

World champ
Ross Seyfried
tells...

HOW TO HIT
WITH A

HUNTING H A



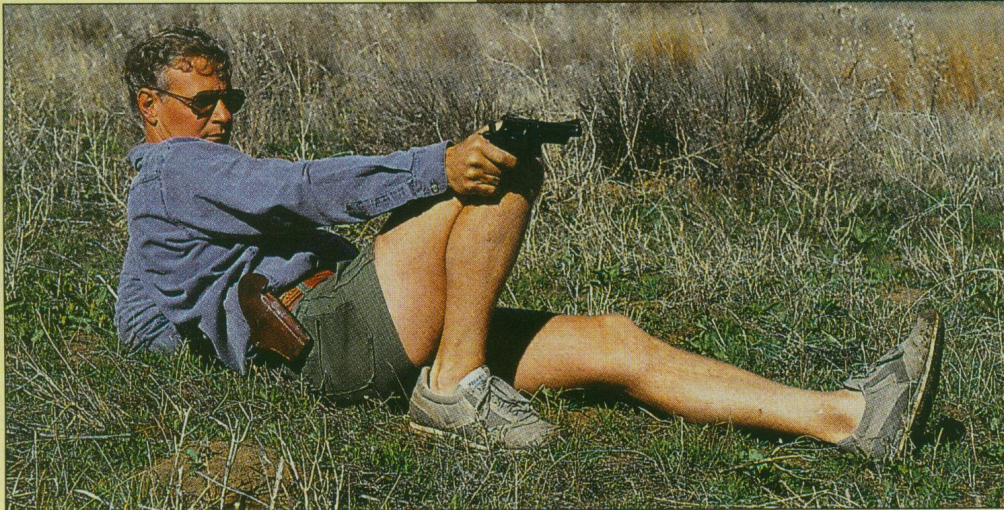
HANDGUN



When a log or rock offers a rest, use it to support the hands or arms—not the gun!

A firm grip, a steady hold and making good use of your sights are all important factors in making that hunting shot count. However, there are “secrets” to each of these that can help the handgun hunter.

Kneeling is the author’s most often used position in the field. The shooter’s knee makes a solid rest, improving chances for a connecting shot.



Seyfried likes the Keith reclining position. It is quite steady and offers more ground clearance than prone.

Handgunning is quite probably the most difficult of the three shooting disciplines and in the open, dynamic expanses of hunting fields handgun hits become a supreme challenge. A precise hit on a game animal with the first shot—on demand—requires above-average skill and dedication. A proper handgun with relatively short barrel and iron sights is one of the most unforgiving and rewarding tools of the hunter. While precise hits using a handgun carry a high degree of difficulty, they need not be impossible. With the application of some special techniques and thought processes you can make those “impossible” shots a reality.

All handgun hits start and finish with the basics—the correct use of the sights and trigger. Field/hunting hits are no different. In the October 1990 issue of *G&A* I tried to cover the basic requirements of handgun hits. (If you don't have it and want a copy, you can get this issue and most other back issues from: Highwood Book Shop, Dept. GA, P.O. Box 1246K, Traverse City, MI 49685.) Here I will add to the basics with some more tricks of the handgunning trade. Just remember you have more need for those boring basics when a big buck is under your sights than you do on the formal target range. The shooter who thinks he can make hits on game and who

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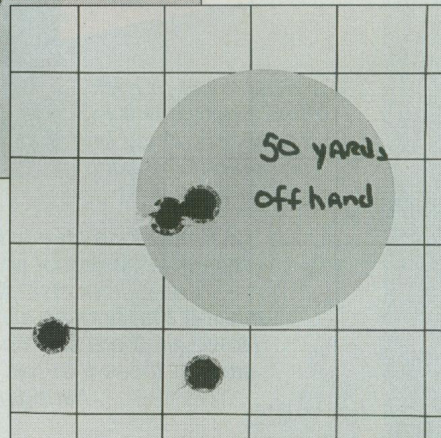
admits that he can't hit targets is fooling himself. When my shooting skills are in a reasonable degree of trim I expect to hit a 10-inch target with almost every shot at 100 yards. Change the scene, put a deer's shoulders at 100 yards, and the shot always looks incredibly difficult to me. The mechanics of the shot are the same, but the complicating circumstances often make me let the hammer down in silence and walk away or at least try my best to get rid of another 30 yards.

