HIGH RELIABILITY PISTONS FOR RECIPROCATING COMPRESSORS WITH VALIDATED PERFORMANCE MODELLING

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ABSTRACT

Piston slippage (blow-by) on reciprocating compressors is highly predictable due to defined leakage paths at the end gaps of piston rings. A new engineering approach quantifies the slippage through the piston rings and determines the dynamic pressure difference on each ring on the piston. With this approach the expected discharge gas temperature increase, expected capacity losses and the risks of rider bands activation due to piston ring slippage can be quantified. The piston design and ring styles can be iterated to find an optimized piston layout for a given application.

Within the last two years piston performance has been evaluated and tracked on all compressors that have been subject to technical surveys (Reliability, Efficiency and Environmental Soundness – REE – Audits). The result of this study suggests that on 30% of the reciprocating compressors in the process gas industry there is at least one cylinder with a piston that shows high sensitivity to piston ring leakage and subsequent performance related issues.

This paper suggests quantifying piston performance as a standard when evaluating compressor reliability and efficiency. The industry managed to reduce compressor valve related problems due to more sophisticated modelling tools and smart design changes on valves. It is time to go that next steps on pistons.

INTRODUCTION

Most industrial reciprocating compressors in the Oil & Gas industry have double acting cylinders. That means that gas is compressed during both, the inward and the outward stroke. The piston rings seal the gas between the two cylinder chambers (head end – HE, and crank end – CE), the rider band carries the weight of the piston. Figure 1 shows a piston with piston rings and rider bands in the cylinder. Both functions (Sealing the gas and carrying the piston weight) are fundamental for reliable compressor operation. And both – rider bands and piston rings – are a frequent cause of unplanned outages. The study from Goebel, 2014 suggests that 9% of compressor damages are due to piston ring related problems and 9% due to rider ring related problems. Both together constitute with 18% the 2nd most frequent failure cause of reciprocating compressors after valve failures.

Most cylinders are lubricated which reduces the amount of frictional wear. Non-lube application that are not uncommon (special materials for non-lube service are required) are especially critical with respect to life time and blow by. Very often problems on piston rings or rider bands are not identified early enough and the impacts on compressor performance (e.g. increased discharge temperatures) are attributed to the wrong cause and are thus not addressed. When valves fail, the valve covers get hot, if the rod packing fails, the packing leakage rates increase and operators can identify the cause of the observed performance losses. Cylinder ring related problems such as piston ring leakage and rider band wear are harder to identify and can only be confirmed with data acquisition equipment. The MTBF of the components are expected to be, depending on the application and industry between one and five years.

![Figure 1: Piston with rings and riders in a cylinder of a reciprocating compressor](image1.png)

![Figure 2: Compressor audits with substantial piston performance concerns](image2.png)
There are several different designs of piston rings and rider rings. The most common piston ring is an angle cut ring. Figure 3 shows different kind of piston rings including a straight cut ring, an angle cut ring, a step cut ring and a pressure balanced ring. One of the most common rider bands is the solid shrunk on rider band without relief grooves. Figure 3 gives an overview of the most common ring styles for cylinder rings. The application engineering of these designs is often based on rule of thumb methods. The failure statistics prove (Goebel 2014) that a more comprehensive approach in designing pistons and cylinder rings is required.

![Figure 3: Different styles of piston rings and rider bands as provided by all major suppliers of compressor components.](image)

**MODELLING**

The mass flow model
Every cylinder ring (piston and rider ring) is represented in the model by one orifice. The flow model used to describe the flow through these orifices is based on the steady state isenthalpic throttle process through an effective leakage area. At a given wear state of the rings the effective flow area of the piston ring can be calculated.

\[
\dot{m} = \phi \sqrt{2 p_0 \rho_0} \sqrt{\frac{k - 1}{k}} \left(1 - \left(\frac{p_1}{p_0}\right)^{\frac{k+1}{k}}\right)
\]

