

Zen And The Art Of Hitting Stuff

Understand the psychology of marksmanship to develop strong, reliable skills.

Bruce Gray 2004

We can separate the skills associated with practical handgun marksmanship into three rough sets: aiming, trigger control and tactical gun handling. In my experience, handgun shooting errors are invariably trigger control related, though most shooters tend to ascribe large groups and missed shots to incorrect aim, poor vision or a “bad grip”. Blaming your sights is praying to a false idol. Let's assume sight regulation is OK for now.

I'll go so far as to say that just about every person I've ever worked with had the ability to see and focus on their aligned sights, and hold that alignment well enough to shoot a very small group. However, few have had the ability to press the trigger well enough to exploit their aiming skills without considerable training.

So, I agree with those who counsel dry firing.

I'd say dry firing is far more important than any other single thing you can do to build your fundamental skills. I do not think it will hurt your pistol as much as shooting poorly can hurt *you*.

Shooters generally seem to "flinch" (which we can define here as a failure to press the trigger and release the hammer without disturbing the sights, and/or to follow through during the entire shot) for two basic reasons:

The first is performance anxiety. By it's nature, shooting is an exercise in truthful self-realization: the bullet hits or misses, whether completely or by degrees. Everyone wants to “do well” and not look like an idiot in front of others. Without intending to make broad gender-based generalizations, women are less prone to succumbing to this anxiety (and in fact often do better in marksmanship training as a result), whereas men do tend to become more ego-involved in the results to the detriment of their skill development. In any event, those who have been highly conditioned to feel potent and capable (such as law enforcement officers and other highly trained professionals) will tend to identify strongly with symbols of that potency to support their self image. Nothing in American society symbolizes this potency more than the gun.

It follows that when presented with an objective test of competency that challenges one's illusory self-image, even highly educated and successful new shooters will freak out and fail. This is the person who shakes his or her head in growing frustration at each “bad” shot. In reality, shooting is pretty darn easy; it's just the shooter's highly personal investment in results that makes it difficult.

Everyone wobbles. The sights are never going to rest motionless and in perfect alignment on the target. Yet, our egos tend to be perfectionists. Result-oriented shooters won't accept their wobble and are disappointed in the lack of immediate reinforcement shot as an instantaneous event mediated by their will to hit, yet are frustrated by that overpowering will when they jerk the trigger, flinch and miss. That frustration stems from the highly conscious (and thus clumsy) nature of their technique.

In the absence of a learned, subconscious and *visually patient* process which presses the trigger in response to the appearance of aligned sights orbiting about the target area, the results-oriented shooter jumps on the trigger when the sights suddenly look right "NOW". This reinforces true flinching reactions from recoil and blast, which is the second reason we miss. It's true the good Lord didn't design us to well tolerate an explosion 18 inches in front of our eyes. Guns were *our* idea.

Grabbing at the trigger when the sights look "right" to satisfy the ego causes the shooter to place his focus even more on the target, and less on that icon of his increasingly conflicted, unpleasant and unsuccessful marksmanship process: his sights. When a shooter feels he's inconsistent, it's often because his visual attention floats aimlessly on an unstable emotional sea between sharply focused process and vaguely seen results.

Process oriented shooters develop a sense for what they must do to fire an acceptable shot for a given target and distance, and train their subconscious minds to do *only that*. Note, I do not say a "perfect" shot, as that's not possible or even desirable to strive for. We must define an acceptable shot as one that puts the bullet within a reasonable target area for the style and application of shooting we're doing.

For IPSC and other practical shooting applications, the process of making an acceptable shot varies by distance, target area, position and how long it takes to make it. Some shots require an absolutely hard sight picture, perfect trigger break and monolithic follow through. Other acceptable shots require a quick slap of the trigger with the gun on the move to the next target. Training the mind to select and apply the correct technique for each shot is the first trick.

Having the visual patience to let your highly trained mind do it for you *without conscious intervention* is the second trick. Guess which trick is harder to master?

While perfectionism can be counter productive, I also believe shooters handicap themselves by being too in awe of supposedly greater talents and therefore convincing themselves they can't shoot as fast or as accurately for various reasons. The empirical nature of shooting spawns endless excuses that allow each of us to remain comfortable in our self-imposed zone of relative skill. It's a little uncomfortable to extend oneself out of that comfort zone and try something harder. The champion differs only in that she knows her comfort zone is an illusion.

But that doesn't mean we start out trying to hit aspirin tablets at 50 feet. For right now, we just want to hit something honestly and reliably. Let's say a 2" dot at 10 yards? That's reasonable, though daunting for the new shooter. (For that matter, I know of some very experienced competitors who won't allow themselves to hit that target reliably.)

Well, assuming your sights are aligned fairly well and you see the blurred dot somewhere behind them, you'll hit within a 2" target area every time so long as the trigger is pressed correctly.

That's the fundamental skill. This is how to get it:

Unload your gun, and check it three more times. Good! You'll do the rest with eyes closed.

You note that you can easily drop the hammer without disturbing a dime when dry firing, but not when you know a bullet is present. I think you need to develop an unshakable faith in that skill, and an equally hard faith in the belief that if you focus on and align the sights and press through as you practice, you absolutely will hit the target. You also need to have equal faith in your ability to call each shot, and know where it went based on what the sights were doing as they lifted off the target during recoil.