The complications in game shooting simply make the basics more difficult or increase the chances for human error to creep into the results. The basic, clean and precise sight picture is relatively easy on a paper target with a clearly defined aiming point. Game animals almost always demonstrate a definite lack of "bullseyes." Critters are also very likely to be hidden by camouflaged coloration and physical obstacles such as brush. At the same time the actual target is quite small and a hit on that spot is critical. Our goal is not to hit the animal but to strike a precise spot that will send the bullet through the vitals. Also, under field conditions we are apt to be working against the edges of good lighting as opportunities for a shot are possibly highest in dense cover, at dawn or at dusk.

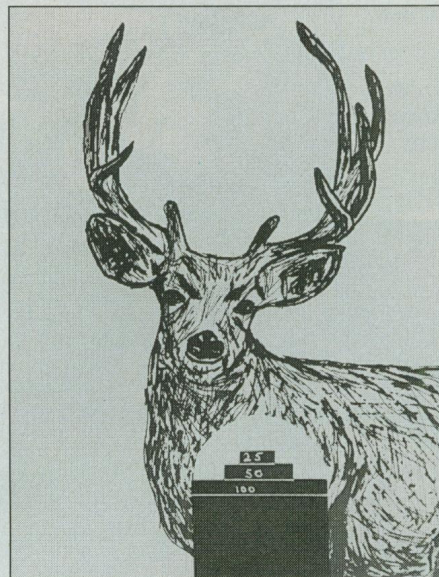
What I am leading up to is that all of these factors make us want to focus our eyes on the target. It is an absolutely natural reaction to want to see the deer and ignore the sights when we start to pull the trigger. If you lock onto the animal with your eyes a miss is the most likely result. The key is, as always, the sights. When the hammer falls the sights must be crisp and perfectly aligned. Fortunately our eyes are very accom-



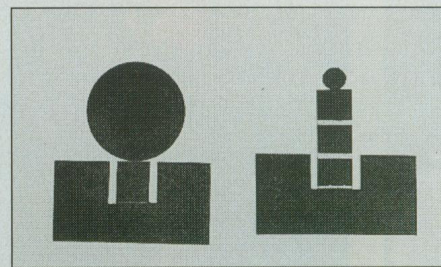
In the field, take advantage of any rest that's available. Often a vertical surface, such as a tree or large rock, can be used to steady the torso and make the shot more accurate.



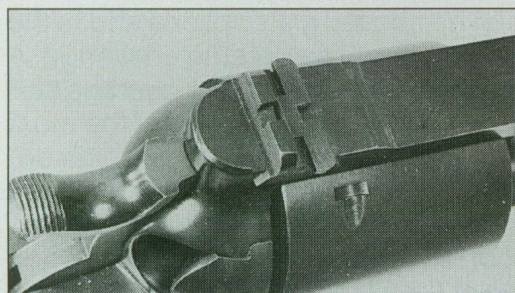
This target, shot offhand at 50 yards with a heavy hunting revolver measures 2½ inches, center to center. It is representative of Seyfried's accuracy capabilities. With this kind of shooting deer-sized targets can be taken to 100 yards or more.



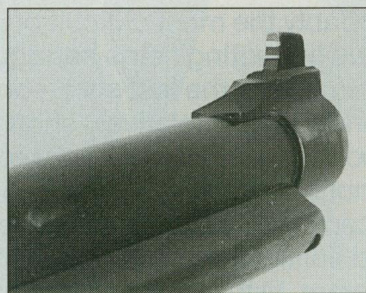
This illustration shows the apparent width of a normal front sight at 25, 50 and 100 yards on a deer. This can be used as a range finder.