The compression chamber model
The cylinder pressures and temperatures in both chambers (HE and CE) are calculated using the standard equations for pressure and density changes in reciprocating compressors. The volume change is given by the compressor geometry, the mass flow through suction and discharge valves are calculated using equation (1). The effective flow area of the valve is a valve specific parameter that can be provided by the valve manufacturer. There are several correlations available to model the heat transfer within the cylinder (e.g. Disconzi 2012) in case adiabatic change of state cannot be assumed. For details and equations on standard compressor simulation see...
The piston ring leakage model

In order to determine the effective leakage area of each piston ring the following assumptions are made:

- The end gap (see dimension GW in Figure 4) of the piston ring is the only leakage gap. Feistel shows that this is a viable assumption.

- The effective flow area is derived from the geometric flow area with the help of a discharge coefficient. Radcliffe 2001 performed measurements for different rings styles. The ring style (e.g. angle cut or step-cut) is accounted for in the model by applying a discharge coefficient corresponding to the ring design. Radcliffe suggests a discharge coefficient of 0.65 for straight cut rings.

- According to Liu (1986) cylinder lubrication reduces the blow by 30% to 35% compared to the non-lubricated case. The effect of lubrication on the piston leakage is accounted for by reducing the effective leakage area of the piston rings accordingly.

- The pressure loss in tangential direction (in case the ring gaps of two neighboring piston rings are not aligned) is neglected. According to Ruddy 1981 this is an acceptable assumption for bores smaller than 500mm (20in). As the results show, piston ring leakage is unlikely to have a significant impact on bores larger than 15in. This assumption is thus justified as it covers the diameter range of interest (<15in).

- Heat transfer is accounted for by a constant head transfer coefficient and by a heat sink with the temperature of the cylinder coolant.

The effective leakage area of each piston ring is given by cylinder and piston diameter, end gap and discharge coefficient.

\[
\varnothing = \frac{d_{cyt} - d_{piston}}{2} gC_d
\]
The calculation of pressures, temperatures and gas densities in between the piston rings is similar to the approach in the compression chamber with the exception that the change in volume is zero. The governing equations are derived from mass balance, energy balance and the ideal gas law.

\[
d\rho_j = \frac{1}{V_j} (d_e m_{ij} - d_e m_{jk})
\]

(3)

\[
dp_j = \kappa \frac{p_i}{\rho_j V_j} d_e m_{ij} - \kappa \frac{p_j}{\rho_j V_j} d_e m_{jk} + \frac{\kappa - 1}{V_j} d_e Q_j
\]

(4)

The tribological model
Radial wear of the piston rings has a direct impact on the leakage area. Wear on the OD of the piston ring reduces the radial thickness and opens the end gap by \(2\pi\) times the radial wear rate.

\[
g = g_{ini} + 2\pi \ w_{radial}
\]

(5)

This linear correlation between the wear rate and the leakage area is one reason for the decreasing performance on reciprocating compressors over time.

The wear rate is determined by a wear coefficient that depends on multiple variables and normally has to be found via experiments. Typical wear coefficients from wear tests (see Radcliffe, 2001) are in the range of \(1e(-16)\) m\(^3\)/Nm. The wear rate that determines the end gap is given by:

\[
w_{radial} = k_p \ contact \ v_{rel} t
\]

(6)

Example of an implementation for piston performance modelling
The piston that is given in Figure 7 has two angle cut rider rings with face and side relief grooves and four angle cut pressure balanced piston rings (see Figure 3). Figure 8 shows the corresponding model to determine the piston ring leakage for given operating conditions.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ambiance e.g. Suction and discharge conditions</th>
<th>Suction or discharge valve</th>
<th>Compression chamber (HE or CE)</th>
<th>Piston ring or rider ring</th>
<th>Volume in between the piston rings</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

Figure 7: Piston with two rider bands and four pressure balanced piston rings in cylinder

Figure 8: Corresponding piston leakage model
CASE STUDY 1

Case description
This described piston performance modelling procedure was applied on a compressor that came down every six months due to rider band failures on the 1st stage.

