

Elements of Quality Holster Design

Does a good holster really make a difference? The answer is that sometimes it doesn't. That may sound odd coming from a custom holster maker, but let's consider the average handgun owner. They keep their firearm on the top shelf in a shoe box in the closet, or in a nightstand drawer. On the way to the range, it might ride in a plastic case in the car trunk and back to the closet again. Should they need a container for their pistol that affords some protection and allows belt carry for short-periods of non-critical use, then factory produced budget models will fit the bill nicely. I'm glad to refer them to my local sporting goods store. The elements of quality holster design and construction are only noticed at the upper levels of performance.

The Situation Report. Since I do a lot of concealed carry holsters, most of my clients are off-duty, plainclothes, undercover officers, and private citizens. But contrary to popular belief, it is the latter group which will benefit most from a quality concealed carry holster. Private citizens with Concealed Carry Weapons (CCW) permits have lost those permits by allowing their weapon to become visible (called "flashing") or show through their clothes (called "printing"). A panic "man with a gun" 911 call then summons uniformed officers to the scene. Their officer survival training will make them assume everybody is a bad guy until they sort out the mess. Off-duty and plainclothes officers often wear their badges on the belt next to the holster. If their piece should inadvertently "flash", the fearful person also sees the badge which settles them down. This tends to create a cavalier attitude among some officers toward concealment. Intentionally or unintentionally broadcasting the fact that you are armed can create a tactical disadvantage. Determined predators who know in advance that a shopkeeper, for instance, is armed tend to come in shooting. And it is the height of foolishness to draw on an already drawn gun.

General Holster Notes. A quality designed and executed holster is part of an overall system that is used in emergency situations. A defensive pistol is an emergency rescue tool, like a fire extinguisher. The problem is having it handy when you need it. This may seem obvious, but the first rule of gun fighting is HAVE A GUN. Having a pistol that is ready without restricting activities of daily living is exactly the mission of the well-designed holster. The holster is a means of always having it when you need it, on your person. For this reason I do not suggest using a bag or purse holster for your primary pistol if it can be avoided. A purse or bag is difficult to draw from, and is often the target of the assailant in the first place.

Holsters should be precisely fitted to the pistol they will carry and should be used only for that pistol, or a pistol with identical dimensions. The selling of holsters marked "Large Auto" or "Medium Revolver" is a common practice but totally ill advised when serious use is intended. Factory produced holsters can and do make compromises in their design, the primary one of which is ease of production. Factory produced holsters are no better than the least skilled worker who builds it. Two types of makers design most holsters: firearms enthusiasts with no leather experience, or secondly, experienced leather craftsmen with no firearms and specifically, no concealed carry experience. The good designers have a combination of both like the late Bruce Nelson, Milt Sparks, Andy Arratoonian, and Thad Rybka, etc. Some of the best designs have been collaborations of these two knowledge bases. In addition, when a holster style or design is successfully created, the manufacturer then attempts to make similar patterns for other types of handguns with subtle differences in weight, balance, and handling characteristics. This compromises the original for the sake of simplicity of production. Some manufacturers contract out the R & D aspects of holster design because they have lost the ability to innovate in house, whereas the custom leather craftsman seeks to address a specific design problem with every project. I have

never made two holsters exactly alike. The rule, "form follows function" applies here. The second restriction on quality is that the best materials are expensive and in most instances hard to obtain in quantity. When the dense, tough leather is found that makes the best holsters, the supply may not remain constant in its quality. A parallel example exists with bench rest shooters who demand premium reloading components so that they can make their own highly accurate ammunition.

Combat Grip. The most important aspect of achieving a consistent firing grip is the burying of the web of the hand between the thumb and forefinger into the upper back strap of the pistol. This is particularly true of recoil operated semi-automatic pistols, some of which have grip safeties that must be depressed by this proper grip. Many holster designs require the changing of ones grip prior to achieving a firing stance. Any holster that, by its inherent design, prevents a full and final grip upon first contact with the pistol while still in the holster is fatally flawed from the outset..

