

50TH ANNIVERSARY 1975 - 2025

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IN IT TO WIN IT

Competition drove the evolution of pistol-mounted red dots.

By Patrick Sweeney

The range was abuzz. “Jerry is using a scope!” This was the 1990 USPSA Nationals, and we were just getting used to the idea of double-stack Supers as a competition tool. Those were the wild and wooly days of IPSC. At every match, someone made an improvement in equipment. Some were marginal, but others were groundbreaking. Jerry Barnhart’s use of a red-dot optic was in the latter category.

Barnhart won the Nationals a few years earlier with iron sights. By 1990, he used a pistol-mounted red dot in a few matches, which is how he knew it was a winner. By then, Aimpoint was already experienced in designing and manufacturing red-dot optics. In those 16 years, they had gone through multiple generations of optics, evolving and upgrading each step of the way. But the idea of putting a red dot onto a pistol for practical competition? That was new.

Also new was the idea of the professional shooter. Smith & Wesson had formed a competition team, and Barnhart had signed

with Colt. His single-stack .38 Super with a red-dot optic was the talk of the match as were the contracts for shooters sponsored by S&W, Springfield Armory, and Colt.

There had already been some experimenting with the use of optics in Bullseye matches, but in 1990, an IPSC Open gun was a different beast. Most of us were using .38 Super chamberings (J. Michael Plaxco used one of the brand-new .40 S&W pistols that year). To make Major with a .38 Super in 1990, you had to fire 125-grain JHPs at over 1,400 fps. The muzzle blast was ferocious, and the vibration and sharpness of the recoil was off the charts.

Looking back, there were two kinds of red dots in use: Aimpoints and everything else. The non-Aimpoint optics had to be rebuilt to make them strong enough to handle the abuse. Optics were sent off with a big check to someone who could perform “surgery.” They were cut open, soldered, glued, reinforced, and then closed up.

How did it work? In 1991, we all had red dots. A shooter on my squad had a box full of non-Aimpoint red dots. Each was pre-zeroed, and when one broke, he would replace it with one that hadn’t broken yet, as he expected to do that at least once a day in a week-long match.

How about the Aimpoint crowd? They spent their time shooting and their money on more practice ammo.

At the 1990 Nationals, there was at least one other shooter using a red dot. I’d like to say that Barnhart ran away with the match, but it was a close competition. He just edged out the returning champion, Robbie Leatham, by

IN IT TO WIN IT



In the '90s, professional shooter Todd Jarrett used an Aimpoint MagDot with his competition pistol.

the slimmest of margins. But in a sport where slimmest of margins reflected the normal match standings, that was a margin everyone had to have. Later that year, Doug Koenig used a red dot at the IPSC World Shoot to take gold.

You may wonder, “How bad could a .38 Super Major be on guns and optics?” Well, Koenig was running a Springfield Armory model P9, a CZ 75 clone in 9mm Major that was even more ferocious than .38 Super Major. The lower half of the rings on his pistol were welded to the mount, and the mount was bolted to the frame.

The next year, there were so many red-dot-equipped pistols that anyone shooting with iron sights had no chance whatsoever at making the shoot-offs at the end of the match. In 1992, the USPSA split the Nationals competition into two divisions: Open and Limited. Open was just that. Limited Division restricted capacity, calibers, and compensators. Red dots were not allowed. Barnhart came back in 1992 to win the Open Nationals, and in 1993, he won Limited. He went on to win Limited again in 1995. To prove it could be done, he won both Open and Limited in 1996.



By then, USPSA was fully into high-capacity pistols in both Open and Limited, and red dots were the default in Open. Red dots were fully accepted on rifles in USPSA 3-Gun competition (the precursor to Multi-Gun), and they just kept getting smaller, tougher, and longer-lasting.

Divisional separations continued as it became clear that as shooters reached the peak of performance, gear mattered more and more. In 2006, the USPSA adopted the Single Stack Division, but it was denied optics. With the growing interest in red dots on everyday carry pistols, the USPSA introduced the Carry Optics Division in 2016. Today, it's the division with the largest attendance at almost all matches. Whether it's a monthly club match, a State or Area championship, or the Nationals (all Divisions have their own Nationals now), you can count on seeing red dots all over the place.

But it isn't like the old days. Back then, red dots were bulky. To withstand the abuse, you mounted them like a riflescope on rings attached to a mount that was bolted to the frame. No one mounted a dot on a slide because there was no way to do so, and no one expected any dot to survive the experience. The idea of an Open gun being an everyday carry gun back then was absurd. Today, it's common, and it's the result of decades of research, development, range testing, abuse, and improvements.

Aimpoint started all this back in 1975. Over the years, with legions of USPSA/IPSC competitors breaking optics along the way, we got to where we are today. Not only do we have everyday carry 9mm pistols with red-dot optic mounted on the slide, but we fully expect them to work when needed. We're all glad we could help. •