

Considering Holster Options

By Phil Elmore

Previously I wrote an article that premiered in *Concealed Carry Magazine* called “The Box of Holsters,” in which I set forth some simple rules for determining which holsters to keep and which to discard. All armed citizens eventually amass a large pile of carry holsters, as we all know, so you’ve got to have some way to sort the good from the not-so-good. The rules I suggested were these:

If you don’t own it, ditch its holster.

The first rule is the easiest with which to comply. If you can’t figure out which gun the holster fits, you don’t need the holster anymore. Maybe you sold the gun, or maybe you use the holster so infrequently that you don’t remember which one it fits. Either way, you can do without it.

“One-size-fits-all” rarely does. There are plenty of holsters on the market that fit many guns, or that are *meant* to fit many guns. I have an Uncle Mike’s IWB holster that “fits most small automatics” that happens to fit my Dad’s Colt Mustang .380 perfectly. It would not necessarily fit another weapon as well. If you’re hanging on to a bunch of holsters in the hopes that they’ll fulfill multiple carry modes for multiple guns, don’t, because somewhere in there, something won’t fit quite right. Take the time to properly fit individual holsters, and in so doing, ditch the multi-carry pouches.



Photo by Phil Elmore

Unless you’re Don Johnson, shrug off the shoulder rig. Some people have to use a shoulder rig for specific reasons. I have a friend who has back trouble. He cannot carry at his waistline and must use a shoulder rig. Unless you’re him or you’re working *Miami Vice*, give up on these elaborate rigs. There’s just no way to conceal a shoulder holster unless you’re practically wearing a medieval cloak over a trench coat. In normal wear, you’ll spend all your time tugging at your shirt or jacket, hoping you’re not flashing the sheeple with your shoulder straps or the gun itself.

Since writing that paragraph, however, I’ve discovered that the only way for me to carry a very large handgun comfortably – be it a 1911 or a Beretta 92F – is to go for shoulder carry. I should, therefore, have appended my original article to say that the exception is large weaponry. I’ve tried and tried, but I just can’t seem to comfortably tote a large-framed gun on my waistline (or in my waistband) without feeling uncomfortable all day.

If the holster magnifies the size of the gun, lose it. Some holsters are so gigantic that it’s hard to believe someone thought they were good ideas.

If the holster material adds so much size to the gun that it makes the weapon harder to conceal, you might want to consider something else, and therefore you can do without that monstrous holster. I once owned a molded leather, pancake holster for the Beretta 92F—already a very large gun—that felt like an entire leather jacket wadded up and strapped to my belt. It just didn't work for me.

If it depends on a nylon strap, dump it. There are a lot of holsters on the market that only retain the handguns in them because they include a big, adjustable, nylon strap with a large, metal snap on the end. That's fine as long as the snap stays on, but what if it gets released accidentally or (Heaven forbid) you'd actually like to make a reasonably fast draw from concealment? You don't want to carry a holster that dumps its contents on the pavement the second a single snap pops free. A *vertical*, nylon rig with such a strap might be okay, but a *horizontal* one is definitely looking for trouble. Such adjustable straps are just not dependable when compared to more purpose-built, retaining thumb-breaks and snap closures.



Photo by Phil Elmore

If it points the muzzle up your armpit, throw it away. As a young, ignorant, and only recently licensed concealed carry permit holder, I once owned a leather shoulder rig (for an old Smith and Wesson .38 Special) that was just like one I saw in the movies. It was a minimalist affair in which the revolver rode upside-down, under my left arm, *with the barrel pointed directly into my armpit.* This was monstrously dangerous, but I did not know it at the time. I was reading a gun magazine and saw an account of a police officer whose fellow officers had to surround him and slowly take away his revolver. "Don't move," they told him, as he stood there dumbfounded because the hammer of the gun, riding in his inverted holster, had been accidentally cocked. He was walking around with a live round under a cocked hammer and the barrel of the gun pointed *into his body.* Merely drawing a pistol whose barrel is pointing at your body is similarly dangerous. After considering the risks of such a holster, I never wore an inverted rig again.

Toss the novelty holsters. If I ever catch you leaving the house with a North American Arms mini-revolver attached to your belt buckle, I will personally find you and slap you. Seriously, there are a lot of "novelty holsters" lurking out there that are better left in the bottom of a box of holsters than *ever* used for daily carry. If you have any of these in your accumulation, do yourself a favor and sell them on eBay. You and I both know you're not seriously going to carry a pocket pistol in a hollowed-out book, or stash a 1911 .45 in a hinged and suspiciously thick picture frame on the wall of your den.

If you just don't use it, why keep it?

This is the same rule that applies to cleaning out your attic and your garage. You might own the perfect holster, or several of them, but if you just never wear them, why keep them around? The holsters in your collection should be those on which you rely, those that you use regularly. There's no reason to maintain a box of mint condition wrappers for your safe queens. Any holster you have not used at least once in the last year is one you can likely do without.

