

KYDEX CARRY— THE IDPA WAY

**Six holster makers
for competition or
the real-world!**

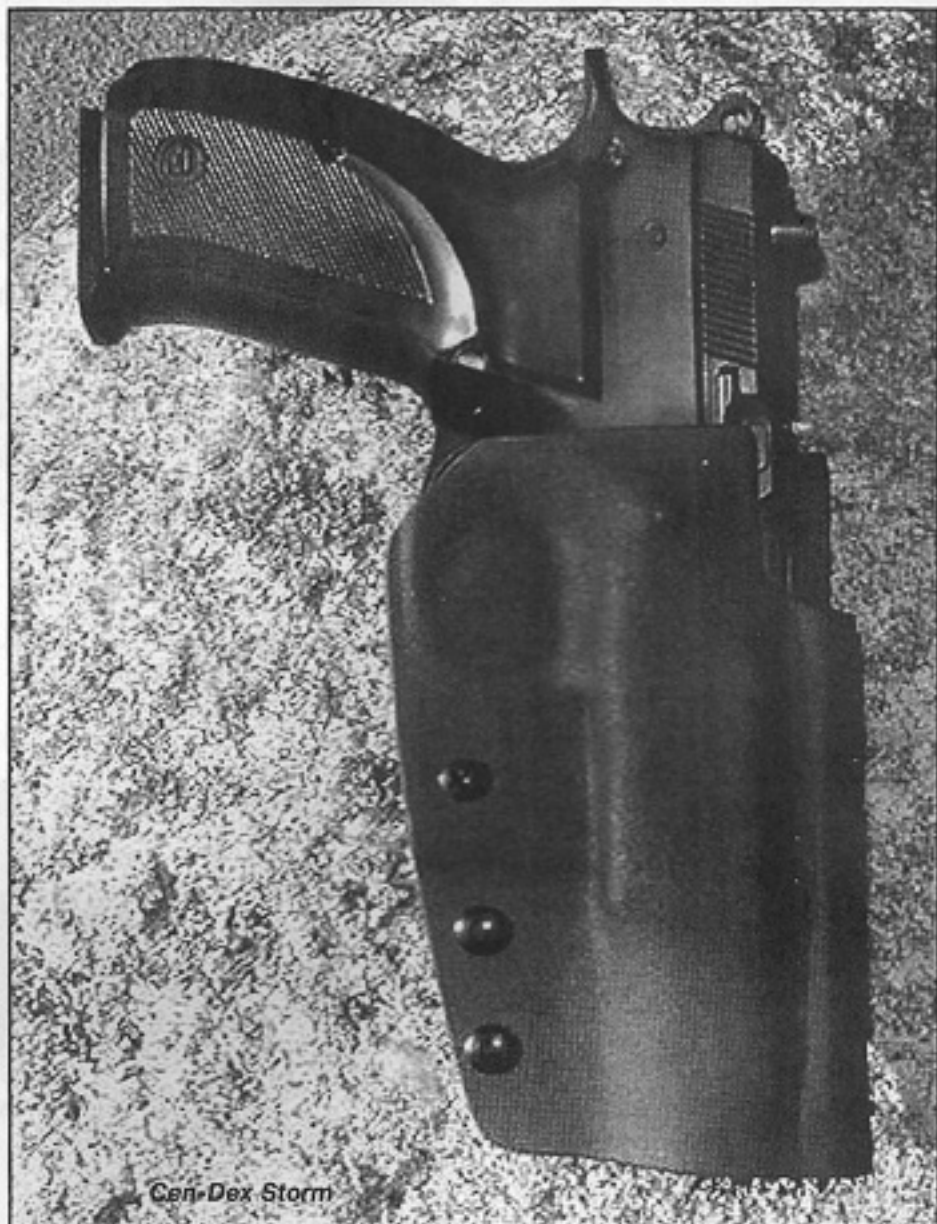
By Larry Pomykalski

Visit any local or regional IDPA match and you'll find a wide variety of guns and gear represented. But while classic 1911s are duking it out with ultra-modern GLOCKs and HKs, one thing seems constant, a vast majority of the top shooters are using modern Kydex holsters.

