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At Last: How to Buy a Handgun, Part I

I have looked back over some old blogs and note that it was way back in 2004 that I started doing this with encouragement (a shove) from the Web Goddess. The concept was to write an article from my perspective on what to look for when buying a handgun. I got sidetracked with what to look for in a rifle and then a shotgun.

More sidetracks as I wandered into match analyses, reloading. etc. and the next thing you know, BOOM! No article on what to look for when buying a handgun.

Finally!

Before you read this article on buying a handgun, go to mdgardner.com/shotguns.htm and mdgardner.com/rifles.htm on my web pages and read the articles on choosing a rifle and shotgun as much of that information is valid when considering a handgun purchase.

Since I started shooting in 1975, the eternally asked question is, "What should I get for a first handgun?" That question is still being asked not only to me but also at gun clubs, stores, all over the web, everywhere. I have read a few of the responses and listened carefully to what new handgunners are being told. Shaking my head in disbelief has become a pastime I would prefer not to have to do.

What are some of these advice-givers thinking?

Mostly I find that this source of information has been shooting for a relatively short period of time and may have reached a level of proficiency or skill where they have enough information to be relatively uninformed. After over 30 years I am STILL learning about guns, shooting, reloading and all the related subjects that go with these topics. It never will end but I will :-)

Allow me to offer my more than two cents worth on the subject.

We need to start by analyzing what a new shooter, Shooter A, has for background. It likely consists of exposure to shooting a pistol with a friend, Shooter B, who likely is relatively new themselves. Shooter B has probably been in Shooter A's shoes and wants to infect Shooter A with the shooting bug. That is a REALLY good thing! But it needs nurturing and Shooter B is still in the start up learning phase, even if he is ahead of Shooter A. Shooter B takes Shooter A out shooting and sets the hook. Nothing is as much fun as shooting and it is a legal addiction. SHOOTER A HAS TO DO THIS!

Now Shooter A starts to look for the CFSC/CRFSC and, if lucky, finds me as their instructor. ;-) Shooter A takes the course, gets the license application out in the mail and finally the coveted license arrives. YAHOO!, let's buy a gun! And off the to the local gun shop where the confusion begins.

Shooter A has shot Shooter B's guns and NEEDS to have one at least as big as Shooter B's. Go big or go home? BALONEY! This is the first trap that awaits Shooter A in the shooting world. It ain't how big... you know the rest. It is how good you are using it. But testosterone makes us stupid (this is why women usually get this part right) and guys will buy something that is

too big and/or costly.

The big gun is great for the ego, easy on target consumption costs but hard on the pocket book. It won't be too long before Shooter A gets discouraged and puts the gun away. Eventually it becomes an anchor and they off it to someone else or trade/sell it to a gun shop. What a tragedy!

Now that we have identified the problem, the next blog will look at my solution.

See you at the matches,
Murray "DOC" Gardner.

blog: January 1, 2008

Budgeting for a Pistol

First, park your ego at the door. The goal is to start shooting, gauge performance and improvement, learn how to economically continue to pursue the sport of handgun shooting and keep moving ahead.

The starting point is with a pencil and paper. If you don't have one, go get one because those devices will save you a ton of \$ and enlighten you. I'll wait while you get the pencil and paper.

Write down a dollar value that you will be comfortable spending to begin your shooting experience. It doesn't matter what the number is. Once you have identified that amount, visit gun shops, web pages, gun shows and more to find out if your number is a real world number. Keep that pencil/pen and paper or notebook handy to write down the things you are certain you will remember but you won't.

Once that data is gathered sit down and look at it. Where is your budget relative to the real world? You may have to make adjustments and that is normal. Like buying a car or house, you have to know the numbers and see what works. In the gun game, you get what you pay for. Pay cheap, get cheap.

If you think buying the gun is the end, give your head a shake. That is less than the tip of the iceberg. There is GOOD eye and hearing protection. ALWAYS buy the best you can afford and never hesitate to upgrade. This safety equipment protects you from the rare problem that you might encounter. If it does its job once, it was a bargain.

What about ammunition for that new pistol? Write down those numbers. Here is a quick thought:

PRICES UPDATED 2022

.22 Long Rifle \$4 or \$5/box of 50

9mm Luger \$19/box of 50 if you buy 20 boxes or more

.40 SW \$22 + /box of 50.