When selecting the holsters you do keep on hand, make sure they all meet certain criteria:

- Each holster must fit the gun for which it is intended.
- It must be comfortable to wear. It must make the weapon easier to carry *and* easier to conceal.
- It must securely retain the weapon, even if it is an open-top design. (If you can't slip and fall on a patch of ice without losing your handgun, the holster is inadequate.)
- Finally, it must be something you can and do use regularly with your carry piece of choice, drawing from it consistently.

A holster that cannot fulfill these requirements is a holster that does not belong in your box, drawer, or suitcase.

Now, with all that said, let's actually consider the most popular holster options from which you might choose, as well as the specific pros and cons of each method.

First, there's the material of the holster. Your options are generally leather, Nylon, and Kydex.



Photo by Phil Elmore

Leather is traditional, looks classy, and is generally of reasonable quality depending on the manufacturer. It also wears over time (which can be good, in that a well-worn holster can fit its handgun like a glove and be very comfortable to the wearer), collects moisture, and may promote corrosion. A well-executed brand-name leather holster can be a bit pricey, but is usually worth the money.



Cheap Nylon shoulder holster (vertical).

Photo by Phil Elmore

Nylon (or "ballistic Nylon," as you'll see Nylon holsters marketed) is usually inexpensive, which is its primary selling point. Nylon holsters don't promote

corrosion the way leather holsters can (though if you get them wet, it's best to dry them out immediately). They are also light in weight, which is usually a plus. On the downside, Nylon holsters quite frequently are poorly tailored one-size-fits-many jobs that don't fit the gun well. Some have plastic clips for IWB use that are really quite poor. The metal clips on other Nylon holsters have a tendency to pop out of their mountings, which can be very aggravating. Finally, Nylon tends to fray with wear (which at least is easily fixed with a butane lighter – you can melt the errant threads back into place).

Kydex and Concealex are synthetic materials molded to the gun. When cool, they become rigid, resulting in a hard-shell holster that protects the gun quite well but offers no flexibility of fit and no adaptation to the user's body over time. Guns in Kydex generally fit by friction, meaning a precise mating of the weapon to the holster is required. The primary downside of Kydex-type materials is that they'll generally scuff up the gun as it goes into and out of the holster, so Kydex holsters should only be used with daily carry and duty guns (not "safe queens"). I've heard stories of such molded holsters becoming deformed if left on the dashboards of cars in the hot sun, but I've never encountered this myself.



There are a few more (and less) exotic materials out there, such as just-plain-plastic (the plastic belt holster available for Glocks comes to mind), but we've covered the major options. Next, we'll talk about the basic carry choices available to you regardless of holster material.

Belt. The most basic of holsters is simply a holster attached to your belt on the outside. This could be a holster on the strong side (on the same hip as your dominant hand) or it could be cross draw on your support side, shifted forward of your support-side hip. It might also be mounted at the small of your back (dangerous if you fall on the hard object directly over your spine) or shifted to one side or the other behind you.

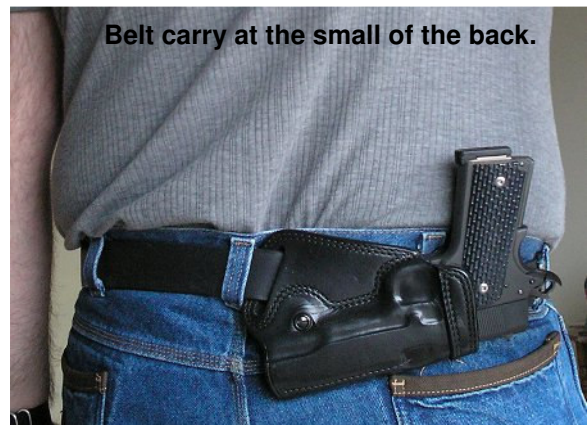


Photo by Phil Elmore

The advantages of this arrangement are that it's relatively comfortable, depending on placement, and there are many quality belt holsters available. The downside is that a belt holster is not usually easily removed and is only as good as your belt. (A quality gun belt, like the Liger or Wilderness Instructor belts, is your best bet when using a belt holster.) Some belt holsters, especially when used with inexpensive, weak belts, will flop around (especially when you change positions such as for sitting) and just won't work well. A belt holster is also not the easiest holster system to conceal, if you must conceal your firearm.

Paddle holsters are an attempt to combine the advantages of a belt holster with the ease of removal of a clip-on holster. A paddle holster consists of a panel of rigid material that fits against the body, stabilizing the holster overtop your belt line, pushing some of the weight of the gun up off the belt. A good paddle holster is a belt holster that you can remove easily, but which will stay rigid and in position while worn. The paddle holster, like the belt holster, is harder to conceal because it rides outside your clothes at your hip, but it's generally comfortable and can put the pistol higher on your beltline (which some prefer). Strong-side carry outside the belt with either a belt or paddle holster also facilitates a fast, positive draw.



