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The MODERN ISOCELES

by Ron Avery

Comments

The Weaver stance is -- don't be shocked -- obsolete. none of the top competitive shooters use it and police departments no longer train with Cooper's outmoded technique. The real hot ticket now is...

There is a great deal of controversy regarding the old topic of shooting stances for defensive handgunning. Some stylists claim that the Weaver stance is the best "gunfighting" stance, offering superior control of the handgun and "blading" your torso to present a smaller target. Others claim that the Isosceles stance is being used more successfully in actual gunfights at close ranges.

Having been involved with handguns for most of my adult life as a law enforcement officer, firearms trainer and professional shooter, this question is of particular significance to me. What I am interested in is determining which stance provides the best all-around control, under duress, using a defensive handgun without benefit of compensators, ports or other gadgets.

Before we begin our comparison of the stances and the various permutations of each, a little bit of the history is in order to establish the developmental sequence.

In the mid '70s, Jeff Cooper helped establish the International Practical Shooting Confederation (IPSC). All competitors used handguns, ammunition and leather which were deemed suitable for defensive use. Matches were freestyle and shooters were allowed to solve the shooting problems as fast and precisely as they could. Cooper used the sport of IPSC as a test medium to evaluate technique, equipment and, to a lesser degree, mindset.

Previously, Cooper was involved with a group of shooters in Big Bear, Calif., in which Jack Weaver, a deputy sheriff, developed a two-handed hold utilizing isometric tension as the basis for controlling recoil and allowing faster follow-up shots. Since Weaver was doing quite well with the technique-- a lot better than the folks who were trying to shoot with one hand-- his stance became the one that others emulated.

Cooper helped quantify the elements of the Weaver stance as well as other principles and used them for the basis of his world famous training facility, Gunsite.

It is important to understand that the Weaver stance was developed in competition among shooters in a structured environment. As one of the more or less scientific means of shooter evaluation at Gunsite, the Weaver stance also became popular in IPSC competition.

In the early '80s, the tone of IPSC started to change. The use of weighted barrels and compensators came into vogue and a couple of hotshots by the names of Rob Leatham and Brian Enos took the IPSC world by storm. What separated these shooters was that they were using the Isosceles stance.

It was during this period that IPSC started to drift away from the "street practical" mindset into more of a game. Cooper and others started to distance themselves from IPSC. With a background in the martial arts, I did not favor the use of gadgets on defensive handguns. It was generally believed that it was the use of compensators and the relatively light-kicking .38 Super cartridge that allowed the top shooters to use the Isosceles stance with success.

The martial artists knew that the Isosceles stance would not work with a "real" gun chambered in .45 ACP. I let myself be influenced by that thinking and continued to shoot the Weaver stance for several more years.

In 1984, I attended my first IPSC Nationals and watched Leatham and Enos in competition. They were simply head and shoulders ahead of anybody else in the match.

Martial artists are exposed to a variety of defensive techniques and thus I have learned that the person who can learn from different styles will be able to expand his abilities. Those who stay locked in their own belief systems tend to stagnate. Watching these top shooters in action, I believed that more than just compensators and "wimp loads" allowed these guys to shoot so fast and accurately.

Testing Method

I believed that the testing methodology used by Cooper-- evaluating technique in a controlled environment as well as using observation, personal experience and interviews with those involved in lethal force situations-- was still a valid concept and I directed my research along those lines.

I started asking questions. Leatham and other top shooters were very open and friendly. I learned as much as I could and then started trying to apply what I had learned. In late 1987, I determined to learn the Isosceles position and then thoroughly test it against the Weaver stance.

I went to a class taught by Leatham in the spring of 1988. In the summer of '88, I attended Gunsite to learn directly from Cooper and his staff.

I spent the next two years researching the various techniques I had learned. I compared both stances against each other. I looked at draw times, time between shots, dispersion of shots, reloading time, time between targets and precision under stress. I fired roughly 60,000 to 70,000 rounds in that two year period.

I attended numerous competitions, interviewed as many top shooters as I could, researched

human biomechanics, stress reactions, motor control learning theory and motor behavior as well as spending countless hours on the range researching the principles behind the Isosceles and Weaver stance. This research, as well as my own experiences on the street as a law enforcement officer, convinced me that the Modern Isosceles offers superior control over the Weaver stance.

