

The .44 Special, a Look Back

IF THERE IS a revolver cartridge that represents handloading — the potential for improved performance — it is the .44 Special. Unfortunately, today when handloaders view .44 Special data in new loading manuals, they probably wonder why all the fuss over such a mild cartridge. With today's published figures, they're right, but for nearly 50 years, from the 1920s to the 70s, it was a different story; the .44 Special wasn't so mild.

Created in 1907 for S&W's new heavy frame revolver, the .44 Special was designed for newly introduced smokeless powders. Its geneses, the .44 Russian, was a popular black-powder cartridge dating back to 1870. Except for the .44 Special being .200 inch longer than the Russian case, other external dimensions are the same.

In 1925 Elmer Keith started working with the .44 Special. After two years he decided the .44, with handloads, was the best sixgun cartridge.

Factory loads were mild; a 246-grain roundnose lead bullet at 755 fps gave 310 foot-pounds of muzzle energy. Keith, over the years, as powders improved, more than doubled this figure. His original load, 12 grains of DuPont No. 80, moved his 250-grain Lyman 429421 cast bullet at 950 fps.

Hercules 2400 further improved performance; 17.5 grains (in solid head cases) drove Keith's 250-grain bullets at 1,150 fps, producing 796 ft-lbs of



John's first revolver was a Smith & Wesson Model 1950 military .44 Special.

muzzle energy. General Hatcher said Keith's bullet design increased stopping power by 25 percent over roundnose bullets.

Keith recalls shooting a bull elk with this load at 30 yards. Placing two shots behind the left shoulder, both exited the off side. The bull went 200 yards and died.

In days of old, .44 Special handloaders had to work hard for their salt. Assembling stiff loads needed strict at-

tention to details, for a Colt or a S&W. Neglect could send a prized .44 Special to that big junk yard in the sky; dimensions were the problem.

Cast bullets are sized .001 inch over the groove diameter, but older .44 Special groove diameters varied widely. Most Colts, prior to 1942, measured .4265 to .4286 inch; converted .44-40 Colts (.44 Special cylinders were installed) might measure as small as .423 inch. S&W barrels from 1907 to 1953 measured .427 to .431 inch.

Below, the relatively thin .44 Special barrel helps lighten the revolver, but contributes to felt recoil and muzzle flip. Right, the unsupported portion of the .44 Special barrel is readily apparent when compared to the shorter barrel extension of the .44 Magnum.

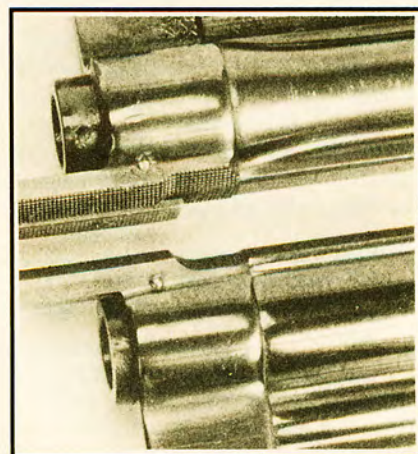
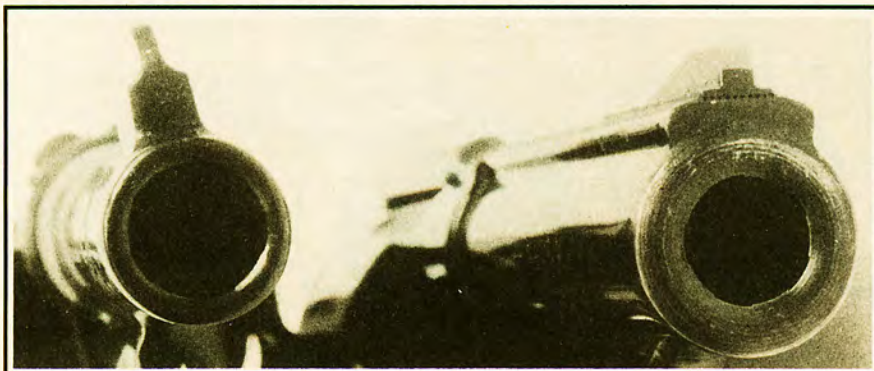


