BETTER EYES FOR THE COOTER CROWD

STAYING IN THE GAME

When I was a 30 something, pretty full of it and a fairly able marksman, I heard mutterings from my senior shooting friends about "the change" that would come in my life in a few short years and then I wouldn't be so cocky. There were cryptic references to eye troubles that gave me to believe I, like them, would soon be unable to hit the broad side of a barn. This didn't make much sense to me, I was born blind as a bat and for a while was perceived to be a fairly simple-minded child given that I couldn't see the blackboard in school. Yet alone figure out why my teachers spent a lot of time up in front of the class waving their arms about, bleating about imaginary letters, numbers and such. Somebody finally figured out I needed glasses.

Glasses opened up a whole new world. Blackboards had discernable hieroglyphics on them. Trees were not really green blobs but had individual leaves. You could identify people by sight rather than smell. End of problem — at least for a while. Well, now, the old guy's secret is out. In my 40s, I noticed sights growing increasingly curious. Now I'm in my 50s, the express sights on my single-shot, double-barreled black powder rifles have largely disappeared. Revolver sights were followed close behind. Shooting ability was going to hell fast.

Simple?
The problem is simple. Your eyes can focus clearly on only one thing at a time, no matter your age. In younger eyes, leaves can fill your field of vision so quickly back and forth among a number of focal planes that your brain is tricked into thinking all are in focus simultaneously. This is why at 30 you can clearly see both front and rear sights and the target, even if you are plagued with the usual vision maladies such as myopia (near sightedness) or hyperopia (far-
sightedness), assuming you wear corrective lenses for these conditions.

However as one ages, the lenses in your eye become increasingly inflexible and slow (or even unable) to focus. When presbyopia sets in earnest around 40, the rear sight will get fuzzy. By the time you are 50, chances are the rear sight will disappear, the front sight will get fuzzy and then game is over. So what to do? While the various corrective eye surgeries give many a new lease on life, they do not cure the basic problem for shooters: inflexible lenses...

...at least not yet. We have to ways was on this problem on other fronts. I haven't found the perfect solution yet but have kept in the game thanks to a couple of approaches. We'll start with one of the essentials in the form of glasses:

If you don't have glasses already and are having trouble shooting, man-up and get the presps checked out, something you should do every year anyway lest you fall prey to some god-awful eye disease leaving you really blind and outfitted with a cane or seeing-eye dog. Not all eye docs are shooters, so you may have to bring yours up to speed on the problem. He will laugh when you tell him you need to be able to see three things at once, perfectly well. At best, you are probably going to get only one place in the rear sight/front sight/target hierarchy of a shooter's focal planes into proper focus.

In my opinion, the front sight is the most critical. You can align a Q-tip with a cotton ball but not the reverse. I went for the "visible rear sight/crisp front sight/visible-but-slightly-fuzzy-target" combo prescription and have never looked back. The real trick here is to find an optometrist or ophthalmologist who is sympathetic enough to let you lug your rifle or handgun in to his office.

The Superfocus adjustable glasses allow you to actually adjust the focus of your glasses using the slider on the bridge between the lenses. It's instant and allows immediate control over sight picture focus.

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I am singularly blessed to have one who did. The hour or so spent experimenting with various lens combinations checked against the sights secretly aligned through the window on the "O" in a stop sign down the street, resulted in a pair of dedicated shooting glasses that gave me a new lease on life. Not a perfect solution, but it put me back in the hunt.

**Mysterious Things**

The other angle of attack on vision problems is found in the laws of optical physics. If you are any sort of photographer, the Cliff Notes version here will make perfect sense. Depth of field is generally defined as the portion of a scene that appears to be in focus, bearing in mind only one plane at a time can be in perfect focus. The objects immediately before and beyond that plane will typically be acceptably focused to...
a degree. Thus degree of focus can be
controlled. A photograph of an object
that shows the whole view in effective
focus is made with a small aperture and
long exposure time. Conversely, an art
photo with the subject in clear focus
but distracting fore and backgrounds in
blurred focus is attained with a large lens
opening and short exposure times.

There are other factors governing
focus and depth of field, but for our pur-
puses, let's concentrate on the trifled
one: aperture diameter. Setting aside
exposure time, light ray behavior and
other realities of the physical world, you
achieve relatively good focus over the
whole depth of view by reducing the
aperture through which you view it to as
small a diameter as possible that admits
light enough to maintain the view. For a
simple and practical lesson in this pheno-
menon, pick some familiar object —
this magazine article is perfect — and
position it where it is blurred and out
of focus to you. Make a tiny hole with
your thumb and forefingers, getting
this aperture close to your eye as pos-
able, and look through it. You will be
shocked at the amount of clarity it adds
to your view.

Without my glasses, I simply cannot
read the text before me on the computer
screen. I can with my hand aperture.
Armed with this useful intelligence, you
can also take an extra measure of con-
trol over your sight picture. I need both
hands to shoot so resort to a variety of
apertures to aid in accurate shooting
with iron sights. We'll touch on a few of
them here.

