

IRONS AND OPTICS

A few thoughts...

By Paul Howe

The debate over whether to use irons or optics are as old as the gun. Since the gun has been developed, man has tried to improve his accuracy, his speed and the range of his weapons.

IRONS FIRST



The above set up is my training rifle. Simple irons to show instructor students they can make the standards using iron sights.

Yes, I am old school and believe that a new shooter should learn irons first. Why do I believe in this outdated system you ask? I have used irons first hand and they work. They continue to work for me. There is only a narrow bandwidth where they have problems. Much less narrow than optics.

I also believe in learning reference points on the weapon. That is front hand, back hand, head/eye position. Head/eye is critical to making consistent accurate shots. This includes shooting with optics. Also, I use my cheek position on the stock to help anchor/stabilize the gun. I don't let it float, I control it with cheek pressure.



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3615 New Press Road, Nacogdoches, TX 75964

(936) 559-1605 | paulkoko@hotmail.com | www.combatshootingandtactics.com

As for shooting in different environments such as jungle, arctic, desert or urban, which sight system will play the entire course? My irons have. Yes, they have weak points such as when the sun is coming up or setting directly into your eyes. It also can impact optics the same way. I usually find a barrier in front of me that casts a shadow and position myself so I can see. Yes, I change/alter my physical shooting position. It is called being flexible as a soldier.

I also like being able to look 180 degrees over my sights and see how the battlefield is changing.

I like a hard/fixed front sight post because I can use my rifle as an impact weapon or a pressure/control device. It is a tool and I like to use it for multiple purposes.

OPTICS SECOND



I place my optic where I can reach the charging handle with my nose. I also use folding irons. Inside the pistol grip is a CSAT Sight tool that will quickly remove the optic should it become damaged. The paper in my mag well is a target of my last zero/ammo. I also mark on the scope the ammo the gun is zeroed for.

I do like and shoot optics. I use a Burris fixed 3X. Why? Good glass, rugged, inexpensive, holds zero, I can do CQB with it and I can see what is in your hands at distance. This means the further out you are, if I can articulate you have a weapon, I can engage you. I don't have to wait until you reach 25 yards, I can shoot you now at 100. It makes life much easier. Also 4X, is a bit too much magnification for me when doing room CQB.



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I have shot the zero magnification optics and they are okay. For me, red dots are not as crisp as I would like. I would like to see one with a fixed reticle.

Further, if you co-witness your irons, you have to look through two-pieces of glass to see your sights. If the glass becomes dirty, muddy or wet, it is harder to see through them.

Next, I don't like looking through a paper towel tube when I shoot. I will generally not shoot more than three rounds at a time in combat before I lower my rifle or lift my head and see how the battlefield has changed around me. That means, what enemy has moved where? Where have my buddies moved. With each shot you make, the battlefield changes. You have to be aware of it and adjust? If you get fixated in a tube, you lose a great deal of valuable data.



The above rifle has a lower 1/3 co-witness. If I were I to use a zero magnification, this is how I would run it.

If you run optics, you will have to do a little more maintenance on the weapon. You need to apply a no-fog to your optics. I remember one officer locally who kept his rifle in an air conditioned car and when he pulled it out, it took a minute or two to defog. This is one to two minutes he could not accurately engage a threat. Also, think about an inside and outside dot intensity. Many times shooters have to take their hands off their weapons once they walk outside or walk inside due to dot intensity. I hate taking my hands off my weapon in a tactical environment.



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Next, co-witness your irons and optics. I don't care if it is lower third or center. As long as your head-eye position remains the same on the gun. I would zero where the tip of my dot is the same height as my front sight post. This way if the dot goes away, the front sight is in the same position and you do not have to adjust your head/eye.

Finally, practice with both. I know an officer whose batteries/dot died and they engaged a suspect five-minutes later with irons that were co-witnessed. Another officer found that the dot washed out in the bright sunlight and the suspect had a red shirt on. Again, irons put the bullet on its mark and finished the fight.



The above is a hunter package with the same set up as .223. I run my head up to the charging handle on a .308 and then slide my head back a quarter to one-half inch so I don't get banged/scope bite with the recoil.

OBSERVATIONS FROM A FORMER TACTICAL GUY

When I returned from Somalia, I went to a local Pawn Shop and purchased a 1.5 x 4 IMI scope so I could do CQB and see people further out and what was in their hands. Later I purchased a Leupold CQT. Both scopes worked, but I hated taking my hands off my weapon to increase magnification. You might lose a shot doing this.

This is why I settled on a fixed three power. I have it on several guns and the circle dot reticle is easy to use and I can shoot it out to 400 yards. I am not selling this, but just letting you know what works for me.

NEED VS. WANT



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For all agencies, cost is a factor. Think about fielding 500 rifles and now top them with an optic that costs two-thirds as much as the rifle. Now qualifications must include irons and optics and the shooter must know both systems. Cost is one factor. Maintaining proficiency is another.

MY EYES ARE TOO OLD....

My eyes are old. They are muscle and if you use them, they will keep working. It is just like the muscles in your arms or legs. If you stop using them when you get older, they will fail you.

As for “tuning” up your eyes, this is an option. I had an RK in both eyes in 1986. I had a Lasik in my shooting eye a few years ago to clean up my focal plane. Now they have lenses and all sorts of advances in medical technology to help your eyes.

In the end, dry fire and exercise your eyes. You are training the eye to focus on the front sight. This is probably another reason that I don't like red dots as my eye focal plane goes out to the front sight, whether it be pistol or rifle.

Optics on Pistols

I am asked about optics on pistols. I have a few shooters that run optics and they use their eyesight as a reason. I have no issues with this.

In the end, I have not seen anyone fast with optics as they are with iron sights. No one has passed my standards yet with a pistol mounted optical device.

The other problem with a pistol mounted optics is the cost. If you put one on your gun, your other guns should have them as well for consistency. The cost may be a factor along with new holsters and bulk of the sight. Finally, you must change the gun attitude on your presentation as there is a narrow “sweet spot” to find your dot and drop it in on target. Real tactical guns and ammo recoil much differently than IPSC guns and follow up shots will generally not be as fast depending how much your dot moves off target.



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CONCLUSION:

- Irons work most of the time
- Optics work most of the time
- Co-witness irons with optics and practice with both

About the Author

Paul R. Howe is a 20-year veteran and former Special Operations soldier and instructor. He owns Combat Shooting and Tactics (CSAT), where he consults with, trains and evaluates law enforcement and government agencies in technical and tactical techniques throughout the special operations spectrum. See combatshootingandtactics.com for details.



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