

HANDGUNNING BASICS

**A World Champion Pistolero
Shares His Tricks of the Trade.**

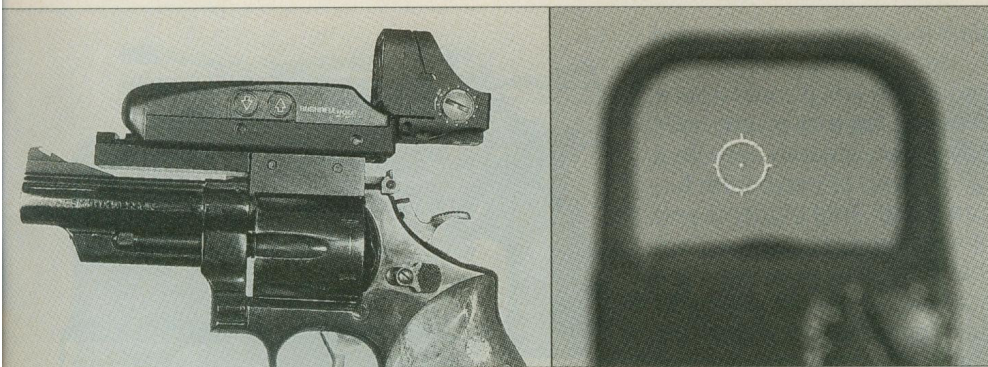
By Ross Seyfried



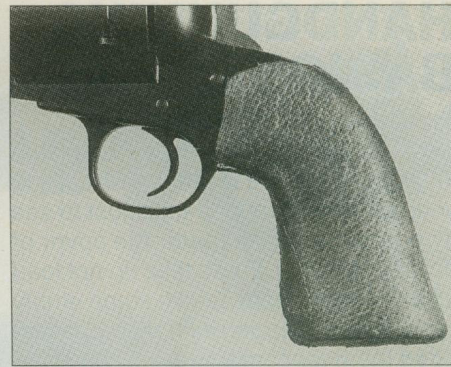
Hitting with a handgun is a very serious challenge and perhaps the most difficult of all of the shooting disciplines. While shooting a handgun well is not easy, it is far from impossible. By understanding the basics—the secret tricks of the trade—almost anyone can hit his target with a handgun.

As we progress keep in mind that, in my opinion, real handguns and handgunners use only iron sights. However, there are those for their own reasons, especially ones of poor vision, who want to use something other than a metallic sight. The sights that eliminate the complexity of a front and rear sight simplify handgunning greatly. After we get past the basic iron sight, we will look at scopes, dots and what I see as the most extraordinary sighting device yet available.

When we consider basic iron handgun sights, the “square-notch” front and rear are the very best. A generous amount of daylight on both sides of the front sight is important for correct,



Author Seyfried feels the Bushnell HOLOSight is one of the best electronic optical devices around. It gives a true 3-D sight picture.



The author's pigskin grip offers the best shooting of any grip he has found.

consistent alignment over a broad variety of lighting situations. Understanding and using the square-notch sight is easy. In use, the rear sight is filled with the front sight, creating the view of three vertical bars, equally spaced and perfectly aligned across their tops. The target (exactly where you want the bullet to strike) is placed immediately behind the top of the front sight. While you are making the shot, the front sight must be the center of focus—that is, you must see the front sight perfectly, focused so clearly that you can define the serrations on the blade. Focusing on the front sight as such, the target becomes unclear... and that is just fine.

With an understanding of how the sights must look to make a hit, we turn to a more intangible part of handgunning: the trigger and trigger control.

Part of successful trigger control comes from gripping the handgun correctly. Again, some basics apply to virtually every kind of handgun. Begin by knowing that two hands are much better than one and that all shooting positions utilize the same basic hold on the gun with your master hand. This correct master-hand grip requires that the barrel be in a straight line with your forearm and that your lower three fingers be wrapped tightly around the grip in a natural position. I like to lock my thumb over the first joint of my second finger. This method completely encircles the grip and locks the hand into a solid ring. After my right hand is in position on the grip, I apply my left hand as an overlay—an added helper. My three lower fingers fall into the grooves between my right hand's fingers and knuckles, with my left index finger lying on (or actually gripping) the front of the triggerguard. The left thumb, in turn, locks over my right thumb, pulling forward and down. The final result is a hold with maximum strength and stability.

