# PARAMETRIC OPTIMIZATION OF HEAT TREATMENT PROCESS OF STEEL BEARING USING TAGUCHI TECHNIQUES

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**Abstract:** Three iterations of Taguchi designed experiments and analyses were used to determine optimal thermal treatments for minimizing retained austenite content while maximizing Rockwell hardness (HRC) in AISI52100 bearing steel. Experimental variables chosen for this study included austenitizing and tempering temperatures, tempering time and cold treatment. After one iteration, tempering temperature and cold treatment were seen to have the greatest effect on austenite content while austenitizing and tempering temperatures had the greatest influence on hardness. After the second and third experimental iterations, two thermal treatments were noted each producing hardness of 58-59 HRC in combination with zero retained austenite as measured by x-ray diffraction.

## 1.0 INTRODUCTION

Taguchi [1, 2] design of experiment (DOE) methods incorporate orthogonal arrays to minimize the number of experiments required to achieve a given set of performance characteristics. The Taguchi experimental approach allows a statistically sound experiment to be completed, while investigating a minimum number of possible combinations of parameters or factors.

Determination of appropriate times and temperatures for a heat-treating procedure that will achieve both low retained austenite and a high hardness can appear initially to require extensive, if not prohibitive, experimentation. Fortunately, Taguchi analysis provides an efficient and effective means of achieving these goals. If retained austenite transforms during service the associated nominal four percent volume increase produces distortion, which can lead to seizure and premature failure. The austenite content is commonly limited to less than 3% for critical precision bearings and 15% for some gearing applications. Higher hardness is generally associated with improved fatigue strength and resistance to spalling failure and wear. To minimize retained austenite and maximize hardness simultaneously appropriate austenitizing, quenching and cryogenic cooling procedures must be determined.

This paper describes an analysis to reach the optimal set of processing parameters for heat treatment process of bearing steel through an inexpensive iterative process. The heat treatment of critical bearing fabricated from 52100 steel requires both minimal austenite content and high hardness for dimensional stability in service, wear resistance and load bearing strength.

## 2.0 EXPERIMENTAL DESIGN AND TECHNIQUE

The objective of the study was to determine how an iterative Taguchi experimental design could be used to systematically optimize a complicated heat treatment process that has several potential variables. The four parameters or factors identified as primarily affecting the retained austenite and/or hardness were the austenitizing temperature, tempering temperature, tempering time, and cyrogenic or cold treatment. The austenitizing temperature is the temperature to which steel is heated in order to transform the BCC ferrite to homogeneous FCC austenite increasing the stability of carbon. Austenitizing is performed prior to the quenching operation that hardens the steel trapping the carbon to form martensitic. The temperature specified for austenitizing is the maximum temperature to which the material is heated during the heat treating process. The tempering operation, performed for a predetermined time and temperature below the martensitic transformation temperature, normally has the effect of reducing the hardness, increasing the ductility, and decreasing the amount of retained austenite. The cold treatment, performed during this investigation in liquid nitrogen at a temperature of $210^0$ C, is a method used to reduce the amount of retained austenite.

To initially identify any interactions that may take place among the factors, an L16 (2)15 array, with two levels for each factor, was chosen for the initial DOE. The L16 (2)15 designation refers to the number of experiments (16), the number of levels for each factor (2), and the number of factors or interactions (15). A full factorial experiment would consist of (2)15 or 32,768 experiments as compared to the Taguchi experiment requiring only 16 experiments. All interactions are considered for the initial screening DOE to eliminate any confounding of the matrix columns that make interpretation of the results difficult. An interaction is defined as an occurrence where the total effect is greater than the sum of the total effects taken independently. The recommended heat treatment [5] commonly performed for 52100 steel was the basis for selection of the initial two levels for each factor. The two levels should represent reasonable extremes for each of the selected factors, especially for the initial DOE. Once the possible interactions were identified an L9 (3)4 array, employing nine experiments, three levels for each of the remaining four factors or interactions, was chosen for a second DOE to increase the number of levels for each factor and to decrease the number of experiments. Finally, a third DOE was performed to refine the results of the second experiment, and approach the optimal heat treating parameters. During the third experiment, the best values from the second Taguchi experiment were used as nominal levels to set each factor. The ranges between the high and low levels were also decreased for third DOE.

