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Evolution of the Beretta 92

During the course of our [series on double action semi-autos](#), I mentioned a couple of times that I'm a fan of the Beretta 92 pistols, and it's one of the guns I've been spending a lot of time with at the range this year. But this gun isn't just a personal favorite — it's one of the most ubiquitous full-size self-defense handguns in the country. Entire books have been written about the 92, and it's been the topic of much debate in the shooting world. Despite this, however, I've found that there are a lot of misconceptions about the Beretta 92 that seem to pop up again and again. So I'm devoting this week on the blog to a brief study of this old workhorse to hopefully clear up some of the confusion.

To kick-off this mini-series, I thought I'd give a brief history of how the Beretta 92 has changed over the years. A lot of people are only aware of the 92FS version, and many of the criticisms and complaints about the 92 revolve around this particular model. While the 92FS is the most common variant, there were several 92 models that preceded its introduction in 1985, and countless variants have been produced since, including several that have directly addressed some of the more common gripes folks had with the 92FS. Mentally keeping track of all of the present and past 92 models is nigh impossible, so we've created this handy chart that includes the most common models (and a couple of those that aren't so common).

EVOLUTION of the BERETTA 92

The Beretta 92 was among the first of the original "wonderines"; 9mm pistols with double column magazines that provide ammo capacity in the double digits. With a design dating back four decades, the 92 series has proven to be a reliable work-horse that has evolved with the times. The most current iterations of the 92 incorporate features that allow this pistol to remain a viable sidearm, even compared to the most modern polymer 9mm handgun designs.

Because of this constant evolution, dozens of variants of the 92 series have been produced over the years, making it a challenge to remember what features appear on each model. This chart is a basic guide to some of the most common mass-produced versions of the 92 series.

PRE-92FS



1976-1985
The original Beretta 92 was first produced in the 1970s. The basic overall design and operation of these early pistols remains in today's 92 series, but many key features changed during the first decade leading up to the development of the 92FS.

EARLY MODELS

- 92** The first model 92 had a frame mounted safety, heel-style mag release, and a blued finish.
- 92S** The 92S model introduced the slide-mounted safety in place of the frame-mounted safety.
- 92SB** Starting with the 92SB, the heel mag release moved to its current location behind the trigger guard.
- 92F** Nearly identical to the 92FS, the 92F saw the move to a squared-off trigger guard and Brunton finish.

BERETTA 92FS



1985-Present
Out of all the variants of the 92 series, the 92FS can be considered the "base model" from which all the modern 92s have been derived. It differs from the 92F only with the addition of an enlarged hammer axis pin. The standard 92FS is chambered in 9mm with a 4.9-inch barrel, slide-mounted safety/decocking lever, fixed front sight blade, and ships with 15-round magazines.

VARIANTS

- 92G** The 92G variants are decock-only versions of the 92. They have no manual safety.
- 92D** The "slick slide" 92D is a double action only version of the 92FS with no safety/decock lever.
- 96** The 96FS, 96D, 96G, and other 96 models are chambered in .40S&W rather than 9mm.
- M9** The U.S. military's M9 is identical to the commercial 92FS except for minor cosmetic differences.
- INOX** Derived from the French word "inoxidable", Inox is Beretta's term for models with a stainless finish.

BRIGADIER



1993-Present
The Brigadier models feature a heavier slide resulting in decreased felt recoil. Brigadier slides also have a dovetail cut for the front sight. Because of these features, the Brigadier models have been popular among competition shooters and others who want to optimize their shooting performance with the 92 platform.

BRIGADIER VARIANTS

- ELITE** 92G with Brigadier slide, 4.7-inch barrel, skeletonized hammer, and beveled mag well.
- ELITE IA** Same as the Elite but with a Vertec-style grip and railed frame.
- ELITE II** Elite with a target crown barrel, Novak rear sight, extended mag catch, and grip checkering.
- 92G-SD** 92G Brigadier with night sights, railed frame, target crown barrel, and aggressive grip checkering.
- Brigadier Tactical** Designed by Wilson Combat, based on a 92G-SD upgraded with Wilson parts.