Talk to any dedicated Kydex holster user and you'll probably get a long list of reasons they prefer the space-age material for their competition gear: it's durable, relatively inexpensive, requires virtually no maintenance and gives a reassuringly secure fit. But the overriding reason more and more shooters are choosing Kydex for their IDPA gear is simple, it's fast. Fast right out of the box with no break-in period needed. Properly adjusted, a good Kydex holster can secure your gun against the most vigorous physical activity and still release it with the smallest tug.

Because Kydex is a thermoforming material, it can be easily shaped and molded without complex tooling, using only simple hand tools and a heat source. Once fitted to a specific gun, only another application of extremely high temperature can cause it to surrender its form. Abrasion resistance is high, and it will stand temperature extremes that would render any user non-functional long before the holster gives up. All these things conspire to make Kydex a nearly ideal material for competition holsters.

As Kydex holsters have gained in popularity, more and more holster makers have begun to work with the material. Some offer it as an adjunct to more traditional holster designs in leather, while others strictly specialize in Kydex offerings. Even some of the major players in the leather holster industry have recognized Kydex's



Cen-Dex Storm

appeal, and are now offering Kydex designs of their own.

Here's a look at some makers at the cutting edge of Kydex competition holster design.

Cen-Dex

Talk to Frank Spezzano of Cen-Dex and you'll soon realize that he doesn't aim to make competition holsters. He talks at length about simplicity of

design and ease of use for people under the stresses of shooting situations. He prides himself on the operators who use his gear in harm's way every day, and it's obvious that his focus is on holster designs that works in the real world. "I consider all my belt holsters practical for everyday carry," Frank explains. It's not his fault that competitive shooters have discovered how fast his gear is.

The Storm model is Cen-Dex's most



**Comp-Tac
Speed Paddle**



**Comp-Tac
Locking Paddle**

popular among their IDPA shooting customers. With the belt riding just even with the top of the holster, the Storm is fast without sacrificing practicality. With a moderate speed-cut and adjustable tension, the Storm offers the trademark Kydex quickness in a street-ready design.

Because a lady's physique offers different proportions than a man's, Cen-Dex offers the Lo' Boy, a holster designed specifically for a woman's needs. With more offset and a greater drop, the Lo' Boy can accommodate a woman's generally shorter torso and wider hips.

In addition to practical, competitive designs, Frank added an innovation in material selection, "PETG" (Polyethylene Terephthalate Glycol), a material similar to Kydex in its working properties, but offering one significant cosmetic advantage - it's clear! For those of you wanting a see-through competition holster in a proven design, Cen-Dex now offers all their models in see-through PETG at no extra charge.

Frank was able to send along one clear and black Storm for evaluation, each with a single magazine pouch to match. I had asked for them to be fitted to a GLOCK 35.

The Storm features a relatively low drop with a moderate speed cut, and rides close enough to the body to use as a casual concealment rig. There's



At the ready with Comp-Tac Speed Paddle.

clearance for a full grip prior to drawing, and the holster is rigid enough to maintain a consistent position on the belt. The sight channel should be sufficient for most sights, although very high target sights might require a call to Frank for an extra bit of clearance.

An interesting feature of the Cen-Dex design is the two fixed rivets that work in conjunction with the adjustable tension screw to retain the weapon. Even if the tension screw were to back out, a safe level of retention would be assured through the fixed rivets and built-in molding. This, along with riveted construction for the belt loop, combines to create a very thin overall

profile for the holster and magazine pouches.

The clear PETG material drew comments from everyone who saw it. While Frank downplays its importance ("It's not really an innovation, just another material choice"), it certainly sets the Cen-Dex gear apart, and works great to boot.

Frank Spezzano and Cen-Dex are putting out some quality gear.

Comp-Tac

Gregg Garrett has only been selling holsters for a few years, and already he's expanding his shop to keep up

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with demand. While most makers are struggling to find dealers and outlets for their products, Gregg has chosen to limit distribution to focus on customer service and reasonable turnaround times. The result is that even custom orders seldom take more than a week to leave his Texas workshop, and most models are done and shipped within a day or two of being ordered.

With a strong background in firearms training and personal protection, Garrett has experience with handguns from a professional's perspective. In fact, his search for the perfect paddle holster helped lead him to the holster business. "I was dissatisfied with the paddle holsters on the market. Most allow the gun to rock on the belt, and I realized that with a better design I could make a paddle holster that was even more stable than a belt model," Gregg explains.

The two Comp-Tac models that are most popular with Gregg's IDPA shooting customers are the Speed Paddle and aforementioned Locking Paddle.