The 52100 steel bar stock used during this investigation was purchased in an annealed condition with an initial hardness less than 25 HRC and no measurable retained austenite. Disks that were approximately 0.5 in. thick were sectioned from the bar stock to be used in the analysis. A total of sixteen disks were used for the first experiment, and a total of nine disks were used for each of the second and the third experiments. The hardness and retained austenite measurements were made on the flat face of each specimen after a mechanical polish to a six micron diamond finish. Retained austenite measurements are determined by quantitative microscopic examination if the austenite is high, usually above about 15%. Since the austenite content can be very low in bearing steels, a more accurate x-ray diffraction technique was used during this investigation. The retained austenite measurements were made by x-ray diffraction in accordance with ASTM E975 and SAE SP-453, using the direct comparison method of Averbach and Cohen.[5] The unit cell volume and the chemical composition of 52100 steel were used to calculate the intensity factors, "R”.[6]

The integrated intensity of each austenite and ferrite/martensite peak was measured using chromium K-alpha radiation. The use of multiple diffraction peaks from each phase minimizes the possible effects of preferred orientation and coarse grain size. Four independent volume percent retained austenite values were calculated from the "R" ratios and the total integrated intensities of the austenite (200) and (220), and ferrite/martensite (200) and (211) diffraction peaks. A Miller fixture [7] was used to minimize the influence of preferred orientation and grain size. The Miller fixture rotates the specimen around the surface normal and oscillates (± 45 deg.) perpendicular to the diffraction plane. The Rockwell C hardness measurements were acquired using a Wilson Rockwell Model OUR-a hardness tester. A standard Brale sphero-conical diamond penetrator was used with a load of 150 kgf. The hardness readings reported are an average of three measurements. Retained austenite measurements and hardness readings were obtained on the same sample. The factors and levels selected for the DOE A analysis are shown in Table I. The well established heat treatment of 52100 steel [4] was used to aid the selection of the factors and levels shown. A large matrix was selected for the initial DOE to identify all possible interactions between the main factors. Once the interactions between the factors are established for any process, heat treating in this instance, the larger matrix need not be repeated for further refinement of the same process.

Table-1: Factors and their levels for initial DOE

| Factors | Symbol | Level 1 | Level 2 |
|---|---|---|---|
| Austenizing temperature | A | $774^0$ C | $871^0$ C |
| Tempering temperature | B | $93^0$ C | $343^0$ C |
| Temper time | D | 1 Hr | 4 Hrs |
| Cold treatment | H | None | 1 Hr |
| Austenizing temperature X Tempering temperature | C | ---- | ---- |
| Austenizing temperature X Temper time | E | ---- | ---- |
| Tempering temperature X Temper time | F | ---- | ---- |
| Austenizing temperature X Cold treatment | I | ---- | ---- |
| Tempering temperature X Cold treatment | J | ---- | ---- |
| Temper time X Cold treatment | L | ---- | ---- |

Table-2: Factors and their levels for second DOE

| Factors | Symbol | Level 1 | Level 2 | Level 3 |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Austenizing temperature | A | $774^0$ C | $827^0$ C | $871^0$ C |
| Tempering temperature | B | $93^0$ C | $177^0$ C | $343^0$ C |
| Temper time | D | 1.0 Hr | 2.0 Hrs | 4.0 Hrs |
| Cold treatment | H | None | 0.5 Hr | 1.0 Hr |

Table-3: Factors and their levels for third DOE

| Factors | Symbol | Level 1 | Level 2 | Level 3 |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Austenizing temperature | A | $774^0$ C | $802^0$ C | $827^0$ C |
| Tempering temperature | B | $93^0$ C | $135^0$ C | $177^0$ C |
| Temper time | D | 1 Hr | 1.5 Hrs | 2.0 Hrs |
| Cold treatment | H | None | 0.25 Hr | 0.5 Hr |