VERTEC



2001-2007, 2014-Present
One of the most common criticisms of the 92 series is that the large grip and long trigger reach do not fit many shooters' hands. The re-countered straight backstrap of the Vertec model was an effort to remedy this issue. The Vertec pistols also have a removable front sight, accessory rail, flared mag well for easier reloads, and a slightly shorter 4.7-inch barrel.

M9A1



2005-Present
The M9A1 was developed as an update to the M9 based on feedback from the U.S. Armed

92A1



2010-Present
The 92A1 features an accessory rail and a return of the rounded slide trigger guard along with

M9A3



2015-Present
The M9A2 concept never came to fruition, making the M9A3 the latest evolution in the 92

Beretta 92: The Beginning

The Beretta 92 series has been in continuous production in one form or another since 1976, but its popularity in the US really began in 1985 when the 92F was officially adopted by our armed forces as the M9. During that first decade of its existence, the Beretta 92 underwent many critical changes to its design before it eventually became the iconic 92FS that we're so familiar with today.

The Beretta Model 92 was originally designed using various elements of previous Beretta pistols along with heavy influence from the Walther P38. This first Model 92 is recognizable as part of the 92 family but just barely. In place of the slide-mounted safety/decocking lever that has become one of the trademarks of the series, it had a frame-mounted safety similar in appearance to the thumb safety found on the M1911. This feature didn't last for long, however, and the second iteration of the 92 series — the 92S — debuted with a slide-mounted safety lever.



Another conspicuous attribute of the first Model 92 was the heel-mounted magazine catch, which was common among European-designed pistols of that era, instead of a thumb-activated magazine release button. This feature was retained on the 92S, but after the US armed forces expressed interest in the 92S, Beretta changed the layout of the pistol's controls. The following model 92SB went into production with the mag release moved to its more accessible location behind the trigger guard.

As the US military's sidearm selection process lumbered forward from the late 1970s into the mid-80s, feedback from military personnel led to many other small changes in the 92's design. A slight forward flare was added to the contour of the grip front strap. The traditional blued finish was changed to the more utilitarian matte black Bruniton finish. White dots were added to the sights and the shape of the

trigger guard was changed from a rounded profile to a more squared design. The result was the 92F, dubbed the “M9” by the US armed forces. It quickly became a popular choice in American law enforcement and on the commercial market. Shortly after introducing the 92F, Beretta released the updated 92FS, which included a minor internal safety improvement.

Those G D Berettas

During the 1990s and early 2000s, Beretta rolled out dozens of limited-production variants of the 92FS with interesting features that would eventually find their way into major updates of the design. Many of these features were added as the result of special requests from law enforcement contracts while others were influenced by target and action pistol competitors.

The 92G and 92D were among the more popular law enforcement variants. The French national police, or *Gendarmerie*, requested a version of the 92FS with no manual safety. Beretta offered the 92G, which is identical to the 92FS except the slide-mounted safety lever functions only as a decocker. For many years, the 92G was only available as a special order option for government contracts but, eventually, Beretta would begin to produce limited runs of 92G variants for the commercial market.



The 92D was a similar story. As law enforcement personnel across the country transitioned from carrying double action revolvers to semi-automatic pistols, some of their leaders were looking for ways to make that transition as pain-free as possible. The Beretta 92D has no safety/decocking lever at all and, instead, relies on a double action only trigger for safety, which is what most cops at the time were already accustomed to. The 92D was never much of a success commercially, but it has made a lasting impression in the development of the 92 series thanks to the lighter hammer spring Beretta used in these pistols. A popular modification made by 92 series owners (and also found in some factory models) is to replace the standard hammer spring used in F and G models with the lighter “D spring” in order to slightly reduce the weight of the double action trigger pull.

Following another trend in law enforcement, in the early 90s, Beretta began offering a version of the 92 chambered in .40 S&W called the Model 96. Since then, the majority of 92 variants produced have also been made available as a 96 option, sold both to cops and commercially to non-uniformed citizens.

Early versions of the 96 were known to wear out quickly, but Beretta later strengthened the frame of all 92 and 96 pistols in places where the high pressure of the .40 S&W cartridge was causing problems.

Among the more popular 92 variants over the years have been the “Inox” models. Taken from the French word “inoxidable”, Inox Berettas have a stainless steel slide and barrel. The frame is anodized with a dye to match the silver appearance of the slide. Like the 96, most 92 variants have been offered with Inox as an option at one time or another.

