



How to Shoot a Ten, Time After Time

By Rev. Jerry Endres, ATC USN Ret.

Shooting a pistol and hitting the target is a satisfying feeling. Doing it time after time is a very satisfying feeling because it's a rather difficult thing to do. However, with proper training and practice any serious minded pistol shooter can achieve great improvement in the scores they shoot.

Having good equipment is important, but having a healthy body is vital. It is the body that has the strength to hold the pistol, see the sights, decide when to fire the shot and the stamina to shoot well over a long day in outdoor conditions. Eating properly, rest and adequate exercise maintain general good health. More will be said on this later as it applies to being at one's best for each match.

Before I begin to get into details I need to say that while there are fundamentals that can not be ignored, the means of accomplishing them can vary from person to person. For example my hands are on the small side and my grip is different from someone whose hands are large. Both of us will hold the pistol so that it is brought up to the aiming eye and under control during recoil, but we do it somewhat differently.

The starting point of shooting a well-aimed shot is the stance. There are several options available as to the relationship of the shooter to the target. This angle will determine the angle that the gun has in your hand and the position of other parts of your body. Is there one angle that is better than another? YES! All major matches are shot outside where the wind blows and only ONE angle is best for the wind. That angle is 45 degrees to the target. If all of your shooting is done indoors it doesn't matter. Or if you can be satisfied with having a bad day when the wind blows from the worst direction choose something else. The old practice of closing the eyes and extending the arm to find out where your best strength is leaves too many things to chance. If your best strength is not at 45 degrees train with some small weights (5-10 lbs) until it becomes your best strength. While standing at a 45-degree angle the feet should be spread comfortably apart with the center of balance midway between the feet and slightly forward. The weight forward keeps the body under control during recoil. The non-shooting hand can be anywhere but remember that its weight is part of your overall balance, and that it should not be affected by the wind.

The head must be held in a vertical position so the blood vessels in the neck are not restricted and so that the inner ear can function at 100% to provide balance information to the brain. The shooting hand should bring the gun to the aiming eye, not the other way around. If this seems strange keep practicing until it becomes natural.

The proper grip is a vital fundamental that each person must work out on their own if they are to consistently shoot high scores. The key points to be concerned with are first to seat the gun into the palm of the hand so it will not shift during recoil. Next ensure that the trigger finger is naturally resting on the trigger. The strength of the grip is a fundamental that will determine whether your trigger control will seem natural or strained. For illustration make a fist and tense your forearm. Next wiggle your trigger finger and notice that its tendons and muscle are surrounded by the others in the middle of the forearm. When you grip with full strength those tensed muscles work against the muscle of the trigger finger and it takes more effort to pull that trigger. The secret is to develop your strength until your 80% grip is good enough to hold the gun during recoil. While holding the gun you should still sense the “feel” of the gun and trigger. A maximum tensed grip has no feel and cannot allow proper natural trigger control.

Sight alignment is still a fundamental to those who use iron sights. Iron sights are my personal preference for sighting a pistol. If my old eyes could still focus on them I would not be using optical sights. With iron sights shots can be called within an inch at 50 yards. Optical sights are a hindrance because of their weight and that they require the gun to be held at a different angle. The “secret” to using iron sights is to look at them. The focus should be the top of the front sight and it should not be allowed to go elsewhere. One does not know where the gun is pointing if the sights are not in focus. Small changes in sight alignment will go unnoticed and a ten will come only by luck.

Connected with sight alignment is aiming area. Since it is impossible to hold a pistol completely motionless some movement will occur. If this motion bothers you an attempt to make the gun fire at a precise instant will result in a jerk and a bad shot. The goal is to accept normal movement and cause the gun to go off while the sights are aligned within the aiming area without disturbing the sight alignment. This should result in a group that is centered over the ten ring without any wild shots. The key is practice, practice and more practice until those wild shots are a bad memory.

Ask most pistol shooters what the main fundamental is and the answer is likely to be trigger control. They are right in that more bad shots are caused by poor trigger control than anything else. It matters little if the stance was solid and the aim was right on if the gun is disturbed at the moment of firing.