Finally, I like my trigger finger to contact the trigger right in the wrinkle of the first joint. That is, the right edge of the trigger

nestles in that wrinkle, with the pad making the remaining contact with the trigger face. My trigger finger forms an arch, bowing away from the frame and sides of the trigger, with the only contact between my trigger finger and the gun being the face and edge of the trigger. If my finger touches the frame or grip (or sides of the trigger on a Colt auto), I lose sensitivity and trigger control.

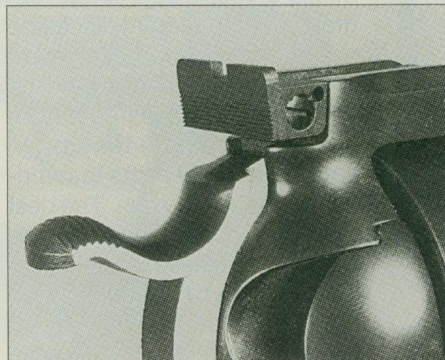
During the actual act of pulling the trigger, you must teach your trigger finger to move absolutely independently. When that finger presses the trigger, it must do so without any movement or change in muscle tension in the rest of your hands. The perception of trigger movement must be straight back, and you should be aware of even the slightest movement between the sear surfaces, even on those breaking-glass triggers found on Smith & Wessons. As you move the trigger, the gun will be moving relative to the target. The great trap you must avoid is grabbing the trigger, that is, punching it to make the gun fire when the sights are perfectly aligned during their momentary flight past your target. If you do so, you will have flinched and disturbed the sight alignment. Unless luck intervenes, you will miss.

You must "trust your wobble." Believe in your sights, let them wander over the surface of the target and constantly use your muscles to drive that front sight toward your intended point of aim. As you push

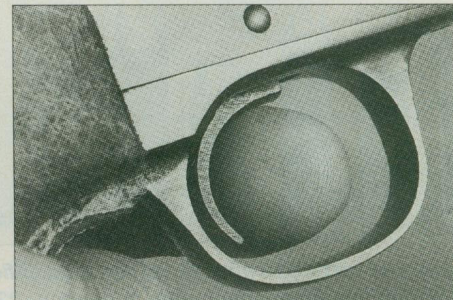
the sight into the target, also increase the load on the trigger. When the hammer falls, it will do so with the sights in perfect alignment. With this method you may miss the mark by a tiny amount, but if you change the angle between front and rear sights, you will miss by "miles."

The word *practice* is a very important one. I do not know any great handgun shots who have not practiced a tremendous amount. Fortunately, a high percentage of that practice-related learning can be done by dry-firing. Practicing perfect technique—keeping the sights perfectly aligned before, during and after the hammer falls—is best with an empty gun. The goal is perfection. First in slow motion, then by compressing the time from 10 seconds to one second and finally to tiny fractions of a second, you learn perfection in a hurry. By using this time-reduction method, you teach your mind and muscles their lessons on an easy level.

Also, remember that as the bullet is in the barrel after the hammer falls, it is still possible to create a miss after the primer has ignited the powder charge. The way to avoid these seemingly impossible misses, after you have done everything correctly, is to follow through. Follow-through means that the last thing you see is a perfect sight picture. If the first and last thing you see is correct sight alignment with eyes focused hard on that front sight, you will avoid the in-barrel miss.



The Bowen rear sight is streamlined, precise and accurate.



Finger contact with the trigger is important. The author uses the first pad of the index finger with the edge of the trigger nestled into the wrinkle of the finger joint.

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When you are firing live ammunition in a revolver, there is a means of giving yourself an instant pop quiz, just to see if you are cheating under the cover of noise and recoil. To do this, do not load all of the chambers. Leave some empty or better yet charged with empty cases. Load them randomly, then roll the cylinder without looking before you start to shoot. I will bet virtually every shooter will find a flinch under that first empty chamber. Shooters using auto pistols have a slightly more difficult time with this test but can perform it by making up several dummy rounds. Mix the duds in with some live ammunition, and load the magazine without checking the primers. In this way you will get some surprise "misfires" to show your errors.

