

Crafting Your Own Leather Part 2: The Holster “Eight Bits” SASS# 25618L

In my last article I showed you how to make a shooting cuff. We also learned the basics of preparing, finishing, lining and stitching. In this article we're going to work on a holster, which is a slightly more complicated project. With this project you will need to plan ahead, and whenever possible, practice on scrap leather until you feel confident enough to proceed with your project.



Pattern:

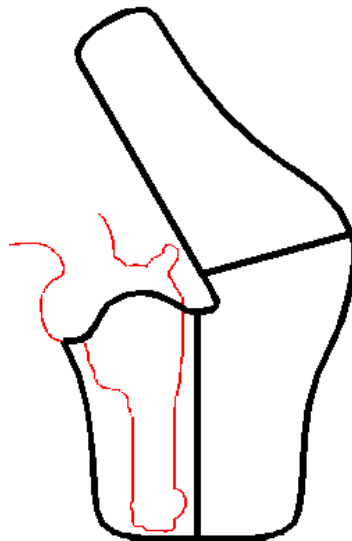
Once again, we will begin by making a pattern out of paper. Your pattern is very important because it determines how your final project will look. Make sure your pattern is exactly how you want it before you cut your leather. It's much easier and cheaper to throw away and redo a pattern than an entire project. Again, you can get ideas for holsters by browsing through catalogs, gun stores, and checking out the rigs of your posse members. First you need a tracing of your gun. A typical western or Mexican-style holster requires a large pattern, so begin by taping four sheets of white paper together to make one large, square sheet. If you have access to butcher paper, tear off a large piece. Next, fold the paper in half then open it up so there is a crease down the middle. Turn the paper over so the fold is up.

Now, **be sure your pistol is unloaded**, then place it on the paper so that the middle of the top strap and front sight are on the fold with the muzzle facing away from you. Carefully roll your pistol so it lays flat on the paper. Roll it to the right if you are making a right-handed holster, or to the left for a left-handed holster. It really makes no difference which way you roll the pistol. What is important, however, is how you lay the pattern onto the leather. Take a felt pen with a thick tip (not a wide felt-tip marker) and carefully trace completely around the pistol. Try not to move the pistol in relation to the fold. After you are done, place your pistol in a safe place. You may want to make some photocopies of the tracing just in case.

Now that you have the tracing, you are ready to design your holster. With a PENCIL draw the shape of the holster around the tracing of your pistol starting and ending at the fold. This will be the outside/front of the holster. You must leave at least 1/2" all around the pistol. This allows for the thickness of the leather, and leaves room for the stitching. You can leave more if you want a looser fit. If your first attempt doesn't look right, simply erase it and try again.

After you have completed your drawing, take a pair of scissors and carefully cut from the fold, along your holster pattern back to the fold. Now fold the cut-out pattern and trace around it on the back of the paper, **but do not cut it out yet!** The back and flap (or skirt) of the holster are shaped somewhat differently than the front. After tracing the pattern front, unfold the paper and continue drawing the back and flap of the holster. You may have to continuously fold the pattern to accurately draw the shape of the back and flap. When you have completed drawing your pattern, you may finish cutting it out.

The accompanying diagram shows my pattern for a cross-draw holster that fits a Ruger® Vaquero® with a 4 5/8" barrel. Notice the angle of the flap; this angle determines the angle of the holster. This pattern is set to 30 degrees, which is the SASS® legal maximum. I usually create my patterns using a computer by scanning the tracing, then using a draw program to do the design work.



Cutting and Preparing the Leather:

Trace and cut your leather as described in my previous article. I use 9-10 ounce leather for my holsters. Now it's time to make some decisions regarding how you plan to stitch your leather. If you are going to line your holster with suede take your grooving tool and cut a groove completely around the leather. (Practice on a scrap piece, first!) If you are not going to line your holster, then you will only need to stitch the seam where the holster is folded and meets the back. For an unlined holster you only need to cut a groove along the edge of the holster that will be stitched. However, you may want to cut the groove

completely around the leather even though it won't be lined as this makes a more professionally looking finished project. When you bevel the edges you do not want to bevel the inside edges where two pieces of leather come together. Bevel all other edges and slick them.

If you want your holster to be tightly molded to your pistol, do not add the final finish at this time. If you want your holster to be loosely molded or just have a general shape, you can apply the final finish. Glue the lining to your holster as previously described.

Stitching:

Once again, we first need to mark the stitches using the overstretch wheel. As I mentioned before, it's best to start in a corner, or where two grooves meet at a sharp angle. For a lined holster you need to overstretch the entire groove. For an unlined holster, only overstretch the groove that will stitch the holster together.

Drill your 1/16" holes and begin stitching. When stitching the two halves of your holster together, fold the front half with the suede inside so the edge meets the edge of the back half and hold it in place with a clip or clothespin. Push the needles through both sides and make sure the holes line up (some variance is ok). After each stitch, pull the thread tight. Continue stitching your project until all holes have stitches, then install the lock stitches and cut the leftover thread flush with the leather.

Molding:

The final step to finishing your project is to mold the holster to your gun. Fill a sink with warm water and totally immerse the holster. Leave it in for a few minutes until the leather becomes soft and pliable. **Be sure your pistol is unloaded**, then put it into a plastic bag and insert it into the holster. Mold the leather around the pistol, and at this time fold the flap and crease it. Remove the pistol and allow the holster to dry. You may need to add some oil to the surface of the pistol if it becomes wet. As the holster dries, you should insert the plastic-wrapped pistol a few more times so it maintains its shape. You may also want to flare out the top edge of the holster so the pistol doesn't hang up when you insert it.

If you haven't added the final finish yet you may have to apply one more coat of dye after the holster dries because the water has a tendency to leech some of the dye out of the leather. After the dye dries you can apply the final finish.

After the holster dries you can add the retaining belt or strap that holds the flap to the holster. This is easily accomplished by drilling holes through the flap and strap and attaching them with a leather thong (I use leather boot laces). For a Mexican-style holster you can cut the retaining strap(s) from the back flap. Be careful that you do NOT cut from edge to edge or you will cut off the flap! You can make the retaining strap more classy by grooving it, beveling and slicking the edges, and adding stitching. Now assemble your holster onto your gun belt. For the finishing touches, drill two holes through the bottom of the flap and bottom of the holster and thread some leather thong through the holes and tie it in back. This will keep the holster together and keep it from

“flapping” when you draw the gun. You can also drill two holes through the back flap near the top front of the holster and thread a piece of thong for a safety strap. Fit your holster onto your gun belt first so you can locate the exact placement of these holes. On my holster I added a silver concho to the retaining strap and outlined it with stitches made of silver thread.

Congratulations, you now have a hand-made, custom holster designed especially for your particular pistol. Once again, remember to go slow, don't cut any leather until your pattern is just right, and practice on scrap leather. In my next article I'll show you how to make a gun belt to match this holster. Shoot fast, shoot straight, be safe, but most of all, have fun.