Table I

.44 Special Loading Data

bullet (grains)	powder	charge (grains)	muzzle velocity (fps)	barrel length (inches)	test gun	pressure (CUP)	data source	publication date
173 Lyman 429348	Unique	11.5	1,500	—	S&W M-1926	20,000	American Rifleman	1953
242 Hensley #35	2400	20.0	1,194	—		19,700		1953
250 Lyman 429421		18.0	1,080	—		19,000		1953
250 Lyman 429421		17.5	1,150	6.5		—	Elmer Keith	1960
240 Speer JSP		16.0	1,174	6.5	S&W M-1950	20,000	Speer #7	1966
240 JSP	H-4227	14.0	1,002	7.5	U.R.	18,600	Hodgdon's #20	1967
240 JSP	H-110	14.5	1,192	7.5		14,600		1967
215 Lyman 429215	H-4227	18.0*	1,208	7.5		18,200		1967
250 Lyman 429244	2400	17.5	1,150	5.5	Colt S.A.	—	Lyman #44	1967
250 cast SWC		17.0*	1,198	6.5	S&W M-1950	—	Speer #8	1970
250 Lyman 429244		17.5	1,150	5.5	Colt S.A.	—	Lyman #45	1970
250 Lyman 429244	H-110	16.0	1,202	7.5	U.R.	13,200	Hodgdon's #23	1977
245 Lyman 429421	HS-7	10.4	828	4.0		14,000	Lyman #46	1982
240 Speer		9.5	846	4.0	C.A.**	< 14,000	Speer #9	1987
240 Hornady	2400	12.0	850	3.0	C.A.**	< 14,000	Hornady #3	1989
240 Nosler		14.0	870	8.2	U.R.	—	Nosler #3	1989
250 Sierra		12.6	850	6.5	S&W M-24	—	Sierra #3	1989
246 LRN	Blue Dot	9.2	845	—	U.R.	12,300	Hercules	1990
246 LRN	IMR-4227	14.2	815	6.5		14,000	IMR	1990

* Magnum primers

** Five-shot revolver

Notes: Loads are for modern, six-shot, heavy-duty revolvers — Colt 2nd and 3rd generation and Smith & Wesson Model 1950 and Model 24. Five-shot revolvers should only use factory loads or handloads that do not exceed factory pressures. All listed loads for six-shot .44 Special should be reduced by 20 percent for starting. These loads may be used in all revolvers chambered for the .44 Magnum. U.R. — Universal Test Receiver; C.A. — Charter Arms five-shot revolver.

Be alert — Publisher cannot accept responsibility for errors in published load data.

Bullets sized down over .002 inch are not accurate and serious shooters slugged their barrels. When needed, special moulds were ordered to match their barrels. If one chamber mouth was more than .002 inch over groove diameter, cylinders were replaced. When chamber mouths were too small, they were reamed. A poor dimensional match between bullets, barrels and cylinder mouths could break top straps.

Colt and Smith & Wesson will only stand by their guns with factory ammunition, 14,000 CUP for the .44 Special. A February 1953 article in the *American Rifleman* listed selected .44 Special loads, some in the 20,000 CUP range.

Listed pressures were qualified: for a modern Colt New Service or Bisley or S&W M-26 Military — 20,000 CUP. Colt Single Action's below serial number 160,000 should only use factory ammunition; revolvers between serial numbers 160,001 and 340,000 can be loaded to 15,000 CUP along with Smith & Wessons below 16,500. *Speer's Reloading Manual Number Seven* confirms 20,000 CUP for modern Smith & Wesson revolvers, i.e. Model 1950 Military, Model 1950 Target and Model 24 revolvers.

Handloaders must still observe these

Table II

Factory Loads vs. .44 Special Handload

cartridge	bullet weight (grains)	muzzle velocity (fps)	muzzle energy (ft-lbs)	relative stopping power	remaining energy (yards)	
					50	100
Factory published loads — 1991						
.357 Magnum	158	1,235	535	43.4	428	361
.41 Magnum	210	1,300	788	80.2	630	526
.44 Special	246	755	310	59.7	285	264
.45 ACP	185	1,000	441	65.7	362	324
.45 ACP + P	185	1,150	543	75.6	445	385
.45 Colt	255	860	423	77.9	380	345
.44 Special handload						
.44 Special	250	1,150	734	92.5	647	582

Notes: Factory data is from Winchester and Remington. Relative stopping power is based on the Hatcher impulse formula.

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dimensions when using heavy handloads in any revolver, even new revolvers with modern steels. The problem is amplified with cast bullets (.44 Special handloaders didn't have jacketed bullets for reloading until the mid-1960s); their bases expand easier than jacketed bullets.

Gas pressures not only move a bullet forward, but they also expand the base. The higher the pressure and the softer the base the more it expands while moving down the cylinder towards the

tighter barrel throat. It jumps the cylinder gap and is swaged back down as it enters the throat of the barrel. If the bullet's base has expanded too much, induced forces, when the bullet is swaged down to the groove diameter, will rise to damaging levels.

