

Making Master in One Year

Chris Johnson's Story, in his own words

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Special thanks to Chris Johnson for taking the time to chronicle his incredible story! You can quickly tell that he is a great one by how humble he is about his accomplishments. New shooters, you can look to this story for inspiration in pursuing your goals. You can do it! -JD

I was asked to write an article entitled "On Making Master in a Year" but feel a better title might be "One Bullseye Shooter's Experience". Although I am currently classified Master both indoor and outdoor and a member of the 2600 club, I am far from a Zen-master or gun-guru or anything like that. But, I know first hand how much a new shooter can learn from the experienced ones and in that spirit, I will gladly share what I've done.

Background

I grew up on a dairy farm in northern Minnesota where there was never a shortage of work. If something didn't work, you had to figure out what was wrong, ask for help if you needed it, but you got it done. We hunted deer, grouse, and squirrel but never with handguns. College, a desk job (I work with computers) for the past 15 years, and three kids have changed my lifestyle but I still swim at least once a week. I'm about 5'8", 170 pounds and medium build.

Early Bullseye

I believe the first time I fired a handgun was when a friend invited me to an informal action pistol event. That was fun but you'd shoot for about a minute then stand around and wait for an hour. I heard about Bullseye and decided to give it a try. I fired in indoor league then an informal outdoor league two summers ago with a used Smith & Wesson Model 41. First few weeks my scores were about 60-65% average but by the end of the summer, I was up around 70%. I now know that is pretty typical for a beginning shooter. A beginner will have about five good shots on a slow-fire and five bad ones. Timed-fire will be OK but in rapid-fire a beginner will miss the target about once in every five rounds. Been there, done that.

Competition

That fall, I borrowed a friend's 1911 (iron sights) wad gun and fired my first 2700. I didn't break 1900 but I learned a lot. The most important thing I learned was that my guns most certainly shot better than I did. (As a matter of fact, they still do by a long ways) I enjoyed it so much that I talked to a few shooting friends, did my research, and ordered a 1911 .45 ACP custom build. I still shoot that gun and it still shoots way better than I do. Early competition also taught me to never change anything just before a match. (New reloading press, didn't get the crimp die set right, double alibi) Over the winter I fired off and on in a league with some good shooters and watched what they did and asked some questions. Most shooters are nice folks and will almost always share information. I fired a couple indoor matches and, after six months of shooting, shot a target with ten holes in the black. Later that season, I fired a 100 with the .22 and I almost fainted.

Perry

Camp Perry is like going to Chicago O'Hare for the first time; it's wonderful, so many people

and so much to see and do, but you can't let the place overwhelm you. I had just read the AMU Handbook and been to Small Arms School and decided what I needed to do was FOCUS. I focussed my way to an 860 in the Preliminary Match on Thursday as a Marksman. I didn't sleep the entire night. I was not used to shooting those kinds of scores and the whole thing overwhelmed me. I was fortunate enough to place on the NRA/USA Civilian Marksman Team and came home from Perry thinking I had it all figured out.

Mistakes

After Perry, I fired four or five other outdoor matches and quickly received a sharpshooter and expert card in the mail. I began to realize that my scores were inversely proportional to the number of mistakes I made during a match. I would be clipping along with good slow-fires and then loose concentration or not set the gun down on a shot and fire a six. Then I'd follow it with another six. Rapid-fire would give me problems because I wouldn't stay focussed. I would have a 98 rapid-fire followed by a 84 with an entire five shot string out of the black. That was last fall. During the winter indoor season, I found my scores improving when I worked fundamentals on each shot or string. With the fundamentals (stance, grip, sight alignment, trigger control, follow-thru) under control, all I did was look for things I could do better (mistakes teach us this) and improve them. Now, I learn much more from a slow-fire 90-1x than a 97-5x because the 90-1x has four or five "mistake" shots and I figured out what I was doing wrong.

