

# ***Fundamentals of Pistol Marksmanship***

***William Joyner***

www.bullseyepistol.com

In preview, I would like to say that shooting excellent scores with a pistol requires no other elements than those described in the following sentence. **ALIGN THE SIGHTS PROPERLY ON THAT PART OF THE TARGET REQUIRED FOR YOUR GROUP TO CENTER IN THE BLACK AND CAUSE THE HAMMER TO FALL WITHOUT DISTURBING THAT ALIGNMENT.** All elements of pistol shooting such as position, grip, sight alignment, breath control, trigger control, physical condition, and psychology of shooting, when perfected, simply enable the shooter to perform the action described in the above key sentence.

## **Body Position or Stance**

We are all constructed differently and have different natural positions. To find your natural position, face away from the target 45 degrees. Look at the target by turning your head and eyes only and raise the pistol to the eye, target, line. Close your eyes, raise your pistol and arm several feet and allow it to fall relaxed, and naturally to the horizontal. If it falls right down the center of the target, you have your natural position. If it falls to one side, shuffle on your feet, keeping the body axis from the feet to the shoulder the same, until the pistol is aligned on the target again. Several tries such as this one will readily show you how far to face away from the target. This test need only be made during one shooting session. At all following sessions start out with the position that you have decided is natural for you and stay with it. The feet should be spread apart about the width of your shoulders or a little more. I have noticed that I spread my feet farther apart than when I first began shooting. Others have told me that they do the same. However, if you spread your feet unnaturally at first, you will have to exert undue muscular effort to maintain balance. The object is to be well balanced and comfortable.

The legs should be straight, but not stiff. Allow the knee joints to fall into a locked position, but still be relaxed. The thigh muscles should be relaxed. If you are tense anywhere, it is a sign of strain and will show up in your trigger control. The hips should be level and in an easy, natural position. Let your abdomen relax. We have a lot of fun admiring each other's "pots" during pistol matches, but no one ever attempts to hold it in. Allow the shoulders to hang naturally and relaxed. I prefer to place my free hand in my side pocket. Some shooters, especially those with long arms, can perform best by just letting their free arms and hand hang naturally at the side. The object is to entirely forget about it. It must be relaxed and forgotten. An instructor can easily spot a student who is not relaxed by the attitude of the free arm. The head and neck should be in an easy natural position. The shooter must look at the target by turning his head and eyes slightly without moving from the neck down. The simplest way to do this is to face your entire body away from the target at the angle you have selected and then turn your head and eyes only to the target before raising your pistol to the firing position. While looking at the target from this natural position, raise your pistol until you can align the sights on the target. The important thing is to make your pistol arm fit the body position instead of ruining a good body position by craning the neck and shoulders trying to get behind the pistol. The body position must be selected first, then use the pistol arm only to bring the sights in line with the eye and target.

The pistol arm should be extended directly toward the target. The wrist is locked without strain, (this requires practice), the elbow is locked also but with no sense of strain or tenseness. The gull and arm supported by the muscles on top of the shoulder, (the trapezius group). Try holding a ten or fifteen pound weight out in the firing position and feel the top of your shoulder where the arm joins and you will find the small hard muscles that support your gun arm. You should feel that the pistol is hanging from above, and not that you are pushing it up from below.

## **Breath Control**

The object of breath control is to enable the shooter to hold his breath with a comfortable feeling long enough to fire one shot slow fire; 5 shots in 20 seconds timed fire; and 5 shots in 10 seconds rapid fire. I recommend taking several deep relaxing breaths immediately prior to extending the pistol, and as you extend it, take another breath and exhale until your lungs feel normal. Hold until you fire the required shots. If you have too much air in the lungs, you will feel the pressure and it will interfere with your ability to hold. If you completely empty the lungs your arm will begin to shake in about 5 seconds. You are likely to have more trouble in the timed fire stage than the others. In order to be comfortable for 20 seconds, you must time your breathing just right and prepare for the string beforehand by taking several deep breaths. Take a deeper than normal breath at the command "Ready on the right"; take another at "Ready on the left"; at the command "Ready on the Firing Line" extend your pistol and take another breath and exhale to the point of comfort just as the targets turn.