At left is the normal sight picture used at 50 yards. The sight picture on the right is what you would see using Elmer Keith's long-range sighting at 300 yards. Remember, the horizontal lines breaking up the front sight post represent the inlaid brass or gold bars.



The folding-leaf rear sight on the author's .475 revolver gives a 50 and a 200-yard zero with 430-grain bullets. The tall leaf zeros 385-grainers at 50 yards.



For long-range shooting, the author had two bars of gold wire inlaid into the rear portion of his front sight. Each line is used as a reference point.

modating and are able to rapidly change focus from one object to another. When you are ready to make a shot your eyes will search for the target. Once you have defined the spot that the bullet must hit, align the fuzzy sights with that spot. Then let your focus bounce back and forth between target and front sight. Then when the sear is going to release the hammer, rivet your eye on the front sight, letting the target blur or even disappear. If you are trying to do all of this and there isn't sufficient light to let you see those sights, let the hammer down

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quietly. Enjoy the critter for enjoyment's sake and stalk away quietly. He might be there tomorrow morning. If you can't see the sights you can't hit, and besides, with a handgun we are hunting, not killing.

Yes, you in the back row with your hand up. Ah, you want to know why we don't just put a scope on our gun and be done with it, doing away with all of this sight nonsense? There are reasons for hunting with a handgun but pure efficiency is not one of them. Putting a scope on a handgun certainly makes the hits at least 100 percent easier, but it also detracts from my sense of sport.

If bringing game to bag is my absolute goal, I will take a good scoped rifle every time. The success, or rather lack of it, in handgunning is mitigated by the challenge. I am personally more pleased with an occasional trophy taken with a 5-inch barrel and iron sights than a wagonload of game caught with the most modern conveniences. If your eyes cannot see iron sights, a scope is the rea-

The late Elmer Keith, often called the "Dean of American Shooters," was one of the finest field/game handgun shots of modern times. His backrest position, where the shooter leans against a solid object and clamps the gun firmly between the knees, is a very effective method for field shooting—but be sure the cylinder gap on a revolver is in front of your knees to avoid the blast of hot gases.



Among the late Elmer Keith's many contributions to field/game shooting was the reclining position where the body is supported by the ground and the gunner's knee provides a firm rest. As with the backrest position, be sure the revolver's cylinder gap is ahead of your leg to avoid painful blasts of gases when firing.

sonable and justifiable answer. Of course, there is absolutely nothing wrong with scoped handguns, they just won't answer for the purist. If you still have a real handgun, but it has optical sights, the rest of the techniques apply to you.

Game and field shooting complicates our trigger control too. Chances are that when you reach the point of pulling the trigger on game, both your breathing and heartbeat will be elevated from exertion and/or excitement. This alone will cause the sights to be less than cooperative. Combine this with pure desire to hit and you have all of the prime ingredients for a good flinch.

Believe me, when the gun is wobbling and the big buck might break and run any second, your first reaction is going to be to grab the trigger when you see the sights in the right place. You must fight that urge. Force the sights into alignment and onto the target and load the trigger. The trigger will feel reluctant and unusually heavy. You mentally coax your finger to put a load on the trigger. I literally have to tell myself, "Pull the trigger." But I temper that with, "Pull it straight back, press, press, press and, dammit, don't grab!" Somewhere in the process we should hear a loud bang and the "clup" of heavy lead finding home. Again, at the risk of sounding redundant,

If a right-handed shooter uses his left thumb to cock the handgun the firing grip is not disturbed as it is if the right thumb does the cocking.



When shooting from brushy cover care must be taken that a stick does not get between the hammer and frame.

you must fight that flinch. It *will* be there and if you ignore it, it will bite you.

