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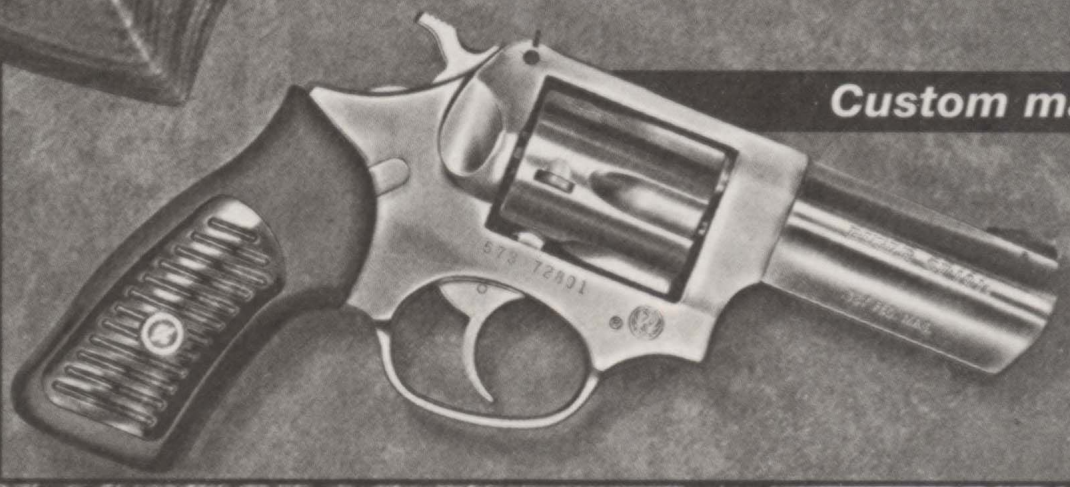
GUN

2010
BUYER'S
GUIDE

GUN BUYER'S ANNUAL #88



Cylinder & Slide's customized Ruger SP101 in the hotrod .327 Mag caliber packs a big bite in a small and sturdy package.



Custom made

The .327 Mag SP101 in its "Before" phase. Good, but C&S makes it better.



GUN TEST

CYLINDER & SLIDE SP101

RUGER'S .327 MAG TO NEW CONCEALED CARRY LEVELS!

By Denis Prsbrey

Way back in 1984 when Federal developed their .32 H&R Mag and I was toting a .45 at work, I wasn't much impressed with the little .32 and commented to a big-bore colleague that it, "Looks like it does everything a .38 Special can do, and less!" The .32 Mag has never been what most of us would consider a mainstream caliber, but it has lingered on in small double-action revolvers offered by Smith & Wesson, Taurus, and Ruger, on and off again by Ruger in their smaller-framed single-actions, and in limited form by Freedom Arms in their premier single-actions.

When I did finally get on board with the caliber it was a Ruger Single-Six "Mini-Vaquero" in high-gloss stainless with fixed sights; a very nice little gun, although still not a primary carry piece for everyday use. Interest remained low for me otherwise, until Federal upped the .32 ante again in early 2008 by stretching the old .32 S&W case even further than the .32 Mag did, and bringing out a very zippy little round to carry in Ruger's small-framed stainless steel SP101 double-action revolvers. With Federal's older 85-grain .32 Mag JHP running at a published muzzle velocity of 1,120 fps (feet per second) and producing a muzzle energy of 237 fpe (foot-pounds of energy), when the new .327 Mag clocks its 85-grain JHP at 1,400 fps and 370 fpe, it's time to take notice. Numberwise, you're looking at very respectable figures and .357 Mag velocities.

The Ruger SP is an excellent choice for the .327, a rock solid chunk of steel well able to handle the high 45,000 psi (pounds per square-inch) pressures of the hot round, with no internal key lock, and in the smaller .327 Mag adding a sixth shot over the normal five-shot .38 and .357 versions of the same revolver. In 2008, and now, the only configuration Ruger had available in the SP101 was the 3-inch barrel with a very basic rear sight blade adjustable for windage, and a black front ramp. I bought a sample from Ruger back then, took it to the gravel pit for initial accuracy and chronograph testing, and eventually shipped it off to Bill Laughridge's crew at Cylinder & Slide. Good as the SP is in factory form, it can use some tweaking, and C&S was the place to go.

