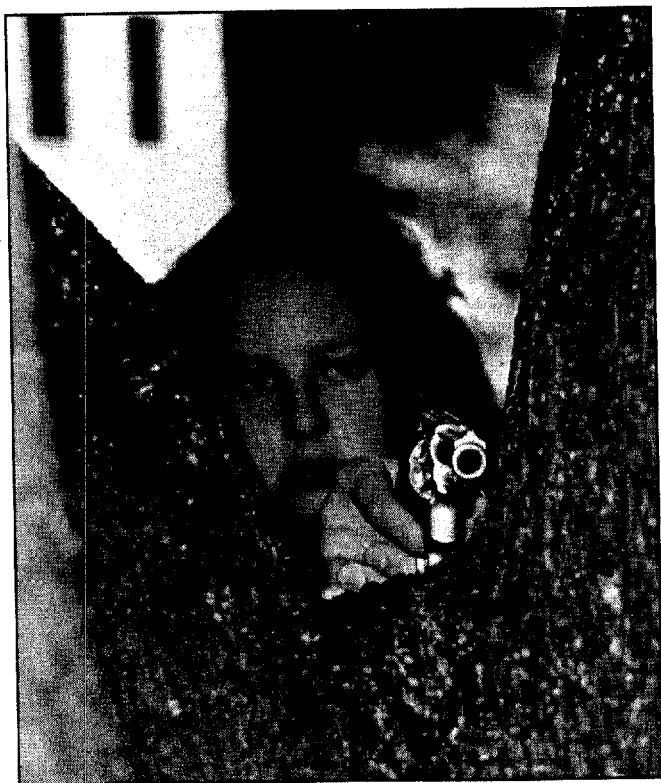


Handgunning Today

PISTOLERA

by MASSAD AYOOB

Today's women take active roles in the shooting sports as competitors and self-defense instructors, and they use guns that fit them.



Women are built to take cover more efficiently...and, psychologically, they're less hesitant to do so. Cathy Ayooob, then fifteen, makes good use of a tree with her S&W LadySmith 357 Magnum.

THERE WAS AN occasion coming up, and I'd bought a gift for my eight-year-old daughter. A friend not involved in the firearms field asked me what I'd bought her.

"A little Ruger Bearcat 22 revolver," I told him.

He was aghast. He blurted, "You mean, a *real* gun?"

My kids have never been permitted to play with the toy ones.

He was almost sputtering, and I was having a little fun. "But, she's *eight!* Do you think that's an appropriate age for a *revolver?*"

"I don't know why not," I answered nonchalantly. "She's had her own *semi-automatic* since she was six..."

I guess he and I just weren't on the same wavelength.

This society still gets shocked about women having guns. Many people got all adither at the thought of S&W and, later, Colt advertising defensive handguns to the distaff market. Of course, it was a sexist reaction; in another generation, those with the same attitude turned up their noses at females who dared have careers and looked with scorn on single mothers. And it's not just women who are locked into those obsolete gender role models. More recently, I remember a clerk in a bookstore who was genuinely offended to learn there was a periodical called *Women and Guns*.