Front Sight, Press. Proper aiming requires focusing on the front sight and allowing the target to blur somewhat. The holster needs to be designed so that the front sight blade does not shave slivers of leather off the inside of the holster. This can be very distracting.

Belt holsters are by far the more popular holsters for people who carry a handgun concealed for serious social encounters. Belt holsters come in two general types: those worn inside the pants, and those worn outside-the-pants. Inside-the-pants rigs are commonly called inside-the-waistband holsters or IWB. Generally IWB holsters conceal pistols better than outside-the-pants holsters since the pistol is only visible above the belt line. There is a downside to this level of concealment, however. Comfort. Even the best IWB holsters won't change the fact that you are carrying a big chunk of steel in your pants. Some people like IWB, some do not. Reinforcing the holster mouth for re-holstering is good for all holsters, but essential for IWB holsters.

Weight and balance are very different between revolvers and semi-automatic pistols. While revolvers center their weight in the cylinder, semi-autos will center their weight in the grip area. Particularly with semi-autos, so-called "high ride" holsters can be very top heavy. Positioning the trigger guard any higher than belt level, places up to 80% of the weight of the pistol from one to three inches above the belt. Example: With a "high ride" Colt Officers ACP pistol on a 1" belt, one could grab the holster and pull out and down until the holstered gun was upside-down on the belt. Smaller torso women find high-ride pistols hitting them in the armpits on the draw, looking like a "chicken wing" motion. With revolvers I position the cylinder at belt level.

Belts should be wide enough to support the weight of the pistol. At least 1 1/2", preferably 1 3/4" for larger pistols. (Caution, wide gun belts scream "COP" if they are not otherwise common in your area). Gun belts should be leather lined and about 1/4" thick or otherwise reinforced torsionally. Fabric and braided leather belts should be avoided. Cutting the belt out on a curve creates a more comfortable belt, especially for women.. The belt should fit tightly into the holster slot when new and will break in to a proper snug fit. Constantly adjusting a poorly fitted holster is the sign of a novice and a dead give away that you're "packing iron." This solid belt/holster connection assures that the pistol will be in the same place with every draw. In time, your firing stroke will be as natural as reaching for your wallet. Consistency leads to smoothness, which with practice leads to speed with accuracy.

Strong side holsters have been the preferred position for belt holsters. Traditionally these holsters were made with the barrel angled as much as 45 degrees back from vertical. This position is commonly called the FBI rake or cant. When first introduced with medium frame revolver holsters with single fold-over belt loops, the design helped to conceal the larger butts of these pistols. In the early 1960's with the advent of practical pistol competition, it became apparent that this angle was detrimental to achieving a good grip on the pistol. The hand as well as wrist should be in as close to firing stance as possible. Imagine a line running through the forearm, wrist, hand and parallel to the barrel of the pistol. In 1967, with the introduction of the #1 Professional for semi-auto pistol, Bruce Nelson was among the first to correct this problem by designing his holster with no rearward cant (vertical). A 10-degree angle is still good for revolvers due to their longer curved backstrap, however. He solved the problem of the butt printing by using a belt loop with a trailing slot to pull the butt in tight to the body, Askins style (i.e. Charles Askins). This allowed the proper firing angle to remain consistent throughout the firing stroke. The further one wears their holster rearward from the right hipbone toward the back, the more angle is required. For this reason, most Small-Of-the Back (S.O.B.) holsters are nearly horizontal. A word of caution on S.O.B. holsters, falling backward against a hard surface wearing a full-size handgun in a S.O.B. holster could lead to injury of the lower back. Use of S.O.B. rigs with smaller frame pistols would be advisable.

Cross draw holsters are good for concealment purposes for two reasons. They provide easier access while sitting and simplify the clearing of the coat since you reach inside the coat rather than "sweeping the coat" out of the way as in a strong side draw. Cross draw holsters are better for women, who are actually faster with them than their male counterparts due to their narrower torsos, greater flexibility, and more limber arms. Some people however give cross draw holsters a bad rap as being easy to snatch away since the butt of the pistol faces forward. With the belt loop and trailing slot design, the gun butt is pulled tight to the body making it less obtrusive. Weapon retention is primarily a training issue and not a holster design issue. Attempts to make snatch proof duty holsters have made them difficult for officers to draw themselves. In addition, the use of a retaining strap can slow the draw and interfere with obtaining a proper grip on the pistol if not designed properly.