The factors and levels for DOE B are shown in Table-2. Three levels were selected for each factor so that any trends in the data would be more readily detected. The factors and levels for DOE C are shown in Table-3. The factors for the second and third DOE's were the same. The levels for DOE C were selected based upon the results of the second DOE B to further refine the heat treatment procedure. The range of the factors between Level 1 and Level 3 was decreased for DOE C. The factors were assigned to an L16 (2)15 array for the first experiment and to an L9 (3)4 orthogonal array for the second and third Taguchi experiments as shown in Tables-4, 5 and 6, respectively. It was assumed that there were no interactions between factors for the second and third experiments. Because it would be difficult and time consuming to heat the coupons individually, the austenitizing temperatures were assigned to column A1, so that samples could be grouped together during austenitizing. The experiments were then randomized within each group.

The specimens were first austenized at the prescribed temperature for 1.5 hours. After reaching the austenitizing temperature, each sample was quenched in oil and was allowed to rest for 0.5 hr. The cold treatment was then performed using liquid nitrogen for the prescribed amount of time. After the cold treatment and prior to the tempering operation, the samples were again allowed to rest for 0.5 hr. The samples that were not cold treated were also allowed to rest for 0.5 hr prior to the tempering operation. After tempering, each sample was allowed to cool at room temperature.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The results obtained for the first, second, and third experiments are shown in Tables-7, 8, and 9, respectively. The retained austenite measurements ranged from 0 to 7.9 volume percent for the first experiment, from 0 to 15 percent for the second experiment, and from 0 to 13.4 percent for the third experiment. The Rockwell C hardness ranged from 38 to 63 HRC for the first experiment, between 53 and 67 HRC for the second experiment, and between 44 and 65 HRC for the third experiment. The variation in the data is the result of all of the levels (temperatures and times) being different for each set of experiments.

Table-4: Experiment planning for initial DOE

| No. | A | B | C | D | E | F | G | H | I | J | K | L | M | N | O |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 |
| 2 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 2 | 2 | 2 | 2 | 2 | 2 | 2 | 2 |
| 3 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 2 | 2 | 2 | 2 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 2 | 2 | 2 | 2 |
| 4 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 2 | 2 | 2 | 2 | 2 | 2 | 2 | 2 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 |
| 5 | 1 | 2 | 2 | 1 | 1 | 2 | 2 | 1 | 1 | 2 | 2 | 1 | 1 | 2 | 2 |
| 6 | 1 | 2 | 2 | 1 | 1 | 2 | 2 | 2 | 2 | 1 | 1 | 2 | 2 | 1 | 1 |
| 7 | 1 | 2 | 2 | 2 | 2 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 2 | 2 | 2 | 2 | 1 | 1 |
| 8 | 1 | 2 | 2 | 2 | 2 | 1 | 1 | 2 | 2 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 2 | 2 |
| 9 | 2 | 1 | 2 | 1 | 2 | 1 | 2 | 1 | 2 | 1 | 2 | 1 | 2 | 1 | 2 |
| 10 | 2 | 1 | 2 | 1 | 2 | 1 | 2 | 2 | 1 | 2 | 1 | 2 | 1 | 2 | 1 |
| 11 | 2 | 1 | 2 | 2 | 1 | 2 | 1 | 1 | 2 | 1 | 2 | 2 | 1 | 2 | 1 |
| 12 | 2 | 1 | 2 | 2 | 1 | 2 | 1 | 2 | 1 | 2 | 1 | 1 | 2 | 1 | 2 |
| 13 | 2 | 2 | 2 | 1 | 2 | 2 | 1 | 1 | 2 | 2 | 1 | 1 | 2 | 2 | 1 |
| 14 | 2 | 2 | 1 | 1 | 2 | 2 | 1 | 2 | 1 | 1 | 2 | 2 | 1 | 1 | 2 |
| 15 | 2 | 2 | 1 | 2 | 1 | 1 | 2 | 1 | 2 | 2 | 1 | 2 | 1 | 1 | 2 |
| 16 | 2 | 2 | 1 | 2 | 1 | 1 | 2 | 2 | 1 | 1 | 2 | 1 | 2 | 2 | 1 |
| | 1 | 2 | | | 3 | | | | | | 4 | | | | |

