

The Way of the Sixgun: An American Martial Art

With culture around us apparently in decline, it's worth celebrating uniquely American traditions, especially growing ones. And few activities could be more American than the marksmanship sport of Old West-style shooting.

The increasingly popular shooting matches of the National Congress of Old West Shooters and the Single Action Shooting Society are perhaps more than a healthy sport. Old West-style shooting could be considered the quintessential "American Martial Art."

Consider the characteristics of the best-known Asian martial arts. They descend from practical fighting systems and can still be used for self-defense. Most hobbyists, however, practice them for refinement of character and, to be honest, the fun of daydreams fulfilled in simulated combat. Historic or quasi-historic costumes are worn, both for practice and competition. While an impression of great antiquity is part of Eastern martial art lore, many of the most popular date back only to the 19th century or are even more recent. (Judo was developed in the 1880s and Aikido was formally named in 1942.)

Many of the martial arts developed sport forms to practice skills safely. Also, it's undeniable that action movies featuring the Asian martial arts have had a huge impact on how they're viewed, and taught.

In Old West style shooting, practiced at clubs around the United States, all of these conditions apply. A combat activity native to our culture and important in our folklore, a set of fighting skills with a rich tradition and history, has been formalized into a martial art.

Not that these shooters necessarily take themselves quite so

seriously. Old West shooters are fanatical about safety, but often lighthearted about almost everything else.

For instance, while the Single Action Shooting Society requires members to dress to suit the sport, they may choose historical impressions, or a “B-Western” look. Shooting aliases often include wordplay, and a day’s shooting scenario (every scenario is different!) is frequently inspired by a beloved movie scene and may begin with the shooter uttering a designated line (“Telegram for Mongo!”).

Don’t let those details mislead you, however. Old West shooters cultivate very impressive skills.

A three-weapon routine is common at such events, alternating among shotgun (double-barrel or pump), lever-action carbine, and classic “sixguns.” Engaging steel targets with the correct weapons in a designated order constitute the [“kata”](#) of the art.

Just as Asian martial arts keep obsolete weapons like [nunchaku](#) or [tonfa](#) on the market, the Cowboy Action scene preserves a market for 19th-century firearm designs and the ammunition to suit. None of those weapons are semiautomatic; none ought to offend the sensibilities of those gun-grabbers whose complaint is “modern military weapons.” Masters of the proper sixgun skills can, nevertheless, approach the Western novel cliché of “emptying the cylinder in one continuous roar.”

We usually think of the martial arts as “empty hand” combatives, but at least one of the most famous—[kendo](#)—originally relied on a specialized, high-quality steel weapon, just as Old West shooting does.

It’s worth mentioning: just as the Japanese sword arts have an adjunct “fast draw” division, in techniques referred to as “iai-jutsu,” the American art has a fast-draw specialty. Fast-draw, though, is not connected with the Western-style range events, and would get you ejected from them. In their own

martial hobby, fast-draw artists, with wax bullets, promote a tradition which is a legacy of Hollywood's Westerns rather than the American frontier; single-action fast draw was refined for showmanship in the movies. Not nearly as popular as the three-gun Old West live fire sports, "fast draw" nonetheless has devotees around the world. Each seeks his inner cowboy as avidly as any teenage boy wishes to be a ninja.

The quest is the same—and need not be a foolish one. Beneath the fancy trappings, either can be the cultivation of mental calm and a capacity for sudden, effective action.

When our forefathers deliberated over the form of the new American society in the late 1700s, there was very little (if any) disagreement about what our citizens ought to be like under pressure. We Americans were to be brave and formidable. Our Second Amendment was not just about an ability to grab private weapons in an emergency; you can't raise an effective militia from a population that doesn't invest time and pride in developing martial skills.

The Founders enjoyed such a culture and perpetuated it. The resulting social climate gave us Annie Oakley and Audie Murphy in real life, and in our imaginations, the cowboy ideal so many of our heroes of the 20th century shared.

What better way, then, to promote American greatness, than to encourage this terrific all-American activity? The six-gun toting cowboy cliché, which the Left despises, represents the *best* in the American spirit. The more Americans take up the traditional tools of our heroes, the better. So "support your local gunfighter"—or better yet, fill yer own hand.

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