Until now we have more or less ignored any physical means of making handgunning easier, concentrating solely on the shooter and what he or she must do to hit. However, there are sights, triggers, guns and a special grip that make the job much easier.

A good quality trigger pull is essential on any arm for a shooter to do his best work, but on a handgun, trigger quality is paramount. Most factory triggers vary from marginal to totally unacceptable. My favorite trigger pulls are just under three pounds and break like a glass rod. However my trigger finger is extremely sensitive and has several hundred thou-

sand rounds of practice behind it. Most shooters, especially beginners, will benefit from a trigger in the four-pound class that is very smooth but with a bit of creep or movement before let off. This trigger is sort of a miniature "double action" that requires gentle constant pressure to fire the gun. With the trigger moving slightly, the shooter has the sensation that something is happening, a movement he must coax and manage during the shot. This kind of trigger pull will reveal a flinch before the gun fires, where triggers that take a light load and break instantly actually invite you to try to cheat the system by forcing the gun to go off on demand, rather than allowing it to fire under controlled pressure. If your trigger pull is more than five pounds and/or has a gravelly feeling, your shooting can be improved with a trigger job. Be sure to consult a qualified gunsmith for any trigger work.

The gun you are trying to shoot also has some serious effect on the difficulty factor. A gun with more than four inches of barrel and a very mild cartridge will be easier to hit with than a shorter-barreled version or one with substantial recoil and noise. The great learning tool is a six-inch-barreled .22. Beyond, the lightly loaded .32s and .38s make a fine introduction to centerfires. As you begin to approach the magnums, keep in mind that two factors will work against your hits. The increased noise may intimidate you. Of course, you are wearing high-quality hearing protection, including perhaps both soft plugs and ear muffs, but the boom and pressure wave are still there to startle your nervous system. You must use your mind to overcome the noise factor.

Beyond noise is the very real matter of recoil. To a certain degree you use mental discipline to disregard recoil. However, when the recoil goes beyond the .357 level, you will need more and more muscle tension in your hands and arms to maintain control on the gun. The best method to control the heavy recoilers is to use a push-pull tension system between left and right hands and arms. A right-handed shooter pushes out with his right and pulls back with the left. The isometric tension be-

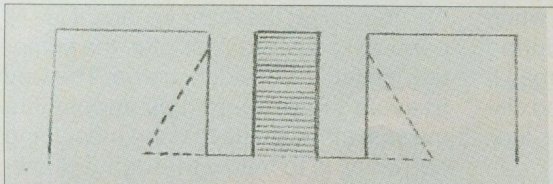
tween the two limbs is both a steadying and a recoil-absorbing device.

Handgun grips and grip surfaces also play an important role in your ability to hit and manage recoil. I am not one who subscribes to "magical" handgun stocks that make you shoot better. I believe that the actual grip is more or less unimportant, kept within the bounds of reason. One of the worst things is a handgun handle that is too large for your hands. If you cannot get wrapped around the gun, with the barrel aligned with your forearm, shooting is going to be difficult. In most cases, extra-large stocks or the big, fat butts on high-capacity autos make hitting tougher than it should be. Tiny grips also give up some control. Also, I find that the surface of the grip or the surface of my hands play an important role in shootability. Regular smooth or even checkered-wood grips can be slick in hot, sweaty weather and equally squirmy when your hands are cold and dry. The soft rubber grips are a step in the right direction. They offer fine traction and absorb some recoil.

If the gun has heavy recoil, a PAST shooting glove is priceless. This fine leather glove, with exposed fingers and thin but effective padding in the palm and web area is a standard part of my shooting gear. In cold weather a pair of Bob Allen Capeskin shooting gloves offers a real advantage. The very thin, supple leather and soft, thin foam insulation offer a "tacky" grip, some warmth and delicate feel that preserves trigger control. I use them for fall and winter hunting with rifles, shotguns and handguns. But my all-time favorite secret grip is the result of a pure accident.