With widely spaced hooks that clip under the belt, the Speed Paddle features a wide fold and paddle to promote stability on the belt. Tensioning screws let the user adjust retention and draw characteristics, while an IDPA legal speed cut minimizes the distance the weapon must travel on its way out of the holster and onto the target.

The Locking Paddle takes Comp-Tac's paddle design a step further, adding two locking tabs that hook under the belt from the front. Once attached, the holster is as secure and stable as any belt holster, yet it can be removed and replaced without removing the belt.

Gregg was kind enough to send along a Locking Paddle sized to fit the GLOCK 35. He also sent along a Speed Paddle holster for a full-size 1911, and double magazine pouches for each.

The first thing you notice about the Locking Paddle is the two locking 'wings' on the back of the holster. After the oversized paddle is inserted under the belt, the two wings slip under from the front, completely locking the holster in place. While it might take a minute to realize how to snap it onto the belt, it's an "aha!" moment when you realize how simply and securely it connects. Although I haven't been a great fan of paddle holsters in the past, the Locking Paddle was completely stable when



doing presentations, even when using a lightweight 1-inch dress belt! With a proper gun belt, it was more secure than most solid loop holsters.

While the Speed Paddle lacks the extra wings of the Locking Paddle, its extra-wide paddle with its belt-gripping tabs is nearly as secure. The holster is quick on and off, and stable during even the fastest presentations.

Speaking of fast presentations, the Comp-Tac holsters both shared impressive speed. While evidencing solid retention with the holster fully seated, both required minimal movement to free the gun. The result was draw times faster than I've gotten with any other rig, combined with a reassuring degree of security with the weapon holstered.

The double magazine pouches matched the innovative design of the holsters, and were both secure and fast with a high degree of comfort due to their pre-curved mounting system.

I had the opportunity to shoot a local match with the Comp-Tac Locking

Paddle and Gregg's magazine pouches. The paddle design allowed for placement anywhere on the belt, which was very convenient. I also found my draws were noticeably quicker than with my usual rig, and comfort was very good. In fact, my usual routine of 'draw, shoot, adjust holster' was forgotten, as the Comp-Tac gear didn't shift once throughout the match.

While it's not the most concealable holster Comp-Tac offers, the Speed Paddle and Locking Paddle combine impressive security with truly remarkable speed of draw. It's hard to imagine a better design for the competitive IDPA shooter.

Sidearmor

A quick visit to any IDPA match will quickly demonstrate the two competing philosophies of the competitors. There are those who follow the rules precisely, taking every competitive advantage allowed by the spirit and letter of the rulebook; and there are those that 'practice what they preach' and use smaller guns, inside-the-waistband holsters and real concealment garments. While neither is necessarily right or wrong, their equipment differs significantly.

Sidearmor and Jeff Costa are probably best known for their remarkably successful inside-the-waistband holster. While they also produce an equally well-designed belt holster, it's their IWB design that has caught the attention of knowledgeable shooters looking for a durable and comfortable concealment rig. Among IDPA shooters who choose to use truly practical, concealable equipment, Sidearmor's IWB design has found a number of fans in the few short years it's been in production.

Jeff was kind enough to send a model IWB out, sized for the 1911, for an evaluation and shake-down. The first impression when opening the package was that there certainly was something unique about Sidearmor's product. With detailed molding that seems almost too crisp, finished edges that are flawlessly detailed and perfectly formed curves and belt loops, Sidearmor's product raises the bar for Kydex construction.

The design is also a good one, with the gun carried at a 15-degree cant (others are available) and riding at the right height for concealment without sacrificing access to the pistol. There's a generous sight track, and a projection on the inner side of the holster protects the wearer from the hammer and rear sight while at the same time preventing anything from inadvertently brushing the safety off. Retention is just right for an inside-the-waistband holster, with the gun retained against



DeSantis
The Jackal

any reasonable movement. The belt loops are positioned correctly to pull the holster in without poking anywhere, and the holster positions the firearm securely for a consistent draw stroke.

For a competitor looking for a realistic IWB rig for competition, or a CCW holder looking for an everyday carry holster, Sidearmor offers a top quality concealment rig that offers a level of precision that's simply not available anywhere else.