.45 ACP \$28+ /box of 50

At the range, 100 rounds goes REAL quick but the burn to shoot won't be gone. Do the arithmetic; 5 boxes of .22 LR or 1 box of 9mm Luger? No rocket surgery required there to determine the most volume bang for your buck.

The skills I teach my students to shoot a rimfire pistol are IDENTICAL to the skills they use for larger calibres. There has been a .22 LR pistol in my safe since I started in 1975 and there will always be one there. I am writing this in late November. It is time to drag my rimfire gun out to keep shooting during the inclement weather. Save the centrefire ammo for spring and competition season. Saves money for the centrefire and all the skills keep honed.

By now, hopefully, you have realized that the first gun you should buy will be chambered for .22 LR. If you have not made that connection, stop here, go back to the beginning of

this article and start again. If you have got it, then read on.

To understand some of the reasoning behind my statements about what to buy, you need to know the Secrets of Handgun Shooting. I just made that up as they aren't that much of a secret.

1. Grip
2. Sights
3. Trigger

These are the three elements that will allow you to move towards shooting the handgun to its potential. Handguns outshoot their owners. Always have and always will. Put your pistol in a machine rest to remove the human element and they will tear a ragged hole in the target. Once you attach your hands to the pistol, it will shoot exactly where ever you point it. To prove this, sandbag test your pistol and then stand up, use both hands and duplicate that group. Point made.

What type of handgun for the first one? Visit me again to find out...

blog: January 21, 2008

Choosing a Pistol Action

There are two types of actions to consider that will be advantageous later: either a revolver or a single action semiautomatic. There are very well made break and bolt action handguns but hold that desire in check until later.

We will start by considering a revolver. Price will likely be attractive as revolvers are not as fashionable these days therefore you should be able to find a good used one at a decent price. Choosing a double action made by Smith & Wesson in .22 LR will give you a chance to try both single and double action functions so you better understand those concepts.

- Get the K frame version as there are a good variety of accessory grips for that model and grip is on our chart of important features. Blue or stainless doesn't make any difference.
- The sights on these guns are adjustable and quite acceptable for target shooting.
- Smith & Wesson tend to have very good triggers in single action (SA). If you don't know what single and double action (DA) trigger functions are, back to your CRFSC student handbook -- or pay my Starbucks consultants fee! :-)

Consider this double action revolver as a keeper to share with friends who have not shot. It is very easy to see rounds in the chambers and easy to load and unload. I have had a Smith DA for about 30 years and would be hard pressed to sell it.

Our next consideration will be a single action semiautomatic pistol. There are a wide variety of choices in this area but I have found that models by Ruger, Browning, high end SW and some other quality makes are worth the investment. Steer clear of other than these and your choice will work for you.

- Just about any of the makes referenced above will have a decent grip angle. Stay away from small and oversize grips. The angle and style of the Colt/Springfield 1911 Government model is very workable and I recommend it to you.
- The sights that come on these guns should be adjustable. There are models with fixed sights but unless your budget dictates you have to get fixed, get adjustable sights. I am a big fan of fibre optic inserts due to deteriorating vision but I am certain they may be of value to others as well.
- Single action triggers on most of the rimfire semiautos will be reasonable but not great.

A trip to a good gunsmith will result in a good trigger job. It should be two pounds, maybe 2.5 but no more. No, there is no such thing as too light a trigger. It has to do with the physiology of shooting.

Once you have purchased the model best suited to you, go find the right .22 LR ammo for it. Test one box of 50 on one target for each brand. This testing is done from the sandbags until you find the brand and model with which your gun performs best. Make certain it is the RIGHT type for your pistol. There are differences between .22 Long and .22 Long Rifle. Don't know the difference? Go the Cartridges of the World and find out! :-)

Once you have found the cartridge that works best in your gun, buy at least a brick (500) but preferably a case (5000) of the same lot. This will insure that you have a decent quantity of good ammo. The cost for a case will be around \$200/\$250. That is a cheap investment to have the correct ammo.

As you shoot, track your performance with this gun and ammo. To do that, make up a chart that shows from zero to 100% on a left size axis. Draw a horizontal axis for time (days or weeks or months, it doesn't matter). Track your score by percentage over time. If your scores are on a continuing upward incline, you are doing it right. If your scores do not show increase, or if they are ragged or flat line, then you need to get something fixed or changed. That is when you call me for a lesson. ;-)

In addition to the SW .22 I use, I have a Ruger Mark II, you can see it on my web page. It has a trigger job and muzzle brake and shoots extremely well. It is a great training piece and will give years and years of service. I couldn't ask for more from this gun. When I sell this gun I will buy a similar model with about the same features. There are lots to choose from so that part will be simple. Changing grips, sights and trigger are easy and relatively inexpensive.

