

Glock vs. 1911

Glock fans seem obsessed with comparing their pistols to the 1911, with the overall thrust of the argument being an attempt to prove that the Glock is superior to the 1911 in every way. They will most often point to reliability, durability, capacity, weight, and the simplicity of the Glock design to demonstrate the point. My biases are as follows: I'm a 1911 fanatic and I'm not wild about Glocks. But is the Glock superior to the 1911? The two systems are so different that I have questions about the validity of any comparison beyond the fact that they're both pistols and choices need to be made. Here are some areas of comparison which lead me to prefer the 1911-pattern guns:

Reliability - I have seen more feed failures on 1911-pattern guns than I have with Glocks (or Smith & Wessons and Berettas, for that matter). My personal 1911's, a Springfield and a Kimber, don't experience feed failures, although the Springfield did have a couple when it was new. At a recent IDPA match, I witnessed a Les Baer Custom and Colt Gold Cup experience failure to feed. The original mil-spec 1911A1 is a very reliable gun when using the mil-spec ammo around which it was designed, and contemporary 1911's which are properly throated and broken in are also extremely reliable. The original 1911's which were issued to the Army were built with very liberal tolerances—you could call them loose—because the Army valued reliability under adverse conditions above pinpoint accuracy. Many of the feed reliability problems with 1911 pistols arise from efforts to tighten up the frame, slide, barrel and bushing in order to achieve "match grade" accuracy. Glocks don't tend to suffer feed failures, but in order to achieve this reliability, they have more of their chambers cut away, leaving more of the case unsupported. This design feature has led to some blown Glock .40 S&W pistols. For more on this, see [Dean Speir's Glock KaBoom FAQ](#). One reliability issue which I've seen more with Glocks than other pistols is their occasional failure to detonate primers. While Glock advocates will say that other pistols have the same problem, I've only seen it happen on Glocks. While Glock true-believers are driven to proclaim their guns as the ultimate in reliability, the NYPD has been experiencing extractor problems and double feeds on their Glock 9mms.

The Eye of the Beholder - I am one of those people for whom the appearance of a gun matters. I like beautiful guns made of high grade metals with fine finishes. I don't like black plastic. To me, the Glock is one of the ugliest designs every conceived by the mind of man. Although some custom finishes can be applied to the slide, the options for dressing up the Glock are very limited. In contrast, 1911-pattern guns can accept a wide variety of finishes, grip panels, custom components, engraving, and other modifications which enhance the appearance of the gun. Glocks are made by one manufacturer whereas 1911-pattern guns have been made by scores of manufacturers since World War I, adding a great deal of interest, variety, and individuality to the type.

Uniformity vs. Individuality - With 1911's you deal with a particular gun, the one you're holding at that moment. Glocks are, for the most part, homogenous within model types. Each 1911 has a personality of its own, even among examples of the same model and production run from the same manufacturer. Whether this annoys or delights is a matter of personal preference. Those who like personality and individuality in a pistol will find the Glock uninteresting, and those who value absolute consistency will find their confidence undermined by a fussy 1911 which refuses to feed their favorite load. Any new-in-the-box 1911 is really a custom kit. The 1911 is to handguns what the '57 Chevy is to hotrods or the P-51 Mustang to air racers, the ultimate platform for customization. Pistoleros inclined to tinkering eventually find their way to the 1911. Aftermarket parts abound for this pistol, and you can make it into almost anything your heart desires. The design requirements for the pistol specified a gun which could be serviced in the field with a minimum number of tools, and it can be completely disassembled **using only its own parts**. Consequently, the 1911 is very accessible from a mechanical point of view. It is relatively easy to install custom parts or modify existing ones. Few 1911s remain completely stock for very long, unless they are those models which include the custom features usually added to the mil-spec guns, such as extended beavertails, custom triggers and hammers, full length guide rods, and decorative grips. For those who seek a personalized sidearm, the 1911 is one of the best platforms from which to begin.

Durability - I have heard claims that Glocks have launched as many as 300,000 rounds from a single pistol without a failure. I've never seen any documentation which would substantiate these claims, and I remain a bit skeptical about it. I'd like to see the gun, the round, and the test conditions. The FBI tests did document 50,000 rounds through the Glock .40 S&W without a breakdown, and that's an impressive performance. The original Army endurance test for the 1911 was 6,000 rounds. A well-built 1911 can be expected to have a service life of 150,000 rounds, although a part may break here or there during its lifetime. Only time will tell if the first Glocks will still be serviceable seventy five years from now. We know that many of the early 1911's are still functional and greatly desired by collectors.

Accuracy - In my opinion, an average government model 1911 is likely to be more accurate than the best Glock. In addition to that, 1911's can be tuned for greater accuracy whereas the Glock can't be. Between a really outstanding match grade 1911 and a Glock there is no contest in terms of accuracy. Glocks have acceptable accuracy for their intended mission, that being close range combat, but they are not tack-drivers. I haven't had opportunity to test one of the new long slide Glocks, but my initial impression is that they are an answer in search of a question.