Table-5: Experiment planning for initial DOE

| | $L_9 (3)^4$ | | | | A | B | C | D |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Factors | A | B | C | D | Aust. | Temper | Temper | Cold |
| Exp. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | Temp. | Temp. | Time | Treat. |
| 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 774 C (1425 F) | 93 C (200 F) | 1 Hr. | None |
| 2 | 1 | 2 | 2 | 2 | 774 C (1425 F) | 177 C (350 F) | 2 Hrs. | 0.5 Hr. |
| 3 | 1 | 3 | 3 | 3 | 774 C (1425 F) | 343 C (650 F) | 4 Hrs. | 1 Hr. |
| 4 | 2 | 1 | 2 | 3 | 827 C (1520 F) | 93 C (200 F) | 2 Hrs. | 1 Hr. |
| 5 | 2 | 2 | 3 | 1 | 827 C (1520 F) | 177 C (350 F) | 4 Hrs. | None |
| 6 | 2 | 3 | 1 | 2 | 827 C (1520 F) | 343 C (650 F) | 1 Hr. | 0.5 Hr. |
| 7 | 3 | 1 | 3 | 2 | 871 C (1600 F) | 93 C (200 F) | 4 Hrs. | 0.5 Hr. |
| 8 | 3 | 2 | 1 | 3 | 871 C (1600 F) | 177 C (350 F) | 1 Hr. | 1 Hr. |
| 9 | 3 | 3 | 2 | 1 | 871 C (1600 F) | 343 C (650 F) | 2 Hrs. | None |

Table-6: Experiment planning for initial DOE

| | $L_9(3)^4$ | | | | A | B | C | D |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Factors | A | B | C | D | Austenizing | Tempering | Temper | Cold |
| Exp. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | Temperature | Temperature | Time | Treat. |
| 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 774 C (1425 F) | 93 C (200 F) | 1 Hr. | None |
| 2 | 1 | 2 | 2 | 2 | 774 C (1425 F) | 135 C (275 F) | 1.5 Hrs. | 0.25 Hrs. |
| 3 | 1 | 3 | 3 | 3 | 774 C (1425 F) | 177 C (350 F) | 2 Hrs. | 0.5 Hr. |
| 4 | 2 | 1 | 2 | 3 | 802 C (1475 F) | 93 C (200 F) | 1.5 Hrs. | 0.5 Hr. |
| 5 | 2 | 2 | 3 | 1 | 802 C (1475 F) | 135 C (275 F) | 2 Hrs. | None |
| 6 | 2 | 3 | 1 | 2 | 802 C (1475 F) | 177 C (350 F) | 1 Hr. | 0.25 Hr. |
| 7 | 3 | 1 | 3 | 2 | 827 C (1520 F) | 93 C (200 F) | 2 Hrs. | 0.25 Hrs. |
| 8 | 3 | 2 | 1 | 3 | 827 C (1520 F)' | 135 C (275 F) | 1 Hr. | 0.5 Hr. |
| 9 | 3 | 3 | 2 | 1 | 827 C (1520 F) | 177 C (350 F) | 1.5 Hrs. | None |

Table-7: Experimental results of initial DOE

| Experiment | Volume Percent Retained Austenite | Hardness (Rockwell C Scale) |
|---|---|---|
| A-1 | 6.4 | 59.1 |
| A-2 | 2.8 | 60.4 |
| A-3 | 7.9 | 52.9 |
| A-4 | 2.1 | 53.9 |
| A-5 | 0.2 | 39.9 |
| A-6 | 0.1 | 47.8 |
| A-7 | 0.1 | 38.9 |
| A-8 | 0.1 | 42.8 |
| A-9 | 5.9 | 61.8 |
| A-10 | 2.2 | 62.7 |
| A-11 | 7.2 | 61.0 |
| A-12 | 1.0 | 62.1 |
| A-13 | 0 | 50.6 |
| A-14 | 0 | 52.7 |
| A-15 | 0 | 50.2 |
| A-16 | 0 | 51.3 |