If you have read to here and still don't see the value in buying a rimfire pistol first, or you have already done this, then let's consider centrefire pistols. You are likely going to want buy one eventually so this is still of value.

Next time: Centrefire pistols

See you at the matches,
Murray "DOC" Gardner.

blog: February 17, 2008

Choosing A Centrefire Pistol

Note: If you are going to shoot centrefire pistols, RELOAD YOUR OWN AMMO! I'll say it again, RELOAD YOUR OWN AMMO! Unless you are in a tax bracket beyond my conception, reloading is the most economical way to afford shooting. I have written other articles about this so I won't go over that territory again. Cost to buy your reloading gear should be amortized over about 3 years. You won't believe how much you can save (to buy more guns!).

For your centrefire choice you could consider a revolver. As with rimfire, used revolvers are usually very affordable and have all the mechanical benefits. The downside to revolvers is grip. If you shoot one seriously you will have a custom made set of grips. I discourage the rubber grips as they don't reduce recoil no matter what you have heard or been told. You can only reduce recoil by putting less powder in your reloads. You can soften the felt recoil but that is hardly worth mentioning. Rubber grips also tend to be susceptible to hot and cold and/or wet weather. There are some bargains so don't write off a revolver. They are also a good introductory gun for your friends who are beginners.

And now to semiauto pistols. I will expose my biases here without apology. I have shot about 25,000 rounds a year for over 30 years and have built my preferences from that experience. My goal here is to share that with you so you don't take 30 years to find out

what I know now. This conserves your energy and resources for important matters... more guns, ammo and reloading gear.

Listen carefully... GET A SINGLE ACTION SEMIAUTO PISTOL FIRST! Three reasons; grip, sights and trigger. If I have less than five 1911 pattern pistols in my safe I feel naked :-). These guns in almost any calibre are a winner. I have shot them in .45 Auto, 9mm Luger, .40SW, .22LR, .38 Super, 9x21 and maybe others I don't remember. The bottom line is, this design has everything to do the job. Seriously consider this type of design in the many configurations in which it can be found.

You will find a wide selection of semiauto pistols in the market place and many of them are quite good. But none as good as the 1911. In March of 2007 I bought a Glock 22 in .40SW. I train law enforcement folks who use this gun so I thought I should have one to assist me in understanding the issues related to moving them to success. There were some accessories I put on it that make it meet Production Division in IPSC which expanded its potential. These changes included fibre optic sights, extended mag button, lighter trigger down to 5.5 pounds and some skate board tape on the grips. Using custom loaded ammo, it performs to an acceptable standard. I have not used it in competition and have no plans for that unless maybe at a club match. I also purchased a S&W M&P in .40SW. No changes to it yet but I bought it because it was the right price and it is a gun for my classes to use to learn about grip, sights and trigger.

I always liked the Browning Hi Power because of the grip angle and sights and trigger can be improved. It was the only 9mm Luger I felt worth shooting until I came across a 1911 in 9mm Luger and it is now my choice. That is why I am selling my Browning Hi Power. As a rule of thumb, if I cannot remember the last shot I fired with a gun, I sell it...to buy one I will shoot. :-)

We will assume that you have done due diligence, bought a rimfire pistol, learned to shoot it and have moved on to something in centrefire and got into reloading. You are getting there! The next step might be to look at a specific sport to use your pistol or even buy one for a specific sport (by specific sport I REALLY mean IPSC but I don't want to seem pushy :-)). When that time comes, search out the sport, talk to the winners and experienced competitors. Find out what they use. Buy that type of gun. I had a client this year who spent far too much money on the wrong guns and finally, three guns later, ended up with the first one I advised.

I have watched a phenomenon for years and it never ceases to amaze me. Think about this. If the winners in a sport, who do all the research and development, are using type X, what will you discover from type Z that is better? I will assure you that those seasoned shooters have already tried and discarded type Z. Buy type X and save yourself tons of grief and frustration. What are they using for ammo, reloading, holsters, sights, etc. etc.? Sit at their knee and learn. Certainly as you become more experienced you can make decisions premised on your now extensive experience. Until then, go with the tried and true.

See you at the matches,
Murray "DOC" Gardner.