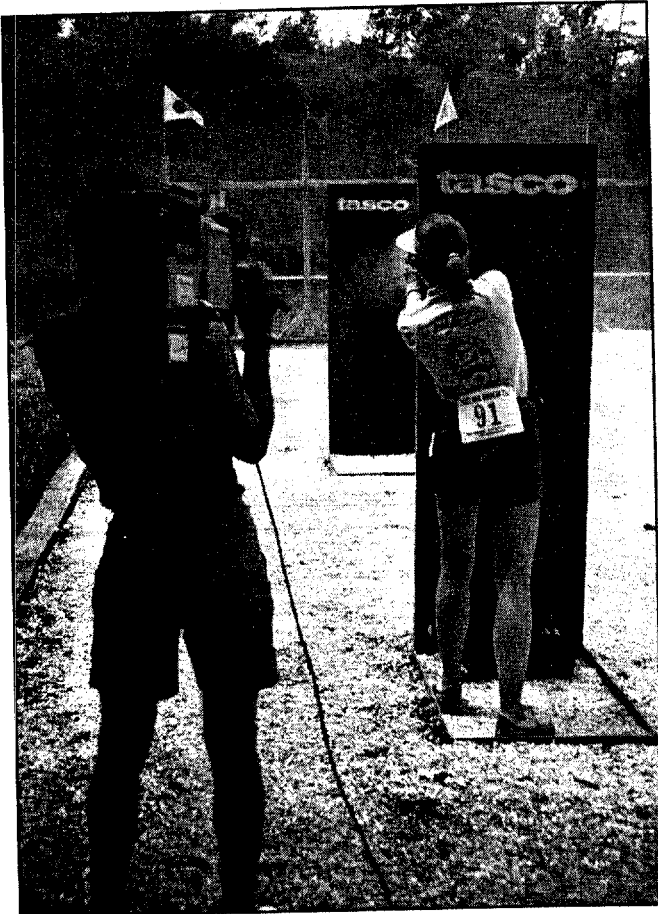
The law itself recognizes, in its explanation of the principle of disparity of force, that men are bigger, stronger and, generally, meaner than women. Unfortunately, it is a fact of life that brutal men have beaten defenseless women to death. But some of these brutal men have learned another fact the hard way.

That fact is, when even an unarmed man violently attacks a woman, the likelihood of her suffering death or grave bodily harm from the beating becomes so great that his male strength is seen as a deadly weapon. She is authorized by the law to put such an attacker on a stainless steel table with a tag on his big toe.

And more than one has done so.

Training the Female

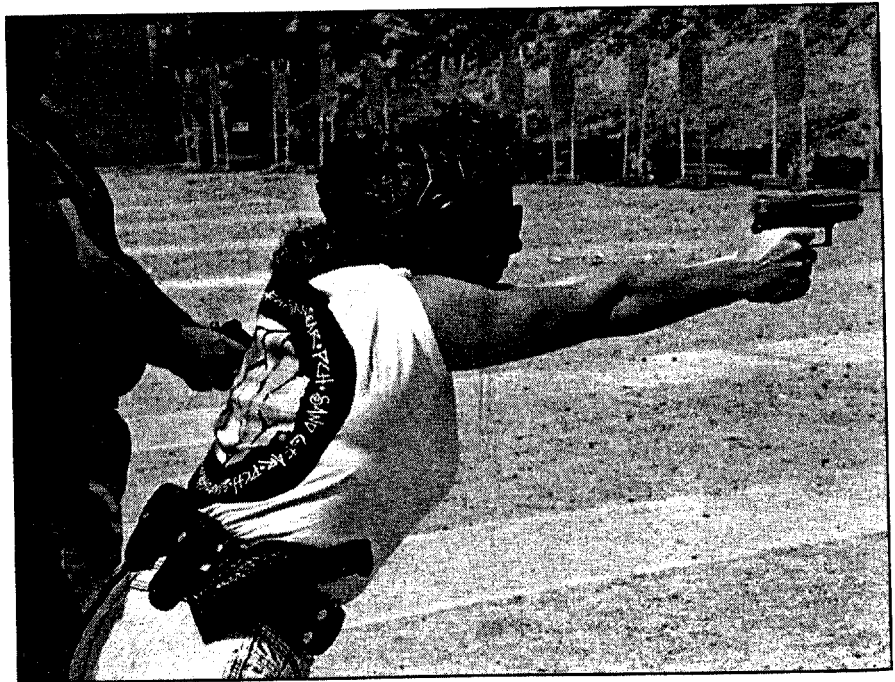
The gender of the instructor is sometimes a factor here. One West Coast instructor who seems self-appointed—there's no evidence he's ever actually taught a full firearms class or been certified to teach—has some extremely viti-



Seen from this angle, a female contestant at the Bianchi Cup effortlessly negotiates the awkward Barricade Event. Women's lower center of gravity and greater lower body flexibility can, with proper techniques, give them advantages over male counterparts.



