

Three Lessons of Pistol Shooting

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The following condensed article on pistol shooting comes from one of the greatest shooters of all time, Bill Blankenship. Bill's experience as a shooter on the U.S. Army Pistol Team and a winner of the National Championship five years in a row, plus a sixth time two years later, speaks for itself.

When reminiscing over the years I've been in competitive shooting, many things come to mind. The feeling of doing something well has indeed been very satisfying and well worth the effort. Winning the first medal, the first match, and to have had the good fortune and the friendships established will rank high among my finest memories. I've also been impressed by the sportsmanship displayed by shooters from the time I became involved.

To learn to shoot a pistol, there are certain basic fundamentals every interested person should be familiar with. In the beginning, most shooters make the same basic mistakes. Some of these are made because of the lack of knowledge, while other mistakes are made because it is simply the natural thing to do, such as looking at what you are shooting at. This is the first lesson a new shooter should learn: The focus of the eye must be on the front sight (with iron sights) or on the reticle (with red dot or scope sights) to get the most accuracy out of the pistol.

There are 3 major lessons that should be taught to new shooters. The first is proper sight picture. The second is trigger control. The third is learning to hold still. When working on these LESSONS, one is learning the majority of the FUNDAMENTALS; therefore stance, grip, breathing, and other fundamentals will be discussed within these 3 lessons. The ability to CONCENTRATE has a direct bearing on anyone's scores, but the fundamentals must be learned first.

Lesson One: PROPER SIGHT ALIGNMENT

Sight alignment has to do with only the alignment of the front and rear sights and has nothing to do with the target. Where you hold on the target is not too important as long as you hold as still as you can and in the same place for each shot. The greatest lesson I learned and one that made the greatest difference in score was to bring the focus of the eye from the target to the front sight. I found that during my experimenting that the focus of the eye was shifting back and forth from the front sight to the target and sometimes the focus was on neither, but somewhere inbetween! Perfect sight alignment is necessary to get good scores, and having a natural alignment of the arm, hand and gun to the eye will keep the sights perfectly aligned.

There are several things that cause the sights to become mis-aligned. The wrist not being held in a stationary position is one. To eliminate this, concentrate on getting the arm straight with the elbow locked and by gripping the gun as hard as you can grip with out it starting to tremble. After you've taken the grip on the pistol and the sights do not align themselves naturally, DO NOT compensate by turning the wrist. This is especially a problem for those who shoot with optical (dot) sights. To do this will cause you to lose control of the

solid arm, wrist, and grip. Practice holding the wrist in a stationary position at all times with a locked elbow and a hard grip. This will strengthen forearm muscles which control the grip.

The position of the head is very important in keeping the sights aligned. The head should be kept in the same exact position at all times. A drooping head will cause many difficulties.

Lesson Two: TRIGGER CONTROL

To new and old shooters alike, controlling the trigger seems to be a major problem. The new shooter has trouble because he has no conception of how delicate this problem is. The older shooters, myself included, are always trying to perfect their trigger control.

All the new shooters I've had the chance to coach have had just about the same problems. For example, the first time a person picks up a .45 caliber automatic, their first shot is usually somewhere between a point one yard in front of their feet to anywhere in the vicinity of the target! Most everyone knows that when the sights get aligned you're supposed to do something that will make the gun fire. This they do, but most of the time all at once. This sudden movement of the trigger finger disturbs the gun and is referred to as "jerking the trigger." Let me explain my idea of the problems and progress of new shooters. I like to use the example of a picture puzzle. When a new shooter starts to understand the fundamentals it's like picking out the pieces that have border lines and putting them together. There is a lot accomplished but a lot ahead. Each new piece of the puzzle is like learning another lesson in shooting. Sometimes a puzzle takes a long time to figure out; likewise, there are many problems in shooting, and each time one is solved, the results produce better scores.

Trigger control can become a habit. I believe that any muscular movement of the body can become a habit through repetition. The reflex action of pulling (squeezing or mashing) the trigger, is the subconscious mind evaluating the situation, making the decision whether or not to shoot that shot, and without any conscious thought on your part starting the trigger finger to move and continuing pressure until the hammer falls. Just as if an object is about to hit you in the face you automatically close your eyes and usually bring your hand(s) up to protect your face, it is a reflex action controlled by the subconscious mind.

Without hesitation, the pulling of the trigger is a positive pressure straight to the rear in such a way as not to disturb the perfect alignment of the sights or the stillness of the gun. Taking a good position and stance is important. Also, you must have a solid arm with ELBOW LOCKED, the wrist straight, and a good hard grip on the pistol. Then try to hold the gun with perfect sight alignment as still as you can with the focus of the eye on the front sight (or reticle). If the gun settles in the PROPER AIMING AREA on the target and the movement is such that you can accept, then commit yourself to deliver that shot and squeeze with a positive pressure without any hesitation. The saying "he who hesitates is lost," applies very well to trigger control.

Trigger pressure must come from the trigger finger only. You must place the trigger finger on the trigger in such a way that you can squeeze straight to the rear and thereby have no disturbance to the sight alignment in any way. Having the arm so solid, the wrist straight, and the grip hard will aid you in trigger control. By gripping hard you can keep the same grip on the pistol throughout the shot or series. The trigger finger must move independently

from the rest of the hand. Consistency is the secret of doing anything well. This is especially true of trigger control.