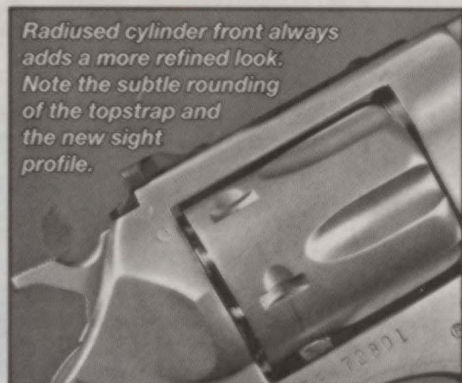
Stock Details

Ruger sells the .327 Mag with their brushed stainless finish, the aforementioned sights, a squarish smooth-faced trigger, sharp hammer spur edges, and black rubber grips with hard plastic inserts that have been standard issue on the model since its inception.

The frame is the beefiest you'll find in any revolver in its class, and one distinguishing characteristic of both the SP101 and most of its larger GP100 .357 Mag cousins is a full-barrel underlug that acts as a shroud for the ejector rod and also to add weight out front in balancing the gun under recoil. That frame and underlug adds weight to the gun, making it not only one



Barrel profile has lost approximately an ounce of weight and the front blade's much more visible.



Radiused cylinder front always adds a more refined look. Note the subtle rounding of the topstrap and the new sight profile.

of the strongest small-framed short-barreled revolvers on the market, but also one of the heaviest at 28 ounces unloaded. Not entirely bad in a .357 Mag version, I wanted to reduce bulk and weight at least slightly in the lighter recoiling .327 Mag gun, it just doesn't need to be that heavy. And while the factory grips are actually quite serviceable on the SP, they're nothing that inspires the soul to lofty thoughts of soaring beauty.

Once the little Ruger was received at the other end the usual discussions ensued back and forth and when the usual compromise was finally worked out between Bill's suggestions and my own (neither one of us is shy in expressing preferences), I got busy forgetting about the SP101. C&S always has a backlog, and holding your breath

The 11-degree dished muzzle crown protects against damage if dropped.



Close-up shows the (barely noticeable with the eye) filler screw in the original rear sight screw

hole, and the recoil shield crosspin now eliminated on current production SP101s.



C&S Extreme Duty Fixed Sight and lightly dehorned hammer spur are very positive personality changes.

while waiting for custom work will neither slow down global warming nor speed up the gun's turnaround.

Custom Details

Two primary considerations were improving the sights and eliminating as much of the unnecessary barrel lug as possible, and Jon Tank who was assigned the project did a fine job on both counts. The factory sights on the SP101 are usable and the ability to adjust for windage is handy, but I need contrasts in the sight picture for a quick pickup that the existing setup didn't give me. C&S offers several versions of their Extreme Duty Fixed Sights to replace the adjustable sights on Smith & Wesson revolvers, and they are solid and highly visible. A rear EDFS with white dots was adapted to fit the Ruger by milling a step in the rear of the topstrap where the factory sight blade formerly sat and a trough for the long sight shank to sit in. The shank is held on by two screws through the topstrap, and a stainless steel screw was permanently inserted into the hole left by the blued factory sight adjustment screw with the head ground down flush with the frame's surface. The front blade was modified from a blank with a white dot, installed into the factory groove, and pinned in place. The barrel underlug was removed to a point by hand filing, and then a special fixture was fabricated to remove the rest of the excess steel and round the contour, losing almost exactly one ounce

PERFORMANCE

CYLINDER & SLIDE SP101 .327 MAG

Load	Velocity	Accuracy
Federal Personal Defense Hydra-Shok 85 JHP	1,462	4.13
Speer Personal Protection Gold Dot 115 JHP	1,351	2.69

Bullet weight measured in grains, velocity in fps (feet per second) by PACT chronograph, and accuracy in inches for best 5-shot groups from 25 yards.

of steel in the process. Admittedly not much, but the best that could be done without also removing barrel markings, which Bill had previously told me he didn't want to do. While Jon was doing the barrel work he also dished an 11-degree target crown to protect the rifling at the muzzle from damage if dropped.