- Speed: 507 rpm
- Rated power: 500hp
- 1st stage cylinder bore: 17.5in
- 2nd stage cylinder bore: 9.5in
- Stroke: 9in
- Rod dia: 2.25in
- Isentropic exponent: 1.167
- Molar mass: 45 kg/kmol
- psuc 1 = 10psig
- pdis 1 = 75psig

Two different ring arrangements are compared:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Piston ring design</th>
<th># of piston rings</th>
<th>Rider ring</th>
<th># of rider rings</th>
<th>Location of rider ring</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Existing</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Outboard</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Proposed</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Outboard</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Changes</td>
<td>No changes</td>
<td>No changes</td>
<td>Face and side relief grooves</td>
<td>No changes</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Results
Figure 9 shows the pressure trends for the original ring layout. Each of the cylinder rings (rider ring – piston ring – piston ring – rider ring) causes a pressure drop. The rider rings do not have relief grooves and the leakage area of the rider bands is comparable to the leakage area of the piston rings. The result is that the pressure drop on the rider bands is very similar to the pressure drop on the piston rings. Rider bands are typically designed for a contact pressure of 5psi (non-lube). Any pressure difference across the rider band will increase the contact pressure and will accelerate the wear. The radial wear length of the riders is limited with ~0.120in. Rider bands that are exposed to a pressure difference are likely to fail prematurely.

Figure 10 shows the pressure trends with the rider band with relief grooves. Due to the wide relief grooves on the rider bands the piston ring leakage does not cause any significant pressure drop across the rider bands. Looking at Figure 10, there are only two distinct pressure drops, piston ring 1 and piston ring 2. The pressure difference (and thus the wear rate) on the piston rings increases which is acceptable as the available wear thickness is an order of magnitude larger compared to rider rings.

Figure 11 and Figure 12 show the average pressure difference on each of the rings with the original set up and the recommended ring
design. The recommendation was implemented and the run time increased by a factor of three.

Figure 9: Simulated pressure trends in compression chambers and in between piston rings (Original piston layout)

Figure 10: Simulated pressure trends in compression chambers and in between piston rings (Recommended piston layout)
CASE STUDY 2

Case description
High discharge temperatures on both stages on a two throw non-lube Hydrogen compressor. The compression ratios on both stages were moderate (2.25 on stage 1 and 1.65 on stage 2) but the discharge temperatures became critically high within one year of operation. Measured discharge temperatures were 50°F higher than the isentropic discharge temperatures. The valve losses were low so most of the irreversibility that caused the temperature increase could be attributed to piston blow-by.

- Speed: 412 rpm
- Rated power: 2500hp
- 1<sup>st</sup> stage cylinder bore: 5.75in
- 2<sup>nd</sup> stage cylinder bore: 4.25in
- Stroke: 9in
- Rod dia: 2in
- Gas: Hydrogen
- Isentropic exponent: 1.4
- Molar mass: 2 kg/kmol
- psuc 1 = 405psig
- pdis 1 = 929psig
- pdis 2 = 1534psig