Bulman Gunleather

For a number of years now Bulman Gunleather has been making serious, and seriously beautiful, leather concealment rigs for a demanding clientele. With gorgeous hand molding, solid designs and a great attention to detail, Bulman's leather work is the stuff a real leather aficionado dreams of. By now you're probably wondering what a fellow known for top quality leather gear is doing in a review of Kydex IDPA holsters. The truth is, Josh Bulman has found an innovative and interesting way to marry the beauty and comfort of leather with the rigidity and durability of Kydex.

Josh's SBS-2 appears at first glance to be a top-quality, hand made and finished piece of leatherwork. And it is, but it's just built on a hidden frame of Kydex. With the Kydex lending all the support its known for, the leather that covers the outside and inside of this unusual design can work to protect the gun's finish while giving it that special look only leather can provide.

How's it work? Based on the evaluation sample I used, it works just as Josh intended. While possibly a smidgen slower than a full Kydex rig at first, the holster quickly works in to a slick and fast draw as the leather lining breaks in. Carrying the gun in the popular vertical position, I found a

Ken Hackathorn: IDPA Holster Designs

At nearly every IDPA match you attend you'll hear shooters discussing and debating what holsters are approved for competition and why. The IDPA publishes a list on their website (www.idpa.com) that specifically names each manufacturer's models that are approved for use in IDPA, and even some which are specifically disallowed. The rule is simple—if it's not on the approved list, you can't use it in IDPA competition. But the process by which holsters get approved remains a mystery to many shooters.

To get the straight story on how a holster is (or isn't) approved for use in IDPA competition, I decided to go straight to the source, Ken Hackathorn, a founding member of the International Defensive Pistol Association and previously the head of the holster committee. During his tenure Ken was the one to make the final decision on whether a holster will be allowed in IDPA sanctioned matches.

"When we formed IDPA, we probably spent a third of our time discussing holsters," Ken recounts with a chuckle. "We wanted to limit designs to practical holsters for real-world carry, and that's harder to define than it seems. 'Practical' is like

pornography—everyone knows it when they see it, but it's hard to put down in writing."

The foundation of IDPA approved holster design is a requirement that the holster be worn on the strong side, behind the centerline of the body. While Ken readily admits that some people can effectively use crossdraw or shoulder holsters in day-to-day concealed carry, a decision had to be made on how best to safely run thousands of shooters through hundreds of events around the world. "Crossdraws and shoulder holsters are problematic for range officers, so we decided not to allow them in competition," Hackathorn explains.

Other limitations were designed to retain the 'realistic' spirit the founders of IDPA sought to maintain; 'speed cuts' to the front of the holster are limited in size, the gun must ride close to the body and the holster must be really concealable—no muzzle-forward designs are allowed. Ken says that the trend toward Kydex holsters is easy to understand from one perspective, "They're fast, even with a sufficient amount of retention. In the years since IDPA started, we've watched holster material go from about 80% leather and 20% Kydex to just about the reverse."

So there we have it, a little insight from the IDPA's holster expert.



At ready with DeSantis The Jackal.

1911 to ride comfortably and securely, while offering quick access in a variety of positions on the belt. A generous sight track and good access to the gun's grip allow for smooth drawing and reinsertion of the pistol.

If you simply must have the look of leather, and crave the speed of Kydex, Bulman Gunleather's SBS-2 offers the

best of both worlds. Perhaps best of all, nobody will know that the speed of Kydex is lurking in your new leather holster!

DeSantis Gunhide

DeSantis Gunhide needs no introduction to any serious shooter. Begun as a small operation by Gene DeSantis roughly 30 years ago, DeSantis Gunhide has grown into one of the powerhouse leather holster and accessory makers. And while still committed to their core product lines of leather, DeSantis is also becoming a major player in the Kydex holster market.

"Kydex is really not new to us," Gene explains. "We've been using the material for decades." With holsters like the Pro-Fed, a Kydex paddle design covered in a synthetic to resemble leather, DeSantis was doing Kydex before the look of 'plastic' holsters became accepted. With the company's Nite Watch and The Jackal models, they've joined the conventional Kydex market in a big way.

Constructed of sheet Kydex material just like the smaller, custom makers use, the Nite Watch and The Jackal

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models are produced in greater quantity using modern production methods, which allows DeSantis to offer a significant savings to the customer. Of folded construction, the two models differ primarily in belt mounting – the Nite Watch being a conventional belt holster while The Jackal is an innovative paddle design. An inside-the-waistband model is also offered, called appropriately, the IWB. All are offered for a wide variety of gun models.