"Home alone?" Not hardly. Shown at age ten, Cathy Ayoub had mastered both her Fred Sadowsky Custom Colt Police Positive 38 Special and her Akita. Note the custom revolver stocks by "Fuzzy" Farrant.



An aggressively forward isosceles position gives this LFI student excellent control of her SIG P-225 9mm auto, which fits her hand well. A high speed camera has caught the gun just coming back into battery during firing cycle; note the muzzle has barely risen from point of aim with a full power load.

perative words for any female student who insists on a female instructor. I can't quite buy that.

I was still fairly young when the first female student looked at me and sighed, "You stand there with your mustache and your leather jacket and your baritone voice and your 45 automatic, and you don't *begin* to relate to my fears."

I thought she was wrong, then. I still hope she was. But that wasn't the point. Her perception was her reality, and if I couldn't get past those perceptions, it was my fault, not hers.

A number of women pick up the gun *because* they've been brutalized. It's confusing enough when credentialled people like Susan Brownmiller urge victimized women *not* to arm themselves because the gun is "an icon of male brutality" and owning one somehow forfeits the moral victory; it is worse to *force* a woman in this unenviable position to accept her training from a teacher who is an alpha male.

For several years, I've experimented at my training school, Lethal Force Institute (LFI), with women-only classes. Success has been mixed. The classes worked out very well and the students loved them, but they were never commercially successful. A lot of strong women refused to take the single-sex program, stating determinedly, "I want the real one, the same one you give the men."

Of course, our course was "the real one," plus many hours of women's issues (guns that fit smaller hands, holsters that fit their anatomies and wardrobes, and the moods of the courts on using a handgun in self-defense). But again, the perception had become the functional reality. So, those women who felt that way were simply plugged into the co-ed classes.

Today, our format is to occasionally offer a one-day "testosterone-free environment"—all female students, all female instructors—the day before the full class begins. This familiarizes the female student with those subjects more specific to her than her brother and creates more of a level playing field the first morning of the regular program.

LFI was the first of the mainstream schools to begin using women as full instructors. Past and present staff have included such fine trainers as Kate Alexander, Gila May-Hayes, Graciela Casillas, Diana Smith, Tandra Leslie, Gail Burton, Leah Garlich, Gail Devoid, Ruth Warners and Linda Pendleton. Running the all-women classes with great success were former Second Chance women's champion Lyn Bates and crack USPSA competitor Laurie Kraynick.

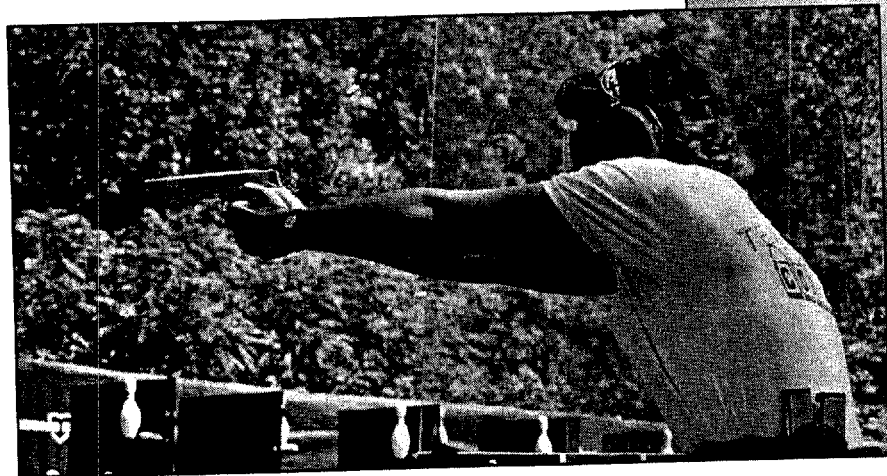
The Female as Trainer

Valerie Atkins runs firearms training at the Federal Law Enforcement Training Center. I invited her to teach firearms for the American Society of Law Enforcement Trainers, and her students' critiques were among the most complimentary ever submitted in that demanding *creme de la creme* atmosphere.