Table 1 – Relevant operating conditions – discharge temperatures are 54°F higher (stage 1) and 35°F higher (stage 2) than the isentropic discharge temperature for reversible, adiabatic processes.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>$\Pi_1$</th>
<th>$T_{\text{dis1 Theor.}}$ [°F]</th>
<th>$T_{\text{dis1 measured}}$ [°F]</th>
<th>$\Delta T_1$</th>
<th>$\Pi_2$</th>
<th>$T_{\text{dis2 Theor.}}$ [°F]</th>
<th>$T_{\text{dis2 measured}}$ [°F]</th>
<th>$\Delta T_2$</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2.3</td>
<td>226</td>
<td>280</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>1.69</td>
<td>190</td>
<td>225</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Pressure data was analyzed and severe piston blow-by was confirmed on both stages, see Figure 13 and Figure 14. Comparison of the measured pressure trends (solid curves) and the ideal pressure trends (dotted curves) reveals a typical piston leakage pattern (cylinder pressure rises faster (compared to the theoretical curve) at the beginning of the compression stroke and slower at the end of the compression phase).
The piston performance modelling technique described above was applied for the existing pistons (see Figure 15 and Figure 16). The results with regards to temperature trends can be seen in Figure 18 and Figure 17. The expected temperature increase on stage one after 4000hrs of operation is about 60°F on stage 1 and about 35°F on stage 2. A comparison with Table 1 – Relevant operating conditions shows that the simulation result corresponds well with the measured discharge temperatures (The 1st stage discharge temperature increase due to blow-by is almost twice as high as the 2nd stage discharge temperature increase).
The model was then used to evaluate different piston designs. Figure 20 and Figure 19 show the results of the performance simulation for both stages. The solid blue line gives the discharge temperature for different piston ring end-gap flow areas. The remaining the straight lines represent different piston designs. These graphs allow determining the piston design based on a required run time and maximum allowed discharge temperature. On the 1st stage a piston design with 6 piston rings, a liner to piston gap of 0.065in and pressure balanced piston rings was selected to give a maximum discharge temperature of 250°F after one year of operation. On the 2nd stage a eight ring piston design with 0.06in liner to piston gap was chosen (maximum expected discharge temperature after one year: 210°F).

Based on the piston performance analysis, the pistons were designed (Assembly drawings see Figure 21 and Figure 22). Figure 24 and Figure 23 show the manufactured pistons with installed rider bands for 1st and 2nd stage. The pistons were installed and the first compressor with upgrades was started on 8/21/2015. As expected the discharge temperatures were significantly lower and the piston and cylinder rings are no longer the bottle neck on this compressor.
CASE STUDY 3

Case description

The capacity on a single stage non-lube Hydrogen compressor decreased over time. The recycle valve (the primary capacity control system on this unit) had to be closed over time. At zero percent recycle valve opening the compressor had to be shut down in order to replace the wear components. A snapshot analysis revealed high piston blow-by and a piston performance analysis was conducted.

- Speed: 412 rpm
- Rated power: 170hp
- Cylinder bore: 6.5in
- Stroke: 9in
- Rod dia: 2in
- Gas: Hydrogen
- Isentropic exponent: 1.4
- Molar mass: 2 kg/kmol
- psuc = 395psig
- pdis = 810psig

Figure 25 shows the original piston design with four standard angle cut piston rings and two (two inch wide) rider bands. Figure 25 shows the performance result of the current piston. After 8000 hours of continuous operation the expected effective leakage area on the piston rings is 0.125cm² (0.02in²) which corresponds to capacity losses of almost 15%.

In order to reduce the capacity losses the performance of different piston designs was modelled and compared. Figure 28 shows the result for six piston ring (increase by two), pressure balanced rings and different liner to piston gaps. A liner to piston gap of 0.055 in was chosen resulting in an expected capacity loss after one year (continuous operation) of 3% (as compared to 15% before). Figure 27 shows an assembly drawing of the new piston including the six piston rings wider rider bands. The piston was installed in 2016 with the expected result of reduced capacity losses. The sister machine has since been upgraded.
CONCLUSIONS

Piston performance modelling has identified several deficiencies in piston design and cylinder ring selection. Utilizing the modelling capabilities optimizes piston design resulting in:

- Substantially decreased discharge temperatures.
- Increased unit capacity.
- Greater MTBF on wear components.

The complexity of piston performance modelling is moderate and can be included in everyday engineering work with a focus on problem cases and technical challenges.