Visualize a sight picture on your chosen target in your mind while simultaneously pressing through on the trigger. Feel the trigger, how it might creep and wiggle under finger pressure. Try to get as close to dropping the hammer as you can, and hold it as you watch those imagined sights. You should ignore the target if your mind wants to stick one down there for you to look at instead.

Watch the sights in your mind's eye and you'll see them dip, jerk and do all sorts of things. Feel the recoil and blink, perhaps. That's great! Let your visualized shooting session seem as real as possible without too much conscious direction. Just allow yourself to come back to the sights, focus on the front blade, align them and press.

Be focused on the process of operating the trigger, and learn to press through without tension, convulsive grasping of the hand, jerking or other funny stuff in response to the appearance of aligned sights in your mind. It's a thing, a device, a machine you own and control. It doesn't control *you*.

Do this for two weeks, each night for at least ten or 15 minutes, or until you can't maintain good form and sight visualizations without your mind wandering too much, and stop when you can't feel exactly what the trigger's doing as it releases the hammer. It's fine to alternate visualization drills with a sighted "shots" against the wall, but the bulk of your dry firing practice should be associated and reinforced with guided imagery.

Then, go the the range. Dry fire in this way on the line a bit. Now, here's the deal: tell yourself the truth. You know when the gun's loaded, but you have convinced yourself that following this process is what you will do. You must allow your subconscious to do it for you, since that's what that last two weeks of intense repetition was for. Trust me, you've learned it. To actually DO it, you just occupy the ego with something safe it can do to help, rather than letting it take over in a doomed effort to make it happen and be the star of the show "now that it counts."

So, give the ego a job: let it watch the sights. Tell it to focus intensely on the front sight and not to think of anything else. Not the target (it's there), not the gun (it's fine and we know it's zeroed well enough), just the front sight, aligned in the notch just as you've visualized. If you visualize the pistol firing when the sights appear aligned on the target, that's what will happen. You have only to step out of the way and watch that front sight.

The gun will fire, at least once or twice in that first session, without conscious thought making it do so. Those are the shots you'll remember. Ignore the flinches, jerks and misses, as they don't matter and are not any indicator of success.

That's how top shooters get there: they focus on the process and count their hits.

Note, the most highly skilled shooters use the sights all the time, every time, as clearly and as well aligned as needed to make a given shot. Some tactical gurus, gun writers and other hounds baying at the moon will tell you that truly practical shooting isn't about sights, and you'll swear when you watch us on ESPN, the Outdoor Channel or at your local match that we can't be seeing the sights at the rate we're shooting in high-level competition.

The entire concept of "point shooting" is praying to yet another false idol. I personally think the only true god is God, but your front sight is a safe icon to regard with complete obedience when it's time to shoot, whether at maximum warp or at aspirin tablets.

Here's some additional thoughts on trigger pull weight and technique: Yes, a 1.5 pound trigger does facilitate trigger slap without unduly disrupting sight alignment / index / pointing or whatever you choose to pay attention to during a given shot. It also makes anything *but* a trigger slap impossible for most shooters, particularly at moderate speeds on discrete targets where positive reset would be a good thing.

Much of what you see top Limited and Production IPSC shooters doing when shooting relatively quickly is indeed drawn from Open gun technique, in which the trigger is released and then pulled right through the reset point without stopping. Slapping the trigger is easier to learn with a dot, since you get instant feedback from that bouncing ball if you jerk the shot. I had leaned to slap with good follow through once, long ago when I shot an Open gun; somewhere along the way, I lost much of the follow through but kept the slap when I lost the dot.

I say, follow-through is everything, whether you take a hard reset before breaking each shot or blow right through. I think it's best to learn to use both trigger techniques, and incorporate them when appropriate in a seamless skill set.

I can slap the 3X trigger on my SIG P-226 9mm with fair accuracy. It *can* be done. The first trick is to train your mind to apply only the pressure and rate required to release the sear without driving the trigger into the frame. The second trick here is to develop rock-solid, "dead" follow through skills. Yes, your muscles will always react to recoil in a reflexive way, as you realign the sights. Fine! Just make sure that reaction takes place well after the bullet has left the barrel. Dry firing with visualization and dummy round training at the range are keys, I believe.

Calling shots at speed means using information from the sights to determine whether the previous shot hit or missed. There's two ways to shoot: One is reactively, in which the sight picture is read on some conscious level and coordinated with a more or less sub-conscious action of trigger pull. That's the "watch your front sight" school, and it works...sort of. The other is proactively, in which the sight picture is recalled on a lower-conscious level as verification that the subconscious saw what it needed to see when it broke the previous shot, while the subconscious is busy making the present one. This relates to the mode of observation that Enos and others describe. The conscious mind tends to linger in the just-past, not the present. If you ever wondered why some top shooters could do the things they do, this paragraph is really the whole enchilada.

As for transitions, I do mean between targets. I stress, and can prove, that fast splits between first and second shots are not very productive in Limited, and for darn sure not in Production. (By fast, I mean faster than most anyone can really call their shots, or faster than about .16.) Despite what you see the hosers in your local club do, you will generally not find that the top guys like Todd, Robbie and Eric Graffel depend upon such splits in Limited to make up time per se. In Open, yes, they can get away with more. But, the math suggests there's little to gain in stressing splits over transitions, due to the points inevitably lost on the second shot and the extra physical and mental tension involved.