

UniqueTek “Tips” File #21: “Confessions of a Gunfighter”

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By Cris McPhail a.k.a. Lacey D’Oyly
With Forward by Lee Love

This “Tips” file is a bit different than any we’ve presented before. I asked Cris McPhail a.k.a Lacey D’Oyly to author something that would help Cowboy Action shooters yet left the door open for her to talk about anything she wanted. So, rather than a list of “Tips”, what she wrote is a chronicle of how she got started in Cowboy Action shooting and how she got from there to where she is now ... including all the challenges, pitfalls and just plain mistakes she made along the way. I applaud her for unashamedly confessing to all those mistakes while sharing the solutions that worked.

Hopefully, you will be able to glean some “Tips” from her “confessions” that will help you advance your own shooting. Keep in mind that, although Cris is a Cowboy Action shooter, everything she discusses can be applied to virtually any other type of competitive shooting.

Lee Love

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Who is Cris McPhail?

Name: Cris McPhail
SASS Alias: Lacey D’Oyly

Cris McPhail is a Cowboy Action shooter and member of the Single Action Shooting Society (SASS). She started shooting in October 2011 and has worked diligently to advance her shooting skills and rankings. Below are just a few of her achievements.

World Champion SASS Lady Gunfighter 2014
World Champion SASS Lady Traditional 2016 (Wild Bunch)
National Champion SASS Lady Traditional 2018 (Wild Bunch)
Arizona State Champion SASS Lady Gunfighter 2012-2015
Arizona State Champion SASS Lady 49er 2016, 2017
Arizona State Champion SASS Lady Traditional 2013-2015, 2017-2018 † (Wild Bunch)

† Did not compete in 2016.

“Confessions of a Gunfighter”

By Cris McPhail a.k.a. Lacey D’Oyly

I shoot Cowboy Action. What is that? Well, you are about to find out if you stick with me here.

If you go to the Single Action Shooting Society (SASS) website: www.sassnet.com you can find quite a bit of information including that the first World Championships were held in 1982, so the competition style has been around in various forms for quite a while. SASS is the governing body of the sport. According to the Shooter’s Handbook, the organization was formed in 1987 to “preserve and promote” the sport. All the rules and requirements can be found in the handbook.

The basic concept of the sport is that shooters dress in clothing reminiscent of the turn of the 20th century and compete with firearms of the same era. It’s a three-gun style competition with two single action revolvers, a rifle and a shotgun. There is also another competition style called “Wild Bunch Action Shooting” that uses different firearms, but we will get to that another day.

Now comes the confessions part. I had no idea what I was getting into when I started this journey and made all the rookie mistakes. Hopefully, I can save someone from falling down the same rabbit hole.

First, how did I get involved in the first place? I started with target shooting. After I sorted out the basics of the sight picture, stance and trigger control it was great fun. First it was once a week, but as I gained confidence, I wanted to go two and three times a week. It wasn’t enough just to dial in my accuracy. I needed another challenge. I had heard of “a group of crazy guys” that dressed up and shot revolvers and lever rifles a couple of times a month. This gave me an outlet to challenge my skills and enjoy the company of a friendly group of shooters. The first step was to visit a match, one of the few things that I did right in the beginning. I was hooked. The group was friendly and welcoming, and I could see that this was going to be a lot of fun. As it turned out, it wasn’t just guys. Cowboy Action is family friendly with competition categories for all ages. There are many women shooters.

Here’s where the confessions begin. I didn’t know what the heck I was doing. Now I could shoot and hit the targets, but I didn’t really “know what I didn’t know” as my coach likes to say.

The first thing you have to do is sign up with SASS and pick an “alias”. The alias thing is not my cup of tea, but I get why. It levels the playing field socially. There are no professions, histories, hierarchies. The person who is an internationally known surgeon is on the same level as the person who works in a gun store. It’s the “Cowboy Way” to treat others with respect. Well, I picked an alias that is constantly being misspelled and mispronounced. Pick something simple and easy to read.

Now I was armed with an alias and needed to get some firearms. I didn’t ask anybody, didn’t tryout guns. I just started buying stuff. While that was fun in the store, out at the range, not so much.

I started with two Uberti Bisley 38s, a Rossi 92, and an old Winchester 97 pump shotgun. Sounds reasonable. The Ubertis have a leaf style mainspring/hammer spring. When I took them to a gunsmith (a regular one, not one that specializes in Cowboy Action - second mistake) one gun was too light and the other was fine. I didn’t realize at the time how stiff and slow they were. The Rossi was cheap, but fairly smooth; however, within six months I was out running the gun (couldn’t get it to move as fast as I could move my hands).

The 97 was fine when it was running. If you run a 97 a lot it will break. The story about the 97s is that you need to have at least three: one to shoot, one that’s broken and one that’s in the shop. Now don’t get me wrong, there are many high-level shooters that run 97s brilliantly and swear by them, but they do have a lot of them and a good gunsmith to keep them running.

The rifle was the first to go. It never ran fast or smoothly enough, so I saved up my dollars, bit the bullet as it were, and bought a Uberti clone of a Winchester 73, the gun you could load on Sunday and shoot the rest of the week. The top shooters run either a super slicked and short stroked 73 or a super slicked Marlin 94 with a serial number starting with JM. I got my rifle from a guy that specializes in Cowboy Action 73s and it made all the difference. There are several gunsmiths that are well known for their good work.

I got mine in 44-40. My thinking here was that I could use the same rifle to shoot Cowboy and Wild Bunch since you need to have a lever rifle in .40 caliber or above for Wild Bunch. Frankly, I might have been better off with a top quality .38 and getting my skills together before venturing into Wild Bunch, but what did I know. I still have the 44-40 for Wild Bunch but compete Cowboy Action with a .38/.357. I load .357 in my rifle, but most shoot .38s.

