

ARTICLE: "DRY FIRE SECRETS OF THE PROS"

TEXT:

I rarely encounter shooters who feel their shooting and gun handling is as good as it should be, and most will acknowledge a real need for improvement in shooting abilities. Whether you are new in recreational shooting, an officer of the law or armed civilian, or a seasoned practical competitor, experience suggests the place to start rebuilding your firearms training program is by reinforcing the fundamentals.

Fortunately, the most important single fundamental skill in shooting- trigger control- is the one which can best be improved off the range in independent practice. As good as the trigger on your SIGARMS service pistol may be, correct dry firing with visualization is the key to mastering it.

This basic dry-firing and visualization regimen evolved during thirty years of practical pistol competition and professional instruction, and includes ideas I've shamelessly robbed from some of today's best shooters and anybody else I couldn't outshoot. These basic techniques are directly applicable to anyone who wants to hit accurately at speed with a handgun. As well as being a standard amongst many top competitors, it has been adopted

by a number of elite agencies as part of their tactical firearms skill building programs. I urge you to spend the minimal time required to employ it as a cost-free method to improve your shooting skills.

What sports gurus say about training is really true: it takes a minimum of 5 to 10 thousand correct repetitions of an activity before that action becomes permanently hardwired into your subconscious, and proper attention must be paid to form during each repetition for the imprinting of that action to be perfect. Many people hold the mistaken belief that great shooters, like musical prodigies, are simply born with superior coordination, vision or other innate talents from whence they draw their superior skills. The reality is they work harder, but they also have developed better training tools to work *smarter*.

Practical, defensive shooting requires mastery of many skills beyond simple marksmanship such as the draw, reloading and safe, high-speed gun handling. It might seem that the task of correctly executing each skill many thousands of times while maintaining correct form and acute mental focus would seem almost impossible. It's really not, but the ability to train effectively is actually the only attribute separating champions and survivors from the losers and the dead. It's not the amount of training time they put in that counts, it's the quality of their experience.

The key to such effective training, defined as getting the most correct reps of an action from the time available, is to focus on quality. Do a thing perfectly even one time, and you've learned something; let yourself flail about in haste and distraction, and each crummy repetition just does more damage. The purpose of practice is to reinforce your subconscious' ability to reproduce a performance on demand. Your mind cannot differentiate between a good shooting string and a lousy one, a proper trigger press and an ugly jerk, an aligned and clear sight picture or a fly on the target; it grooves in what you actually do and see as the model for future performances. If you do not want to jerk the trigger and miss your target while staring blankly under stress, you must align your sights and press the trigger as perfectly as possible in practice. This is equally true for both recreational and defensive shooters. Such conceits as letting yourself ignore fundamental shooting skills and hosing wildly or point shooting "because that's what happens on the street" will gain nothing; an edge hit in practice will be a missed shot when it counts.

We've all succumbed to the little panic before a big match or qualification that tells us we haven't "practiced enough", and crammed in a lot of rounds in one session. We may get a lot of rounds down range, but have we really gotten the most out of our practice time? I doubt it. If you aren't shooting at least 95% center hits in practice, you aren't paying adequate attention to the quality of your shooting. Realistically, most people cannot maintain good

focus and excellent performance throughout a long day's shooting anyway. And, it has to be fun at some point. Practical shooting requires a host of skills beyond sight alignment and trigger control, but it's always those fundamental skills that are most critical for success. Fortunately, coordination of sights to proper trigger release is, along with the draw and magazine changes, a skill most easily reinforced through dry-firing.

Your dry-fire regimen must support the manner in which you really shoot. Most people dry fire by carefully aiming their UNLOADED pistol at a spot on the wall, bringing the trigger through it's arc of pre-travel to the sear reset point and then pressing off as good a shot as they possibly can. Beautiful! And, not very applicable to the demands of fast, practical shooting. What you need is trigger control at speed, an immediate, smooth and subconsciously controlled release of the shot upon the appearance of the correct, *acceptable sight picture* on your target.

Typically, after the initial double action first shot, most people find themselves jerking the trigger in a convulsive and relatively uncontrolled fashion whether they positively reset the trigger between shots or not. Naturally, the faster the pace the less time is available for positive sear reset, also referred to as "trigger staging". SIG Sauer service pistols such as the P-226 seen here have a considerable amount of trigger reset and reuptake travel which must be mastered to make controlled shots at speed.