S&W Mountain .44 Mag (top) and custom Colt 1911 Govt. Model. The standard 1911 is difficult to shoot because of poor sights, the Mountain because of recoil.



By undercutting the rear sight notch, the sights become easier to see, while maintaining precision.



Handgun cartridges offer varied shooting difficulty. The first five are relatively easy to master: .22 LR, .32 Mag, .38 Special, .357 and .45 auto. The remainder have enough recoil and noise to be very challenging and are best used by accomplished shots: .44 Mag, .45 Colt and .475 Linebaugh.



A PAST shooting glove offers much comfort with handguns having severe recoil such as this 2½-inch, S&W round-butt .357.

Some years ago when my No. 13 revolver, with its delicately scrimshawed ivory grips, needed to go hunting, I sought a way to protect the art. I decided to make a cover for it from thin, soft pigskin. I sewed the bottom and just behind the hammer to fit the gun but left a flap that opened in front. This overlapping flap was lined with Velcro. The Velcro amounted to a closure that allowed me to pull the leather "skin-tight" over the grips and frame. It did a perfect job of protecting the scrimshaw, but far more important, it gave me a "feel," a degree of control that I had not experienced with any other grip surface.

Using a variety of shooting positions besides standing also improves accuracy. Sitting or kneeling steadies the gun hands on the shooter's knee or knees. A prone position can be very solid, but field conditions rarely allow its use because grass and brush will usually be in the way. Resting your hands on a tree, log or rock is certainly beneficial. Also,

The barrel on all handguns should align with the shooter's forearm, forming the basis of a good grip.



cross sticks used in conjunction with sitting or kneeling become very stable shooting platforms for the handgun. The Stoney Point rest is one of my favorites, being both foam padded and adjustable for height.

Even though you thought I would never get around to the question, yes, scopes and other optical devices are the final answer for those who have difficulty with iron sights or who want absolute precision. I personally do not use optics on handguns and feel that any shooter should learn the art with iron sights first and then graduate to optics after

mastering the game. With an optical sight, the shooter no longer has to deal with sight alignment error. It is only necessary to put the aiming point on the target and correctly manage the trigger. There are a wide variety of optical sights on the market. Low-powered, long- and mid-eye-relief scopes are the most basic. I find anything over 4X extremely annoying, and I like 1X or 1.5X best.

The electronic-dot sights are very useful and have proven themselves to be fast and precise beyond belief in competition. Perhaps the most extraordinary sighting device in existence is the new Bushnell HOLOSight. This is true holographic technology. The same kind of technology, by the same company, found on the F-14 fighters. The sight itself is a tidy unit with a small screen that displays a holographic reticle. Basically if you can see the screen you can see the reticle. The reticle moves about on the screen as your eye moves relative to the gun, but the point of impact



Use the basic master-hand grip to form the interlocked two-hand grip.

relative to the reticle does not change. If you see the dot and the target is behind it, the bullet is headed that way. With this sight, virtually nothing interferes with the field of view. With both eyes open, you see the entire world with a red circle and a central dot floating in it. (Other reticle styles are available.) The reticle appears to be out there with the target, eliminating depth of field and focus problems. This is absolutely the fastest and easiest sight I have ever used. The sight works perfectly on a shotgun! It is so good that it is almost cheating. The release price for the sight is \$549, admittedly a bit steep, but it is the cutting edge of sighting technology. Like all electronic gadgets, I bet it will go down in price with time.

Handgunning will never be easy, but for those who will apply some patient dedication and practice, it has great rewards. A master of the handgun has done something that most people have not.

DIRECTORY

Bob Allen (shooting gloves)
Dept. GA, 214 S.W. Jackson
Des Moines, IA 50315

Bowen Classic Arms
(Replacement sight for Ruger, \$60)
Dept. GA, P.O. Box 67
Louisville, TN 37777

Bushnell Sports Optics
(Holographic sight)
Dept. Ga, 9200 Cody
Overland Park, KS 66214

PAST Sporting Goods
(Anti-recoil shooting glove)
Dept. GA, Box 1035
Columbia, MO 65205

Stoney Point Products
(Handgun/rifle rests)
Dept. GA, 1815 N. Spring Street
New Ulm, MN 56073