

MAKING THE .38 SPECIAL MORE SPECIAL

WRITTEN BY **JEFF "TANK" HOOVER**



Elmer's cast 358429 on the left, combined with his heavy handloads planted the seed for the .357 Magnum. Tank shoots a lot of these loads, never missing .357 loads. On the left is a 187-grain WFN loaded in .357 brass.

The .38 [S&W](#) Special, more commonly known as the .38 Special, is a rimmed, straight walled, centerfire cartridge designed by S&W in 1898. Commonly chambered in police service arms since the 1900s, the round-nosed, lead bullet had a lot to be desired as a manstopper. The bullet's effectiveness, or lack thereof, was responsible for the deaths of several law enforcement officers. Too many felons were able to return fire after being shot with the timid round nose slugs.



Turning the silver stream into viable Lyman/Ideal 358429 slugs by Tank.
Birthing cast bullets is a beautiful thing when you think about it.

New Beginnings

It wasn't until Elmer Keith started experimenting with the anemic round that the .38 Special reached full potential. It was also the seed planted for today's .357 Magnum. Elmer's design featured a new bullet for the .38, having a flat nose, semi-wadcutter design known as the Lyman/Ideal 358429 and weighing 173 grains. The flat-nose transmitted more energy, producing larger, permanent wound channels than round-nosed bullets commonly used at the time.

Elmer turbo-charged the meek cartridge using 13.5 grains of Hercules 2400 powder. With today's [Alliant](#) 2400 being a tad faster, loads should be reduced to 13.0 grains. I've personally shot thousands of this load in heavy .38 and Magnum sixguns. Accuracy is all you can hold, with performance being wonderful. You'd be hard-pressed knowing you weren't shooting magnum loads. Velocity runs around 1,260 fps from most guns, depending on barrel length.

Mid-Level Loads

The wonderful value handloading affords you is the ability to throttle velocity up, or down. There are times when we don't need all the velocity and accompanying muzzle blast of heavy loads. A few of my favorite mid-level loads involve the same Keith 385429 bullet, or Lee's 160-grain radiused flat-nosed slug. Loaded over 5.0 grains of Unique, or 6.0 grains of AA #5, I get around 950 fps. I shoot a

lot of the LEE bullets and love their wide, energy transferring, flat noses. They really pack a punch for a .38 caliber slug.

This load is accurate, packing enough punch to be a useful trail, or woods walkin' gun. It's an accurate load and useful for going up, recoil wise, to the next level, for someone learning how to shoot a handgun.



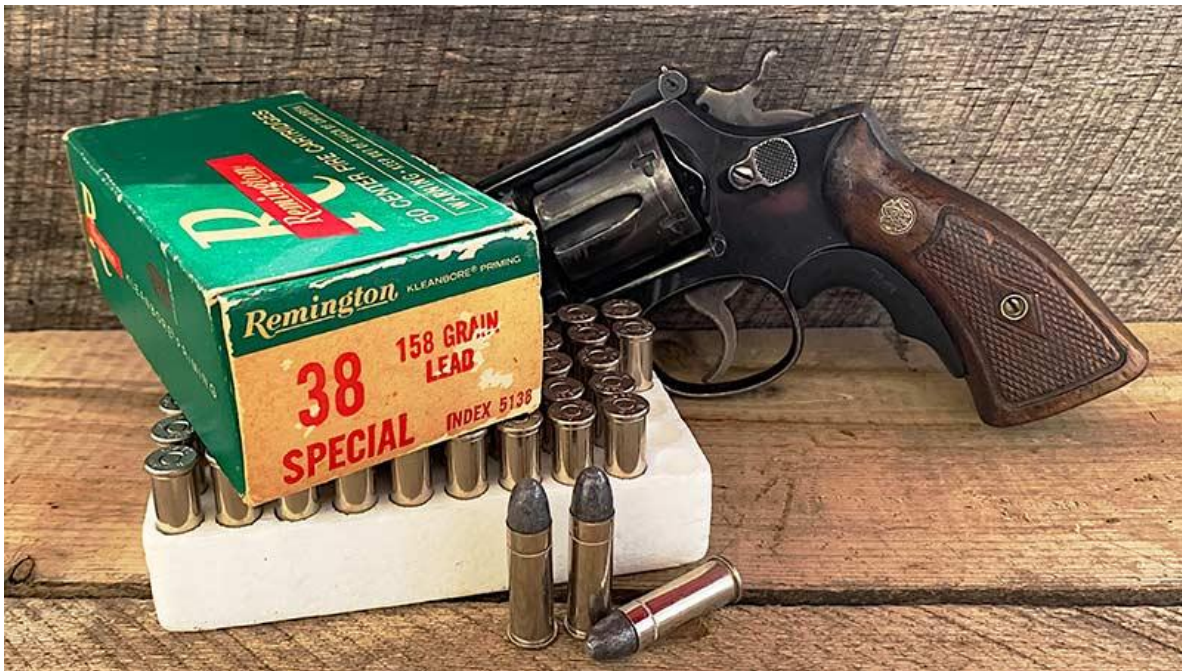
Here's the Lee 130 radiused flat-nose, the Lyman 358477, and the Lee 160-grain radiused flat-nose. All good slugs, with specific purposes in mind.

Target Loads

When punching paper, there's really no need to shoot heavy sixgun loads. Target loads are an economical choice for shooting. One of my favorite .38 Special loads involves a Lee 130-grain radiused flat nosed slug over a mere 3.0 grains of

Bullseye powder, sparked by a standard small pistol primer. Velocity is a scant, recoil free 700 fps. This load is the obvious step for new shooters, after getting the basics down in form, function and accuracy, from shooting a .22 rimfire sixgun.

Using 4.0 grains of 231 with the same bullet, or one up to 150 grains, goes around 800 fps with just a touch more recoil. It too is a good training load and enjoyable for beginners to shoot. The Lyman 358477 is an excellent bullet for these loads and a favorite of mine.



The soft, factory swagged, lead round-nosed bullets were terrible performers as manstoppers. Their shape allowed wounds to close-up, making them ineffective.

The Great .38

Handloading the .38 Special provides you with the versatility of essentially three different cartridges with varying power levels. And if you don't handload, simply doing some Internet shopping will fulfill your needs. Buffalo Bore Ammo carries their Outdoorsman line, which features heavy loaded .38 +P 158-grain hard-cast bullets going 1,250 fps.

On the lighter end, cowboy action loads from [Black Hills](#) offer a 158-grain lead slug at 800 fps. The options are out there. But there's no denying handloading will give you a lot more options for feeding your .38 Specials. And while you may not save a lot of money, you'll shoot a heck of a lot more. And that's a good thing!