

MEDITATIONS ON HANDGUN SIGHT SYSTEMS

By Ashley C. Emerson



This photo depicts how a properly aligned large dot/express arrangement appears on a dark target in poor light.

Few of you know me so a little background on why my thoughts and opinions on handgun sights might be of interest. On the top of the list is the variation and depth of my experience. From my college days I learned about formal target shooting on the R.O.T.C. pistol team. Numerous shooting schools, police academies and experiences as a Texas peace officer have taught me about both offensive and defensive use of the handgun.

My most useful and thought provoking experiences, however, come from well over a quarter century of using a handgun in the hunting field drawing blood well over a thousand times, (and plinking at everything else, including rocks). This hunting has taken place under nearly every conceivable condition and has included critters from mice to mountain lion with handguns ranging from a .22 match pistol to a .500 Magnum revolver. Add to this the ability to customize and completely fabricate my own sights for the last 25 years and the experience of designing the current MMC adjustable sights and the Ashley Express Sight Systems.

In the end, what follows is still just my opinion. It is, however, an opinion based on common sense, widely varied in-depth experience and more up-to-date actual handgun sight research and development than any other one person may have to offer.

This article will not deal with optical sights as they are fairly regulated to game/sport shooting and as used by some for hunting. I do not have a problem with glass on single-shot specialty handguns because they probably deserve them. I am pretty sure that if you put a scope on a revolver or auto pistol, however, you are going to hell as sure as if you put a scope on a lever gun. As for battery operated primary sighting systems, they are fine—as long as they're not on my gun.

On handguns you will find that preferences vary from black target sights to no sights at all. Listen closely to the "adviser" and most of the time you will find little actual experience with the many variations of sights or the conditions in which the sights were used. When thinking about what sights are needed, many issues need to be brought up that will lead to the best compromise.

For instance, what will the gun be used for? It could be for hunting, target practice or a pure defensive gun. Are you going to hunt jackrabbits or elk? Are you going to shoot bullseye on I.D.P.A.? Are you going to defend yourself from gang bangers or bears? An issue that is even more important is the user's current skill level and where he or she intends to level out. Even the personality of the shooter will play a role in coming up with the best compromise for them. Most sights can be used to some benefit in most circumstances. Given a high skill level, a shooter may "get by" with a less than ideal sight arrangement better than the less skilled shooter.

I have only scratched the surface of the situational variances that are involved in picking a best compromise handgun sight system. However, because any reader of this magazine probably has at least some interest in the ability to stop a deadly threat, from this point I will focus on the pros

and cons, and perceived pros and cons of different sight systems commonly seen on fighting handguns.

The most common sights seen on fighting handguns today are notch and post. This target style sight picture may be all black or enhanced with color and/or tritium. There are many variations of the conventional notch and post, but all of them are aligned for a dead-on hold when the tops of both front and rear sights are level and the front sight centered in the rear notch. Most of the time a sight of this type gives good service if the design hasn't been seriously flawed. Design flaws can be any of (but not limited to) the following: front sight too narrow for the individual user; rear notch too shallow or narrow; three dot system where the dots do not line up when the sight is aligned; anything that makes the rear sight over power the front sight.

In plain black, the correctly proportioned notch and post is the most precise iron sight for the handgun if we are talking about good light and sharp targets. If we are talking about little or no light and a dark target then the best bullseye target sights are among the least precise. Widening the front sight and widening the notch enough to allow a good amount of light on each side of the front blade makes the target sight more versatile. Here is a tip if you have conventional notch and post sights—leave the front sight alone and widen the notch by about 50% and deepen it 20% to make front sight acquisition much faster. The half ghost-ring sights are an extreme example of the above and work well for black sights.

Black sights work great with light background and good light, however, they are near worthless in poor light and against certain backgrounds. To help with this, many combinations of tritium and paint have been tried to help with sight acquisition. At this point we need to get something straight. Unless you are wrestling with someone or something trying to kill you, you must do your best to center the front sight on the threat.

I am not saying you have to get the front sight on the threat, only that at some ranges it is preferable to no sight at all. Obviously, if you are wrestling with the assailant you don't need to aim, but as the range extends past arm length it will depend on the situation, your skill level and how easy your front sight is to pick up.

To help shooters find their sights in low light or high stress, all kinds of colors and tritium arrangements have been tried, and most work better than black sights. What color? White! Two huge reasons, first white reflects more light than any other color. If you were looking at a wall that had one-inch dots representing all the colors that we see on sights, and the room was totally dark, you would see the white dot first if the light was very slowly turned on.

The second reason is that even in broad daylight all of your peripheral vision is from the rods in your eyes and they only see black and white. I can assure you that as you bring your gun to bear on a deadly threat you will be fixated on the threat, and the gun will be coming in to this view from your peripheral vision. Any color other than white will just be a darker shade of gray.

What about tritium? Tritium is a good idea as long as you

don't get carried away. One tritium dot on the front is the answer (unless you are selling tritium, then a bunch is better!). Fast front sight acquisitions is what we are after and in a situation where your vision may well be a slightly out of focus blur having two dots or any other configuration of tritium on the rear isn't going to help find the front.