Size Variants

One of the very first variants of the 92 series ever offered was the 92SB Compact L, which came along in the very early 1980s. It was essentially the same as the 92SB with the barrel shortened from 4.9 to 4.25 inches and the length of the grip reduced, which lowered the magazine capacity from 15 rounds to 13 (full-size Beretta 92 magazines may be used, though they will protrude from the grip slightly). Eventually, the 92SB Compact L was replaced by a compact version of the 92F and then the 92FS in 1990. The 92FS Compact L has been in Beretta’s catalog on and off ever since. In 2011, Beretta introduced the latest compact model based on the M9A1, featuring an accessory rail and aggressive grip texture. All of these compact models followed the same pattern as the original 92SB, using the same barrel length and magazines.

In the late 80s through 2004, Beretta also offered the Compact L Type M variant. Viewed in profile, the Type M appears to be identical to the standard Compact L, but closer inspection will reveal a slightly narrower grip to accommodate a single stack 8-round magazine. For a very brief period in the early 2000s, Beretta produced limited-run special edition compact models called the Custom Carry (a 92 FS Compact L with a single-sided safety lever) and the Custom Carry II (a 92FS Type M Inox with a single-sided safety lever and Novak rear sight). For the first half of this year, Wilson Combat offered the Beretta 92G Compact Carry with a target crown barrel and Wilson Combat grips and rear sight.



When you start with a larger-than-average full-size pistol, it's no surprise that the compact version also ends up being a bit large compared to its counterparts from other manufacturers. The 4.25-inch barrel of the 92 Compacts is closer to the length of most full-size pistols than it is to other popular mid-size compacts like the Glock 19 and Sig P229. The butt of the 92 Compacts is roughly the same length as other compact models, but the ammo capacity is only 13 rounds of 9mm, compared to the 15 rounds you'll usually get from other guns. This disparity in size and ammo capacity has prevented the 92 Compact from being a popular option among today's concealed carry pistols, but fans of the full size 92 often find that the Compact L offers just enough reduction in size to make the 92 manageable for concealed carry while still retaining most of the larger gun's shootability.

One final size variant of the 92 that's often overlooked is the now-discontinued Centurion. With a full-size Beretta 92 frame and a compact slide and barrel, the Centurion has often been considered analogous to the Colt Commander 1911. Several versions of the 92 and 96 Centurion were produced beginning in the early 1990s, but Beretta discontinued all of these models when 92 series offerings were trimmed back in 2004. However, in recent years, Beretta has made a return to serving some of the more niche interests among 92 fans, and I wouldn't be surprised to see a Centurion variant offered again at some point in the near future. In the meantime, some Beretta owners may be tempted to create their own "Centurion" by mating their 92 Compact slide to a full size 92 frame, but [Beretta does not recommend it](#). The parts might fit together, and the combo may even function for a while, but the pistol will experience increased wear and less reliable feeding.

Brigadier, Vertec, and Beyond

In 1993, Beretta introduced the Brigadier style slide for the 92 series. This slide is reinforced at the locking lugs for greater durability, creating a trademark “hump” in the slide’s contour when viewed from the side. One of the first users of this style slide was the US Border Patrol, who ordered the Brigadier version of the 96D in the hopes that the pistol would better hold up to the hot .40 S&W duty loads they issued at the time. With other improvements now made standard on the frames of all 92 and 96 pistols, it’s debatable whether the Brigadier slide actually improves the gun’s longevity. However, many users have noticed that the Brigadier slide provides the unintended benefit of reducing felt recoil and muzzle rise. As a result, the Brigadier design has been used in many 92 variants designed with high-performance action pistol competition in mind.

In the early 2000s, as Beretta struggled to compete with other manufacturers in the crowded law enforcement market, one of their major efforts was the 92 Vertec. Among other things, the Vertec attempted to address the common criticism that the 92 series is difficult to use for shooters with smaller hands. With a short reach trigger and a drastically reduced backstrap, the Vertec model was a radical deviation from previous 92 models ergonomically speaking. The Vertec also modernized the 92 design by including an accessory rail on the frame, a beveled magazine well to accommodate quick reloads, and a dovetail cut in the front of the slide to allow the use of different aftermarket front sights. Additionally, the barrel was shortened from 4.9 inches to 4.7 inches while retaining the same slide length as the standard 92FS, thereby eliminating the barrel protrusion that had always been a visual trademark of the 92 series. While the Vertec grip design has some fans, it’s never been the most popular modification to the 92 series. That said, the accessory rail, replaceable front sight, and flared magazine were welcome changes that have been utilized in many other models.



