My niece recently made a steal of a buy on a barely used Colt Lightweight Commander .45 Auto. Of course, she came to show me the pistol, and the conversation quickly turned to what ammunition she should shoot. The Commander has a 4.25-inch barrel and with its aluminum frame weighs a light 25 ounces, so Mikayla would need practice loads, and lots of them, to master the light pistol. She would also need a potent load for protection while she is backpacking and hiking mountain trails. While working on loads for her Colt, I planned to also develop loads for similar uses in my full-size Colt Gold Cup National Match .45 Auto that weighs 37 ounces with a 5-inch barrel.

Proper .45 Auto practice loads must be economical, accurate and low-recoiling. Speer 185-grain Total Metal Jacket Match SWC bullets would be perfect, if not for their cost of $25 for a box of 100. The Speer Reloading Manual #14 lists relatively light powder charges for this target bullet. At velocities of about 700 fps, recoil energy was a mild 3.6 to 4.0 foot-pounds (ft-lbs) from the light Commander. Recoil was so light from the Gold Cup I sometimes wondered if the gun had cycled. However, every one of the...
cartridges listed in the load table cycled through both .45 pistols.

These light powder charges can cause wide swings in velocity, although all three loads for the Speer TMJ bullet listed in the load table produced acceptable extreme velocity spreads. Unique provided the most uniform velocities, with a 15 fps spread for five shots in the Gold Cup. Titwad was the most constant, with a span of 57 fps in the Commander.

Accuracy was also good at 25 yards. The Commander has a grat ing trigger pull yet on a sandbag rest kept five of the Speer bullets inside 3 inches at 25 yards. The Gold Cup grouped somewhat tighter. All three loads for the Speer TMJ listed in the load table hit closely in line with the sights of both pistols – ever so slightly above aim at 25 yards. That’s important for the Commander, because its rear sight is adjustable only for windage.

My regular target bullet is cast from a Lee six-cavity TL452-200-SWC aluminum mould. The sprue plate for the mould is also made of aluminum and requires all my attention while casting, because the aluminum plate is not stiff enough to cleanly shear the hardened sprue. The instructions state to fill the mould then “Quickly cut the sprue by moving the sprue lever to the right.” I tried that, and with the lead barely solidified, the sprue cleanly cut from the base of the bullets. However, there is a balance of cutting the sprue when the lead alloy had hardened just enough to prevent smears of lead from building up between the mould and the plate and letting the sprue harden too much with a resulting bump on the base of the bullets. I finally got the hang of it, and bullets began to pile up. Bullets fell from the mould at exactly 200 grains with a diameter of .451 inch, so there was no reason to size them. That worked out perfectly, because the TL in the TL452-200-SWC mould designation stands for “tumble lube” with five shallow grooves on the bullets that hold lubricant. The lubricant is applied by tumbling bullets with a sufficient amount of liquid lubricant, like Alox, to fill the grooves and entirely coat the bullets.

I mostly cast these bullets of wheelweights, so they cost only pennies apiece – and my time. Quite awhile ago I settled on Ramshot Competition powder with the Lee bullets, because a pound of it will load 1,700 rounds. Plus, the Lee bullets and Competition shoot great with the Gold Cup – five bullets in 2 to 3 inches at 25 yards. They group even tighter when my hold and aim are rock-solid.
That combination also worked well for the Commander. Accuracy was fair. Recoil was just enough to raise the pistol to provide a drill to bring it back down and realign the sight onto the target.

So here is a great practice load for .45 Autos of all sizes. For a .45 Auto protection load, a shooter can go with the force of a heavy bullet or increased velocity of a lighter bullet. The Commander shot 185-grain bullets at upward of 1,000 fps, 200s at 900 fps and 230s at 800 fps. The Gold Cup’s .75 inch longer barrel increased those velocities only about 20 to 70 fps. Loads with the 230-grain bullets had the least loss of velocity from the Commander.

It’s questionable if any of these three bullet weights develop enough velocity to expand the bullets. Speer Gold Dot Short Barrel 230-grain bullets have a large hollowpoint cavity that is said to enable expansion at the slow velocities, but the .45 does not develop enough energy to provide both expansion and penetration.

All three bullet weights, at their top velocities, develop between 8.5 and 8.9 foot-pounds of recoil from the Commander. The three loads listed in the table for the Speer 185-grain Gold Dot were rather stiff. Recoil was mild shooting the Speer 230-grain bullets loaded with Red Dot and Clays powders. Velocity spreads were also lowest with loads for the 230-grain bullet. With Clays, they ran 20 fps for the Gold Cup and 31 fps for the Commander. Velocity spread with Red Dot was 27 fps for the Gold Cup and 63 fps for the Commander.

So Mikayla and I might be best served with the old standard, 230-grain bullets with a muzzle velocity of slightly over 800 fps. One hit with a slow bullet is better than misses from a magazine of heavy-duty loads. That weight bullet with somewhat of a flat point to transfer some shock would be better than the roundnose 230-grain TMJ bullets included in the load table. As a bonus, both pistols had the same point of impact at 25 yards with the 230s and the 200-grain cast bullet practice loads.

We shot 400 of the practice loads last week. Actually, Mikayla shot the majority of them, because she’s faster loading her magazines. We split a box of the jacketed 230-grain bullets. Big or small, .45s do it all.