Anyone who thinks women cannot successfully teach strong men has not met Atkins. Nor have they met Pamela



Graciela Casillas, undefeated women's World Kickboxing Champion, prefers a Colt 45 auto for serious business. (Photo courtesy BC Academy)



An aggressive stance gives Barbara Budnar, shown here competing at Second Chance, excellent rapid-fire control. The pistol is a Wilson Custom Colt with hot +P 45 ACP ammo.

J. Miller. Barely 5 feet tall and less than 100 pounds, Miller wields a baton with such authority that she is at the highest level, International Instructor, that a baton trainer can earn with the potent PR-24. Nearly 10 percent of PR-24 internationals are female; Miller is joined by Cat Kelley and Missy O'Linn. O'Linn is also one of the nation's leading authorities on police civil liability and is an ex-cop turned trial attorney who represents policemen in excessive force cases.

What about firearms? John Farnam's wife, Vicki, began in her famous husband's shadows, but quickly developed her own reputation as an excellent trainer and diagnostician who could help the problem shooter. I've noticed that the female firearms coach will tend to be more compassionate and more patient than her male counterpart. She'll also be less clinical, going for core problems that lie beyond the easy diagnoses of heeling or jerking or not watching the front sight.

Do some males have problems taking direction from females in a discipline they've been conditioned by childhood play and a lifetime of entertainment media to see as macho? I ain't gonna lie to you. It happens, though not as often as a woman who has not been in a structured shooting environment might fear. Every now and then, though, the testosterone does get a little bit thick.

In 1993, my sixteen-year-old daughter, Cathy, began interning with me on the range. Having been in shooting and martial arts all her life, her strong foundation in body mechanics made her an excellent diagnostician of tech-

nique. She had also been raised not to take anything from males, in general, and adult males, in particular.

One of her students was an instructor in a police academy. He was firing from what I call the "feeb Weaver," the pathetically weak and off-balance parody of the Weaver stance developed by the FBI in 1981 and, thankfully, abandoned as soon as John Hall became head of the Bureau's firearms training unit. The man wasn't shooting nearly as well as he could have with proper techniques.

Cathy calmly and quietly (but drastically) altered his position. She took his feet from their pedestal position and gave him a wide pyramidal base, brought his shoulders aggressively forward out of his backward lean, and locked his weakly bent gun arm.

This did not sit well with the man at all. In a voice loud enough for all to hear, he remarked sharply, "I didn't pay all this money for a little girl to teach me to shoot!"

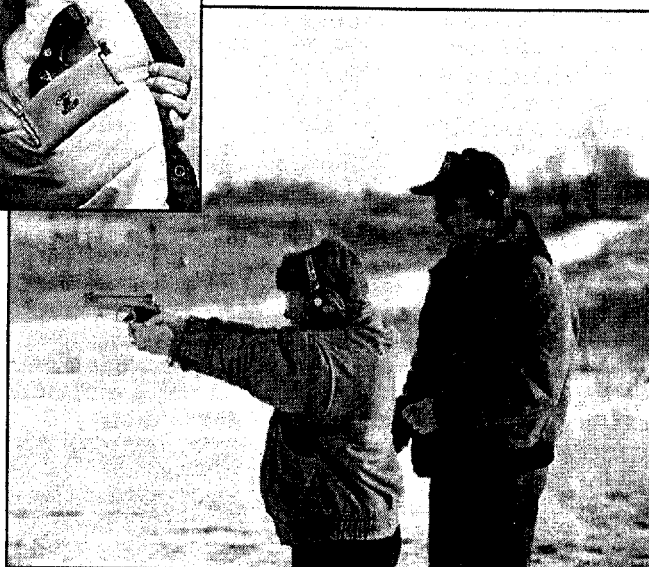
Such a comment from an adult would have been devastating to the average sixteen-year-old. Mine just looked at me and rolled her eyes.