Why is this important? Because you can only shoot as fast and accurately as you can release the trigger from the previous shot and take up the pre-travel on the way to the next one.

At a pace exceeding about three shots per second, all but the most accomplished shooters will slap all the way through without pausing to stage the trigger. While breaking the traditional rules of bullseye-based trigger control technique, there's really nothing wrong about a *controlled* slap. Given the nature of practical shooting, trigger staging is not necessarily a prerequisite for making an acceptably accurate shot; all that counts is that the trigger press is physically isolated enough from the rest of your grip so that it doesn't disturb sight alignment.

I view trigger control on a continuum, with precisely coordinated bullseye style shooting on one and a high-speed controlled slap on the other. All points on this continuum can be mastered by varying the pace of reset, reuptake and trigger press in coordination with appropriate mental imagery. Properly hardwire each individual aspect of shooting into your subconscious, and it will all come together in a seamless, fluid skill set at the range.

To develop that ideal trigger coordination, break it down to the basics. You're conscious mind can only direct one action at a time, so don't clutter your trigger press training with unrelated skills, or all will

suffer. Want to practice draws? Practice *draws*. If your reload needs work, dry-practice reloading. Want to develop awesome trigger control and overcome jerking and flinching? Just practice the specific acts of releasing and pressing the trigger.

It's about this simple: While comfortably seated in a safe area with a solid backstop, and with NO AMMUNITION anywhere in the room with you, check to verify your pistol is unloaded. Twice. Good! You're not ready to anything until you're ready to be safe.

First, let's work on your first shot from the hammer-down position. You'll want to reach through with your trigger finger just as far as needed to draw the trigger straight back without any side pressure one way or the other. In my experience, most people are more than strong enough to control a DA trigger once they've developed proper muscular coordination; resist the temptation to shift your grip and choke up on the trigger just to gain some leverage! If trigger reach is an issue for you, contact the SIGARMS Custom Shop for a short trigger.

Now, close your eyes and imagine yourself at the range, with a single large target before you. While paying attention to your grip and form, press through a smooth double action shot while imagining your sights on that target. Did anything move? Don't be surprised if you find yourself visualizing flinching or missing! That's OK, as it may be an indication that you are really relaxed and allowing

your subconscious to work for you; just allow yourself to make the next shot better, seeing the sights more clearly in your mind.

Despite what many 1911-centric gunwriters have long stated as their objection to double action service pistols, mastering the double to single action transition is easy. While maintaining your strong hand grip, hold the trigger back after your DA shot and cycle the slide of your pistol to cock the hammer. Close your eyes and visualize your target before you. Let yourself "see" the sights appear on it as you release the trigger, feel for the reset and take up the pre-travel; refine your imagined sight alignment as you press off the shot, just as you will on the range. Perfect! That was easy, wasn't it? Repeat 10 thousand times...and you'll be unbeatable. Do it for twenty minutes a night for a week and you'll not only see huge improvement only your trigger control, but sight picture and acquisition skills as well. I've seen scenario and qualification scores literally double after only one night of homework by law officers.

Why does this work? By correctly "prepping" the trigger, mentally visualizing the sight picture and "shooting" in response, you are able to perform the trigger press perfectly while coordinating it to the appearance of the sights on the target. Your subconscious, being the reliable little soldier that it is, perceives all this as if you were literally shooting and grooves it all in more perfectly than could be had with all the distractions of the range. Perhaps of

equal importance, the discipline and “time in the zone” accrued through regular practice will definitely smooth some of those range distractions out. It’s been proven to my satisfaction that dry fire practice with visualization is a shooter’s single best tool for improvement, and I’d take it over range practice if I had to choose.

Finally and most importantly, relying on your subconscious training to make shots on demand frees up your conscious mind to react quickly to changing circumstances and make correct decisions under stress. The secret to thinking on one’s feet is to limit what one has to think about to begin with!

I urge you to spend the minimal time required to employ it as a cost-free method to improve your lifesaving skills.

Photo Captions:

1) To illustrate the importance of smooth trigger control in speed shooting, Gray burned this 6 shot “Bill Drill” in just under 2 seconds at seven yards with his P-226 Stainless 9mm. (Count the taped holes; this was his third attempt, but it makes the point!)

2) Gray believes sight alignment is subordinate to trigger control in practical shooting since the majority of misses are due to trigger errors, not improper sight alignment. Proper dry firing practice with visualization is one key to success on the range.