While I am on this point let me make clear that tritium or not, any rear sight that over-powers or out reflects the front is hurting front sight acquisition speed. A perfect example of the rear sight over powering and out reflecting the front sight is the system used on Glocks. The Glock sights are high visibility stupidity; they were obviously designed by someone who did not understand that fast front sight acquisition is of great importance to the defensive shooter. The Glock is one of the best fighting handguns in the world with one of the poorest rear sights.

What about express sights? They get their name from dangerous game rifles used in Africa. Whether you are stopping a charging lion or a deranged psychopath this, in my opinion, is the best way to go. There are several variations that have been designed for handgun use.

The best version uses a large white dot (3/16 inch) on a round top post with a thin rim of black showing around the circumference for contrast and a tritium dot in the center of the front sight. The large white, round top front sight looks like a white blob—and it looks like a white blob in your peripheral vision too. This makes for a faster, already identified transition to your line of sight. (The black post does not appear to be a square post in your peripheral vision because the rods in your eyes do not see detail.)

The rear sight is a shallow "V" with a narrow white line



Here, a conventional blade front and square notch rear sight is seen on the same target. For clarity this photo was taken with a lot of light on the handgun. Under most circumstances, the sights may not have this much contrast.

Painted vertically at the bottom of the "V." The correct sight picture for deliberate aiming is to place the front dot in the bottom of the "V" and use the top of the dot as the aiming point just as you use the top of the front sight when using notch and post sight systems. When going for a quick hit at normal defensive ranges, just pull the trigger when the large front dot centers the threat.

There are some who unjustifiably say that these sights cover too much target. A notch and post covers everything from the point of impact down. Using the top of the dot for

deliberate sighting, the express sight couldn't block that much target if it were the size of a dime.

Another common claim is that express sights are not accurate enough. This is crap spread by those who either do not have much experience with properly configured and sighted-in express sights or who can't shoot accurately anyway. I will give them that under good light and good target conditions that the best groups will be fired with proper black target sights. However, as conditions turn to life threatening and in poor light conditions with no control over the color or configuration of the target, the advantage for precision goes to the proper express arrangement. I can promise you that if you try the above described proper express arrangement you will achieve a new level of confidence in your ability to get sure hits fast at normal defense ranges. You will need to train at real fighting ranges and train to let the shot go at the instant the full front dot is on or near the center of threat.

How many times have we heard "Sights don't matter in a fight cuz' you ain't gonna see 'em anyway?" I have lost count. There are many reasons for this statement. One is that even a modified target shooting sight picture is inadequate under the many adverse conditions of an attack. Here's a thought to ponder. Why do you suppose the average custom .45 auto carry gun has some sort of a notch and post target type sights and the average big bore African stopping gun has some sort of express type sights. I think it's because the .45 guys either don't know any better, or they have optimized their guns to play on the range. Big bore stopping guns do not spend much time playing at the range and tend to be set up for serious business.

There are lots of other things that beg for answers. For instance, if the front sight acquisition is all you need to get a quick hit at normal defensive range, why mess with a rear sight at all? The answer is because even the minimal rear sight of the express system provides extra confidence and accuracy at close range if there is time. It also allows considerable accuracy at extended range.

Having sighted in hundreds of handguns with both conventional notch and post and large dot tritium express sights, I have a good idea of what a pretty fair shot can expect from either arrangement. I generally, because of 25-yard range limitations, sight in defensive handguns to ideally be two inches high at 25 yards, shot off-hand at a human silhouette target. (I confirm this elevation on my guns when possible at 75 yards, where they should be close to dead on.)

Shooting at the undefined shape of a silhouette, given a quality handgun, I can count on averaging about 2-1/2-inch groups from good notch and post

sights and about 3 inches with large dot express sights. In other words, the difference under range conditions on a humanoid target are minimal. In real life, I have more confidence in getting a usable sight picture in a fight with the proper express arrangement than with any notch and post arrangement.

The question often arises as to whether to use fixed or adjustable sights. Assuming you will go to the trouble to get your gun sighted in—and it can be a pain with fixed sights—correctly designed fixed sights have some advantages. The most obvious is that they tend to be more robust. This is especially handy if your sights have not been wrongfully designed so they do not work well as a cocking mechanism. In a contact distance fight the best use of your sights may be to one-hand cycle your gun on the fender of a car or the side of your assailants head. The well-designed fixed sight tends to work as a cocker, and generally stay put better than adjustable sights.

Most adjustable sights, though, are much tougher than they are given credit for. With the exception of Millett sights, you are unlikely to actually break an adjustable or fixed sight. While I was a Texas cop back in the early '80s I broke three Millett blades on my S&W Model 29 and Ruger Redhawk revolvers. I had to give up on them even though they had the best sight picture available in a factory sight at the time and yes, they were broken on duty, in my holster. I have never before or since actually broken a handgun sight. Some have been bent and some came loose, but never have they broken.

In summary, I have about an even mix of adjustable versus fixed sights on my defensive handguns, however, most of my dedicated "street" guns have fixed large dot tritium express sights. ●

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