I let the student know that the kid was actually a very credible authority.

He listened. He did what she told him. His scores shot upward, better hits in faster times. He kept doing it and finished at the top of a very good body of students. On his critique, he wrote the high point was realizing he could learn something from a teenage girl that was better than what a prestigious academy had given him in instructors' school.



Far-back belt carry works better for women than men, as do shoulder and crossdraw holsters. This Law Concealment holster, formerly known as the Shadow, holds a high-capacity Glock. An S&W Bodyguard 38 inside the breast pocket of a lady's jacket is also held in place with a Law Concealment holster. (Photo courtesy Law Concealment Systems)



Under the watchful eye of Ray Saltzman, Ashley Reichard (age fourteen, 5-feet tall, 110 pounds) fires a full-power 45 round from an S&W auto. Though the spent casing is just above the rear sight at 1 o'clock, the muzzle is still on target for next shot. (LFI photo)

The kid took that in stride, too, but her dad's hat size expanded by about four.

Perhaps some men never will allow themselves to learn from women. But the ones who do will remember the lessons all the more.

Guns for Women

Given lesser upper body strength and particularly smaller hands, the average-size woman will not always be comfortable with the same handgun designed for the average to large male hand. The petite female shooting a full-size service revolver or, worse, double-action autoloader with a long reach to the trigger for the first DA shot is going to have trouble.

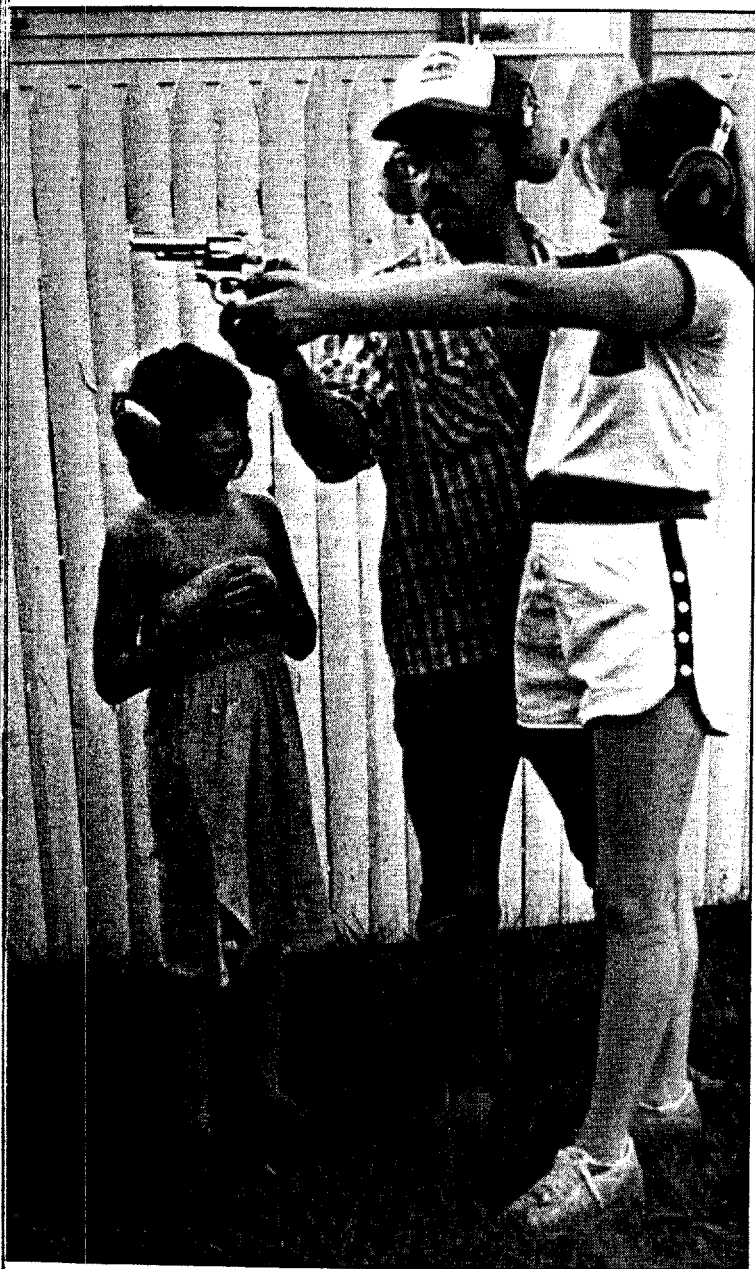
Guys, triple-check that your favorite handgun is unloaded and do a little dry fire with me. Point it in a safe direction, take a good hold, and place your trigger finger on... *the front edge of the trigger guard*. Ask yourself what your trigger control would be like if your trigger were suddenly moved to that position. That's not far off from what a petite female with short fingers experiences when she has to use a handgun designed for a big man's hand.

