

# Riding Into the Bizarre

## 2006 Rio Salado Desert Classic

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PHOTOS BY NYLE LEATHAM

It's O-dark thirty on Thursday morning, Nov. 10, 2006, time for the 19th Annual Rio Salado Desert Classic and Area 2 Championship. The sun is just starting to rise over the the Rio Salado Sportsman's Club range in Mesa, Ariz., and I'm thinking about how fortunate I am to be here.

It all started months ago. Like many folks I overnighted my application for the match. Unfortunately, my application arrived at 4:00 p.m. and was awarded the No. 52 slot on the waiting list. The Area 2, scheduled for Nov 9-12 that year, is probably the most popular match in the country. There are a myriad of reasons: unbelievable props, challenging stage designs, great range officers and staff, great weather, some of the best shooters in the world, and the richest prize table I have ever had the privilege to walk (albeit at the tail end). The fact that it's the only major match in November doesn't hurt either.

A week before the match on Friday, Nov. 3, I called Barbara LaMarca to learn that I was now number one on

the waiting list. I took a chance and shipped my pistol and ammo ahead (care of Don Golembieski at Kodiak Precision). Little did I know there was a NASCAR race the same weekend. Luckily, I got a room, but the rental car was expensive. Next year, I will make reservations well in advance.

On Monday, Nov. 6, I got the call. I was in!

### **The Stages**

I can't over-emphasize the elaborate nature of the stages at the Desert Classic. Fireman's poles, Hummer vehicles, a mining cart, even a rubber brain — the bizarre was normal here in Mesa. True to their reputations, when I arrived at the range, Paul Caudill and his demented team of stage designers had done an outstanding job.

### **Stage 1**



**Steve Horsman  
unleashes his Glock.**

“Engine 12 Code 5” typified this match — do not expect the ordinary. The shooter climbed a set of stairs to the start position, then chose to either run down the stairs or slide down the fireman’s pole to retrieve their pistol from a closed case. Just to make things interesting, a nearby swinger exposed itself for a nanosecond. I made RO Kyle Schmidt laugh by putting one into the berm before the target was even exposed. Now I don’t want to say this stage was hard, but 94 out of 122 Limited shooters had at least one penalty.