Lesson 3: LEARNING TO HOLD STILL

To the new shooter holding a handgun relatively motionless is most difficult. He must learn this lesson early in his training. Even the most experienced shooters never hold the gun absolutely still, but the attempt to hold it still is always present. The experienced shooter has many shots break when the gun is almost motionless, and this is what the new shooter must be striving for in his performance. But when the gun still moves slightly he must accept this movement, always attempting to hold the weapon as still as it is possible for him to do so. As the new shooter progresses in his training, he will learn what movements he can expect and those that will cause a bad shot. The important thing to remember is that the shooter must always be trying to hold the weapon as still as he possibly can, with perfect sight alignment.

How to Stand: The feet should be at least shoulder width apart. This is a comfortable way to stand and also helps to keep the body balanced. The legs should be straight but it is not necessary that the knees be locked in the joint. The hips should be near level, the back should be straight. The head should be erect and turned toward the shooting arm. If you lower the head gradually toward the arm, your front sight will dip, causing low shots. The reverse of this is true when the head is gradually moved to the rear. In this line of thought a number of shooters droop the head to the left while attempting to fire the shot or a string of shots. This causes the front sight to block toward the left side of the rear sight. This brings out the importance of holding the head erect and in the same position during delivery of every shot or string of shots. To get the arm still you must first make sure that the arm is straight, the muscles firm, the elbow locked. The wrist must be set so that there is no movement of the hand. This will help minimize your movements because the arm, hand, and weapon are then supported by the muscles in the shoulder. As the shoulder muscles get stronger the ability to hold more still becomes more apparent. While studying movement in general, it was helpful to aim at a cross on the wall. I found that by aiming perfect sight alignment on a horizontal line that the movements up and down were exaggerated and while aiming at a vertical line the movement from side to side was exaggerated. Working on these two separate lines enabled me to get an idea of what was necessary to stop movements that I did not desire. I did not stop all the movements of the gun or arm but there was less movement than I had ever had before. There were times in the next year after spending the time studying movement, that I had the sensation of the weapon being perfectly still for a short period of time just after settling the arm. I was not aware of this short period of stillness of the arm and gun just after settling, until I spent the time studying movement. To find this fact out made the considerable amount of time spent a very good investment.

How to Grip the Weapon: The first point to be emphasized is that the shooter must learn to grip the gun hard to get consistent results. He must also learn to grip the same way for each shot or string of shots. To do this, he must use both his senses of seeing and touch to see if it is right as well as to feel if it is right. The point here is that just getting a hold of the weapon is not enough. There must be a decisive effort each time to get the same firm grip on the gun for each shot or string. The young shooter, especially, has trouble here because he hasn't yet found out exactly how to grip the weapon or how hard he should grip it to get the best results. This can only come through time and practice. To get a good grip, first watch closely how you do it each time. This educates the mind to see as well as feel and it comes easier to

duplicate one's efforts each successive time. I use the following method to get a grip on the gun:

1. Pick up the gun by the barrel or slide.
2. Place the stock between the thumb and forefinger of the right hand and push the gun firmly to the heel of the hand, being careful to watch how the gun seats.
3. While pushing the gun into the hand, wrap the fingers firmly around the grip
4. All the fingers are used to grip the gun and equal pressure by all the fingers is necessary to control the weapon. No excessive pressure should be exerted on the side of the gun by the thumb.
5. The greatest pressure should be between the heel of the hand and that portion of the fingers on the front of the stock.
6. While gripping very firm, the trigger finger must be able to work back and forth enough to give it an independent action. This can be accomplished through dry firing and practicing taking the grip on the weapon.
7. This firm grip should be maintained at the same pressure while squeezing the trigger to fire one shot or an entire string of shots. A common mistake made is to not get the grip in the same way, causing the gun to feel differently in the hand and thereby causing the individual to hesitate to squeeze the trigger. A frequent mistake made is to gradually release the grip while squeezing the trigger especially during a string of sustained fire and will result in a definite loss of control. To grip the weapon with a very firm grip and with the same pressure throughout the delivery of a shot or string of shots will reduce the chances of making this mistake.

Breathing: It is not often that the average individual would have to think about breathing. The body functions are such that the lungs take care of the body without conscious thought. However, where the breath must be held, an individual must plan ahead for the period that the breath will be held. The brain must have sufficient oxygen to function properly. To illustrate: a deep sea diver who does not have sufficient oxygen loses his coordination and then begins to have difficulty seeing. The shooter is frequently holding his breath for periods of 20 seconds and more. If there is not sufficient oxygen in the blood stream, the eyes are not clear and the lungs want to take a breath causing movement in the body. To illustrate this point, without taking a deep breath try to hold your breath for 20 seconds. You will find that you become very anxious for the 20 seconds to be over with. You will also gasp for breath as soon as the time is up, if not sooner. The purpose of this is to bring to your mind the importance of taking a few deep breaths in order to store up the greatest amount of oxygen possible in your body. You will also find that deep breathing tends to relax the body and has a calming effect on the nervous system. This is reason enough to point out the importance of the shooter practicing deep breathing just before a shot or string of sustained fire. I would like to point out that to deep breathe is not natural to all individuals, so it becomes necessary to practice it until it is a habit. The time for deep breathing is immediately before each slow fire shot and immediately before every string of sustained fire.

Learning to Settle the Arm: Although it is possible to get good results in shooting by expecting movement in the arm, it is possible to get better results if the arm and gun are almost motionless. It is possible for most individuals to hold the arm and gun almost motionless for a short period of time just after the arm has settled. By settling I mean the arm and gun stopping at a certain area on the target and becoming as still as it is possible

for the individual to hold. To get the stillness of arm and gun that I refer to takes a lot of practice, concentrated effort, and a great deal of thought on the subject.