Running with the Big Dogs

This past spring things seemed to settle in nicely for me. Each time I would shoot, I would focus on fundamentals and look for mistakes. I saw my scores increasing on average and was very pleased to have shot 875 to win an Indoor Sectional and place first Expert in the Indoor Championship. Later in the spring, I went to the Dixie Match in Jacksonville with four goals. I focussed on fundamentals, had some bad targets (because of loss of focus) but still met three of my goals; a personal best 2587, first expert civilian (those service guys/gals can really shoot), and I legged with a 270-10 in the ball match. Even though I had some bad targets, I figured out what went wrong and kept track of those things to make sure I focussed on them in the future. My big problem in Jacksonville turned out to be trigger finger placement.

The Wailing Wall

In order to stay mentally focussed, I learned that I must focus my conscious attention on the current shot or string. Worrying about my score, someone else's score, or the last bad shot will not help. Just before Perry this year, I went to Valporaso, IN thinking I was hot stuff. I came out blazing and fired a 881 rimfire score at my first match as Master. Then I made the mistake of looking at the Wailing Wall only to see Dave Glenn (a high master from Illinois and a great guy) had shot a 890. I didn't let it bother me until .45 rapid-fire match. I couldn't get it out of my mind and fired 92 and 93 at the end. I missed 2600 by four points because I didn't focus. The lesson I learned that day was to focus on me and my shooting, the round in the chamber now, and nothing else. Experienced shooters will chat and relax before a match but most will put on a game-face during the match. Mental focus; it can and will make a big difference.

Perry II

The huts aren't nearly as bad as some folks say. I went to Perry this year and had an even

more enjoyable time than last year. One thing that contributed to my enjoyment was the success of some of my friends. For some strange reason, that seemed to help me relax and just shoot. I did well the first two days and knew that I had a good chance to break 2600. But every time I started to think about it, especially during slow-fire .45, I would stop myself from doing mental arithmetic. I would tell myself to just shoot one at a time and figure the score when it's all over. My last rapid-fire target was 100-3x and I finished with 2603-91x. A couple of high masters overheard me when I did my final addition on the ready line and came over to congratulate me. You could have tipped me over with a feather. They signed my last target and I brought that one home.

Equipment

I currently shoot a Hammerli 208S with a 25mm UltraDot on a BME mount. I have anatomical grips made by Horton of Illinois. In practice I shoot CCI Standard Velocity and in matches I shoot either Eley Yellow or Federal UM-1. The CCI groups 1 1/4" at 50 yards from a Ransom Rest, Eley Yellow about 3/4" and the Federal UM-1 just over a 1/2". For centerfire and .45, I shoot a Masaki wad gun: Caspian frame and slide, Kart barrel, Wilson rib mount with 25mm UltraDot on the slide. I also have anatomical grips from Horton for this gun. For long-line I reload Hornady 200gr JSWC with 4.05 VV N310 and they've grouped x-ring with a flyer at 50 yards from a Ransom. For short-line and all indoor, I reload Behnke 185gr cast LSWC with 3.9 Bullseye and they group just outside x-ring with a flyer or two. Overall length of these is 1.255 with a crimp of .468. With the UltraDot on the slide, I use an 11lb recoil spring. When I get a stovepipe, it's because the gun/chamber is dirty.

I've experimented with a lot of bullets (Nosler, Star, Bull-X, Meister, Speer) and powder (Clays, AA #5, 231) and this combination seems to work well for me. I use a Dillon 550, Federal primers, and WCC many-fired cases. I inspect my lead bullets and only use the visually clean and perfectly shaped ones (especially bases) for matches. That means about one in ten goes into the practice box. Before each match, I will quickly visually inspect each round and set aside any that look different, just in case.

For a ball gun, I purchased a basic mil-spec 1911A1 from Springfield Armory and had Masaki do a accuracy job on it. I believe that included a hand fitted Kart barrel, slide to frame fit, Bomar adjustable rear sight, and a trigger job. I've never really benched it but I've fired in six leg matches and am now fortunate enough to be distinguished. Using the CMP issue WCC Match ball, I fired 277-5x in the NTI match this year at Perry and won a Gold Custer Medal. The key to shooting the ball gun for me is one thing and one thing only; front sight. I remove everything else from my mind but front sight. I actually say "front sight, front sight" over and over to myself all during a ball match.