Externally, the trigger face was rounded off to roll more smoothly against the trigger finger during double-action fire, highly polished, and the sharp rear corners removed. A carry bevel removed any other sharp edges such as the cylinder thumbpiece and the abrasive hammer spur, and the gun was eventually bead-blasted to reduce the brightness quotient. I don't like shiny guns for serious purposes.

Inside, Jon ran into some aggravation in doing the action work I'd requested. This particular SP101 fired perfectly during my range session with no misfires whatsoever, but it was apparently right on the edge in terms of tolerances. During the process of smoothing and lightening the trigger pulls, misfires began to occur with the Speer loads used in testing. Setting the barrel back one turn, correcting the headspace, maximizing the firing pin protrusion, adjusting the hammer to provide a full-force strike on the transfer bar, and switching to a heavier hammer spring instead of a lighter one got the Ruger back to full reliability with the notoriously harder Speer primers, and usually if a gun will fire Speer primers it'll work with everything else. The word that came back with the gun was "Smoother, but not lighter" on the trigger. A reduced power Wolff trigger return spring was also used, and altogether the double-action pull feels much better now, while the single-action break is about as crisp as a Ruger trigger can be at 3.25 pounds with minimal overtravel.

The forward edges of the cylinder were "black powder" radiused, and while the idea's most commonly attributed to facilitating smoother re-holstering I doubt it makes much practical difference. But to my eye it makes a revolver just look much more refined. The rear of the chambers were very slightly chamfered to assist in loading with speedloaders, and the chambers themselves were also lightly polished, and this brings up additional issues. When chamfering the chambers you have to avoid the urge to overdo it; the little .327 Mag case rim's diameter is close to the case diameter and smaller proportionately than brass in other calibers, and there's not as much case support from it. Also, some early SP101s in the .327 Mag caliber showed a tendency toward sticky case extraction.

As it turns out, Ruger later determined that the intermittent extraction problem

reported by several .327 Mag SP buyers was caused by tolerance stacking between the two extractor locator pins and their holes in the rear of the cylinder. During normal machining processes there's always a certain amount of variation in physical dimensions between individual units in any given production run; this is simply a fact of manufacturing life and such variances are tiny, allowed for, and monitored to accept parts within a specified range. The long-running and successful SP101 platform originated as a five-hole revolver, and in adapting it to a centerfire six-holer the thickness of the walls between each chamber was necessarily reduced. While individual chamber strength wasn't an issue, the one that did surface occurred when some of the two extractor star locator pins were just slightly oversized and exerted sufficient pressure when seated in their small cylinder holes to fractionally displace material, creating a minuscule bulge in the inside chamber walls on each side of their positions. Barely visible when it happened, the easy corrective solution was just what C&S did — carefully buff it down enough to eliminate contact with any of the four cartridge cases in the affected chambers.

But, the long-term solution adopted by Ruger was more extensive and involved altering the shape of the extractor star to allow the outside "leg" edges to orient it in the cylinder, and eliminating the locator pins altogether. Smith & Wesson went that route several years ago, and it works quite well. (Ruger will replace an older cylinder if you have one that's showing the sticky extraction, but says the problem didn't show up in all of the "pinned-extractor" .327 Mag guns, and there's no reason to send yours in for replacement if it's extracting fine.) The other major change appearing in current SP101s eliminates the cross-pinned recoil shield (AKA firing pin bushing that retains the pin and spring from the front) in favor of a new firing pin retainer at the rear. Under heavy use, the older recoil shield occasionally set itself back in the frame minutely (a thousandth of an inch or so), and the new arrangement eliminates that possibility. Current manufacture SP101s should be fine in both areas, and Ruger did well to own up to the unforeseen development glitch with the cylinder pins and correct the problem.