Cowboy Action is a speed completion. You shoot at 16” steel plates at a distance of between 5 and 10 yards. That rifle needs to have as little muzzle lift as possible to gain consistent speed. It is difficult to run a 44-40 or a 45 LC as fast as a smooth 73 in .38 caliber. The best of the best predominately shoot a short barreled .38 rifle. I shoot an 18” “Brush Popper”. I can swing it through close spaces and it is scaled to my 5’7” frame. When I got my new rifle, I bought a second stock and cut it down to fit me. I see all too often that guns don’t fit the shooter. They get their husband’s (or uncle’s or cousin’s) rifle and its too long. Then they wonder why it isn’t accurate. Not good. All firearms should be fitted to the shooter.

My next set of revolvers was a pair of Cimarron 45 LC 3.5” barrel bird’s head grip beauties in stainless steel. Too much muzzle lift, barrels were too short, and the bird’s head grip didn’t have the same stability as a plow handle. Harder to controller, and thus slower. This phase didn’t last too long. By this time, I had switched from shooting two handed to shooting “gunfighter style” which is pulling two guns at the same time and alternating a shot from each gun for ten rounds. Hence, the smaller guns so that they would fit in my hands.

Finally, I had been around enough to see what people were shooting and see what seemed to be working. I bought a pair of Ruger Vaqueros in .32 caliber. These guns fit perfectly in my hands and were easy to control. Finally, I had guns decent enough to begin to drop my times and gain some confidence. I have since switched to shooting each gun two handed, the traditional method, and have switched to .38 caliber Vaqueros. I still keep the .32s in case I ever need them.

It was about this time that I decided that I was going to take the show on the road and enter competitions outside of my local shooting club. I didn’t really know what I was doing but wanted to take that next step. It was a train wreck but gave it my all.

I’m at my first big match and this guy comes up to me and says, “Hey, I think you could be a champion”. I was skeptical. He asked if he could give me a few tips and I was glad for that. It turns out the guy was a coach and has trained several world champions. The best thing that I have done in my shooting career was to work with a coach. From that moment on, my skills progressed quickly. By the way, my coach is Clyde Wason of Shooting Solutions Unlimited.

Finally, I had someone with experience giving me good information. I have found that oftentimes, the guys giving you the most information are the ones that you should listen to the least. The advice that I give new shooters is that they should watch and look for the shooters that can walk the walk and listen to them. Most of the best shooters don’t give out advice unless asked.

One of the first things that my coach did was get me squared away with good holsters positioned correctly for me and a good shotgun belt. We also switched from the pump 97 shotgun to a double barreled hammerless shotgun. I had a brief experience with a \$250 hammered Chinese shotgun early on, but that went by the wayside almost immediately. My holsters are two straight hang or top draw canted a bit inward. I have them positioned forward so that I can see the gun going into the holster rather than having to hunt for them way back on my sides. It's all about speed. My shotgun belt has double loops so that I can easily pull two shells at the same time without them separating in my hand. Single loops are not helpful.

I remember clearly my first training session. After we went through the basic safety information and the sight picture, we went through each firearm to learn the correct technique for drawing and firing the first shot. We began to discuss the transitions between firearms. I realized about halfway through that I didn't do anything properly, had no idea what I was doing and that I'd had spent about \$10,000 in firearms, ammo and clothes. I was devastated. But I wasn't going to give up, even if I had just learned how much I sucked at Cowboy Action.

Then, there was the lesson when I first learned to shoot the double barrel. Mine is in 12 gauge. More shot and easy to find ammo. My coach had shown me how to load the firearm properly and off I go to a local match to give it a go. I banged my jaw on the first stage because I didn't have the stock tight to my face. Ouch. A few days later, I go for my lesson. Needless to say, I needed to really work. We probably shot 300 rounds of shotgun for a couple of hours. Coach keeps asking if I'm okay and if I want to keep going. By heavens, I'm going to get this, so we keep going. Two days later I am black and blue from my eye socket to my jaw. I'm at the gym and this woman keeps looking at my damages. Everybody else around knows that I am a shooter, so I introduce myself to this new person and explain that I had a long lesson with my shotgun. Her comment was "Thanks goodness! I'm a counselor and am duty bound to report abuse". Nice.

I can't say that it has been smooth sailing from that time to this, but I promised my coach that I would practice the things that we work on and not argue with him until I won the world championships. After that we would discuss. Two years after we started working together, I did win the worlds and can say that it is due to good training and hard work. Shooting doesn't take an inordinate amount of talent. It is hard work and determination. Anybody can be an accomplished shooter, if they put in the work. I train at least three days a week (usually 5) and then shoot local matches most weekends. Getting ready for State level and above matches, I train six days a week including the local matches that I shoot on the weekends. I train to automate my skills and pick up speed in the shot to shot time and in the transitions.

The other thing that I have done is to work with a sports psychologist, Rebecca Smith of Compete Performance Coaching. I have been working with Rebecca a couple of years now and it has given me the edge to accomplish my goals. One of the first things we did was to really drill down on why I like to shoot and what I want to accomplish. What gets me motivated to get to the range to train.

Training to automate my skills allows me to really be aware and focus on what's necessary to be mentally tough. I can honestly say that the mental toughness side of competition has enabled me to perform at a higher level and understand what is happening in the moment.

So, there you have it. This is my odyssey so far. I hope to put together some other tips files addressing individual technique and training issues. Until then, you'll find me at the range.