

Holster Safety

After a couple of accidents last year involving holsters, the President asked me to write up some points on the safe use of holsters for newer action shooters – and perhaps a reminder for experienced shooters.

For the majority of people in the world who use holsters - like hunters, the Police, the Army and some target shooters, the holster is just a way of carrying a hand-gun until you need it. All it has to do is to carry your pistol until you need it, at which time you take it out in a fairly leisurely way and use it. This may happen only infrequently. If the draw is not particularly fast or smooth, it doesn't matter. All the holster has to do is to retain the pistol during your normal activities, even if they are strenuous. If this impedes the speed of the draw it doesn't matter.

For shooters of action pistol matches however, this is turned on its head. We draw the pistol frequently and require a smooth and fast draw. I personally would rank the matches in this order for importance of a good draw - Speed; IPSC; NRA; Service; CAS, but it is important for all.

Provided the holster retains the pistol well enough to allow walking round the range, this is considered adequately safe. So, what are the requirements of a holster to let it do this, and how do we maintain safety during what is, by normal hand-gun owner standards, a huge number of draws?

The first point is that we are considering a system consisting of belt, holster and pistol, not just the holster. These three things have to work properly together for safe, quick and smooth draws to occur consistently (a fact overlooked by the police, by and large). They need two more important items added to meet this objective. These are - training of the shooter in fitting and use of the holster; and large amounts of practice. When you draw a pistol to shoot at an action target you should not have to think about it, it just happens, and the same with re-holstering.

The training is the Holster Training course. The practice is up to you.

Let us now consider the hardware and its correct use a bit more closely.

The first thing is that the belt, holster and pistol have to be fitted to each other and to you and your use. Fortunately we can buy belts and holsters that fit each other and virtually any particular brand of pistol. There is no need to use any old gear, and the use of "any old gear" is guaranteed to be ineffective and possibly unsafe.

The belt

Not just your ordinary trouser belt! Indeed, such a thing is pretty useless on which to carry a gun. While you may conceivably want to use a gunbelt to hold up your trousers, you definitely do not want to use a dress belt on which to mount your holster. The critical feature is that it must be rigid enough that when you pull the pistol out the holster stays right where it is. This requires a good rigid belt and a holster that fits it. Once upon a time gunbelts for action shooting use were two inches wide and made out of two or more layers of good quality leather stitched together, and to work properly had a piece of stiff steel inserted where the holster is mounted. These were great, and looked good – if you had a pair of jeans with two-inch belt loops (many don't). I have one still and I like wearing it – but I don't now use it for very serious shooting. Why not?

Well, it is rigid enough, but fitting it through the belt loops and mounting the holster and the mag pouches every time you use it really is a hassle. In addition it doesn't really hold the holster all that well (and guess what, holsters don't all come with two-inch loops either).

Some time ago the answer was found to these problems and has been used by the majority of action shooters world-wide ever since. It is the Velcro under/over belt system. The under-belt is a one and a half inch woven synthetic belt with Velcro on all of one side and one end of the other side. This slips easily through the trouser belt loops, Velcro out, and is fastened by pulling it tight and sticking the short bit of Velcro on the inside onto the outside. This gives an exact tight fit, and you can vary it according to how many clothes you are wearing, or how fat you are (or, I suppose, how pregnant you are). So now you have a nice firm belt fitted into your belt loops with no hassle, no adjustment and no bits to fit onto it.

The outer belt is leather or whatever with Velcro on the inside all the way round. On this are mounted your holster and your mag pouches – permanently in the correct position. It may or may not have a buckle or clip, and to put it on you just wrap it round you straight on top of the Velcro-out under-belt, and pull it tight (and do up the buckle or clip). The result is that you now have all your gear fixed securely to your person, at a fixed location (waist or hip as determined by sex and belt-loops). This is quick, easy, and secure, gives consistent positioning of all your gear, and meets all world match and safety requirements. Some holsters have a Velcro patch on the inside of the loop to fix it really firmly to the gun belt.

