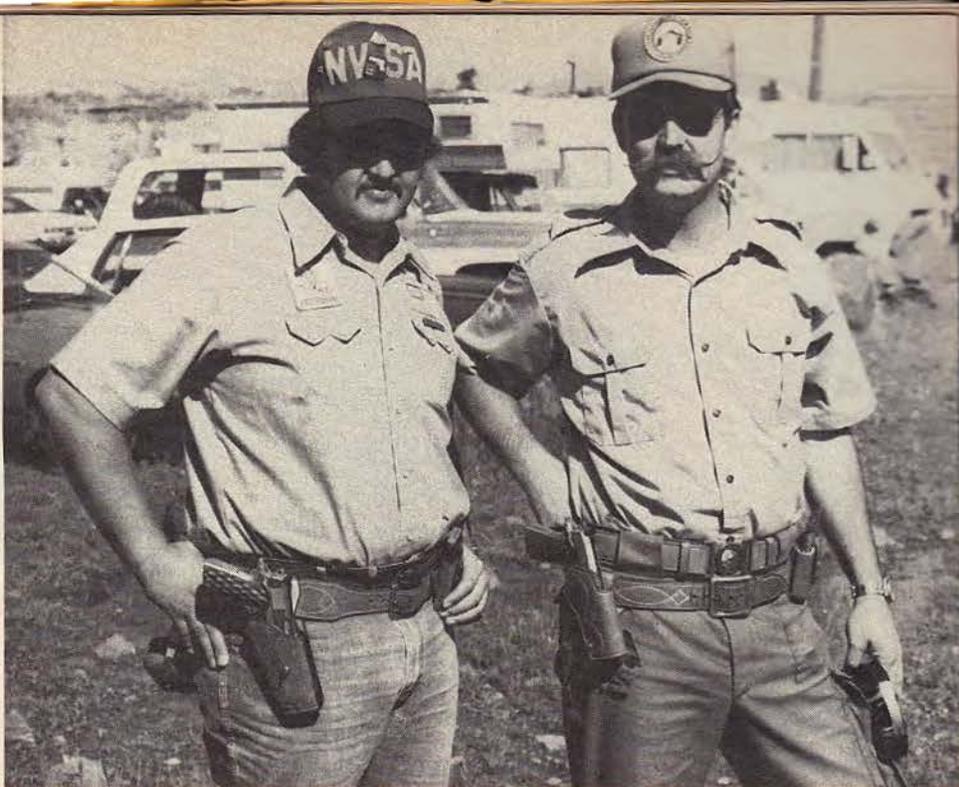
Aside from good sights, a smooth trigger and an accuracy job, the most important pistol modification at Denver proved to be an ambidextrous speed safety. This year's IPSC Championship Match had a weak hand only stage (which means the left for most shooters) that required the gunner to remove a cloth from over the pistol, pick it up from a table, and hit three targets, one at five meters and two at fifteen, in the space of four seconds. This had to be done not once, but four times for record! Those shooters not fortunate enough to have a pistol so equipped were at a distinct disadvantage in the weak hand phase of the match.

The most widely used ambidextrous safety in evidence at the match was the excellent stainless steel job produced by Armand Swenson of Fallbrook, California. There were some other ambidextrous safeties that I spotted here and there, mostly of the homemade variety. These were not as pretty as Swenson's, but were still quite serviceable.

One other interesting feature found on only two pistols at the IPSC match was a six inch barrel with two transverse cuts in the top of the tube beyond the barrel bushing. Raul Walters and Ray Chapman both shot nearly identical pistols customized by Pachmayr that shared this unique set up. The transverse cuts are designed to act as a muzzle brake, and both Raul and Ray claim that this helps reduce apparent recoil and muzzle flip to a noticeable degree. With the barrel cuts in front of the bushing all powder gasses are vented into the open air, with none of the residue getting back inside the action to cause fouling.