Interested in what this classic gunleather designer would offer in their Kydex line, I ordered an evaluation holster to review. I received a Nite Watch fitted for a GLOCK 17/22 and The Jackal fitted for a 1911.

The quality is what you'd expect from a name like DeSantis with smoothly finished edges and crisply molded details. I found the paddle fitted to The Jackal to be comfortable and stable, due in part to the two belt hooks that secure the holster to the belt. The Nite Watch uses a very functional belt loop with a slot for a trouser loop, and mounts the gun at a slight, very comfortable muzzle-forward cant.

Draws from both holsters were smooth, and tension was easy to adjust. All in all, I found these DeSantis products every bit as attractive and functional as some much more expensive hand-made holsters, and at a price that brings quality Kydex gear into the mainstream.

DeSantis continues their tradition of quality Gunhide, only now, that 'hide' might be Kydex, rather than their traditional cowhide.

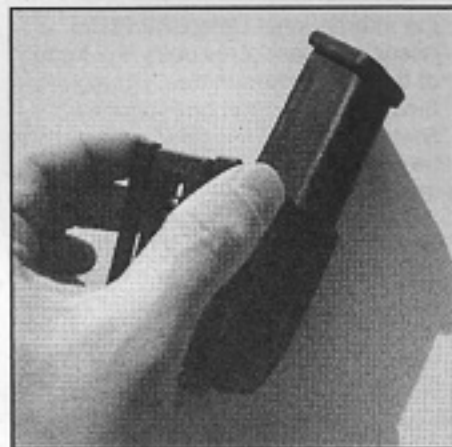
Blade-Tech

Tim Wegner and Blade-Tech have been at the cutting edge of the Kydex revolution right from day one. At any IDPA match, Blade-Tech holsters are almost always well-represented, and for good reason. Tim has managed to figure out the Kydex design and manufacturing processes that make for some very fast, very durable products.

Starting with a small shop in his home, Wegner has built Blade-Tech into a corporation that specializes in a wide variety of Kydex gear for special operators, competitors and law enforcement officers. The dedication Tim brings to his design work is evident when you handle his gear. I was sent a variety of Blade-Tech holsters and pouches to evaluate, and



*Blade-Tech
Belt Holster*



*Blade-Tech single mag pouch with
Tek-Lok belt attachment.*

they demonstrate a consistent theme of good design, excellent execution and real understanding of the issues and concerns of both competitors and tactical operators. Tension adjustments are meaningful, and draws are consistent and very quick. There are no sharp edges and the detailing inside the holsters is as good as the detailing outside the holsters—to my mind, a real sign of thorough attention to detail.

Of the holsters and pouches I had the opportunity to use, three bear special mention. The first is the holster that has made Blade-Tech's mark in IDPA, the straight drop Belt Holster design. While still available in its original, semi-custom form, this holster was recently introduced in an injection-molded version that brings quality design and execution in synthetic holsters to a whole new price range. My sample was fully as fast as its sheet Kydex counterpart, releasing the gun easily on the draw while retaining it securely while moving. It even shares the innovative shim system Wegner designed, a truly simple and effective way to allow one holster to fit 1-1/4 to

1-3/4 inch belts securely. Both the injection molded and sheet formed belt holster are hard to beat for IDPA competition, and fully capable of concealed carry with the right clothing.

The other remarkable product that Blade-Tech sent out was their single magazine pouch design with Tim's Tek-Lok belt attachment. This innovative clip allows you to snap the pouch onto your belt without removing it, and keeps it there very securely. It's also adjustable for various belt widths, and even reversible, should that work better for your needs.

There's a reason so many top level IDPA shooters have chosen Blade-Tech gear. Quality, value and innovation are what Tim Wegner's crew is all about, and any serious competitor should check out their stuff when shopping for a new rig.

Final Notes

Competitive shooting drives the technology that will eventually influence the gear law enforcement and armed civilians use everyday. Kydex, or Kydex hybrids, are now used in much of the state-of-the-art police duty and SRT gear, with more being developed even as we speak. And one important test lab for that gear is the shooting sports, including IDPA competition.

Whether you're looking for a faster draw and a competitive edge in your next IDPA match, or you just like having the fastest presentation possible for your defensive weapon, you owe it to yourself to investigate these synthetic marvels. ■

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