And shall we talk pull weight? Take a hand dynamometer and measure your own hand strength. Now give it to your wife, sister, daughter or mom. If your hand strength goes about 120 pounds, don't be surprised if hers runs maybe half that, 60 pounds.

What's the corollary? Well, if your pet double-action auto requires 16 pounds of pressure for the first shot, ask yourself what your hit probability would be if it were suddenly doubled to a 32-pound pull. Half the strength demands twice the effort.

Now, picture that 32-pound pull on a trigger positioned out to the front of the trigger guard. This will give you a graphic understanding as to why some women can't control man-size guns and, in some cases, can't even fire them.

Women's guns shouldn't be short on power. They should be short only in the dimension of trigger reach. The first of the new generation S&W LadySmith handguns was built on



The author instructs his nieces in handgun safety. They're getting used to the earmuffs in dry fire; when live work starts, they'll don eye protection as well.

the J-size revolver, a 38 Special on a 32 frame. It was superbly designed to fit fingers about one knuckle shorter than the average male's. (This is why so many of you guys with J-frames had to buy bigger grips to be comfortable with them.)

The same thing occurs with the venerable Colt 45 automatic and its many clones. Get the 1911 pistol with the short trigger (the one so many of you guys have to replace with a long trigger to get the right feel) and *voila*: We have a gun exquisitely suited for the hand of a woman 5 feet tall or so, with proportional finger length.

The same is true of Browning's Hi-Power, which may well be the gun best suited to the female hand. I now keep a couple of Novak Custom Browning 9mms on hand. More than once, a small woman who couldn't qualify with the oversize gun she brought has easily "gone over the top" when she switched to one of my Hi-Powers.

HK's P7 squeeze-cocker is another excellent gun for the female shooter. It forces a firm grip, has perhaps the lightest recoil of any carry-size 9mm and is superbly reliable. The M8 version with the single-stack magazine is best, or the grip girth is likely to be too much. There are exceptions, however; Nancy Bittle, the violence survivor who founded Arming Women Against Rape and Endangerment (AWARE) can shoot "300 possible" scores on demand in police qualifications with her fat-gripped, high-capacity P7M13.

The Glock has gained a reputation for not working well for any shooter who holds the gun with a limp wrist, male or female. This has erroneously been determined by some to mean that women shouldn't use Glocks. *Au contraire*; it means that weak-wristed shooters should not have Glocks. Some of the top female firearms authorities (Sonny Jones and Gila May-Hayes to name but a couple) swear by these polymer pistols, and many of my female students have done their best work with Glocks.

Colt is now pushing its reintroduced D-frame, six-shot 38 Special revolvers rated for +P ammo. The female officer or security professional required to carry a gun fitting those specs will be splendidly served by the 4-inch-barreled Police Positive. The 2-inch concealment version, the Detective



Women are increasingly involved in the firearms industry. Jackie Udell (far left), a sales rep for Springfield Armory, and Mark Stuart (far right) present the 1990 award for top retailer of Springfield Armory guns. (Photo courtesy Springfield Armory)

Special, is the choice of a number of gun-wise women, including my wife.

