

WAY OF THE GUN: ANCIENT JAPAN TO MODERN AMERICA

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# WAY OF THE GUN

Hojutsu Teaches Defensive Shooting as a Martial Art

by massad ayooob • photos by gail pepin

## THE KATA IS UNDER WAY.

You block the invisible blow and counter with a reverse punch and a front snap kick. Sensing danger to your flank, you pivot to face the threat as you draw your pistol from the holster on your *obi* (belt) and ...

Wait a minute! What was that?

Welcome to *hojutsu*, the martial art of the handgun. Born in the 1530s when the Portuguese first brought gunpowder to Japan, the system—which literally means “fire skill” but is more loosely translated as the art of firearms—flourished for a time but ultimately fell dormant. Resurrected and modernized in the early 2000s in the United States by Jeff Hall, it’s been quantified as the first modern small-arms shooting system in the mold of the traditional martial arts.

Hall, recognized as the *soke* of the system by the United States Martial Arts Hall of Fame, the Universal Martial Arts Hall of Fame and the World Sokeship Council, is a traditional martial artist with roots that go back to the early 1980s. A fourth-degree black belt in *shudokan* karate, he’s also a third degree in *hakka-ryu jujutsu* and Okinawan *kobudo*. He’s studied under several renowned masters, including Tak Kubota, Kiyoshi Yamazaki, Dr. Charles Scott and Wally Jay.

It was Yamazaki, he says, who gave him the epiphany that convinced him to revitalize the long-lost martial art. >>



## THE LIGHT BULB TURNS ON

On that inspirational day in the early 2000s, Yamazaki told his class that the key elements of effective karate were stance, balance, focus, execution of technique and follow-through. Hall, who'd been a police firearms instructor nearly as long as he'd been a *karateka*—realized that those same principles formed the core of effective shooting. He'd long dreamed of a martial art that would combine shooting with *bushido*, and at that moment, he resolved to make it.

For Hall, the concept was more than academic. At that time, he was approaching retirement from a distinguished, decades-long career with the Alaska State Troopers. Because those officers cover huge areas of rural Alaska without backup, he realized early on that when the going got tough, he needed more than his strapping 6-foot-4-inch frame to come out intact. His martial arts training allowed him to win fights that were often stacked against him, not just with skill but with the confidence and determination he'd learned in the *dojo*.

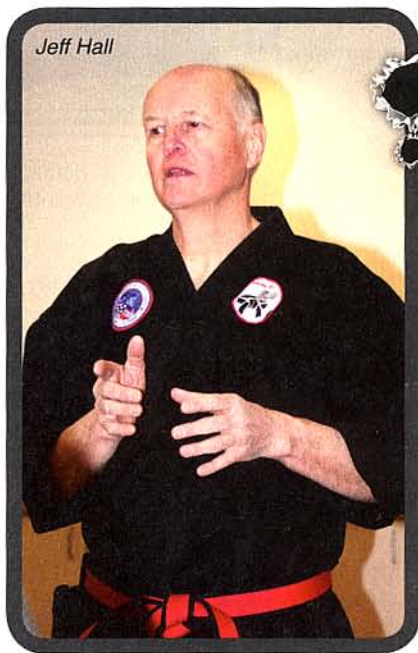
For much of his career, Hall was a member of the SWAT team, and over the years, he'd won more than a few gunfights. That helped him understand the importance of infusing the discipline and self-confidence of the *dojo* into men who carried, and sometimes used, guns as tools of their trade. While teaching police around the country, his most famous lecture was one he called "Finish the Fight," and it drew as much from his martial arts background as it did from his law-enforcement experience.

"Many famous martial artists who've graced the cover of *Black Belt* have integrated firearms into their personal defensive skill set—some conspicuously, like Chuck Norris and Steven Seagal, and some quietly, like Bill Wallace and Graciela Casillas."

### JEFF COOPER'S FOUR RULES OF FIREARMS SAFETY

1. EVERY FIREARM IS ALWAYS LOADED.
2. NEVER POINT THE GUN AT ANYTHING YOU ARE NOT PREPARED TO DESTROY.
3. KEEP YOUR FINGER OUT OF THE TRIGGER GUARD UNTIL YOU ARE ON TARGET (AND INTENDING TO FIRE).
4. ALWAYS BE CERTAIN OF YOUR TARGET AND WHAT IS BEHIND IT.

Jeff Hall



## FINDING THE MIX

Wearing your *gi* with a holster on your obi is a strange experience for several reasons. For one thing, the gun rides higher than it would on a trouser belt or police uniform belt. For another, it's a jarring incongruity.

Hall thinks it shouldn't be such a shocker.