Years back handloaders had a good way to reduce dimensional problems, they cast their bullets hard. The harder the base the less it expands. Hard bullets give good accuracy and penetration.

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It is fair to say that Elmer guided reloaders and component manufacturers to impressive levels with the .44 Special. He also tried for years to get ammunition companies to offer these loads. Finally in 1956, Remington agreed; helping him was the aura created around the .44 Special and its enthusiasts. They had grown to overwhelming proportions.

Cases were 1.285 inches long and wouldn't fit .44 Special revolvers. The cartridge drove a 240-grain bullet at 1,470 fps with 1,151 ft-lbs of muzzle energy and pressures close to 40,000 CUP; it was called the .44 Magnum.

S&W built the first revolver for the longer and more potent round. Called the Model 29, it had improved metallurgy, a bull barrel to reduce recoil, a longer cylinder to eliminate the unsupported barrel and large wood grips.

Keith stated, "Just for the record, I worked 30 years to get the .44 Magnum produced. Both the gun and ammo makers did a wonderful job. I tested the first Remington loads, they gave about 1,400 fps and proved very accurate. Since then, velocities have been boosted too high, in my opinion. After all this time, I still prefer the hand load I worked out for reloading the .44 Magnum, just after it came out. It gives around 1,400 fps with just under 34,000 CUP as tested by the H.P. White Laboratories." Now .44 Magnum sales started to put the .44 Special out of business.

The loading data from older manuals shows, at one time, that published data did reflect the full potential of the .44 Special in modern revolvers (starting loads should be reduced by 20 percent). Fifteen years ago, the introduction of a 19-ounce, five-shot, .44 Special under-cover revolver was the death blow of this published data.

From then on, component manufacturers began to play down heavy .44 Special loads, fearing product liability problems. Concerned with the strength of this light revolver when using anything but factory loads, they reasoned the .44 Magnum could be loaded to .44 Special levels if desired.

Removal of this data from loading manuals has ended the era of the good old days of reloading for the .44 Special. Perhaps the most positive aspect of the .44 Special's demise, as we used to know it, is its legacy, the .44 Magnum cartridge and the heavy framed revolvers that have followed.

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Today, who or why would anyone want a .44 Special? It is my humble opinion that the answer to that question lies at the beginning of Ken Waters' article on the .41 Magnum in *Handloader* No. 71 (Jan/Feb 1978). Regarding the .44 Magnum, "Non-magnum shooters found it too much; too much recoil in particular, along with unnecessary power." Forty-four Special shooters, with their lighter revolvers, also found the recoil of heavy loads unpleasant. Light barrels and small wood grips gave serious discomfort; these were the days before rubber grips and magnaporting; .44 Special shooters used heavy loads sparingly.

Colt brought back the .44 Special in the mid-1950s in their Single Actions; production stopped a few years ago. Smith & Wesson brought back the Model 24 in the early 1980s in blue and stainless steel with 4 or 6.5-inch barrels. Today, with shooters turning to high capacity, high performance automatic pistols, revolver sales are down. The Model 24 is a casualty of this trend; it was recently discontinued.

For those who feel they must have the power of the .44 Magnum, have at it. I'm prejudiced; new and good used Model 24 .44 Specials are still plentiful. If you can live with 250-grain cast bullets at an occasional 1,150 fps, with most of your shooting being target, plinking or small game, I think one is best served with the .44 Special. Hopefully some of Elmer's reloading spirit, to always try to improve, lives on in the hearts of all handloaders.

Note: Keith's .44 Magnum load, 22 grains of 2400 and his 250-grain cast bullet, was chronographed at 1,400 fps from a 6.5-inch test barrel in the old days. That load, when tested today in a 4-inch test barrel with venting — the way factory revolver ammunition is currently tested — gives velocities closer to 1,150 fps. Keith's .44 Magnum revolver had a 4-inch barrel. Today Winchester, Remington, IMI, Hornady, CCI and Federal offer .44 Magnum loads with 240 to 250-grain bullets at 1,000 to 1,150 fps.

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Reader Bylines

(Continued from page 6)

verifying the accuracy of a vernier caliper.

Mr. Morrison was kind enough to send me a copy of their case gauge chart which lists the lengths of each of the calibers they offer. (*Editor's Note: The chart includes an extensive list of all the popular, and some not so popular, cartridges.*) It may be useful to many handloaders who use Wilson case gauges.

R.H.B., Vichy MO ●

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