Gotta have a magnum, but you're 5 feet tall and 90 pounds? Ruger's SP101 will do the job splendidly, but it's a five-shot. If your job requirements demand a half-dozen 357 rounds, the same firm's GP100 is the choice, because its stud-type grip frame allows a pistolsmith to "hog out" a recoil shelf beneath the back of the frame, bringing the web of the hand more into the gun and allowing proper index finger placement on the trigger.

Holsters for Women

The general rule is, "If it won't work for men, it'll work for women, and vice versa." Most males wind up with strong-side hip carry holsters which for the female, with higher hips that swell outward, cause the gun butt to dig into the body and bring it up level with the shoulder blade. You have to be double-jointed to quick-draw from there if you're a woman. Lower carry on the hip is fine for an exposed-duty weapon, but it won't conceal.

The shoulder and crossdraw holsters are ideal for women: narrower bodies and relatively more flexible arms allow drawing from them with ease. The crossdraw usually works better for women than for men for the same reasons. Middle-of-the-back carry, which I consider a terrible idea for men, is a less terrible idea for women because of their body dynamics.

The Mind of the Armed Woman

A strong woman—the kind who accepts responsibility for her life and her family in America in the '90s—can handle a threatening situation.

If all else is equal, women seem to handle post-shooting trauma better than men primarily because society views men and women differently. To the man who shoots a guy coming at him with a knife, society says, "Why didn't you just kick it out of his hand like on TV?" To the woman under the same circumstances, society doesn't expect a TV reaction and judges her less harshly.

Stress studies at LFI, using devices to monitor stress signs (the blood pressure cuff or full cardiac telemetry) as students go through role play, showed that the stress indicators of women rose less precipitously and plateaued sooner than those of males in the same age group.



Cathy Ayoub is shown at age fifteen with her 3-inch S&W firing full-power 357 Magnum loads from an aggressive Chapman stance. Her motto is, "Guns that don't recoil are boring!"



The author talks with P.J. Miller, master instructor of the PR-24 baton. (Photo courtesy Monadnock Lifetime Products)



Male and female instructors share duties at the Lethal Force Institute. Shooting a pace-setter qualifier demonstration for students are (left to right) Laurie Kraynick, Lyn Bates, Roger Lanny and the author. (LFI photo)



Who says women can't conceal guns. Lyn Bates has just drawn these fourteen combat handguns from complete concealment.

Most firearms instructors agree that female students have a faster learning curve with the handgun. The sidearm demands fine motor dexterity, of which women seem to have more. And women don't suffer from the macho psychological baggage men bring with them, so they stay open to lessons and absorb them faster. In awkward shooting postures, such as shooting from behind cover, their much greater lower-body flexibility gives them an enormous balance advantage.

Resources

For the woman considering a gun, there are several sources of positive role modeling and reinforcement of the decision.

Paxton Quigley's book, *Armed and Female*, remains the strongest manifesto of the concept. If your local bookstore or local gun shop doesn't carry it, it can be ordered from Police Bookshelf for \$8.45.

Sonny Jones founded *Women and Guns*, and the Second Amendment Foundation has kept it going under the able editorship of Peggy Tartaro.

Nancy Bittle is executive director of AWARE, Arming Women Against Rape and Endangerment. They've done a lot of great work in raising the consciousness of mainstream women from all walks of life as to their options in defending themselves. And they offer training seminars.

AWSDA, the American Women's Self Defense Association, doesn't do that much with firearms, but concentrates on realistic unarmed combat and less lethal force options. They do an excellent job.

Massad Ayoob's Lethal Force Institute offers training around the United States for armed citizens who can show clean criminal records. Write for information. Ayoob's testimony in the famous case of *Christine Hansen, et. al. v. FBI* several years ago resulted in the rehiring of several female agents fired for failure to qualify on the range and the court's order to the FBI to "revise and update its obsolete and sexist firearms training." He has taught some of the nation's leading *pistoleras*, including Lyn Bates, Laurie Kraynick and Barbara Budnar.