There is one more of the built-in handgunning traps that is enhanced in the field. This is the follow-through or, more accurately, the failure to follow through as the shot breaks. Remember, we are struggling to force ourselves to look at the sights. Our natural tenden-



cies don't want to do that. Instead we want to see the deer, turkey, bear or whatever. Even more, we want to "see" a hit. Give yourself a chance and you will quit shooting and start looking right after, during, or worst of all, just before the hammer fall. Stay with those sights right through the recoil. Try to see a good sight picture after the recoil. There is plenty of time to look at the game after you have taken care of business. When you are hunting with a handgun it is unlikely that your game will fall to the shot. That last mental impression of the sights as the recoil begins will provide one of the vital clues of not only if, but where your bullet hits.

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With this preliminary walk through the woods and all of its pitfalls, I will digress back to the beginning and a paper target. No good rifleman would venture afield without thoroughly sighting in his arm, and the same rule applies to handgunners. For all normal shooting my handguns are sighted so that the bullet strikes the top of the front sight at 50 yards. With this kind of zero the bullet rise at mid-range is imperceptible and the bullet will usually be about 6 inches low at 100 yards. While trying to utilize such things as maximum point-blank range and increased ballistic coefficients may be unwise with a rifle, it is ludicrous with a handgun. The phrases "flat handgun trajectory" and "aerodynamic bricks" have great similarity. With the exception of some long-range sighting and shooting techniques as practiced by Elmer Keith, handgun hits will take place at under 150 yards. Most of them will be under 100 yards and the good handgun hunter will be taking his game from 25 to 40 yards.

The process of zeroing your handgun is a good teacher. First, handguns do not respond to the benchrest as rifles

do. With a bit of coaching even a totally inept rifleman can get reasonable hits over a benchrest. Rests simply do not offer a handgunner that much help. Without some reasonably developed skill a handgunner will miss the paper, not to mention his 3-inch aiming point at 50 yards. If you are going to use a rest for zeroing a handgun I suggest a large

"With the application of some special techniques and thought processes you can make those 'impossible' shots a reality."

padded surface, such as several layers of carpet that extend over the normal sandbag rest. I use the carpet to support my hands and arms, not the gun. This technique allows you to hold the gun more or less still while you work on a perfect sight picture and trigger release. I actually prefer to zero my guns from kneeling, prone or even offhand. In fact I check the zero from all three positions to see how they affect the point of impact.

Now the "teacher" part enters the

picture. If you are having trouble holding a 6-inch group at 50 yards under controlled conditions with your rest, don't expect to be able to hit the vitals of a buck at 100 yards. Part of the responsibility of handgunning is knowing your own limitations. My rule of thumb is that my maximum range in the field is the distance at which I can consistently shoot groups on a target that are one half the size of the game's vital zone. That is, if my game has a 10-inch vital circle, I quit shooting at it at the distance where my very carefully controlled target groups become much larger than 5 inches. The point here is that it is a rare individual who will shoot even remotely as accurately at game in the field as he will at a target.

When we actually come down to making the hit in the field with a handgun many of the "rifle" rules apply. The most important is to "cheat" at every opportunity. We don't want to get caught taking a shot at a game animal with one hand on the gun. The bare minimum shooting position is the two-handed, offhand stance. My favorite field position is kneeling. Here a firm, two-hand grip is supported by resting the left elbow on the left knee. Pull back and down with your left hand and you begin to have a spring-loaded triangle

that uses your left leg bones to rest on the ground. This plan is very similar to a structural form used by bridge builders. Rollover prone is great but, like rifle prone, is seldom useful because of obstacles between the gun and target.

Pure handguns don't like rests. Unlike their long or short rifle counterparts there really aren't places on a handgun to rest on trees, rocks or your hat. There are times when you can sup-

Also, with the big supermagnums there is enough recoil to really hammer your shoulders against the solid support.

