



# Handgun Silhouette For The Uninitiated

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Article #25 – May 21, 2005



*Just what is silhouette? And why are so many people shooting it?*

Since I've been on Specialty Pistols, I've chatted with quite a few shooters who don't really know much about handgun silhouette competition. Most of them own single-shot pistols, Contenders, Encores, or XP-100's, but are unaware of just how much more fun they can have with these fine guns.

IHMSA. The International Handgun Metallic Silhouette Association is the main governing body for this sport. Its sole purpose is to promote knocking down metallic targets with handguns. The game originated in Mexico, where guests at local ranches got together to shoot at live, tethered animals with rifles to provide food for the afternoon's feast. The sport eventually evolved into the current crop of steel targets shaped like game animals, specifically chickens, pigs, turkeys and rams, from 200 meters out to 500 meters, offhand. Some owners of large caliber handguns, particularly the AMT Auto Mags, got together in the mid 70's and decided to try shooting these targets at shorter distances out to 200 meters, something a little more fun than shooting at paper with these big magnums. Since this is a handgun forum, we'll leave the rifles out.

Silhouette was originally a center fire handgun sport only, but over the years has evolved to include just about anything you might own in a pistol. The targets are approximately life-size and are placed at various distances. The chicken is at 50 meters, the pig (more like a wild boar) is at 100 meters, the turkey is at 150 meters and the ram (desert bighorn sheep) at an eye-straining 200 meters. The targets are made of hardened steel to prevent cratering and are very heavy...the chicken weighs about 25 pounds, while the ram weighs 50-55 pounds. As such, it takes a fairly powerful caliber to reliably knock over the rams.

### *How Do We Play The Game?*

Handgun silhouette is a very simple game...seemingly too simple. All you have to do is fire a shot at the target and knock it over. That's it...no scoring rings, no measuring group sizes and no extra points for hitting it dead center. Knock it off the stand and it counts, miss it and you go on to the next one. A normal match consists of 40 targets, 10 of each animal at its respective distance. You start at the closest one, the chicken. You'll have either a bank of 5 or 10 chickens, depending on the range setup, and you shoot the left one first, working your way to the right, one target at a time. Oh, yeah...you only get one shot per target. If you hit the target, and it falls, you score an "X" on the scorecard. Miss it, and you score an "O", then you move on to the next target, you don't get additional shots until you connect. At the end of the 40-round match, add up all your "X's" for your score. Hit 23 targets and you get a 23x40. The shooter with the highest score wins...but there are caveats we'll get into later. Larger championship matches shoot 60 or 80 targets.

Simple right? We'll add a bit of pressure to you in the form of a time limit. You get 2 minutes for a bank of 5 targets that equates to 24 seconds per shot. Seems short, but in reality is plenty of time to fire and reload any single-shot handgun. You just can't go to sleep on the firing line...after all; other shooters are waiting their turn to shoot! Once you're on the line, you'll be given a "Load" command, during which you'll have 30 seconds to load, adjust your sights and position, or dry-fire if you want, before the "Fire" command. After your 2-minute firing period is over, a "Cease Fire" command is given, a short break is allowed if necessary to reset the targets, then, after another 30-second loading period is called, your second bank of targets is fired upon. Upon completing your 10 shots, you will move to the next position, the pigs, and repeat the process until 40 rounds is fired. Takes about 30-40 minutes per entry.

What if you don't know where your shots are going? Before you fire for score, you can shoot the sight-in targets, 5 shots at any or all animals in one 2-minute period, to check if you're zeroed in. Usually, each shooter will have a partner with a spotting scope, or binoculars, and timer to tell you where your hits and misses are going and help you keep track of the remaining time.

After your match is over, you'll swap duties.



*How accurate do you have to be?*

Although the targets look really small out there, especially at 200 meters, you really don't need a tack-driving load. The chicken at 50M has about a 5" diameter body, not counting the head, tail, or leg. If you can keep your shots within 2.5" from center, you'll hit it every time. The hardest target is the turkey at 150M, due to the distance and irregular shape, but even that has about an 8" diameter body zone. However, throw in a little misalignment in your sights, unsteadiness in your position, a bit of wind and you can see where a more accurate load would be beneficial to help cover up your errors...and you will make some of those.

Remember when we said all you have to do is knock down the target? Just connect anywhere; if it goes down, it counts. You don't have to center punch each target, hits in the head, beak, leg, or tail all count if it falls...even ricochet hits count. Bounce the bullet off the dirt in front of the target, hit the target and knock it down, and it's ok...just don't count on that happening often!