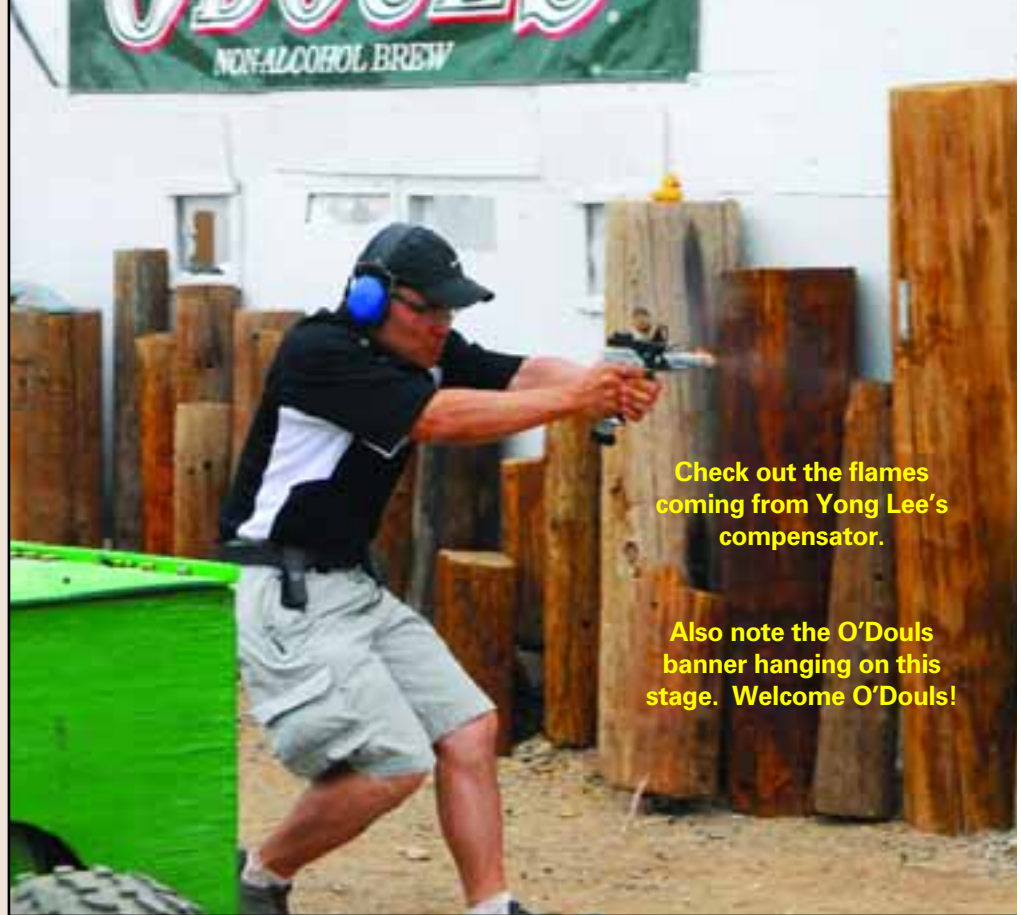
### Stage 2

For “The Rock” you crouched your way through a tunnel and basically stayed crouched as you proceeded through a simple maze. On the RO and staff match day, several shooters bypassed the entrance tunnel and ran around to enter the shooting areas. After some controversy, that evening the administration decided that these shooters would have to re-shoot the stage by going through, not around, the tunnel.

### Stage 3

If stage two wasn’t enough, “The Temple of Doom” generated more comments than any stage at any match I have ever attended.

The shooter walked up a flight of



Check out the flames coming from Yong Lee’s compensator.

Also note the O’Douls banner hanging on this stage. Welcome O’Douls!

stairs and sat in a “mine cart,” then pulled a lever and released the cart for a ride down the rail track with arrays of targets alternating right and left until the cart stopped in front of an array of targets. This last array included a head shot taken from about 20 yards away!

Out of 120-plus Limited shooters only seven shot this stage without a

penalty. Approximately 51 zeroed it. Almost every comment was in the same vein, “...that was fun, I want to do it again” — even among those who crashed and burned. Someone predicted that whoever won this stage would probably win Limited Division. That worked out well for Emanuel Bragg, since he won both.

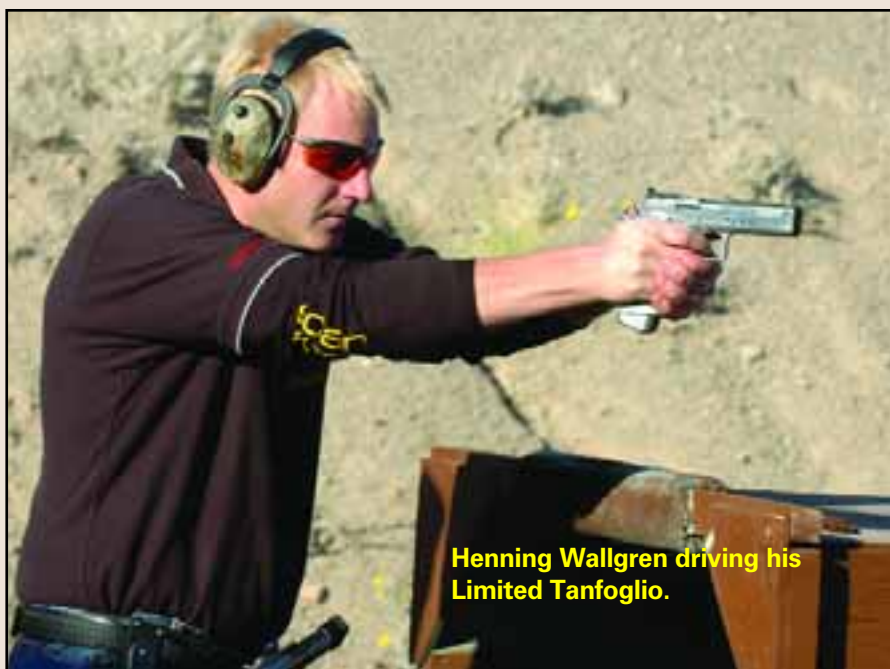
### Stage 5 “Night of the Living Dead”

Weird enough yet? This 32-round field course was not for the squeamish. Shooters started holding a brain. To be honest with you, I am a little surprised

### The Sponsors

Caspian Arms Ltd, was once again the match sponsor. Brownells sponsored the shooters’ banquet. Division sponsors included; Blue Wonder, Howard Leight, iShot Shooting Sports, STI, Smith & Wesson, and U. S. Shooting Academy.