The Winning Stance

Let's look at the Modern Isosceles and see what it has to offer. The muscles and tendons of both forearms, the elbow joints, wrists and hands are set in a medium to firm static contraction, depending on amount of recoil. The rest of the body is more or less relaxed, based on individual preference.

Both arms are braced behind the handgun with the elbows at natural extension. This allows two pivot points at both shoulders. Shoulders are relaxed and down. The gun is centered and close to midline of body. Recoil is absorbed passively by the body through both arms.

The axis of recoil is roughly through the centerline of the body. The upper body is generally more squared to the target than the Weaver, although the spacing of the feet is a matter of shooter preference. Stability is achieved by shifting the center of gravity forward and keeping the hands close to the same height as the shoulders in order to keep the arms from pivoting up in recoil.

The shooting grip places the heel of the support hand very close to boreline, which decreases the leverage the gun has in recoil as well as placing the tendons of the support hand and wrist in a straight line. This placement results in a biomechanically stronger grip in which both wrists are set.

The major difference between the Weaver and the Modern Isosceles is the active use of isometric (push/pull) tension to control recoil. The Modern Isosceles relies instead on a static contraction of the hands, arms and wrists, passively absorbing recoil with the body.

The Weaver Stance

The basic principles of the Weaver stance are:

Isometric contraction in which pushing with the strong arm and pulling with the weak arm offset recoil. The weak arm's elbow is bent downward to control muzzle lift. The body is more or less bladed to the target. The shooter stands in an upright stance, head up or canted sideways according to shooter preference.

While not really an element of the stance, the "thumb-on-thumb" grip was popularized by Cooper to prevent the thumb safety of a 1911 from engaging inadvertently. This grip places the heel of the support hand well below the axis of recoil.

In my research using the Weaver stance, I found that when shooting under different stress loads, the amount of isometric tension varies. I saw this in competition, during tactical training

exercises and in actual street confrontations while involved in law enforcement activities.

When using the correct amount of tension, the Weaver stance is very effective in holding down the gun. However, if your attention is distracted by events, there is a tendency to either relax the isometric tension or overdo it. This directly affects shot placement and dispersion.

Another factor to consider in evaluating the Weaver stance is the "correct" extension of the strong arm and how much bend, or angle, of the support arm is necessary to provide optimal recoil control. Ray Chapman had great success with his strong arm nearly straight like a rifle stock whereas Ross Seyfried shot a radically bent arm style. Both won IPSC World Championships.

When shooting at high speed, such as performing two shots under a second from the holster, I found myself "freezing" my bent arm in place in a static contraction rather than pulling back. Even though my support elbow was bent, I was really just utilizing static contraction.

With the classic Weaver, the axis of recoil is mostly through the strong arm, on the right side of the body (if right handed). This can cause the body to turn slightly under recoil, resulting in lateral dispersion of shots, if the shooter is not braced correctly.

Also, with only one pivot point at the strong shoulder-- the weak arm only assists in providing tension for the strong arm-- the gun can move in a circular fashion if strong tension is not maintained.

When shooting the Modern Isosceles, there are two pivot points. What is most important about this is that both arms are braced behind the handgun. The strong arm is set, holding from the strong side while the weak arm supports the gun from the other side. This helps keep the gun from drifting left and right when shooting at high speeds.

Recoil Control

What keeps the arms from flying up under recoil like they did in the early days of Isosceles? To answer this question, we must take a closer look at the biomechanics of the stance.

In the pre-Weaver era, the Isosceles stance was promulgated by the FBI and others. The technique had the shooter squatting down with the back straight, head upright, arms fully extended and weight centered neutrally or even slightly back on the heels.

This put the body weight behind the center of gravity and placed the hands higher than the shoulders, creating an upward angle to the arms. When trying to shoot out of this position, the body rocks back under recoil and the arms pivot up at the shoulders.

With the Modern Isosceles, the center of gravity is shifted forward, towards the balls of the feet. The upper body is curled forward slightly. The arms are held more in line with the shoulders. Both wrists are set and the support hand thumb and wrist are held in a straight line, resulting in a very strong grip, which, when set, assists in controlling muzzle flip very effectively.