Kobudo has the *bo* and the *sai*, the

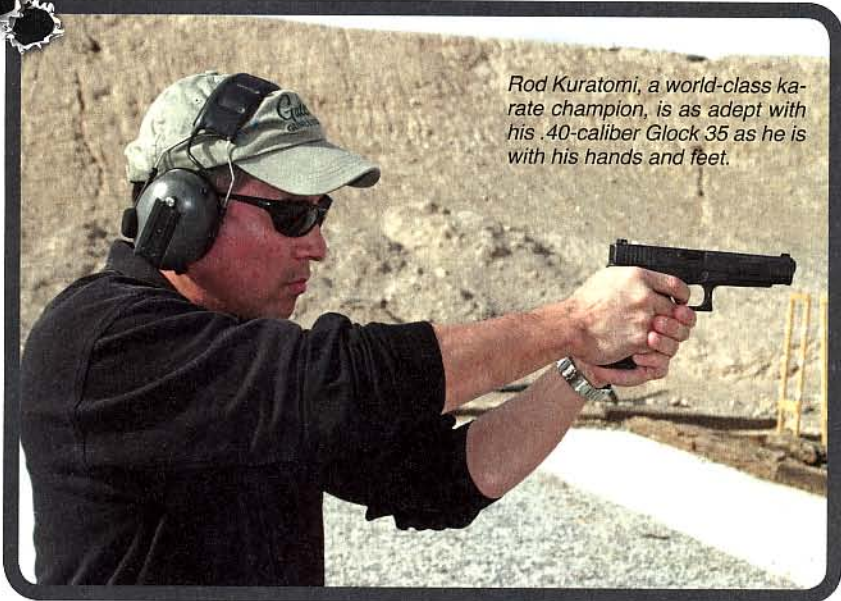
*tonfa* and the *kama* and, of course, the *nunchaku*. *laido*, *kendo* and other traditional arts revolve around the sword. *Arnis* and its mother art of *kali* focus heavily on the knife and stick.

While some purists believe that only ancient weapons have a place in the *dojo*, many practitioners have adapted to modern ways. Decades ago, Dr. Maung Gyi ignited controversy when he included the pistol and the .30-cal-

iber carbine into his teaching of Burmese *bando*. Many famous martial artists who've graced the cover of *Black Belt* have integrated firearms into their personal defensive skill set—some conspicuously, like Chuck Norris and Steven Seagal, and some quietly, like Bill Wallace and Graciela Casillas.

Hall's approach is to teach the empty hand and the gun hand together, in the same spirit of *bushido*.

"Kata work is unique to the art. It encompasses not only the traditional blocks, parries, punches, kicks and takedowns but also gun-related movements, many of them focused on countering disarm attempts."



Rod Kuratomi, a world-class karate champion, is as adept with his .40-caliber Glock 35 as he is with his hands and feet.

## THE CURRICULUM

Being a martial art of shooting, hojutsu places 90 percent of its focus on firearms, Hall says. The remainder is split between empty-hand combat and traditional, more primitive weapons such as the knife and stick. You can progress through first degree with just the pistol, but beyond that, you must broaden into the rifle and shotgun. And lest it be said that tradition is neglected in this *ryu*, know that advanced degree-holders are required to shoot black-belt-level scores with the slower, old-fashioned

revolver instead of the modern semi-automatic pistol, while their speed and accuracy with the latter is expected to advance proportionally with each promotion test. Second-degree and higher ranks are awarded only to those Hall or his instructors have seen teach and whom they've deemed to be sufficient in both dedication and teaching ability to impart the spirit of hojutsu.

To better grasp the art for the purpose of writing this article, I took a hojutsu seminar at the Las Vegas Metropolitan Police Range. It was heavily attended by law-enforcement of-

ficers, with a few civilians thrown in. A quarter of the time was spent in the makeshift dojo at a local community center. The gi, while not mandated, was strongly urged as the dress code of the day, and we bowed as we entered and left there, a practice not required on the firing range. On both the range and the mat, however, we were expected to address the instructors with the traditional titles of respect.

I learned that kata work is unique to the art. It encompasses not only the traditional blocks, parries, punches, kicks and takedowns but also gun-related movements, many of them focused on countering disarm attempts. The armed portion of the kata includes drawing and holstering with clean and positive technique. Movement with the drawn gun is emphasized over static stand-and-shoot patterns, with firing on the move resembling a stepping pattern from white-crane kung fu. Nonshooting movement incorporates a relatively recent development in the world of the gun: position sul.

In position sul, the handgun is tucked close to the body, its muzzle down and to the side, as the practitioner moves. It's designed to keep police and military raiders in stack formations from covering one another with the muzzles of their weapons as they make an entry. An old SWAT hand, Hall incorporated it into his rejuvenated and updated style of hojutsu.

The majority of the seminar was spent on the firing range. All the work was done with pistols (it was a *shodan*-level course) and distances that ranged from close contact to 50 yards. Half a football field away from the target, you could almost hear Yamazaki and Hall alike reminding you, "Focus!"