In fact, since the turn of the century, most new editions of the 92 series have essentially mixed and matched various features originally found on the Vertec and Brigadier. The competition-oriented 92G Elite combined the Brigadier slide with replaceable front sights, 4.7-inch barrel, and beveled magazine well. The Elite IA was similar but utilized the Vertec's straight backstrap grip design and railed frame. The Elite II was a near copy of the original Elite but used Novak rear sights, a target crown barrel, and introduced a frame with aggressive grip texture. The popular 92G-SD was the first to combine a railed frame with the standard 92 grip contour, beveled mag well, and aggressive grip texture from the Elite II. With a production period of just a few years in the mid-2000s, the 92G-SD would become a sought-after fan favorite and would go on to influence the design of future 92 variants.

Around the same period, the US military requested some changes to the original M9 design. Beretta answered with the M9A1 which borrows features from the 92G-SD's frame, leaving the slide of the original M9 largely unchanged. In 2010, Beretta released an updated commercial version of the 92FS, somewhat confusingly called the 92A1. It includes a railed frame but, unlike the M9A1, uses the standard grip serrations of the original 92FS. The 92A1 has a replaceable front sight along with some internal slide design changes that were originally used on the 90Two, an odd 92 variant with a drastically restyled external appearance.



For 92 fans looking for that “holy grail” pistol combining the best of all of the above features, Beretta and Wilson Combat joined forces to offer the 92G Brigadier Tactical in 2014. This pistol is heavily based on the 92G-SD, but also includes, among other things, a rounded trigger guard, 4.7-inch barrel

(which some shooters believe offers better accuracy than the standard 4.9-inch barrel), a Trijicon replaceable front sight, Wilson Combat rear sight, and VZ grips.

The latest update to the 92 series is the M9A3, and it may be the most feature-rich 92 model yet. [First unveiled at SHOT Show in 2015](#), the M9A3 has a replaceable front sight, railed frame, and a Vertec style backstrap combined with aggressive grip texture. The pistol also includes a wraparound style rubber grip to mimic the feel of the standard M9A1 backstrap. The truly innovative feature of the M9A3 is a redesigned slide that allows the pistol to be converted between an FS and G configuration by an armorer with a conversion kit. Previously, this kind of conversion could only be performed by a gunsmith which is both expensive and permanent.

Even after 40 years of evolution and innovation, it's clear that we haven't seen the last changes to the 92 series, and we probably won't for many years to come.

Optimizing the Beretta 92 for Self-Defense



[Chris Baker](#)



For this next installment of our [mini-series on the Beretta 92](#), I wanted to address some of the practical issues related to using this pistol for self-defense. I know several shooters who own a Beretta 92FS, but only because it had some novelty appeal when they were fairly new gun owners. As their involvement in the shooting world grew deeper, they became more interested in the latest polymer pistols or custom 1911s, leaving the Beretta in the back of the safe. But the Beretta 92 still has a lot going for it, especially if you're willing to look beyond what's offered with the vanilla box-stock 92FS.

Optimizing the Beretta 92 for Self-Defense

Full video transcript below:

I have a theory about the popularity of the Beretta 92 series of pistols. It's super-popular with novice handgun owners because of its connection to the military and prominence in Hollywood. But it's not as popular with shooters who have a little more experience and that's because it's an old design, but not as pretty as the 1911. It's a double action, it's big and heavy, and just not cool anymore. But if you keep moving along that axis of experience and skill, eventually you will start running into some of the most respected shooters and instructors in the industry and a lot of those guys are big fans of the 92. Guys like Ken Hackathorn, Ernest Langdon, Dave Harrington, Mike Pannone, Bill Wilson, and Massad Ayoob. Now, these guys are not necessarily carrying Beretta 92s all the time, but they are quick to point out the merits of the design and the fact that it's still a viable platform today.