Table-8: Experimental results of second DOE

| Experiment | Volume Percent Retained Austenite | Hardness (Rockwell C Scale) |
|---|---|---|
| B-1 | 15.0 | 61.1 |
| B-2 | 0 | 56.6 |
| B-3 | 0 | 47.9 |
| B-4 | 6.1 | 65.4 |
| B-5 | 0 | 58.9 |
| B-6 | 0.1 | 55.1 |
| B-7 | 10.2 | 66.7 |
| B-8 | 0 | 60.9 |
| B-9 | 0 | 53.2 |

Table-9: Experimental results of third DOE

| Experiment | Volume Percent Retained Austenite | Hardness (Rockwell C Scale) |
|---|---|---|
| C-1 | 11.5 | 59.5 |
| C-2 | 2.4 | 43.5 |
| C-3 | 0 | 54.0 |
| C-4 | 4.5 | 62.3 |
| C-5 | 13.4 | 59.3 |
| C-6 | 0 | 58.1 |
| C-7 | 6.7 | 65.0 |
| C-8 | 4.5 | 62.4 |
| C-9 | 0 | 58.7 |

Table-10: Response table of initial DOE

| | | Austenite | | Hardness | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | Level 1 | Level 2 | Level 1 | Level 2 |
| Factors | | | | | |
| A | Austenitzing Temperature | 2.5 | 2.0 | 49.5 | 56.6 |
| B | Tempering Temperature | 4.4 | 0.1 | 59.2 | 46.8 |
| D | Temper Time | 2.2 | 2.6 | 54.4 | 51.6 |
| H | Cold Treatment | 3.5 | 1.0 | 51.8 | 54.2 |
| Interactions | | | | | |
| C | Aust. Temp. vs. Temper Temp. | 2.4 | 2.1 | 53.9 | 52.1 |
| E | Aust. Temp. vs. Temper Time | 2.2 | 2.3 | 54.0 | 52.0 |
| F | Temper Temp. vs. Temper Time | 2.2 | 2.3 | 53.4 | 52.6 |
| I | Aust. Temp. vs. Cold Treat. | 2.2 | 2.3 | 52.5 | 53.6 |
| J | Temper. Temp. vs. Cold Treat. | 3.5 | 1.0 | 53.7 | 52.3 |
| L | Temper Time vs. Cold Treat. | 2.0 | 2.5 | 52.7 | 53.3 |

The response data for the initial experiment are shown in Table-10. The results indicate that the tempering temperature and cold treatment have the most influence, and the austenitizing temperature and tempering time have the least influence on the retained austenite levels. The tempering temperature and the austenitizing temperatures appear to have the most influence on the hardness, with the cold treatment and temper time having some influence. The tempering time and cold treatment seem to be interacting in relation to the retained austenite levels. None of the main factors show strong interactions in relation to hardness. The results of the initial experiment indicate lower austenite content at the higher tempering temperature of 343C and after the one hour cold treatment. The tempering times (one hour and four hours) and austenitizing temperatures (774C and 871C) appear to have little effect on the retained austenite content. The hardness also seems to be most influenced by the tempering temperature followed by the austenitizing temperature. Hardness is highest at the lower tempering temperature of 93C and at the higher austenitizing temperature of 871C. The cold treatment (none and one hour) and tempering time (one hour and four hours) appear to have a minimal affect on the hardness. There is an interaction between the cold treatment and the tempering temperature in relation to the retained austenite. There appears to be no strong interactions in relation to the hardness.