If your vision is still relatively good
and you use uncorrected shooting
glasses, one of the simplest and most
effective ways to bring your front sight
and target into usable focus is with
aperture sights. Before telescopic sights
came into vogue, precision shooting
got done with peep sights. Not every
gun is amenable to peep sight installa-
tions, but the vast majority of American
sporting arms are. While I have tinkered
some with aperture sights on handguns,
the jury is still out on this notion but
I have at least a couple of customers
who swear by them. Peep sights are my
favorite approach when practicable,
since they eliminate the need for auxi-
tory aids to vision which all have some
drawbacks in the field.

The Vision Infirm

One of my long-time customers had
over the years sent along numerous
custom revolver projects, mostly vin-
tage-style guns with fixed sights that
had to be regulated for a specific load.
Luckily, we had been very successful
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since we evidently had similar holds and similar interpretations of the sights. He was always very pleased with the results. Also, as time wore on, his results with my handwork became increasingly problematic. Eventually, Marc Dyer, a 30-year-old police officer in the shop took over shooting duties. His first effort and regulating our old customer's sights was disastrous through no fault of his own. His results were just different. I took a cell phone and followed, and I did my best to explain the situation. Not long thereafter a small miracle in the form of a Mantis Eye disc arrived in the mail with a directive for me to use. I've used this next time we regulated his sights.

I was stunned at how well I could shoot with the revolver again, though I did not use the entire Mark's rack on head sightimeter. This small gadget has a small, adjustable leaf that is ranging in size from about 140° to 140°. By varying the diameter, you can usually settle on a diameter that is a good compromise of clarity and illumination. It's offered to glasses with a small sticky cup and swivels on an arm, which lets you move it out of view when not engaging a target. Effective as it is, it is my backup. The disc is now I have a third component of my sight picture, which will come in handy when you are working on a shooting range in a particular shooting position, this isn't troublesome. In the field or in changing positions, it becomes a minor nuisance. Still, it is a valuable shooting aid for the varmints.

More Goodies

Similar to the Mantis Eye disc in principle are the stick-on apertures from Crossfire. These little stick-on plastic or plastic pins are easy to install. They are not as versatile as the Mantis device, but they are easy to use. I do not find the fact that the discs are a little hard to move as the leaf is a bit more flexible. The Mantis disc, though, are not as convenient as the Mantis device with respect to local shooting conditions. As with the Mantis disc, the discs require some getting used to since you have to align them simultaneously.

Scopes and dot sights are often the least resort for handgun shooters suffering from presbyopia since the optical lens package do the work of a set of good eyes. A practicing Luddite, I have a hard time warming up to scopes and optical gadgets on handguns since these contraptions destroy the quick handling and general effectiveness of belt guns by adding weight and bulk. Still, if you can't see to shoot anymore, they are a small price to pay. In my experience, the dot's display contraptions are typically smaller and lighter and do the least amount of harm to the gun. I suppose if I were a serious handgun varmint hunter, a conventional scope would get the nod by virtue of precision. By using very low-power scopes, such as the Leupold VX 3i, you don't add a great deal more weight and size by comparison to the red dot cans.

RIFLE shooters have better time of it since scopes detect relatively less from portability and hardness. Further, scopes have been on rise now for more than 150 years now and do not offend delicate sensitivities as much. However, as with handguns, there are some rifles that simplify cannot gracefully accommodate optics or even spotters sights so options to improve shooter performance may be limited to visual aids.

Super Focus

Here, I'll hand off to Editor Roy since he's the one who discovered those dandy glasses.

"Okay, these are cool," he told me. "Basically you have a pair of glasses around your distance prescription. They go on both sides, and the center one (closest to your eye) is flexible. The space between the outside and inside lenses is filled with clear liquid. When you move the slider on the bridge above your nose, it changes the focus of the lenses, allowing you to go from close, medium to distance, or anywhere in between. The SuperFocus glasses mimic what your eyes used to be able to do when they were young and flexible. The first time I used them, I suddenly saw the sharp sight picture I remember from the old days — not that I'm as old as you, mind you."

Roy said with the SuperFocus glasses, he can actually get sharp sight pictures simply by sliding the focus bar, and can favor the rear, front, target, or get a nice blend of all three. Darnest thing if you ask me. Maybe there's hope for all of us. I have to be polite to him though, or I'd address the cloud about our eyes.

Since the advent of squinting, the physical clock 20 or 30 years, there's no way you will ever recover the level of visual acuity you once had. Still, there are several ways to keep shooting effectively that are neither complicated nor overly expensive. You will have to do a little experimenting to find the course of action best for your optical circumstances, but don't give up. If my experience is any indicator, there is hope for most of us. They say growing old is not for sissies, but quitters finish last no matter what.

Author's note: A particular thanks to Dr. Allyn Hildebrandt of Campbell, Cunningham and Taylor, P. C., who let a gun-toting patient into his office, provided a life-changing prescription for my shooting glasses and who kindly read this article for technical accuracy.

For more info www.americangunner.com/product-index and click on the company name.