Grips & Leather

When the finished project came back home again, I had a set of two-piece Badger laminated walnut grips ready to replace the Ruger rubber on it. Jim Badger crafts beautifully made grips for Rugers, S&Ws and Colts in several styles



Kramer's durable lightweight horsehide Belt Scabbard carries the SP101 securely, and the open-top design gives quick access for drawing and re-holstering.

and materials at his shop, including full-sized patterns for double-action and single-action revolvers, bird's-head single-actions, and boot grips for double-actions, in several different laminated woods and a white ivory-like Corian material. While the SP101 is still a trifle on the large side for practical pocket carry, I wanted to keep the grips reasonably compact for concealed carry but substantial enough for a good hold. The .327 Mag is no buffalo buster, but it lets you know when it lets one go. Smooth-finished Badger bootgrips are a natural for the little .32, with two finger grooves and a bulbous width and contour that add minimal bulk but more control. I'd have them on this revolver even if they cost twice the current price of \$69.95; high quality custom grips for the SP101 don't grow on very many gun trees.

Greg Kramer's Belt Scabbard is one of a (small) handful of open-topped holster designs that I feel truly comfortable with. Kramer does make them in cowhide, but his rep was made on the horsehide versions of the scabbard, which are comparatively light in weight and very durable. I have horsehide holsters from the company going back several years, and they're a primary go-to for belt-carry revolver concealment when the need arises. Coming from an police background where losing your sidearm is only a laughing matter years after retirement (if you survive it), I'm very partial to positive retention, with tight moulding and high coverage of the gun itself; I get it with the Belt Scabbard. This gun and holster combination doesn't fit too tight for a convenient draw, but the size of the grip does leave a little less to draw with, and practice wouldn't hurt. At \$126.50 it's a pro-grade transport system for a serious defensive

piece. Kramer also makes a moulded 3x3 6-round ammo pouch to match for \$58, it and the holster can fit up to a 1¼-inch belt.

When you order, make sure they know your .327 Mag SP101 has the adjustable rear sight, and the pouch is to fit that caliber, not the .32 S&W or the .32 Mag. They haven't dealt with this combination a lot, and that rear sight blade only sold now on the .327 SP101s makes a difference from the dimensions they normally build their fixed-sight SP101 leather to.

Shoot Impressions

This project took a while longer than usual, as Cylinder & Slide was already chugging through their regular backlog when the Ruger arrived just in time to get buried in an avalanche of panicked owners sending their own guns in as a response to the 2008 political scene. This was also the first .327 Mag they'd gotten in, and the project was something of a learning process for Jon Tank as he worked through it. The end result was worth the wait, as usual, and my thanks to both him and Bill Laughridge for the 9th custom project that Cylinder & Slide has done for me over the years.

The price tag? \$1,286.03 for the work listed, but as always the C&S operation is a buffet situation where you pick and choose which options you want done on your own gun, and some of the charges relative to cleaning up the headspace and chambers shouldn't be necessary on current production .327 SP101s. At a minimum, the sights and action work are highly recommended.

How does it shoot? With the two defensive loads tested, the little Ruger shows a clear preference for Speer's 115-grain Gold Dot JHP over Federal's 85-grain Personal Protection JHP at 25 yards, and I'd prefer the heavier bullet weight anyway. Accuracy and velocities are shown in the chart. I've seen recoil and muzzle blast described as high, but don't notice either as excessive myself. The high-pressure round is a "cracker" without ears on, but you'll never notice that if you have to shoot in the stress of self-defense. Unfortunately, ammunition may be hard to find in some areas, but hopefully that'll change as the caliber gets more exposure.

Federal's taken the diminutive .32 caliber to a whole other level, and if you're a fan of one of Ruger's best revolvers, C&S can do the same with your SP101.

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