Kydex paddle holster.

Photos by Phil Elmore

The letters **IWB** stand for “Inside the Waistband.” There are many types of IWB holsters, ranging from cheap Nylon holsters with plastic or metal clips (which often do not fit well – the clips can come loose easily and the holsters may not be custom tailored to the gun) to more expensive Nylon or leather models (with metal clips or leather straps). Some models are available that allow the wearer to tuck a shirt in over the holster, completely covering the grip.



The basic advantage of an IWB holster is that it covers most of the gun inside the pants, leaving only the grip for the user to conceal. A good IWB holster can also be very secure, because the pressure of the belt holding the weapon against the body aids in retention. Cheap IWB holsters, however, often ride too deeply (fouling a proper grip on the draw) or can come loose too easily (especially if their clips disengage or pop out). Many users also find that IWB carry can be extremely uncomfortable, because the gun digs into the side of the body (especially when sitting). Placement on the body (ranging from in front in the “appendix” position, to fore or aft of either hip) can mitigate this discomfort and varies from person to person.



Photo by Phil Elmore

If you remember the Mel Gibson movie *Lethal Weapon*, you’ve seen the “**Mexican**” carry in action. Any gun simply tucked into the waistband without a holster is said to be carried “Mexican” style. This is extremely popular among the criminal element, to hear experienced law enforcement officers tell the tale.



Photo by Phil Elmore

Mexican carry is also favored by some gun owners who really ought to know better. Mexican carry is extremely insecure (the gun can come loose very easily). It is also potentially dangerous, for without a holster to cover the trigger guard, it may be possible to fire the gun accidentally if the trigger catches on clothing.



Photo by Phil Elmore

A **shoulder holster** makes it possible to carry even a very large gun very comfortably. Shoulder holsters can be vertical, pointing the barrel of the gun up into the armpit or down at the floor (avoid the into-the-armpit holsters unless you want to risk shooting yourself, as I said previously). They can also be horizontal, as popularized by the Jackass rig (now the Galco Miami Classic) worn by Don Johnson in *Miami*

Vice. Shoulder holsters make it easy to draw your gun while sitting and they put all the weight of the weapon and spare ammo across the shoulders, leaving nothing to dig into your body when you sit. They are very hard to conceal, however, as the shoulder straps tend to peak out unless you're covered in yards of cloth. They are also difficult to use when shooting around groups of people, for the shoulder draw quite often causes the muzzle of the gun to sweep people to the shooter's left (if he's right-handed). Some argue that the shoulder draw is also prone to being jammed because it is an obvious, relatively slow, cross-body movement.



Photo by Phil Elmore

Pocket carry is just that – placing a gun in your pocket. To do this right, the gun has to be small enough to fit without being too obvious. It should also be carried in a pocket holster, which helps protect it from pocket lint, keeps clothing from getting tangled up in the trigger guard, and keeps the gun in the same position in the pocket (while breaking up its outline somewhat). Pocket-carried

guns are slow to deploy because one must dig into the pocket to get them.



Pocket-carry holster for a mini-revolver.

Photo by Phil Elmore

Ankle carry puts the gun on the ankle under the pants leg. While this is discreet and can give the shooter a place to hide his piece without the need for wearing an untucked or layered shirt, it is difficult to pull off comfortably and well. Most ankle holsters, to be secure enough, will restrict blood flow at the lower leg. They are hard to get to in an emergency (unless the shooter is already sitting) and may even make it harder to walk comfortably (with the added weight above one foot).



Photo by Phil Elmore

If the wearer's pants rise slightly when sitting, the weapon may become visible (if only slightly). Placement on the ankle

quite obviously restricts the shooter to only those smaller guns that can be comfortably hidden in that position, as a larger revolver or automatic simply wouldn't fit.

As you can see, every single holster option has both advantages and disadvantages. There is no "best" holster for this reason. Every person is different, which means that every scenario, every set of carry requirements, and every wardrobe choice varies from individual to individual.

You must ultimately experiment with multiple carry options (never forgetting that your own preferences will dictate some factors arbitrarily). You will, ultimately determine what best works for you, as well as what you *like*. In a world of multiple choices, never forget that some things are just a function of what you like better and nobody can tell you otherwise.

While it is not necessary to spend a fortune on a holster, don't go the cheap route for the sake of budget alone. It is worth your time to purchase a high-quality holster that will last a long time and retain your weapon securely. You don't have to break the bank, but neither should you skimp. You're trusting your life to both your firearm and its carry system.

Your life is worth a few extra dollars ♠