Like most great martial arts instructors, Hall is a compendium of the masters who formed him, and you can see it in some of his techniques and principles as surely as you can see a father's genes in the features of his son. One of Hall's mentors in firearms training was the late Col. Jeff Cooper, whom Dennis Martin of Britain's *International Fighting Arts* magazine once called the "Funakoshi of combat shooting."

Cooper's famous Four Rules of Firearms Safety (see sidebar) permeate hojutsu gun handling. His influence is also seen in the two-hand firing platform—the Weaver stance that he made famous, essentially an isometric push-pull executed with front-stance foot placement. >>



Inserting a pistol into a holster mounted on an obi (belt) takes some getting used to, but hojutsu practitioners become accustomed to it during kata training.



The essentials of hojutsu are the same as the essentials of karate: stance, balance, focus, execution of technique and follow-through.

## THE MELDING

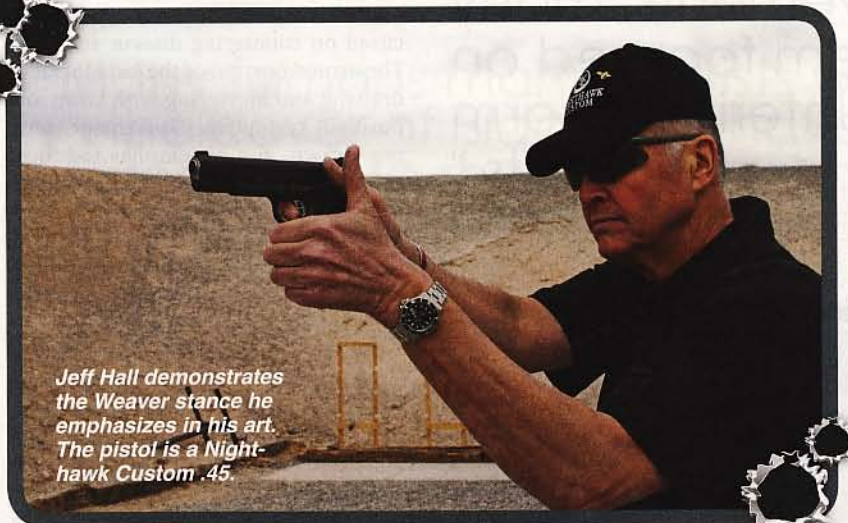
Watching advanced hojutsu practitioners is pleasing to those who already possess a background in the empty-hand arts and firearms. The flow from the punch to the draw appears seamless, rapid and fluid. After decades of teaching police officers to flow up and down law enforcement's force continuum, Hall recognized a need for the same principle in other training theaters, and he appears to have succeeded brilliantly in combining the two worlds in hojutsu.

He's found that martial artists learn the gun more quickly than shooters learn the empty-hand side of the system. He believes it comes from having a better-developed learning ability with psychomotor skills and an ingrained willingness to follow instructions. Hall's heir apparent and second in command, Rod Kuratomi, is a classic example. Kuratomi holds the same position under Kubota in *gosokuryu* karate, and before studying the gun with Hall, Kuratomi had won the grand championship in sparring and weapons at the IKA's World Cup Tournament in 2000. Today, Kuratomi flows between hand-to-hand moves and deadly accurate, high-speed live fire with a Glock .40. He's capable of delivering champion-level performances with one foot in each world.

An example Hall likes to use is the day he took Yamazaki to the range to shoot a pistol for the first time. "He'd never fired a pistol before, but at the end of his first 10 minutes, he was shooting one-inch groups with a 1911 Colt. I think that was my first inkling of how easy it is to turn a dedicated martial artist into a shooter." ✂

### About the author:

Massad Ayoob wrote for *Black Belt* and other martial arts publications extensively in the 1970s before switching to full-time instruction in weaponry and the legalities of using deadly force. For information, visit [massadayoobgroup.com](http://massadayoobgroup.com). For more information about training with Jeff Hall and Rod Kuratomi, visit [hojutsu.com](http://hojutsu.com) and [martialartofthegun.com](http://martialartofthegun.com), respectively.



Jeff Hall demonstrates the Weaver stance he emphasizes in his art. The pistol is a Night-hawk Custom .45.

# FIGHTING BACK

**Source:** More of the Deadliest Men Who Ever Lived

**Author:** Paul Kirchner

**Publisher:** Paladin Press, [paladin-press.com](http://paladin-press.com)

**Expert quoted in the chapter:** Jeff Cooper, a renowned firearms instructor and self-defense advocate

Cooper considered self-defense not so much a matter of personal choice as a positive social duty. He outlined his philosophy in *Principles of Personal Defense*:

"Violent crime is feasible only if its victims are cowards. A victim who fights back makes the whole business impractical. It is true that a victim who fights back may suffer for it, but one who does not almost certainly will suffer for it. And, suffer or not, the one who fights back retains his dignity and self-respect."