

The Los Angeles Silhouette Club

So, you want to be a crack pistol shot?

By: Glen E. Fryxell

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We hear a lot about all sort of shooting events that focus on speed -- IPSC, cowboy action shooting, falling plates, Bianchi Cup, etc. Dynamic targets are always fun and are good at keeping people's attention. Speed is a challenge, and the folks that excel at these events are truly inspirational to watch. But are these the disciplines to work at if one wants to become a crack pistol shot?

No.

These disciplines will teach the draw, the grasp, target acquisition, sight picture and follow through, all important skills, and useful in defensive shooting situations. But they don't teach the most important component of handgun marksmanship.

To learn to become a crack pistol shot, one needs old-fashioned bullseye-style shooting. Yes, it's slow. Yes, the targets are boring. Yes, it requires an attention span that lasts longer than your average rodeo bull ride. But it's the only handgun shooting discipline that is able to teach the shooter how to shoot a handgun with precision. How can I make such a claim? Let me explain...

How many times have you heard the pneumatic, "Sight picture, trigger control."? Shooters in pretty much all of the shooting sports recite this mantra, constantly and repeatedly. What is covered by the concepts of "sight picture" and "trigger control" may vary from discipline to discipline, but those two basic themes pervade the whole of shooterdom. But these things are not enough.

What's really meant by the concept of "trigger control"? Basically, the idea is to manipulate the trigger in such a way as to not disturb the sight picture, so the shot lands where it was intended. That's all well and good, but it doesn't teach us how to do this, or what some of the common pitfalls are. "Trigger control" just says fire the shot and don't disturb the sights. It is *outcome oriented*, not *how-to procedure oriented*.

I have taught handgun marksmanship for the better part of 2 decades, and the one concept that is most awkward for shooters (novice and experienced alike) to learn, and the one most overlooked in most marksmanship courses, is to isolate the trigger finger. The human hand is a wondrous instrument. One that is capable of complex motions and delicate tactile sensation. We use it to grasp, lift, turn, throw, twist and squeeze objects hundreds of times each day. The intricacy and complexity of these motions can be summed up by considering what the hands of a jazz guitarist, a big-league baseball pitcher and a master gunsmith do every day.

The fingertips, knuckles, palm and thumb work together as a truly remarkable team.

To become an expert pistol shot we have to break that team up. We are asking the hand to two very different jobs simultaneously. First, it must serve as a stable foundation from which to launch the shot, and secondly it must trigger that shot at the moment that the sights are precisely aligned with the target of interest. The first job is static, the second job is quite dynamic. We want the grip to remain unchanged throughout the shot execution, but we need to have the trigger finger "activate the mechanism". While most shooters recognize (at some level) that these two jobs contradict one another, relatively few can actually pull it off. Learning to do this will make you a better pistol shot.

The key here is to learn how to isolate the trigger finger.

What do I mean by "isolate" the trigger finger? [Learn to move the trigger finger without moving anything else in the hand.](#)

Let's do a little drill --

Assume your shooting stance as though you were holding a favorite handgun (this drill actually works better if you're not holding the gun). Hold your shooting hand out, in classic bullseye form and line up a convenient sight picture (I use the knuckle at the base of my thumb as the "sight" and aim at a light switch on the far wall). Now go through 10-15 slow, deliberate "shots" with your trigger finger. A very common outcome at this point is for one (or more) of the fingers (or even the thumb) in the shooting hand to "follow" the trigger finger, closing slightly as the trigger squeeze progresses. This is fine for picking up and peeling an orange, but is counterproductive for handgun marksmanship as that change in finger pressure will change not only where the handgun is pointed, it will also alter how it moves in recoil (thereby impacting the accuracy of follow up shots). Now repeat the 10-15 "shots", this time concentrating on the shooting hand, and keeping everything fixed except the trigger finger. Do not allow anything else to move, or even tense up. This will be awkward at first. That's OK. This is a very un-natural motion for us to ask the hand to make. Keep repeating these virtual dry-fire drills a couple of times a day. In time this task will become more comfortable and feel less awkward.

One needs a means of monitoring progress and seeing how much improvement is being made, and that's where bullseye competition comes in. Regular bullseye shooting (either formal matches or practice rounds) will help a pistol shooter gauge how much his or her skills are improving through these virtual dry-fire drills. Bullseye gives the shooter a permanent record of where each shot landed, allowing an analysis of the root cause for each flyer. This can be very diagnostic, and a powerful teaching tool. Sight picture, trigger control, and isolate that trigger finger!

Grip That Pistol!



Single Actions- I grip it high



Double Actions- I get my hand up on the gun where it won't move.



No - don't hold it sideways! Looking from the top, the gun should be in line with your arm. Hold it tight so it don't squirm around in your hand.

Diagnosing Your Trigger Squeeze

Taken from the NRA's "The Basics of Pistol Shooting"

Trigger control is of utmost importance, especially when shooting handguns. Shooting bullseye targets on paper is the only way to properly diagnose your trigger squeeze. It will also keep track of your progress and is an instant reminder if you start making any wrong moves.

To diagnose your trigger squeeze we start with a gun that is properly zeroed and that we know is hitting dead center. If you don't know how to do that then you don't need this article. You should start with something a little more basic. The suggestions below are also based on a right-handed shooter. For a left-handed shooter the target results will be on the opposite side from what is stated.

1. When you fire 5 to 10 shots on the target, if it looks like someone has been using a shotgun - that is, they are a "pattern" and not a "group", this indicates you are not consistently gripping the firearm in the same manner, and most likely are putting your finger on the trigger differently each time. You probably do not have a consistent sight picture either, focusing on the sights for one shot while you focus on the target for another. Probably your hold is not steady either.
2. If your shots group low and to the left most likely you are jerking the trigger

instead of squeezing it.

3. If your shots group high to the left - say in the 9 o'clock to 12 o'clock position - you are probably anticipating the recoil and pushing the firearm up. This is called "riding the recoil". Groups in this area are also caused by lack of follow-through.
4. If your group is consistent at about 9 o'clock you most likely do not have your finger on the trigger properly. You are probably squeezing at an angle instead of straight back.
5. If your group is high to the right you may be "heeling" the firearm - anticipating the recoil and pushing with the heel of your hand.
6. If your shots group fairly consistently to the right in the 3 o'clock area you are probably "thumbing" the gun. That is, as the gun goes off you are pushing on the side of the frame with your thumb.
7. If your group is consistently low, say in the 6 o'clock area, you may be "breaking" your wrist, that is, anticipating the recoil and cocking the wrist down. Low shots also come from improper follow-through when the shooter relaxes too quickly.
8. If all the shots are hitting right, low, say in the 4 to 5 o'clock area, you may be tightening your grip just as the gun fires. This is another form of anticipating recoil.

Again, the above is based upon a handgun that is properly zeroed with a right-handed shooter.

Be aware that there are other causes for the above results on target. These are the main mistakes that shooters make, but they are not the only ones.

- Glen E. Fryxell / Jim Taylor

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