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Around the Water Cooler: Ken Hackathorn and the State of the Industry

Ken Hackathorn is the best known trainer coming out of the early days of the Modern Technique of the Pistol. In 1974, he reached out to Jeff Cooper as someone who was taking the world of defensive handgun use from what was seen on television to a way to quickly get hits and stop fights. Ken trained with Cooper, was in on the meeting that started IPSC and ultimately taught for Jeff at Gunsite. He's trained military, police and private citizens for about forty years. Meanwhile, he's acted as a consultant to the firearms industry, he's written columns for national magazines and taught on government contracts overseas.

The editor met Ken at Gunsite in 2002 and snapped this photo.

Ken is part of our firearms history and, as he moves into well deserved "semi-retirement" in the mountains, it's appropriate to get his take on the industry and its place in our world.

-- Currently there are negative perceptions that are being expressed on the 1911 style pistol. Your take?

"I have a hard time being objective about it," he said. "I grew up with it, invested a lot of effort in learning how to use it."

The basic service pistol, the 1911 pattern gun has gotten the job done for over a century. "I carried it daily." The question as to whether the gun will withstand a 2,000 round test or class without cleaning or lube is silly.

"My question is, "Will the gun go three magazines without choking?"" he said. "I only carry three magazines with the gun. As a practical matter, it's most important that the gun work through that load."

"If I'm in a place where I need more than that pistol and those magazines," he said, "I'm in the wrong place with the wrong gun at the wrong time. It's a bad day."

As to the 1911 pattern, "it's a great weapon." It's quickly reaching the point of the 1873 Model P in terms of practicality as an issued firearm. "There are simply better choices in today's world."

He mentioned a class he'd recently taught in which no student had a metal frame pistol. Polymer frame

guns are cheaper - to make and to buy -- for one thing.

"They're simpler to maintain, easier to use and easier to teach."

Still, a gun is a machine. "They *have* to be maintained. We have to keep after the springs and take care of the piece."

Ken said that it's a Glock world today - generally, a striker fired polymer pistol is the way to go. Overseas, it's a 9mm Glock world - that's the ammo and the gun and parts you're likely to be able to get.

-- Ammo and calibers

"You are what you practice. The most inexpensive pistol round is what you can most afford to shoot. That's 9mm. For most people the 9mm pistol makes more sense than anything else."

".45 ammo is so expensive that (if you don't reload) you can't afford to shoot enough to be proficient. "

-- What are the "sleepers" out there in the market? What guns are great that no one's tipped to?

"As far as SIG, the P2022 is one of the best kept secrets in their line. After a week of shooting it overseas, I found it shoots good, it's reliable. It's a damn good gun."

"Another one, is the PPQ Walther - pretty damn good. They took a P99 and made it a striker fired gun. I likewise discovered it on a training job before they were available here. Great trigger."

For 1911-type pistols, "Colt is really doing good work. They're making guns better now than ever."

-- What's the biggest issue facing service agencies with armed personnel?

"Same as always, it's training."

Like me, Ken started out when the duty gun was the K-frame Smith & Wesson revolver in a Don Hume Jordan holster.

"The Model 10 was it," he said. The guys who could pick their own gun would opt for a .357 Magnum. Regardless, it was "pull gun, point gun, pull trigger."

"Look at carry systems today. Sophisticated holster systems - in addition to all that other gear they carry." It takes practice, good repetitions, to get fast on demand.

"But, about 4% of cops practice on their own." And if you depend on the agency to provide the training, you're out of luck. In tough times, like now, training's the first thing they cut.

-- How's the training business?

"Right now, it's a tough market for trainers," Ken said. "We've got all these guys coming back from the wars, retiring and they're trying to make training businesses. The competition is fierce and the audience, for the kind of training we're discussing, is small."

I asked who Ken recommended if you wanted to spend those sparse training dollars. The answer was no

surprise to me.

"There are a multitude of trainers out there now, like I said, lots of those are great people. I don't know them all. I know Larry Vickers and I know Dave Spaulding."

With Larry Vickers, you get the real deal -- "I'm here to show you what you need, not what you want." Dave, likewise, has considered the alternatives and has, in his case, taken lots of training from lots of different trainers. Some of their stuff you get with him - it includes his take on it. But you also get his analysis of the various aspects of gunhandling.

That's what you're paying for with any of us. So, how does Ken think you should decide which class to take?

"Ask guys who've been to the classes about trainers," he said. The AARs on various top flight forums help that process along. That's not all though. You can be a detective.

"If (a trainer) has been in the business for some years and people are *still*paying to get in, they're probably pretty good."

Trainers are not always the problem. There are problem students too - Ken sighed on the phone. "If you use bull's eye targets, you have a center which is black and a perimeter which is black. I tell shooters to read then tape the targets, "Black tape on the black, white tape on the white." This way they can keep up with where they are shooting."

"The number of people who cover an entire repair center with black tape (obliterating the center rings) is disappointing."

-- How about our society as a gun culture? What are you seeing?

"There are more people shooting than ever in history and there are more shooting well than ever before. And that's a GOOD thing."

"When I was growing up, those guys on motorcycles - our parents told us, stay away from them. As we all grew up, it seemed every yuppie wanted (and got) a bike. In the 70s and 80s, parents said "guns are evil." Now we're seeing the backlash."

There's also the issue of an unstable government. "If I don't trust the government, the citizen says "I have to take care of myself" . . . he buys a gun."

-- *Rich Grassi*

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