The key is knocking the target over...if you hit it, and it doesn't fall, it won't count, even if it's hit dead center. That's where the more powerful loads come into play, especially on the rams. Remember, they weigh 50+ pounds. It takes a pretty good wallop with a heavy bullet, especially after losing velocity over 200 meters, to reliably take down a ram.

What's the minimum? Depends on the range and targets. Some ranges have auto-reset targets. These are a bit easier to knock over with lighter loads. Other ranges with free-standing targets may require a bit more due to warped stands, bent targets, or targets not set properly. A .357 Magnum with 180-grain bullets should be ok. Sometimes, 158-grain loads on auto-reset targets will work, but you might ring a few rams (leave them standing when hit, and they produce a nice, metallic ring that alerts the rest of the shooters to your dilemma). For center fire rifle-type cartridges, 6mm or larger, using 100 grain bullets or

heavier will work fine. The .22 center fire's just don't have the bullet weight and many of them can do target damage also, due to their much higher velocity.

### Who Do I Compete Against?

Earlier, we said that the shooter with the highest "X" count wins. Well, there are some exceptions, and that is one of the things that makes silhouette so enjoyable.

There is a ranking system in effect to even out the playing field. Unlike many other shooting sports, where only the best shooter takes all the money and prizes and the rest of them go home with empty wallets, silhouette was made for the average guy. Not everyone can practice daily, or has unlimited funds to spend on the most expensive guns, so you are ranked according to your skill level. The first time you shoot, your initial score establishes your class. Let's say you are a pretty good handgunner already, practice often and know your gun and load well.

You try silhouette and shoot a score of 22x40 with your 10" Contender in .357 Magnum. That puts you in AA class, which means you'll be shooting against only those shooters who get scores between 18-23. (The classes are C, B, A, AA, AAA, INT from the lowest to the highest.) You're not competing against the top shooter at the local match...he's in a different, higher class.

You might be shooting NEXT to him on the firing line, but you're not shooting AGAINST him.

You're also not going to beat up on the guys in the lower classes who only average 11-17 targets. That wouldn't be fair either. This is the beauty of silhouette...every shooter has an equal chance to win his class. As your skills progress, and you start shooting higher scores, there's a system that enables you to advance to higher classes, where you're still competing against your peers. Two scores above your current class within a year, and you move up to that level.



### Shooting Positions

There are basically two positions used in silhouette...standing and freestyle, your preference. Standing is exactly what you would expect. Stand up and shoot like a man! (No offense to women intended). You can shoot with one or both hands, but no leaning on anything. Hold the gun out in front of you, but don't rest your arms or elbows on your body for support. This is absolutely the toughest position, and the standing class scores are lower than the rest to compensate for the difficulty...and no one has shot a 40x40 with iron sights, standing, ever. There is also a Taco-style hold, where the gun is placed close to your eyes with the off-hand wrapped over the top, just like holding on to a taco, that is a bit more specialized.

The other position is called freestyle, and it means exactly that. Do whatever you want, as long as no part of the gun comes into contact with a solid object, like the firing line or shooting table. Sit, kneel, or shoot prone, all are ok. The most common, and the weirdest looking, is called creedmore, but it is extremely stable, near benchrest in solidity, and very effective. To get into this position, sit facing the target, lie back down, bring your knees up and together with your feet spread apart, forming a triangle with your legs. Grab the gun, rest it on the side of your calf and hip, with your elbow on the ground. This also forms a triangle for solidity. Now take your non-shooting hand, reach around behind your head and place it on the shooting mat. Rest your head on the forearm. Adjust your body's position till the sights align with the target. Feels a bit uncomfortable, and it certainly looks strange, but you'll soon get used to it and abandon any other shooting positions. You must be absolutely certain about where the muzzle is, so adjust your legs as necessary to clear the barrel.

Even this position is not cast in stone. There are many variables, so use whatever is comfortable for you. Best to get an experienced silhouette shooter to assist you when you

start. That's the other thing that makes silhouette competition so great...go to a match, and within minutes, shooters will introduce themselves, answer your questions, even offer you guns and ammo to try! Steel shooters are the friendliest bunch I've ever encountered, no matter what range you visit. They'll give you the shirt off their back, share all their secrets, and help you do your best, even if doing so allows you to beat them.

### *What Guns Do I Need?*

There is so much diversity in silhouette that virtually any handgun you own has a place to shoot. The center fire version was the original, known as Big Bore, shot out to 200 meters. Any bottleneck or straight-wall cartridges are allowed, factory or hand-loaded. Target damage is the only concern here, so a muzzle velocity of 2600 fps or less is usually required.