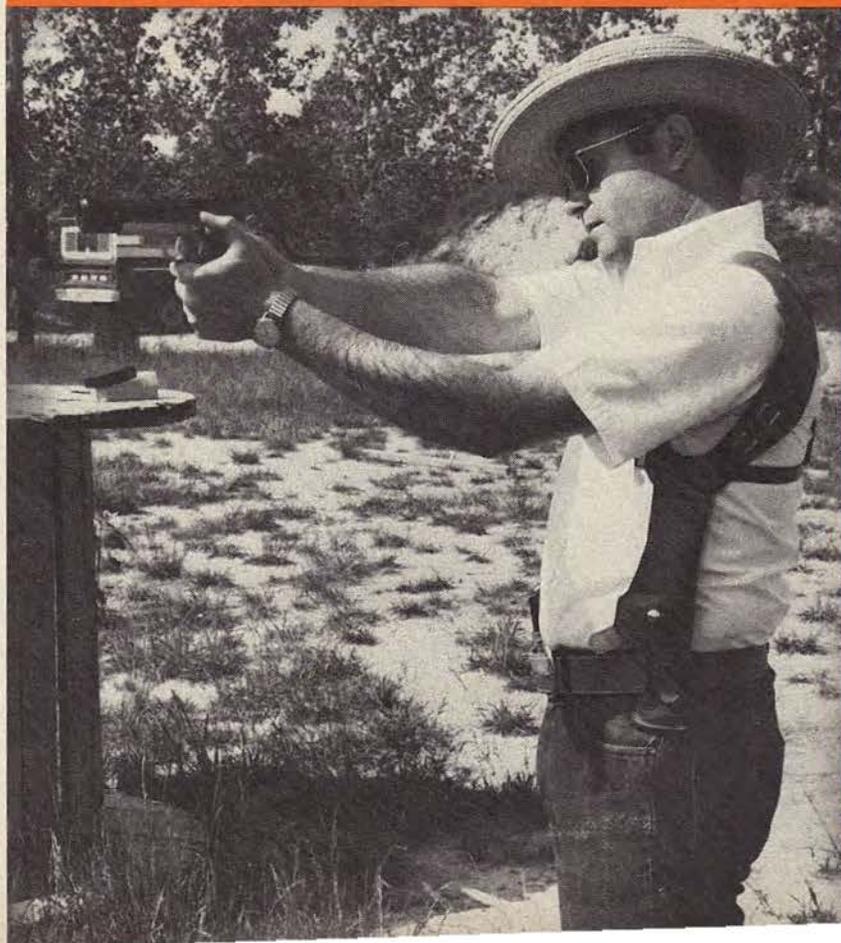
Beyond pistols, another interesting aspect of the Denver match was the leather gear used by the contestants. Among the major manufacturers of leather goods the best represented was Bianchi. Several of

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Keith Hamilton and Ken Hackathorn display their choice of leather for the .45 Auto. Keith has a Gordon Davis Thunderbolt while Ken wears a Hackathorn Special by Milt Sparks.

Dick Thomas wears the only shoulder holster entered in the match. Made by Milt Sparks, it was developed from the old Hardy-Cooper design. It has spring retention and Velcro tabs.



The Vermejo is a 479,000 acre ranch principally located in north central New Mexico but spilling over on the north into Colorado. One of the largest ranches under single ownership in the United States, it covers an area of approximately 750 square miles. A working cattle ranch during most of the year, it is opened to hunters, with guides furnished by the ranch, on a commercial basis during the hunting season. About the same size as Los Angeles County, California, it is reportedly the home of North America's largest elk population, some 5,000 animals. This is a figure I am prepared to accept. Fresh elk tracks were everywhere. The problem was that, due to unseasonably warm weather and a full moon, the only place elk were standing in those tracks during daylight was high up in practically impenetrable timber. All the tracks in the open were made while their makers were prudently grazing in the moonlight.

Bob Petersen and Ken Elliott each caught what were evidently mentally retarded elk, both beautiful six pointers, and both made good one shot kills. Petersen's 8mm Magnum followed the pattern set by my rifle in Africa of shooting through and out, so I have yet to see a recovered 8mm bullet from that cartridge. The bull went down in his tracks.

Neither Gresham or Skelton got shots and Wootters, out for a trophy, turned down several small legal bulls without seeing one that he wanted.

Having put off an embarrassment as long as possible, I must now plead guilty of breaking a ranch rule of "Do not feed the bears". The one shootable bull I saw was running in the middle of his small harem of cows at what later paced out as 170 yards. Unable to swing for a lead because of his escort, I was forced to "snap shoot" when he got momentarily clear. The bull sagged, then caught himself and went on as a second shot caught him just as he went into the timber. The shot had no visible effect but the sound of the bullet hitting was unmistakable. The remembered sight picture of that shot indicated a forward raking hit at the back edge of the rib cage.

The bull was down about 150 yards into the timber but got up and away without offering a chance for a shot. Down again 100 yards further, he again got up. There was not a drop of blood visible, and in the jackstraws of down timber and multitude of elk tracks, we were unable to track him further in the deepening dusk.

Next morning four of us went in to look for him without success. Too thick and too many tracks. It was obvious that we could have passed within twenty-five feet without seeing him.

