THE
Thompson/Center
Contender
PISTOL
How to Tune, Time, Load, and Shoot for Accuracy
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INTRODUCTION

1 The Contender Pistol
   Parts and Prices

2 Tuning and Timing

3 Care and Maintenance

4 Shooting the Contender

5 Accuracy and Performance

Appendix
Almost every new pistol I have purchased in the past 20 years has required some hand work, known in the world of gunsmiths as tuning and timing, to enable me to shoot it accurately. Some of these pistols would shoot a specific lot of ammunition or a certain handload very accurately without any individual hand work. However, for the same firearm to shoot most any ammunition or all good handloads accurately, some tuning and timing were required. The Contender pistols I have purchased are no exceptions.

Tuning the Contender to extract top accuracy from it requires a trigger job. Two surfaces of metal, one on each of two different parts of the trigger group, require polishing before a shootable trigger pull can be obtained. Of course, there are always exceptions to this polishing procedure, one alternative being to have the two parts hard chrome-plated.

Jim Ishmael does a fine job of chrome-plating the striker and the striker notch area of the trigger. I have
fired a Contender pistol that incorporated Jim’s chrome-plated parts thousands of times without experiencing a single failure. (Jim can be contacted at 1433 Bryan Drive, Bedford, TX 70622.)

If you don’t want to have these parts chrome-plated, then you must ensure that the mating areas get a good polishing. Before polishing the parts, a good understanding of their operation during the functioning of the pistol is important. A description of these operations follows.

When the trigger is pressed to the rear, the striker is released from the notch in the trigger and flips upward, hitting the sear and knocking it out of engagement with the hammer. (Study the parts illustrated in Chapter 1 so that you will know what they look like when you see them.)

If you are not an accomplished gunsmith, I do not recommend that you attempt to polish the trigger and striker-engagement surfaces. To polish these surfaces correctly requires a sear hone, which most shooters, including me, do not own. Also, the reader should be cautioned about the adverse consequences of any such modifications to the pistol that can result even if the work is accomplished by someone who claims to be a gunsmith. If too much surface metal is removed from parts with a sear hone or any other device, the parts may no longer have enough bearing surface to function properly and safely. Such damaged parts will certainly have to be replaced with new ones from the factory to restore the firearm to original, safe functioning condition. Having a competent gunsmith polish these surfaces will usually guarantee a smooth trigger pull that is also safe.

Most people can obtain an adequate trigger pull of 4 pounds for most hunting applications or 2 pounds for most competition purposes, by making just two simple
adjustments to the Contender. First, adjust the amount of trigger/striker engagement by turning the trigger spring tension screw (part # 36-3) shown in the previous chapter on page 12.

Do this adjustment by first opening the action and making sure the chamber is empty and the firearm has been rendered safe. Remove any cartridges now, if your firearm is loaded. Only after you have emptied the chamber and placed the hammer safety in the safe, center position, should you close the action and cock the hammer. Using a trigger weight scale, pull the trigger and observe the pull weight on your scale.

You are now ready to make an adjustment to the trigger-spring tension screw. With the frame held upside down so that you can observe the screw, use the proper size Allen wrench and turn the screw clockwise until the hammer falls safely and harmlessly on its safety mechanism. Now turn the screw counterclockwise just a degree or so. Turning the screw counterclockwise will increase the trigger pull weight so that the hammer will remain cocked when it is returned to the rear position in the frame. After this first adjustment, check the pull weight on the scale again. You may have to try several small adjustments before you achieve the pull weight you desire. A safe, trigger pull weight of between 32 and 64 ounces (2 and 4 pounds) may be obtained by adjusting this trigger spring tension screw, or a combination of adjusting it and clipping a coil from its length.

When clipping the coil spring, you should clip a quarter of a turn at a time until the desired pull weight is obtained. Clipping too much coil at one time can result in inadequate contact between the trigger and striker surfaces at full cock, and also inadequate trigger return each time the trigger is pulled. If this occurs, you must replace the spring with a new one.

Older model Contender pistols had a very tightly
The Thompson/Center Contender Pistol

wound and stiff spring when new. It is next to impossi-
ble to clip this old-model trigger spring. If the desired
trigger pull weight cannot be obtained by polishing the
trigger/striker engagement areas and adjusting the
trigger return spring, then the trigger return spring
must be replaced with a lighter aftermarket one. If you
return your old model frame to the Thompson/Center
Arms Company, the company may replace it with one
of the new models that incorporate the latest safety
mechanisms. Call the company first before you ship
them your old frame to be sure of the action you want
to take. Your old frame may be worth more to the col-
lector than the price of a new one, and you may wish to
advertise it or trade it in the T/C Collectors
Associations quarterly journal.

There are other parts of the Contender that require
polishing. I consider polishing these parts to be part of
maintenance, as doing so will not usually improve the
accuracy of the pistol. The next chapter covers the pol-
ishing of these parts.

The best thing about timing the Contender is that you
don’t have to tune the pistol in order to time it. Timing
the Contender is a separate procedure and is the sim-
pler, and perhaps more neglected, of the two. Timing, as
the term is applied to handguns, refers to the condition
of the pistol when the hammer is cocked and the gun is
ready to fire. This condition should be the same each
time the gun is fired.

For revolvers and semiauto pistols, this condition is
no more complex than for the Contender. For all three
types of firearms, the gun must be in perfect time in
order for it to consistently fire accurately. The key word
here is consistently. The Contender is timed by the
shooter for each shot. The shooter achieves the timing
by pulling the trigger guard rearward to release the bolt
and open the action.
The amount of trigger/striker engagement is controlled by the distance the trigger guard moves as the shooter pulls it backward each time. If the shooter pulls the trigger guard backward to a different point each time, the result will be a Contender that is out-of-time for each shot. The trigger pull weight will then vary from shot to shot, resulting in inconsistent accuracy.

The way to correctly time the Contender is to always pull the trigger guard back to its maximum rearward travel each time the action is opened. This will guarantee maximum trigger/striker engagement for each shot, with the final result of producing consistent trigger pull weights and accuracy. The firearm will be “in time” for each shot.