

# The Pueblo Chieftain

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CHIEFTAIN PHOTO/NATHAN PAPES Pueblo Police Cpl. Tom Cody fires an AR-15 assault rifle during a shooting competition for law enforcement officers Saturday at the Pueblo West Sportsman's Association range.

## **Entrants say competition is one of the toughest nationwide.**

**By NICK BONHAM  
THE PUEBLO CHIEFTAIN**

Instead of criminals, about 70 law enforcement officers from Pueblo, Colorado, and surrounding states squared off against each other this weekend at the Pueblo West shooting range.

Speed, athleticism, performance under pressure and - most importantly - accuracy, were on display in the seventh annual tactical, three-gun match sponsored by Point Blank Body Armor and the International Brotherhood of Police Officers Local No. 537.

Federal agents, sheriff's deputies, detectives and cops of all stripes honed their weapon skills and tested their athletic ability in the two-day event that lumped fun and teamwork into a hail of gunfire and adrenaline.

Using their handgun, rifle and shotgun, sometimes all three, the officers competed in six timed stages, capped off with the Sunday finale of the much-anticipated team event.

"We design realistic combat courses of fire," said event organizer Randy Wills, a former Sergeant with the Pueblo Police Department who is now a sales director for Point Blank. "We try and design these stages for real-life situations that the officer might encounter. It puts a lot of stress on them, and you know the pride cops have." "It's hellacious competition," said Pueblo Police Sergeant Ken Espinoza, Vice President of the officers' union. "This gives the officers the opportunity to do things they don't normally do."

Shooting a target at 100 yards from inside a plastic culvert being held by three teammates is a good example. And that was just one phase of the team event.

Before that there was plenty of running and jumping fences, blasting targets down range between 100 yards and 450 yards and mowing down dozens of smaller, close-range targets in a barrage of handgun and shotgun fire.

When the group got to the plastic tube portion of the event, one team member climbed inside and took aim at two targets about 100 yards away. Once each target was struck, the team carried the shooter inside the tube to two different positions across the field to shoot each target again.

After that the team raced to the last obstacle: a wooden incline where the team's best shooter has to fire an unfamiliar rifle at a target 300 yards out.

The shooter only gets two shots at the last target, and he has to do it with his team members huddled around or atop the small incline.

Oh, and they have to do all that in six minutes. Missing the last target is a 30-second penalty. Many teams didn't finish the course, couldn't get past the troublesome tube.

"It's hard to get your magazine in a position where it's steady to get a shot. It's not comfortable in there," said Detective Mianna Sorensen, a crime scene investigator with Pueblo Police, who shot from inside the tube.

"This match had the best team event that I've ever seen. Some very complicated scenarios. You have to keep your head" said Kelly Neal, a prosecutor for Pinal County in Arizona. The 39-year-old Neal, who teamed with four other prosecutors from Arizona, said he's shot and competed across the country as well as in England and Denmark.

Neal took top individual honors at the tactical match.

The New Mexican SWAT team from the San Juan County Sheriff's Department took overall team honors.

Lt. Shane Utley, a 17-year veteran of San Juan County SWAT team, said Pueblo's match is "one of the most challenging in the country."

With the shotgun being his weapon of choice, Utley said the long-distance rifle shooting is what makes the course difficult.

An agent with the Drug Enforcement Association from Albuquerque, N.M., competed this weekend.

He didn't give his name, but said he's been a federal agent for six years.

"This is great for networking," he said. "You get to meet different officers from all over. If we ever have to come up to Pueblo and work, you know people, know who to call."

Participation numbers were up this year, according to organizers. The number of women shooters, though was not.

Sorensen, a nine-year Pueblo police veteran, was one of three female competitors. Seven women attended last year, she said, adding that the cost to compete probably contributed to the decline.

The entry fee is \$175, but organizers awarded \$30,000 worth of prizes, from fancy weapons to handbags. Every participant walks away with something.

"It's not cheap. You can spend \$400 to \$500 in ammunition alone," said Sorensen, who practiced bi-weekly for two months for the shooting match.

Local officers who placed in the top 25 individual shooters competition include: second, Capt. Eddie Rhodes, Pueblo Police; third, Cpl. Gene Ragulsky, Pueblo Police/State Parks; sixth, Detective Jeff Furney, Pueblo Police; eighth, Sgt. Jeff Bodmer, Pueblo Police; 11th, Ranger Mike Dowd, State Parks; 17th, Detective Mike Simonich, Pueblo Police; 23rd, Ranger Mark Reeves, State Division of Wildlife; 24th, Cpl. Tom Cody, Pueblo Police.