## **Physical Conditioning**

Many shooters discount the element of proper physical conditioning. They think that so little effort is required to extend a two pound pistol and fire it that they need no exercise. I have spent many days at hard labor such as cross-tie loading, woodcutting, ditch-digging, football, etc., but I have never felt as much fatigue from those labors as I have from a full day at match shooting. I realize that some of my fatigue is due to a certain amount of nervous tension, however, I have learned that when I am in top condition, I feel good even after two or three days of match shooting. The real payoff for good condition lies in the score. I know several shooters who have added fifty points or more to their Grand Aggregates by conditioning themselves with systematic weight lifting programs prior to the matches. I recommend a mild weight-lifting program and some road work to put the shooter in a good general condition, then some special exercises for the shooting arm. These special exercises consist of dry firing with a weight weighing several times more than the pistol. A quart milk bottle full of water, or a six pound dumb-bell are some of the things I have used. Extend the weight just as you would a pistol and line it up on an object and try to hold it steady until your arm starts throbbing. Rest for a few minutes and repeat the exercise. 10 minutes of this each day that you do not shoot on the range will enable you to hold steadier and longer than before.

## **Trigger Control**

I do not like to use the word "squeeze" in connection with trigger control. When we think of the action of squeezing, we usually close all four fingers and thumb together at the same time. This is definitely not proper trigger control. The pressure put on the trigger must come from the trigger finger only. The gripping fingers and base of thumb do not move. Review the chapter on grip. Get the proper grip on your pistol and keep the pressure constant, align the sights on the target properly, then with the trigger finger only, exert a steady, constantly

increasing pressure, straight to the rear, until the hammer falls. There is a slightly different method of trigger control that I recommend for master shooters only and even then with extreme caution. The difference is that while the sight picture is not perfect, the trigger pressure is maintained, but not increased. When the picture becomes good again, the pressure is continued. This method when used correctly, insures that all shots go off with a perfect sight picture. The danger in this method is the tendency to flinch. I have been successful in the timed and slow fire stages, but I revert to the constantly increased pressure method in rapid fire. I just don't have time to interrupt my pressure in the rapid fire stage.

There is one very important element common to both trigger control methods: the shooter does not pick out a definite moment to fire the gun. He knows by the amount of pressure on the trigger about when the hammer will fall, but not the exact instant. If he does pick out one exact instant to make the hammer fall, he will invariably flinch.

## **Flinching**

Flinching is the convulsive movement made just as the hammer falls that causes shots to miss the target, or strike anywhere from the 5 ring to the 8 ring. All shooters suffer from this malady at one time or another. When Joe Benner gets an eight he has flinched because he would never put pressure on his trigger with his sights aligned in the eight ring, (windy shooting excepted). Your progress in the competitive field of target shooting depends largely on your ability to overcome flinching. I include all such movements as "Bucking," "Jerking" in the general term "Flinching." Here is exactly what happens: If you know the exact moment your pistol is going to fire, your subconscious mind orders you to brace your body against the recoil, and you do so, resulting in a flinch. The remedy is to never know the exact instant the hammer will fall. Even then your subconscious mind will make brace, but the reaction time between the explosion and your bracing will allow the bullet to leave the barrel without being misdirected by your flinch.

## **Psychology of Shooting**

This is a serious problem to many shooters and to some degree a problem to all shooters. I'm referring to the building up of pressure inside the shooter that makes him shoot like a novice when he is capable of shooting 2600. It is sometimes called "Buck Fever" or "Monkey on my Back." It prevents the shooter from shooting in matches, the scores that he shoots in practice. The best cure for this feeling is self confidence. If you shoot 870 with your .22 in practice, walk up on the line with the feeling that you can shoot 870 and will. 870 probably won't put you in the first 5 places, but it is your normal score and you can always shoot it. Sometimes you get hot and shoot 880. Don't keep such an accurate count of your scores that you end up in the National Match Course knowing that if you shoot 295, you will set a new record. Just shoot your matches as they come, record your score, and forget about them. Absolutely don't count your competitor's score to the point that you know exactly how much you need to beat them. Sometimes a shooter shoots 5 or 6 consecutive tens in the slow fire string. It is awful hard to stay with it. My advice is to spot your shots until you are sure that your sights are set right and then finish your string without spotting any more.