Now when the gun is fired, the arms move in and out like a piston, instead of flopping up and down.

Relaxing the shoulders contributes to helping absorb recoil more effectively. The elbows are allowed to come to a more natural extension, further assisting in recoil absorption and a lessening of muzzle flip. The head is moved forward to get a clearer view of the relationship between sights and target as well as bringing the center of gravity forward.

These subtle changes to the Isosceles, thus creating the Modern Isosceles, allow the shooter to relax more behind the gun and allow him to concentrate on shooting without worrying about maintaining active tension in the stance. In addition, both sides of the body are doing the same thing and the resulting symmetry is easier to assume, especially under stress.

But the bottom line is performance. With the lessening of body tension, the shooter is able to execute all moves with more finesse and speed. This goes hand in hand with modern motor learning principles and sports psychology, which emphasize relaxation for peak performance and execution.

Placing the handgun at the centerline of the body, with the axis of recoil through the centerline, keeps the gun centered on the target, with less horizontal dispersion between shots.

The recovery time between shots is faster with the Modern Isosceles and muzzle flip is decidedly less. I attribute this to having both the arms and body weight actively involved in absorbing recoil, along with an enhanced shooting grip.

The Modern Isosceles, when done correctly, is so efficient in shot to shot recovery that it has made obsolete some of the concepts used in the early days of IPSC. One such concept is what Jeff Cooper called the "hammer" for which the shooter would take one sight picture and fire two shots into the target at close range.

With the Modern Isosceles, you literally cannot outshoot your front sight at the closer distances. It will barely lift out of the rear sight and you can track it through the cycling of the slide and see it for the second shot. I'm talking about times less than .12 of a second between shots.

At distance, this faster recovery, along with less lateral and vertical dispersion, means the shooter can engage targets faster and more precisely.

"Bladed" To The Target

Some advocates claim the Weaver stance is more practical since the body is bladed, making you less of a target. In other words, is it better to get shot through both lungs or just one? This argument has been around since dueling began and has not been satisfactorily answered to this day.

What about when you are wearing body armor? Turning the torso in a Weaver stance exposes the

armpit area. The Modern Isosceles presents the full body armor to the assailant.

I blade my body when confronting a potentially hostile person at two to three yards in order to protect my holstered gun. But, when you are five, 10 or 20 yards away, blading is not as important as assuming a stance with a natural point of aim which allows you to get on target faster and more precisely.

I tend to find myself agreeing with former Border Patrol pistolero Bill Jordan, who, in his book, No Second Place Winner, had as a photo caption, "Quickness of erect stance could prevent your presenting any kind of target." Amen.

Far too many modern day trainers have turned a blind eye to the Modern Isosceles. In my opinion, they really don't understand how it works so they either choose to ignore it or knock it as a "gamey" technique. It was listening to this kind of talk that held up my progress as a shooter.

Remember, the Weaver stance started in competition and later proved itself in combat. The Modern Isosceles started in competition and has proven itself in gunfights as well.

In fact, there have been some studies done in which law enforcement personnel, trained exclusively in the Weaver technique, switched to Isosceles in gunfights and training exercises. While the data is far from complete, it is interesting and should not be discounted or ignored.

I continue to test and evaluate the Weaver and the Modern Isosceles technique in my shooting school with students and compare notes before and after on student progress. While there are other advancements of technique, such as using vision more effectively and mental conditioning techniques, almost without exception, shooters do better with the Modern Isosceles.

Does this mean the Weaver stance is dead? Absolutely not! There are a great number of shooters who have trained with the Weaver and simply prefer it for various reasons.

You can greatly enhance the Weaver stance by getting the center of gravity forward a bit and bringing the arms more to the centerline of the body. This will assist in recovery and lessen dispersion.

However, for pure performance, the Modern Isosceles is tough to beat. Many of the elite military units, HRT personnel, law enforcement officers, special response teams and citizens interested in self defense are taking up the Modern Isosceles.

In a gunfight, mindset is still the most important element. But, assuming that you have a fighting mindset, the Modern Isosceles has an undeniable edge and is the stance of choice among the top professional shooters in the world.

Ron Avery is the director of the Practical Shooting Academy. His Advanced Handgun Skills class explores the Modern Isosceles stance in great detail.

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