Two days later, on hunting the same area, we followed a trail into the timber along which an old sow bear, her last year's yearling and a cub had come down only minutes before us. When we got to the area near where the bull had been

shot, crows were spotted flying low in the timber. Investigation of their activities located the bull—or what was left of him—no more than fifty yards from where he was down the second time. There was no way of knowing exactly when the bears had found him, but in a maximum possible time of three days and two nights, those three had left nothing but the head, feet and a little skin. In that short time they had managed to get outside of some 400 pounds of meat!

Although it was not possible under the circumstances to pinpoint where the shots had hit, it can be reasonably assumed that the cartridge performed well again. I am sure that both shots were well back from the shoulder area (if "Texas Heart Shots" may be so charitably described), yet the animal traveled only 300 yards from the first hit and was down three times in that distance. I feel certain that he would not have gotten up a second time if we had been able to wait before following him up. Approaching darkness had ruled out that strategy.

Based on the accuracy, flat trajectory and demonstrated power of the cartridge, I predict that it will prove popular for use on our heavier game animals, including elk, moose and bear. Although too long for many of the rifle actions available, it can be accommodated by the Champlin, Kleinguenther and Weatherby, as well as the Winchester 70 and Remington 700. Scarce, but also available, are the Magnum and Brevex Mauser actions.

It looks as though the breakthrough to the metric system may begin with shooters. Remington says it's as simple as 1-2-3. And even easier if you start with 6-7-8.



BIG GUNS, FAST RIGS

(Continued from page 43)

the new Bianchi Model #45 Pistolero competition rigs for the .45 Auto were used at Denver, as well as some of their less pretentious Model #2 Speed Scabbards.

By choice, most of the top pistoleros used rigs put together by one of three custom leather craftsmen. Milt Sparks, Andy Anderson, and Gordon Davis were the custom makers best represented by their gear.

Most of the custom competition rigs used at Denver were of the strong side, forward rake, adjustable tension variety. Milt Spark's #120 Combat Rig was the most widely used, followed by Andy Anderson's Thunderbolt model, and Gordon Davis' Championship Rig, which closely follows the lines of the Thunderbolt. The Hackathorn Special, a strong side, high ride, forward rake, adjustable tension model made by Milt Sparks was also used by a number of competitors.

Several shooters, including Ray Chapman, used Gordon Davis' International

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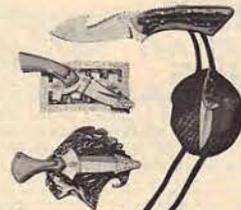
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Dick Thomas of Columbia, Missouri used the only shoulder holster in evidence at the U.S. Nationals. His rig is a highly modified version of the old Hardy-Cooper shoulder holster. It was built by Milt Sparks, and incorporates design features by both Milt and Dick. Dick is a real virtuoso of the shoulder holster, and uses it almost exclusively.

Two unusual and innovative holsters were used by a fair number of shooters at Denver. These were the Snick and the Rogers break front designs. The Snick holds the pistol in a vertical position, and retention is provided by a formed plastic extension that locks into the trigger guard or ejection port of the pistol, depending on the model used. The Rogers holster utilizes the forward rake position and has an adjustable tension screw to keep the pistol in place. In addition, the Rogers is leather lined to protect the weapon's finish. Both are made of tough black plastic, and both are very fast.

Among the top ten shooters at the end of the match, Milt Sparks' products were the most in evidence. Three of Milt's #120 Combat Rigs and one Hackathorn Special were used by this group. Gordon Davis was represented by one cross draw rig, and two Snick break front plastic holsters were also used. One Andy Anderson forward rake, a S&W prototype holster, and one homemade rig also made the top ten.

Tom Campbell, who placed seventh, and who works in Smith & Wesson's Research and Development Department, used the new S&W prototype holster for the .45 Auto. This holster is still in the developmental stage, but it appeared to work well enough under match conditions. It features vertical positioning of the pistol with no cant forward or back, and it also incorporates a rather unique retention system. A small plastic block backed by a spring snaps into the trigger guard to hold the pistol in place.

As can be seen by this description of equipment used at the U.S. IPSC Nationals, a heavy emphasis is placed on custom craftsmanship, both in weapons and leather gear. Only by the custom touch can the small details be taken care of that can make a big difference in efficiency. After all, that is what the sport of freestyle combat pistol shooting is all about, a constant search for greater efficiency in the art of defensive pistolcraft.

COOPER'S CORNER
(Continued from page 17)

reach. Two experienced marksmen found the sights unsatisfactory. These are of the basic Patridge design but with a round