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## Young gun tops field at championships

By Darren Marcy/Outdoor editor

Brett Butterstein/The Daily Times  
Tanner Cunningham, 14, of Aztec fires his 40-caliber handgun Friday at the San Juan Wildlife Federation shooting range south of Farmington.

AZTEC An Aztec youth exacted a little revenge and won a

national handgun competition along the way.

Tanner Cunningham, 14, won both his class and his age group at the STI American Handgunner World Shootoff Championship in Montrose, Colo., in late July.

Cunningham won the B Class competition, besting 30 shooters of all ages. He also won the junior division, beating six shooters in the 18-and-younger division.

Tanner shoots in the stock auto competition, shooting a 40-caliber, 1911-style semi-automatic pistol manufactured by STI International.

Two years ago, Cunningham finished second in C Class as a 12-year-old, but despite a move up in class, this year he took the top spot.

Cunningham's win this year came at the expense of the shooter who beat him two years ago for the C Class title.

"That was a goal for me," Cunningham said. "I wanted to beat him."

With three years of serious competitive shooting under his belt, Cunningham has moved through the classes from being unranked through D and C classes to the B Class.

Competition shooting is graded in classes with the top classes being Grand Master and Master. Below that are A, B, C and D classes.

Most serious shooters take years to move up from step to step and the

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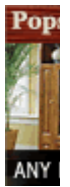
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young handgunner has his goals set on becoming a Grand Master.

There are very few Grand Masters in the world that are also still in their teens.

Jerry Barnhart, a world renowned shooter, has said that if Tanner continues to practice and improve at his current rate, he'd be a national champion by the time he was 15. That came true in July, one year earlier than expected.

The Aztec High School freshman is fast and accurate. He can change a magazine in the blink of an eye and can draw and fire, hitting his target in 1.3 seconds.

That kind of speed and accuracy doesn't come without practice and Cunningham figures he's shot 10,000 rounds on the practice range in the past year.

On average, he practices three times a week, shooting about 400 rounds per session. That's more than many avid shooters will fire in a year.

Cunningham competes in a contest that requires speed and accuracy.

At the World Shootoff, Cunningham competed in an event that requires two shooters to race side-by-side. The handgunners knocked down six targets of different sizes and at ranges from 11 yards to 32 yards. The first one to knock down the sixth target, then hit the "stop-popper" wins the head-to-head match.

The stop popper is a target that, when hit, falls toward the middle. The target that is on the bottom wins the match, since it is sometimes impossible to see with the naked eye which shooter struck the target first.

He also shot in Illinois in a national junior competition, featuring some of the best shooters in the country.

"It's the biggest thing you could go to except the worlds," Cunningham said.

He was disappointed in his finish at the two-day shoot, finishing sixth overall in juniors and fifth in the B Class.

"I was pretty proud," Cunningham said. "But I didn't do as well as I thought I would. I shot pretty good.

Cunningham competes locally, in Durango, Colo., and Albuquerque on a regular basis.

He shoots about 10 competitions a year and has traveled to Texas, Oklahoma, Illinois, New Mexico, Arizona and Colorado to compete.

Cunningham, the son of Cecil and Kathy Cunningham, started shooting with his family when he was only 6.

His next competition will be this weekend at the Rocky Mountain Stock Gun competition in Montrose, which is an International Practical Shooting Club sanctioned event.

Darren Marcy: [darrenm@daily-times.com](mailto:darrenm@daily-times.com)



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