Another Keith shooting position has been widely adopted by the silhouette shooters. This is reclining, with the gun resting on the right knee/leg and only the right hand holding the gun. The pure Keith position is solid and I have used it some. There are lots of variations, but they all tend to suffer almost as much

lights out of someone, so I crept in behind this fellow with a .45 Colt, silently drew the hammer and squeezed off a shot that should have centered the vertebrae just behind his horns. Instead of the roar of a heavy dose of H-110 and a 330-grain bullet there was a dull thump, the kind of noise that might wake up a sleeping buffalo. At the time it gave me quite a fright. The answer to the roaring-click was a thin branch that had been trapped between the hammer and frame when the hammer fell. I cocked again, quickly this time, and applied the sleeping pill without harm, but the thought has made me edgy ever since. The moral of this story is that if you are in the brush or trees when you fire, be sure there aren't branches between the hammer and primer.

In addition to the application of pure shooting skills, a lot of field shooting at game is a study in judgment. Range estimation, coupled with an honest understanding of your own abilities, must always be weighed for each shot. Each handgun comes with a very sophisticated device that helps measure range and your group size at the same time. No, there aren't secret lasers in your grips; the magic "device" is your front sight. It's always there waiting to help; all you have to do is learn to use it. The actual numbers vary with the width of the sight and the distance from your eyes, but your handgun front sight will cover a reasonably consistent width at any given range. My normal sights cover about 3 inches at 25 yards, 7 inches at 50 and 14 inches at 100 yards. That 14-inch dimension is getting very close to the size of a small deer's shoulders.

To make your front sight work as a range finder, study its apparent width relative to the game you are hunting. The method isn't foolproof, because you need to know the size of your target. For instance, a 3-foot black bear will appear to be farther away than a 7-footer, but sizing bears and crocodiles has always troubled me. Now we have a range computer, and if we feed it accurate numbers we begin to have a shoot/no-shoot machine. Assume that from offhand you usually shoot groups, or better yet can hit a target, the size of your front sight first time on demand. That is to say if you have a 7-inch target at 50 yards you can hit it—not maybe. Viewed from a different perspective, as long as your target at 50 yards is larger than your front sight, you will hit it.

If we accept that a deer has a 10-inch vital zone and is standing broadside, we should be very comfortable with a 50-yard shot. Our sight/range finder tells us that he is that far away, because it covers half of his shoulder. When we take a

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The rollover prone is an extremely stable and accurate firing position but is usually foiled by obstacles, such as grass, rocks and other objects, between the gun and target.

port your forearms or hands on a solid object, but care must be exercised, especially with a hand rest, so that the recoil doesn't smash your hand between the butt and a rock or tree. If you must shoot from standing and you have a handy tree or rock, lean on it with your shoulder. This steadies the movement of your upper body and makes a hit more certain. The Keith backrest position is very effective. Here you sit on the ground and lean back against a solid object, with your knees drawn up in front of your chest. A normal two-hand grip on the gun is clamped between your knees. Be sure the cylinder gap on a revolver is in front of your knees; the blast of hot gas is very unpleasant if it hits your legs. The major drawback to this position is that your gun will almost always shoot lower than it does from other positions where it can recoil freely.

from low ground clearance as prone. Unfortunately there isn't enough space here for a detailed discussion of all of the shooting positions. I have detailed most of them in past features and columns; hopefully you have your back issues.

One technique that I haven't yet mentioned is how to cock the revolver to best effect. Generally all game shooting is done with the arm fired from single-action mode. That is, you manually cock the hammer before you shoot. If you draw the hammer with your left thumb (for a right-handed shooter) there is much less disturbance to the firing grip than if the gun is cocked with the right thumb.

