

42 Senior Gunfighters: Age and craftiness

By Barrett Tillman

It happens to most of us. "If you live long enough, you grow older." For practical shooters, that means you begin to realize that you're not as fast as before. The reasons are many and varied, from physical condition to vision to waning interest. For some of us it happens sooner rather than later; for a fortunate few it's delayed into our 60s.

I began serious shooting at age 29, the year I first attended Gunsite and helped form Oregon IPSC. As a ranch kid I'd grown up hunting and shooting, but competition was new to me in 19-ought-78.

Time passed.

I peaked late as a competitor, but in cowboy action shooting I made the top 10 percent in overall national rankings at age 48 and led the championship posse at 49. That was over a decade ago. Being honest with myself, I concede that I couldn't repeat those performances today.

However, as more shooters approach retirement age, more ballistic sports are taking notice. Not satisfied with Senior class, a few years ago SASS established the Forty-Niner category, a tip of the Stetson to the movement's advancing age. Other disciplines such as USPSA also recognize senior shooters, varying from 50 to 60. High power and service rifle seniors begin at the double nickel.

The Vision Thing

Arizona is wonderful. Where else can a marksman find an optometrist who's not only a pistol shooter but also an NRA board member? It's not unusual to wander past Dr. Geiler's office window and glimpse a client trying new glasses while focusing on the front sight of a 1911 or a single-action hawglaig. The drivers in Prescott also are accustomed to seeing a highpower rifleman hoisting an M-1A outside the office, checking the sight picture in bright sunlight.

Unfortunately, when it's time to drive home, you'll need your "regular" glasses. After all, in a surprise gunfight, you probably won't be wearing your competition lenses.

What to do?

Some companies offer products specifically for "vision challenged" shootists. XS Sight Systems offers an option: A big white dot front bead and shallow V rear sight are one answer. They're very good for fast sight acquisition, day or night; not so good for precision.

Crimson Trace provides replacement with built-in lasers for a wide variety of revolvers and pistols.

Their laser sights are excellent in low light, and can be useful in some daylight conditions. Then there are fiberoptic sights from companies such as Truglo and HiViz that largely eliminate playing the optical trombone, waiting for your eyes to focus on a conventional front sight.

Recently, on a hot summer morning in Arizona Territory (en route to 115 degrees of Fahrenheit), I was running some pistol drills and found that I simply could not focus on my 1911's front sight. Or anything else: the world had turned hazy. Finally I took off my glasses and noted condensation on the clip-on sun shades. When I removed the clip-on, the world returned to bright, contrasty reality.

Lesson learned: be aware of the temperature, your amount of perspiration, and effects on spectacles for a given situation. I still got good hits in decent time at eight yards, shooting through the fog, but it's much better if you don't have to.

Incidentally, ever wonder how you'd perform under pressure without your glasses? You should find out.

Since proper training begins with a specific goal for each session, consider devoting some range time to a worst-case scenario: You've been decked, your glasses knocked off, and there's no time to find them.

Practice without corrective lenses but WITH eye protection. How far out can you get a reasonably fast hit? A decisive hit? How well can you make a precision shot at any distance?

Inquiring shootists need to know.

Slowing Down

How much slower are you now versus 10 years ago? And how much does it matter?