The past years have shown that not all applications are equally prone to increased piston ring leakage. Cases with a high risk of high blow-by and subsequent risks of premature failure include:

- Non lube machines
- Cylinder sizes < 10in
- Suction pressures above 300psig
- Compression ratios > 2

NOMENCLATURE

- $h$ = Enthalpy \hspace{1cm} (J/kgK)
- $\dot{m}$ = Mass Flow \hspace{1cm} (kg/s)
- $\varnothing$ = Effective flow area \hspace{1cm} (m$^2$)
- $p$ = Pressure \hspace{1cm} (N/m$^2$)
- $\rho$ = Density \hspace{1cm} (kg/m$^3$)
- $\kappa$ = Isentropic exponent
- $V$ = Volume \hspace{1cm} (m$^3$)
- $dV$ = Incremental change in volume \hspace{1cm} (m$^3$/s)
- $d_\ell m$ = Incremental mass flow into or out of the considered volume (kg/s)
- $i$ = chamber upstream of the considered chamber
- $j$ = considered chamber
- $k$ = chamber downstream of the considered chamber
- $w$ = wear \hspace{1cm} (m)
$g$ = leakage gap (m)
$d$ = diameter (m)
$k$ = wear coefficient (m²/Nm)
$p_{\text{contact}}$ = contact pressure (N/m²)
$v_{\text{ref}}$ = sliding velocity of ring against liner (m/s)
$t$ = time (s)
$C_d$ = discharge coefficient
CE = Crank End
HE = Head End

FIGURES

Figure 1: Piston with rings and riders in a cylinder of a reciprocating compressor ......................................................... 2
Figure 2: Compressor audits with substantial piston performance concerns ................................................................. 2
Figure 3: Different styles of piston rings and rider bands .................................................................................................. 3
Figure 4: End gap on straight cut piston ring ..................................................................................................................... 4
Figure 5: Piston ring in piston ring groove ......................................................................................................................... 4
Figure 6: Leakage gap on a straight cut piston ring ............................................................................................................. 4
Figure 7: Piston with two rider bands and four pressure balanced piston rings in cylinder .................................................. 4
Figure 8: Corresponding piston leakage model .................................................................................................................. 4
Figure 9: Simulated pressure trends in compression chambers and in between piston rings (Original piston layout) ...................................................................................................................................................... 4
Figure 10: Simulated pressure trends in compression chambers and in between piston rings (Recommended piston layout) ...................................................................................................................................................... 4
Figure 11: Average pressure difference across piston and rider rings ............................................................................. 4
Figure 12: Average pressure difference across piston and rider rings ............................................................................. 4
Figure 13: Measured pV diagram on stage 1 (Head end chamber in blue, crank end chamber in red) .................................... 4
Figure 14: Measured pV diagram on stage 2 (Head end chamber in blue, crank end chamber in red) .................................... 4
Figure 15: Existing piston design, stage 1 ............................................................................................................................ 4
Figure 16: Existing piston design, stage 2 ............................................................................................................................ 4
Figure 17: Simulation result - Discharge temperature as a function of time on stage 2 ......................................................... 4
Figure 18: Simulation result - Discharge temperature as a function of time on stage 1 ......................................................... 4
Figure 19: Temperature increase over time for different piston designs (stage 2) ............................................................... 4
Figure 20: Temperature increase over time for different piston designs (stage 1) ............................................................... 4
Figure 21: Drawing of new 1st stage piston ......................................................................................................................... 4
Figure 22: Drawing of new 2nd stage piston ......................................................................................................................... 4
Figure 23: 2nd stage piston ..................................................................................................................................................... 4
Figure 24: 1st stage piston ..................................................................................................................................................... 4
Figure 25: Original piston design ........................................................................................................................................ 4
Figure 26: Performance graph original piston design ........................................................................................................ 4
Figure 27: New Piston design .............................................................................................................................................. 4
Figure 28: Performance graph for new piston design ........................................................................................................ 4
REFERENCES


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