The holster

This is the intermediary between the belt (attached to you) and the pistol (detachable but only on command!). So it has to hold the pistol firmly and safely most of the time and release it quickly and easily when you draw it. (And it should be able to take the pistol back quickly easily and safely using one hand only when you holster it after shooting). There are basically three ways for the pistol to be retained safely in the holster – two of these are not much use for action pistol shooting.

- The pistol may be a less than exact fit in the holster and be held in securely by a strap which fits over the top and clips on the inside (or outside). This is OK but does not allow a quick draw, although there are models with “quick release” studs. Good for police and military use. OK for CAS.
- The pistol may be a tight fit in the holster and have no strap. This requires a good strong pull to remove the pistol, and can twist the belt (which in itself impedes the draw). Good for when the holster fits close to the body and is concealed. Requires a good rigid belt.
- The third method, which is really the only acceptable one for serious action shooters, is the retention clip. This is a device that grips a part of the pistol (nearly always the trigger guard) and only releases it when the pistol is pulled straight up, as in the deliberate draw. Made for the particular pistol it fits closely but not tightly and the retention device when adjusted properly will hold the pistol firmly except when it is being drawn. Then it is released smoothly with minimum friction.

A typical competition holster has such a retention device. This does need to be learned. It also has a good range of adjustment of position so that you can set it for you personal requirements.

NZPA rules require that the trigger is covered when the pistol is in the holster. This is to prevent accidental operation of the trigger while the pistol is being drawn. Of course if you have your finger on the trigger while holstering, the trigger cover may make you

pull the trigger! Many makes of holster sold on the world market do not have covered triggers – beware of these. Correct and safe use of even a good holster still requires skill acquisition and practice.

The pistol

In relation to this exercise, this is the least important part! It must fit the holster. This is done by buying the proper holster for your pistol, in its working configuration – i.e. barrel length, fitted with a shroud and or wings, fitted with a scope, fitted with a compensator, etc. You must have the correct holster to fit the pistol. As you go down the three types of holster listed above this becomes more important – the loose fit with a strap will probably take a range of sizes and shapes. The tight fit has to be pretty near right, but you can still fit a too tight or too loose pistol in it – it just makes the draw difficult and slow.

But the competition holster if not the correct model for your pistol is likely to have retention device failure, and become unsafe. Even a different barrel length may make a difference, and prevent safe operation. So, when you buy a new pistol, sorry, you will probably need a new holster as well. Look on it as an investment in safety; anyway you can always sell the old one with the old pistol.

A sometimes-overlooked but very important factor is that some pistols not made specifically for action shooting may have the trigger the same width or wider than the trigger guard. A revolver used for ISSF shooting may well have a special wide trigger or a trigger shoe fitted to widen the trigger.

Either of these is potentially lethal. The trigger should be no wider than the guard, and preferably narrower. This is to prevent the close fitting holster or the retention device, pulling back the trigger. NZPA does forbid the use of trigger guards for action shooting for this reason.

A too-wide trigger is particularly dangerous with a double action revolver (or semi-auto) because all it needs to fire is for the trigger to be pulled right back. This will happen if the trigger is wider than the trigger guard when you push the revolver right into the holster. Try it with an unloaded gun sometime and see what happens.

So, what are the conclusions?

- Belt, holster and pistol are part of a system to ensure safe, quick, easy, and consistent draws.
- These parts must be matched to each other to work properly.
- Proper competition belt and holster are essential not discretionary, for safety and effectiveness.
- Trigger must be covered and must not be too wide.
- Be familiar with your gear and practice, practice, practice.

Your Section Directors can provide information on specific gear for your discipline, and your local Holster Instructor can show you how to use it properly. I understand that Holster Instructors are starting to check gear at competitions.

There are plenty of experienced people around – ask someone before you buy that wonderful looking piece of gear!

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