Shoulder holsters are also better for women for the reasons cited above, in addition they are good for pregnant women who can't wear belts. The hardest part to conceal in a shoulder holster is not the holster but the harness; most "print" through jackets. One way to discover ("make") a person wearing a shoulder rig is to pat them on the back. One-handed blind re-holstering is almost impossible with shoulder holsters. As an experiment, try to simultaneously cuff someone while re-holstering your pistol in a shoulder rig. Not only is it a two-handed operation, but you will probably have to look to see what you are doing. On a personal note, as a certified firearms instructor, horizontal shoulder holsters (where the muzzle points backward), have always made me cautious. If you are new to concealed carry and must use a shoulder rig, use a vertical shoulder holster. I use an Andy Arratoonian SHR vertical, it's the best. Sorry "Miami Vice" fans.

Ankle holsters are well suited for guns of back-up size such as medium to small semi-autos and shrouded hammer or "hammerless" J-frame revolvers. Why might one who is not not an officer, carry a second gun? The fastest reload is a second pistol. Also, imagine a situation where you are confronted by multiple assailants (read: gang). You can now arm your fully trained and trusted associate who doesn't have a CCW permit, thus greatly improving your odds of survival. For a right-handed (strong side) person the ankle holster should be positioned above the inside ankle of the left (weak side) leg. Ankle holsters work well when seated or pretending to tie your shoe, but are not particularly fast. One draws his primary pistol, reaches for his back-up gun, and struggles for his hideout piece (don't let things degenerate to hide-out phase please). This is one mode of carry that would benefit from a pull-

through type of retention strap. However, I always hand bone the holster for proper fit first, then size the straps, I never rely on the retention device for proper holster fit. This maxim applies to all holsters but especially ankle rigs. I do not generally use linings for holsters, but ankle rigs need to be padded and lined on the leg side of the holster. Thick wool fleece is often used, but an orthopedic (silicone tannage) suede over non-crushing foam seems best. Wool fleece will absorb moisture and mat down. Also, if you are apt to break into impressions of Gene Kelly doing "Singing' in the Rain", an ankle holster may not be right for you.

Pocket Holsters work well with handguns of back up or the smaller hideout size. The practice of carrying a pistol loose in a pocket presents several problems. A pistol loose in your pocket looks like a pistol loose in your pocket. It will probably not be oriented butt up for a proper draw when you need it. Dirt and pocket debris can foul the action if not protected. In addition, the loose lining of some pockets can block hammer travel on revolvers causing a jam. These issues should be addressed in both weapon selection and holster design. Firing from inside and through the pocket should be possible, should things get "up close and personal". Semi-autos have to eject the empty brass cases somewhere and they tend to jam the piece. Revolvers contain the fired brass cases within the cylinder until manually ejected and are better for in pocket firing of multiple rounds. Yes, you are going to ruin your jacket, better that ruining your whole day!

There are almost as many design elements of a quality holster, as there are people to wear them. Holsters can be a very individual and personal item. I've attempted to highlight what I feel are some of the more important points, and this article is by no means exhaustive. The following resources listed below are well worth the addition to the custom holster users library.

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References and Suggested Reading:

Bruce Nelson, Combat Leather catalog, 1986
Trey Bloodworth and Mike Raley, Hidden in Plain Sight, 1995
Bill Jordan, No Second Place Winner, 1965
Massad F. Ayoob, In the Gravest Extreme, 1980
Massad F. Ayoob, Handgun Primer, 1986
Col. Rex Applegate, Kill or Get Killed, 2nd edition, 1951
Col. Jeff Cooper, To Ride, Shoot Straight, and Speak the Truth, 1988
Jesus Christ, Holy Bible, Luke 22:36, 1611