Stage Sponsors included; Accuracy Speaks, Davis McKee & Forshey, Armscor Precision Inc., Briley, Dillon Precision, Laser Shot Inc., Hensley & Co, and Thunder Mountain Custom Rifles.



Henning Wallgren driving his Limited Tanfoglio.

the demented stage designers did not have a real brain in formaldehyde or something, but alas, it was only a rubber brain. On the start signal, the shooter drops the brain and the running and gunning starts. It was fast. Chris Tilley and Taran Butler were .7 of a second apart in the Limited Division shooting the stage in less than 15 seconds. Matt Burkett won the stage almost a second ahead of Mike Voigt in the Open Division, and Kelly Neal led in Single Stack.

### Stage 6

The 24-round, “Saving Private Sabia” required the shooter to jump out of an ambulance, engage a few targets, enter a hallway, shoot through ports, go through a door and shoot some more targets. Simple, except the shooter is carrying a hand grenade — dropping it into a funnel opens the door to the last four targets. Furthermore, the shooter has to grab and carry Private Sabia, a full size dummy. Private Sabia was then unceremoniously slammed on a table, which activated two drop-out targets (two of the last



**High desert conditions require shooters to take special care with staying hydrated and protected from the sun. The upside comes in the form of sweeping scenery, and a major match in November!**

four targets). Chris Tilley shot this stage about a half second faster than Emanuel. John Mouret edged out Matt Burkett in Open. The usual suspects followed in the other divisions: Production-Angus Hobdell and Dave Sevigny, Revolver-Jerry Miculek and Nils Jonasson, etc.

### Stage 8

“Window Service” required a shooter to open a series of ports to reveal an assorted set of drop turners, swingers, poppers, and a Texas Star. Shooters opened ports by pulling and holding them open with a rope. Although the course description said 32 rounds, many shooters put rounds into the steel hard cover that blocked about 25 percent of the Texas Star. Taran



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won this stage with Emanuel taking second. Kelly Neal rocked on this stage, taking it in Single Stack Division.

### Stage 11

“Humdinger” was another fast stage, with the start position seated in a Hummer. After taking the pistol from the glove box the shooter engaged an array on the left then slid over to engage the array on the right. In Production Division, this was one of the rare stages not won by Angus or Dave, instead by Kyle Schmidt. Mike Voigt’s Open time ruled this stage over all others with a blazing 7.76 seconds.

### Results

Emanuel Bragg won Limited, edging Henning Wallgren and Taran Butler out by less than four points in one of the closest finishes ever at the Area 2. The stage wins were pretty evenly distributed; Taran Butler, Chris Tilley, Phil Strader, and Emanuel Bragg each won two stages. While Henning Wallgren did not win a stage he was consistently a top finisher, putting him almost at the top of the heap.

In a repeat of the Nationals, Jerry Miculek won revolver, followed by junior Nils Jonasson.

Matt Brunell won Limited 10, followed by Peter Quan.



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Dave Sevigny won Production followed by Angus Hobdell.

Matt Burkett won Open, with Joe Bridgman less than four points behind. Matt finished first or second on 7 of the 11 stages.

Kelly Neal dominated Single Stack by winning 8 of 11 stages, putting a sizeable lead between himself and second-place Bob Hostetter.

### **Perspectives**

Taran Butler said that “this match was better than last’s year match,” while telling me that stage three was definitely fun to shoot. He noted, “shooting it later in the match would have given people more time to learn how to shoot it. Listening to the experience of others and how they shot would have been advantageous.”

Matt Burkett talked about the controversy on Stage 2. After numerous discussions with match officials prior to shooting the stage, he and others were told their shooting solution was viable. However, later that night match officials called to inform him he needed to re-shoot the stage. As rattling as that can be, Matt said, “I improved my score for that stage with the re-shoot.”

Don Golembieski talked about how after many years of shooting the Desert Classic, “it is probably the best match in the country.” The “challenge we have each year is trying to outdo ourselves.” He states, “Our intentions are always good. Maybe for some of the shooters the fire pole was a bit more of a physical challenge than they might have expected,



**USPSA member Carly Drake hanging around the match.** but this is the Desert Classic.”

My personal feeling is that they might have gone over the top with a couple of stages, but the Desert Classic is renowned for innovative props, challenging courses of fire, excellent range officers and staff. It epitomizes the philosophy of accuracy, power and speed. All I can add is that “I hope I get into next year’s match!”