The response data for the second experiment are shown in Table-11. As expected, the data indicate a high austenite content and a high hardness for the lowest tempering temperature, and low austenite content and low hardness for the highest tempering temperature. The results obtained in the second experiment indicate the factor most influencing the retained austenite and hardness is the tempering temperature. The retained austenite content is minimal after the tempering temperature of 177C. The response data shown in Table-12 are for the third refined experiment. These results also indicate that the lowest austenite content is associated with the highest tempering temperature. The hardness appears to increase in magnitude from Level 1 to Level 3 as the austenitizing temperature is increased from 774C to 827C. The conditions that gave the lowest austenite content and the highest hardness are shown in Table-13. The results appear to indicate that the cold treatment might have an effect on the hardness of the 52100 steel, but this cannot be confirmed because of the interaction that takes place with the tempering temperature and cold treatment shown in the interactions for DOE A. Therefore, the confirmation experiment was performed under identical conditions with the exception that one sample was cold treated and one sample was not. The confirmation experiment was successful, resulting in no detectable retained austenite and a hardness value on the order of 58 HRC for both samples. The confirmation results do not substantiate the finding that cold treating may increase the hardness. The confirmation experiment also indicates that although an interaction exists between the tempering temperature and the cold treatment, the tempering temperature has the most influence on the retained austenite content.

## CONCLUSIONS

The experiments conducted show that austenitizing and tempering temperatures have the most influence on the retained austenite and the hardness in the heat treatment of 52100 steel. The austenitizing and tempering temperatures of 827C and 177C, respectively, gave the lowest austenite and highest hardness values for both the second and final Taguchi analyses, indicating that no further refinement of the experiment is necessary. Therefore, if the goal of heat treating 52100 steel is to produce the lowest austenite content and the highest hardness, either condition 1 or 2, shown in Table-13, could be used. The experiment also indicates that to produce the best product (low austenite content and high hardness) the process controls should be placed on the austenitizing temperature and the tempering temperature.

This study is intended to illustrate the use of Taguchi DOE methods employing x-ray diffraction retained austenite measurement to efficiently develop heat treatment parameters for steels. It is not intended to provide optimal parameters for any specific application of 52100 steel. The final heat treatment selected to produce negligible austenite and 58 HRC material is not intended to be optimal for any particular application. However, the same experimental approach can, in principle, be used to efficiently develop any achievable set of properties in the heat treatment of steels.

Table-11: Response table of initial DOE

| | | Austenite | | | Hardness | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Factors | Level 1 | Level 2 | Level 3 | Level 1 | Level 2 | Level 3 |
| A | Austenitizing Temperature | 5.0 | 2.1 | 3.4 | 55.2 | 59.8 | 60.3 |
| B | Tempering Temperature | 10.4 | 0 | 0 | 64.4 | 58.8 | 52.1 |
| C | Tempering Time | 5.0 | 2.0 | 3.4 | 59.0 | 58.4 | 57.8 |
| D | Cold Treatment | 5.0 | 3.4 | 2.0 | 57.7 | 59.5 | 60.0 |

Table-12: Response table of second DOE

| | | Austenite | | | Hardness | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Factors | Level 1 | Level 2 | Level 3 | Level 1 | Level 2 | Level 3 |
| A | Austenitizing Temperature | 4.6 | 6.0 | 3.7 | 52.3 | 59.9 | 62.0 |
| B | Tempering Temperature | 7.5 | 6.8 | 3.7 | 62.2 | 55.1 | 56.9 |
| C | Tempering Time | 5.3 | 2.3 | 6.7 | 60.0 | 54.8 | 59.4 |
| D | Cold Treatment | 8.3 | 3.0 | 3.0 | 59.2 | 55.5 | 59.6 |

Table-13: Response table of third DOE

| Conditions | | |
|---|---|---|
| Factors | Condition 1 | Condition 2 |
| Austenitizing Temperature | 827 C (1520 F) | 827 C (1520 F) |
| Tempering Temperature | 177 C (350 F) | 177 C (350 F) |
| Tempering Time | 2 Hrs. | 2 Hrs. |
| Cold Treatment | 1 Hr. | None |
| Results | | |
| Volume Percent Retained Austenite | 0 | 0 |
| Hardness Rockwell C | 58.7 | 57.9 |

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