While I'm on the subject of hammers, there is something that can go wrong with an exposed hammer gun in the field that isn't a problem with other types of arms. This had never occurred to me until one day when I crawled into a thick thorn bush to apply a finishing shot to a buffalo that was basically down and out from .375 blight. Unfortunately, a "dead" buffalo will occasionally jump up and beat the day-

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bead on a buck and find that his shoulders start to look small behind the sight, it is time to stalk closer, not shoot. Under other circumstances, let's hunt a Cape buffalo. Bigger target, so we can shoot him from a longer and safer distance, right? Wrong! Our target on a ton of buffalo isn't the 3-foot shoulders, it is the 4-inch heart buried under those shoulders. Depending on your accuracy capability, keeping in mind you may not shoot as accurately on a buffalo as on some less interesting target, you have to get closer. We might need to quit shooting at 40 yards and 15 to 20 yards is just perfect.

In its simplest form the computer says don't shoot at anything smaller than your front sight. Of course, if you have practiced, are a deadly consistent shot and can hold groups one half or even one quarter the size of your front sight, you get extra credit in the form of more range. The epitome of that extra credit

"When the hammer falls the sights must be crisp and perfectly aligned."

had to be Elmer Keith. I will suggest that his like as a field/game shot with a handgun hasn't happened before or since. With his skill he developed another interesting technique for utilizing a front sight to its maximum. This was long-range shooting, and I mean *long*, hail Mary, 200, 300 or even 600-yard shots. I studied enough under his guidance to gain a reasonable understanding of the process and to say, yes, he did it. At the same time I became proficient enough at the art to make enough hits to feel qualified to describe his long-range shooting.

The basic principle is to elevate the front sight in the rear notch. That is, you do not hold over a distant object that disappears under your sights. Instead perch the target right on top of the front sight, just like you do at 50 yards, but the front is no longer level with the top of the rear. As the range increases so does the amount of front sight above the rear. With a 50-yard zero the merest perceptible amount of front sight will give you a 100-yard hit. At 200 yards, with a 4-inch barrel, I need about 1/8 inch of sight above the top of the rear sight. The 400-yard correction takes all of the blade on a 4-inch S&W Model 29. At 600 yards, you need all of the blade, ramp and a squeak of the barrel sticking up above the rear sight. Here you can see that when the supreme old master of this art was get-

ting multiple hits at these ranges he was doing everything right.

The Keith long-range front sights have the black face of the front sight broken by three gold bars. These are not designed for any specific range, but are used as reference points. The idea is basically artillery, with spotter rounds. With an estimated 400-yard shot as an example, the second bar is leveled with the top of the rear sight and the target is perched—centered—on top of the front sight. The first shot falls 50 feet short and 20 feet right due to wind. Round two is fired with the rear sight halfway between the second and third gold bar, and this time the target perches on the right corner of the front sight. About now Elmer killed something, but the rest of us mortals can have fun with it, shooting at rocks and sagebrush. The basic plan is to have a precise point of reference for each shot and adjust in small increments from there. With a solid black front sight it is very difficult to determine exactly where you held for the previous shot.

To my knowledge there are no commercial long-range front sights, but they aren't too difficult to make. If you have red plastic inserts they should be blacked anyway. Cover them with black magic marker and then scrape away two lines across the red face. If you want the real thing, have a machinist cut or mill narrow grooves into your solid steel sight. Then pound in brass or, better yet, gold wire, making gold lines in the sight face.

Unquestionably, one of my most memorable hits came from this technique. My first shot was low and sent a coyote screaming for cover, the second was admirably close and round three, with the third bar level and the incredibly unlucky coyote's nose on the right corner of the front sight, went thump. As Elmer put it, these are crazy luck hits, but folks who do it right and practice have more luck than most.

This long-range shooting should not be used on game for most skill levels. There is simply too much chance for error. However, against inanimate targets this technique becomes one of the most entertaining of all shooting challenges. It also teaches you about degrees of sight and trigger control you haven't thought of yet.

Handguns are great sporting tools, difficult to master but extremely rewarding when you do. In my opinion hunting and field shooting with a real handgun stands as one of the most enjoyable things I have ever done. Buffalo with .475s or rabbits and tin cans with a .22 are all variations of the same thing—great shooting fun. If you haven't tried it, give it a whirl; the potential of the humble handgun will surprise you. 