So let's look at a few of the things Beretta 92 has going for it and what we can do to get the most out of

it as a serious self-defense tool.

One of the things that really sets this gun apart is the fact that it is one of the most reliable semi-automatic handguns on the market. This is something that gets overlooked a lot of times, partly because Beretta hasn't done quite as good a job at exploiting the gun's reliability for marketing purposes as some other companies have. But it's not uncommon at all to run into somebody who's got a Beretta 92 that's gone thousands of rounds without a single malfunction of any kind.



This has a lot to do with the Beretta's distinctive open-top slide design. The most common type of stoppage with a semi-auto is a failure to eject — the classic stovepipe. But with the Beretta, when that empty case comes out of the chamber, it really doesn't have anywhere else to go except out of the way so it's very uncommon for a case to get stuck where it's not supposed to be.

When you do hear about problems with the 92, it's usually because of either poor quality magazines or poor maintenance. This is especially the case with a lot of the military's M9s that have been chronically abused for the last three decades. But if you take care of these things — if you lube them and use good magazines and replace the springs every few thousand rounds, they should run for a very long time.

The Beretta is also incredibly accurate compared to just about any other non-custom fighting pistol. It soaks up recoil and it's exceptionally soft-shooting, even compared to other full size 9mms. With a \$6 Beretta reduced-power hammer spring, the trigger pull can be smooth and easy to manage without compromising safety or primer ignition.

Now, these are all good things, but they're not all strictly necessary for a self-defense pistol. If we look at what we actually need in a gun like this, it's a fairly short list. Reliability is the absolute top priority.

The Beretta's got that. We also need an effective caliber with enough ammo capacity to take care of the kind of threats that we might face. Depending on the mags you're using, you get 15-20 rounds of 9mm with the Beretta, so we can check that box too. And the gun needs to fit the shooter so they can reach all the controls and the trigger and get a solid firing grip in order to adequately manage recoil.

And that last point, the fit, that is where the Beretta 92 falls short for a lot of people. The standard 92FS like this one does not have great ergonomics. In particular, the slide-mounted safety is not very user-friendly. It's awkward to use, even if you're lucky enough to have fingers that can reach it without breaking your grip. Some people like the safety on this gun, and that's fine, but I think for most people, it ends up being a liability because it's not very intuitive to disengage.

You can carry this gun with the safety in the fire position and it's still completely safe because of the long double action trigger pull. But if you do this, you still need to practice sweeping off that safety — you have to make that motion with your finger every time you bring the gun up to target, just in case the safety becomes engaged without you realizing it.

Because of how awkward it is to use the safety and the fact that most people just aren't going to practice with it as much as they should, I think the Beretta 92G is a better option in most cases. With the G models, this lever acts as a decocker only. It cannot be left in the "safe" position, so you remove that liability completely. The G models aren't always easy to find so if you get impatient, Wilson Combat will convert your FS model to a G for \$150.

The other issue some people have with the fit on this gun is the large grip. This can make the trigger reach too long for a lot of people so they either end up with a bad grip like that, or they just can't properly manipulate the trigger for that first double action shot. You can get a little help here by trying some slimmer grip panels, or by installing the short reach trigger. Those things can both make a huge difference. There's also a version of the 92 called the Vertec which has a reduced grip with a straight backstrap — it's not for everybody, but it can help with trigger reach issues in some cases.

If you can get a Beretta 92 set up so that it fits you, it's really tough to beat for a full-size self-defense pistol, and it doesn't have to be an expensive custom job, either. I've got a nice Beretta like that — I enjoy shooting it, it's a great gun. But really, if you just gave me a plain 92G, I would stick a reduced-power hammer spring in it, I would put some bright orange paint on the front sight, and really, I would feel pretty well-equipped for anything I might need to do with that pistol. Of course, Beretta has made a ton of variants of the 92 over the years that add some of those nice-to-have features like a light rail, a removable front sight, and more aggressive grip texture. And if you want to actually carry the 92, there are several compact models that I think are severely underrated. Yesterday on the blog [we posted a graphic](#) that charts these different 92 models as a reference to help you figure out what features are on each model.

There's a link to that in the video description, so be sure to check that out if you haven't already. And then, if you want to support our video channel, buy some ammo from [LuckyGunner.com](#).