Getting it Done

As I get ready for each string, I will set my feet, look at the target, close my eyes and take a few breaths. Then I raise my shooting arm and mentally play a shot in my mind (the Army calls this visualization). As my imaginary shot breaks, I open my eyes and if my hand isn't pointing directly at my target, I adjust my back foot. Early in a match, I will take as many as three times mounting the gun in my hand to get the right feel of the grip. I find my hand changes slightly because of temperature, stress, and dampness during a match. Once I feel the proper grip, it starts to become second nature later in the match. Then I do the same with trigger finger placement. It might take three or four times, but I don't shoot unless it feels just right.

I try to dry-fire 8-10 times before a slow-fire string; it helps me to identify subtle problems

with my stance, grip, and trigger control. Relaxing and clearing my breathing helps me to mentally focus between shots. After the dot settles (about 2-3 seconds), I apply pressure to the trigger. If the shot doesn't break after about 6-8 seconds, my mind starts telling me to set the gun down. If I don't, it will always be a mistake. I shoot slow-fire in about 7 minutes but find that time decrease with later slow-fire targets because I get in the zone. If I am really in the zone, the dot stops moving for a few seconds but most of the time, it just slows down and the arc of movement gets smaller.

From time to time I'll have a timed or rapid-fire target with a group that is tighter than any of my slow-fire targets. That makes me want to shoot my slow-fire in a timed-fire cadence. That might work for some folks, but not me. What I have found is bad slows and good sustained's happen because my sub-conscious is pulling the trigger for sustained but my conscious mind is pulling the trigger in slow. If I consciously pull the trigger it will usually be a bad shot. I need to apply pressure to the trigger and simply have the gun go off subconsciously. In sustained fire, I reset the trigger and recover the gun at the same time. By then, the sights are coming back on target and as soon as the dot (or front sight) is entering the black, I begin to apply pressure. The breaking of the shot needs to surprise me or it's probably a bad shot. I'm getting better at this, but I have a long ways to go. For me, timed-fire is the same as rapid-fire except the first shot doesn't have to happen so quickly. I focus my vision through the dot to the target. As the shot breaks, I try to freeze that image for just a moment and call my shot. On indoor targets, I can pretty consistently call my shots to within a half-inch, outdoors about one to two inches. If two or three shots are consistently away from my call location, I'll consider changing my sights. A friend of mine once told me, "You have a screwdriver in your gunbox for a reason; USE IT!" My Hammerli seems to require no sight adjustment between 50 and 25 yards. However, the .45 requires about 7 down and 3 left when moving to the short line with the different load.

Maintenance

I swim once a week for exercise. While working on the computer, I'll pick up exercise putty and squeeze it for 10-20 minutes twice a day. I believe this really helps my grip and forearm strength. I am not a coffee drinker but still avoid any caffeine or sugar 24 hours before shooting. I am moderately near-sighted but shoot with contacts that correct my vision to 20/20. I completely clean my .45 (field strip then remove firing pin, extractor, sear, disconnect, trigger, etc) about every 500 rounds. In between time, I'll field strip and clean the barrel and slide/frame about every 200 rounds. In addition, I'll brush out the barrel after shooting lead before shooting jacketed. The Hammerli gets the barrel cleaned with a string and wet patch about every 500-700 rounds. At that time, I clean the extractor, bolt face, and chamber/feed ramp.

Keys to the Game

I have good days and I have bad days. When things don't go well, especially slow-fire, I try not to let it affect my mental concentration. I just run through my fundamentals and try to diagnose the problem. At an outdoor match recently, I fired two slow-fire targets with scores in the low 80's before I figured out what I was doing wrong. I'd like to practice and train with 100-200 rounds per week but my time just doesn't allow that. Because of that, I try to make my best effort to improve whenever I have an opportunity to shoot; be it practice, an informal league, or a match.

Buy as many points as you can and then earn the rest. I find this an accurate statement when it comes to Bullseye shooting but there is a point of diminishing returns. Spending the extra \$1000 on a Hammerli or similar gun over a Smith & Wesson Model 41 is not going to

make a Marksman a Master. When a shooter has the fundamentals down (stance, grip, sight alignment, trigger control, and follow-thru), this sport becomes simply a test of mental concentration. Learn from your mistakes and concentrate only on the current shot or string. Expect X's and 10's; be satisfied with 10's; improve all the other shots until they are X's and 10's.