The match shooter has a complicated problem. He wants to win and when he sees a chance to win because of some good strings, his breath quickens, and his heart beats so fast that he can feel it in his trigger finger. As a result he usually blows a five shot string and then for the rest of the match shoots normally. If we could just go to a match and be satisfied with our practice score; refrain from counting up our aggregates as we go; refuse to speculate on how

much it will take to win; refrain from comparing competitor's scores, we would probably shoot much better. Here again experience strengthens our ability. The match shooter who has been to match after match and been disappointed time after time soon finds that it just doesn't seem so important to win. Then he begins to shoot his best scores in matches.

## **Suggestions to the Beginner**

We will begin with equipment. I will not discuss equipment any further than to say that you must have complete confidence in your pistols and your ammunition. If you doubt either, you will blame equipment for your errors, and not correct them. Dry firing will develop and improve every element of shooting except recovery from recoil. It develops that machine-like precision in the timings of your timed and rapid fire stages. I suggest a fifteen minute session of dry-firing every day that you do not shoot on the range. Simulate your range conditions as much as possible.

When you are troubled with flinching, use the roulette system, until you conquer the fault. By the roulette system I mean that you load all cylinders and spin the cylinder between each shot. This insures that you will soon be putting pressure on the trigger without knowing whether or not a live one is under the hammer. When the hammer falls and snaps, you will be able to see your flinch and soon eliminate it.

You must do more than just shoot during your practice sessions. Call your shots slow fire and analyze your weaknesses. No amount of shooting will improve your score unless some thought and planning go along with the shooting. I shoot a complete aggregate, (900), with one caliber during each practice session. If you possibly can, practice on the range 3 times a week and dry fire at home all other days. Don't try to shoot too much during one practice session. One 900 aggregate is just about enough, especially with the .45. Keep an accurate record of your progress. If you fail to write down your scores, you will soon remember only the good ones. Always time yourself by some method or have someone time you during practice sessions. It is second nature to shoot your rapid in 12 seconds if you are not timed.

## **Slow Fire**

Remember that you do not have to shoot before bringing your gun arm down to rest. When a shooter feels any fatigue or feels that he is running short of breath, by all means he should lower his arm, breathe deeply and try again, after relaxing. Some excellent slow fire shooters try two or three times before getting a shot off. Don't insist on having the perfect sight picture before applying pressure to the trigger. You can shoot groups only within your ability to hold. If you can hold within the ten ring, then should go there, but if you are like most of us, even after years of shooting; you are satisfied to hold within the nine ring and get your tens from the law of averages, and cuss your eight's.

## **Timed Fire**

Prepare your lungs by breathing deeply prior to firing and holding it just as you align your sights. Make rhythm, (interval between shots), the prime object. Never vary your rhythm. Adjust your recovery so that you have your sight picture in time for the next shot to go, but do not wait for perfect sight picture. If you maintain your rhythm and fail to get perfect sight picture, you'll get nines. If you make the gun fire just as the sight picture is perfect, you will get misses.

## **Rapid Fire**

Rhythm is of prime importance. Rhythm is important because you develop rhythm only by putting a uniform pressure on the trigger after each recovery. You can improve your rapid fire by learning to fire the first shot within one second after the target turns to you.

## **Conclusion**

The theory of shooting is simple: You create a machine rest with your stance, grip and breath control. Then with the gun in the machine rest, you apply pressure directly to the rear until the hammer falls. In practice we sometimes find our machine rest wobbly because it has a brain and can count scores and anticipate wins. Through experience and practice you must make the brain machine-like also.