Got a .22? Of course, everyone does! The .22, or Smallbore category is shot on reduced 3/8 scale targets at 25, 50, 75 and 100 yards. Only .22LR ammo is allowed, but the targets go down easily, as they are much lighter and thinner. Standard velocity ammo works fine, and is preferred due to less wind drift over the high-velocity stuff.

How about a 4" .357 Magnum revolver, maybe a 9mm or .45 Colt? Field Pistol is the best place for you, using half-size targets that are slightly larger and thicker than the smallbore ones, shot at the same distances out to 100 yards. This is the place for your standard straight-wall pistol and revolver cartridges with a maximum length of 1.29"...the case length of the .357 Magnums. A few exceptions include the .32-20, .25-20, .22 Hornet, .270 REN and .22 Magnum Rimfire as additional cartridges. Many shooters also use .22LR, but sometimes the rams and even pigs can remain standing after a decent hit, due to the heavier-gage steel.

Think the Big Bore targets are too easy? Try your hand at Half-Scale. The same half-size targets as the Field Pistol ones, only placed at the Big Bore distances of 50, 100, 150 and 200M.

Same cartridge restrictions as Big Bore, only here, the .22 center fires can be effective, as the target weight is no longer a factor. The faster .22's can be downloaded with heavier bullets to prevent target damage. The Ultimate challenge is the One-Fifth Scale Rimfire targets. These are basically half-size Rimfire targets placed at the normal Rimfire distances out to 100 yards.

Currently, this is an experimental category this year.

What if I have a scope on my gun? Fear not, we have many places for those too. IHMSA started as an iron-sight only competition, but as the shooters aged, and their eyesight deteriorated, many dropped out because they could no longer focus on iron sights and long-distance targets. Scopes were allowed in the hopes of getting these shooters back, and providing a place for the handgun hunters to shoot. Gradually, scopes have been incorporated into all disciplines. It worked...they are the most popular competitions today, and not just for the older guys either! Any scope or red-dot sight can be used...no limit on magnification.



### *What Category Do I Shoot In?*

IHMSA has broken down the gun classification into two basic types...Production and Unlimited. Production is just what it sounds like...any handgun as it comes from the factory with a few limits: barrel length maximum of 10.75 inches, weight 4 pounds with iron sights, 5 pounds with scopes, and no bolt-actions. Sights can be replaced with manufacturer's catalog items, as well as grips. Trigger jobs may be performed.

Unlimited has some...limits, not exactly as it's name suggests. Maximum barrel length and sight radius is 15", weight 5 pounds with iron sights, 6 pounds with scopes.

Bolt-actions and single-shots are the norm, although you can also shoot that 4" Smith & Wesson if you want to. This is the place where those who like to tinker with guns can play.

These are the basic two, although there are some additions. There are also Standing and Revolver categories. Standing is shot with guns meeting the Production rules, as is Revolver.

Revolver was broken away from Production years ago, when it became apparent they couldn't compete on an equal basis with the single-shot pistols. Given the quality and accuracy of the Freedom Arms revolvers, I'm not so sure about that statement anymore!

Scopes can be added to the Standing, Unlimited and Field Pistol categories, and these become known as Any Sight, as in Unlimited Any Sight, for instance. You MAY use a scope in these competitions, although you aren't REQUIRED to use one...iron sights are also allowed. The deviates like myself just love to use iron-sighted guns to beat up on the scope guys.

### Conclusion

Wow...seems like a lot of info, but it's really quite simple. Show up at a match and you'll get all the help you need. Check out the IHMSA website...there's a ton of stuff there, even a chat forum. There are a lot of pics from the Internationals that show shooting positions and equipment. It really is a great way to spend an afternoon outdoors, shooting those specialty handguns on some challenging, reactive targets. There's the smoke and noise, the recoil, the clang of steel, or the puff of dirt from the misses...makes a great spectator sport! Just let any shooter clean the first 4 targets on his last bank of rams, and all eyes will be on him, usually with the clock ticking down to the final seconds, to see if he gets them all. Don't be intimidated...you won't get them all the first time out, but you will have fun! I only shot 3x40 on my first attempt, but it was the most fun I ever had. And let me tell you...the first time you tag a ram at 200M with that 4" Smith & Wesson .357 Magnum...you'll be hooked for life!

Come on out and slam some steel!

[International Handgun Metallic Silhouette Association http://www.ihmsa.org](http://www.ihmsa.org)

[IHMSA Chat Forum http://www.aimoo.com/forum/freeboard.cfm?id=388847](http://www.aimoo.com/forum/freeboard.cfm?id=388847)

[Specialty Pistols IHMSA Forum](http://specialtypistols.infopop.cc/eve/ubb.x/a/frm/f/3546077864)

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