Trigger - The one thing the Glock and the 1911 have in common is that their triggers are their greatest strength and weakness. The "revolutionary" design of the Glock centers on the trigger, the so-called "Safe Action Trigger." The Glock pre-cocks with the cycling of the slide so it can have a much lighter trigger than a true double action gun. In order to increase safety, the Glock was given a very long trigger pull and a little safety flange on the trigger which supposedly functions as a safety—if it isn't depressed the gun won't go off. But given the fact that it's on the trigger, it strikes me as largely superfluous. Aside from this, there are no external safeties on the Glock. If the trigger is pulled, the gun will go off, period. Personally, I find the Glock "Safe Action" scary, and lacking in the backup safety features that I prefer to see on an autoloader. Fans of the "Safe Action" point to the fact that there are no levers with which to fumble in a crisis and compare the Glock to a double action revolver (although very few revolvers have 3 lb. double action triggers). For a combat gun, these are valid points—simplicity translates into speed and keeps Murphy at bay, and light triggers give greater accuracy.

The single action trigger of the 1911 is light, crisp, and short. Since little muscle action is required to break the trigger, trigger control is less of a problem on the 1911 than any double action or "Safe Action" system. Since the trigger pull is so short, rapid fire is easy and fast. And then there's the dark side: for a single action 1911 to be ready for action, it must be carried "cocked and locked," which means hammer cocked and manual safety on. More than anything else, this looks scary. People have come up with several strategies to avoid the cock and lock, also known as "**Condition One**." There is the "Israeli Draw" which means the pistol is carried with an empty chamber and charged magazine ("**Condition Three**"), and is drawn and the slide racked as the gun comes up to fire. Some choose to carry with the hammer down with a round in the chamber (**Condition Two**). Condition Two is just a bad idea for several reasons, but all of them have to do with the gun going off when you don't expect it to. Some choose simply not to carry the 1911 at all due to their discomfort with Condition One.

In my opinion, the Glock carries in **Condition Zero**, that is, hammer cocked with no real external safety applied. I don't acknowledge the trigger flange to be a fully functional external safety, and the number of accidental discharges reported on the Glocks tends to bear this out.

My own preference is for the 1911 trigger with its double safety system (manual thumb safety and grip safety). Even if one were to forget to apply the manual safety, the grip safety must be depressed and the trigger pulled for the gun to fire. With that said, the 1911 requires training and practice to be a safe and effective personal defense weapon. The Glock trigger seems long and mushy, and since there are no external safeties other than the trigger flange, it strikes me as being more prone to accidental discharge than the 1911. For target and competitive shooting, the 1911 trigger is my favorite.

Weight and Capacity - In this category, the Glock has the clear advantage. The Glock with its polymer frame is lighter and uses double stack magazines. Even the compact Glock 30 carries 10 rounds in its magazine. Compact 1911's such as the Colt Officer's model and the Kimber Compact can carry seven in the magazine. Government models can carry eight rounds or ten with an aftermarket magazine which extends beyond the base of the grip. A number of manufacturers such as Para-Ordnance, Springfield, and Kimber have introduced "widebody" 1911-pattern guns which can accept 10-14 round double stack magazines. To me, a true 1911 is a single stack gun. One of the strongest features of the 1911 is that wonderful, single stack grip.

Touchy-Feely - One of the greatest features of the 1911 is the narrow grip and short trigger configuration of the pistol. The grip of the 1911 remains the best feeling grip of any pistol I know of. The narrowness of the handle allows the hand to really wrap around the pistol and get a solid grip. The narrowness also benefits those with smaller hands, since the grip is narrow and the trigger relatively close to the handle. Also, within the configuration is a design feature which has been copied by the builders of most autoloaders since—the magazine release button located where the trigger guard meets the handle. Last, but very important, is the overall narrowness of the 1911 pistol which allows even the relatively large government model to be surprisingly easy to conceal. By way of contrast, Glock handles tend to be fat since they use double-stack magazine, and are more difficult to conceal due to their width. To me, a 1911 feels like a pistol ought to feel, whereas the Glock feels like a water gun.

Conclusion - Well, I warned you of my biases up front. Give me a 1911 any day. Nevertheless, the Glock design has proven to be a watershed event in the development of handguns. I really enjoy 1911's and practice regularly with them. My mode of carry is always concealed, so I'm not in the position of scaring the public with a cocked pistol on my hip. Patrol officers who may not be gun enthusiasts or enjoy a regular practice schedule may be better served by a Glock-type pistol with its long trigger and greater capacity.

"The police establishment is now properly devoted to the Glock, and this seems to be a good choice. The Glock is a difficult piece to shoot well, and its safety problem has been solved by issuing it with a trigger that only a gorilla would love, but it has been generally admitted that the police today cannot be trained to shoot well - not so much because of time and ammunition expenditures, but because of motivation. A man will do well only at things he enjoys doing, and today's police departments are reluctant to hire a recruit who enjoys shooting. Thus the Glock's "shootability" is irrelevant. The piece is relatively cheap, it is usually reliable, and the company's service policies are outstanding."

- Jeff Cooper, Cooper Commentaries, Volume V, Number 11.