The trigger on a target pistol normally has a trigger stop which allows the trigger to move only far enough to allow the gun to fire. Movement of the trigger after the slack is taken up should not be noticeable. It should feel that the trigger is a pressure sensitive switch. Slack in the trigger stop will result in an enlargement in the group in the vertical direction.

When your mind says its time to make the gun go off the trigger finger should initiate the movement that it has been trained to do. Once it is trained it should repeat the movement without thought on your part. The bottom line is practice. Without it you will not improve. Practicing with live ammo is not the best approach because the recoil masks any errors you might make. The easiest way is to tape an aiming spot on the wall at the right

height and assume the correct stance, grip and cause the hammer to drop while the gun is in the aiming area. Doing this for 15 minutes a day will develop every skill you need.

During an at sea period of six weeks I was unable to practice except for using a wooden 45 pistol I had made. It had combat sights and I used two pounds of lead in a sock over my wrist to keep my shoulder strength developed. Upon returning to home port I fired in a competition and fired my personal best over the course of fire. Two months later the same thing happened again. So “dry firing” IS the way to improve your trigger control.

There are several things one could think about while “causing” the gun to go off. Tell the trigger finger to pull straight back toward the aiming eye. Tell it to continue to pull without interruption once it has started. Some are able to hold the trigger pull if the gun leaves the aiming area and restart it when it looks good. Either way will produce a good score. I do the hold the trigger thing normally, but my smallest group was produced by uninterrupted pulling when I was in the aiming area. Pick your own method.

Most know about sight alignment and trigger control as being the main fundamentals but there is a third! It is learning to hold still. The world’s top shooters who shoot free pistol at a ten ring the size of a silver dollar at 50 meters have learned to minimize their aiming area.

Any action, or in this case inaction, done by the human body requires strength. Needed strength only comes through proper training. Since we are training to hold a pistol as stationery as possible use a weight (5-10 lbs) that is heavier than the pistol and hold it to a spot on the wall. Notice if your main movement is vertical or horizontal and work to lessen that movement. When the 10 pound weight begins to not feel heavy the gun will then feel light. You will be on the way to controlling the gun instead of vice versa.

Preparation for each slow fire shot and each sustained fire string should be methodical and planned. For example recheck that the magazine is loaded correctly, the sights are adjusted for the right distance and light conditions and the spotting scope is focused on the target. Prior to each, repeat each, shot or string I ensure that my body is naturally pointing the gun at the target. If it is not pointing at the X-ring the group will tend to go to the natural point of aim. After the command to load I begin to take three deep breaths and will have half a lung full of air when the target turns. I anticipate the targets turning but will not start the trigger pull until I see movement of the target. With a natural point of aim and a smooth trigger pull straight to the rear the first shot of a string will always be a ten or better.

Besides training the shoulder for greater strength additional training is necessary for the muscle that keeps the elbow firm and locked while aiming. Because we don’t usually use this muscle it is weak and allows the elbow to relax during a shot and causes the shot to go low on the target. To strengthen this muscle use the 5-10 lb weights with the elbow in the vertical position and the hand behind the head. Support the arm being exercised with the other arm and start with the 5 lb weight and a few repetitions and work up. Thirty repetitions with the ten-pound weight should produce adequate strength.

Our nervous systems have a funny quirk. After approximately 8 seconds of holding the breath while aiming a nervous system spike will occur. The arm will rise and the trigger finger will pull causing a wild shot. No amount of training will prevent it. Shooters of all levels do it, but the top shooters know enough to avoid the eight-second trap by putting the gun down and starting over.

Shooting our best consistently comes when we are at the peak of health and well-being. Try to get proper rest during the days before matches. If certain foods or drinks adversely affect your performance avoid them during the shooting season. I avoid coffee, tea and sugar because they will cost me points compared to my not using them. You make up your own list.

See you on the range.

About the author:

Atlantic Fleet and Navy Pistol Champion 1978-1988

NRA Master, 2600 Club Member

Presidents 100

Distinguished Pistol Shot

Navy Team Captain and Coach 1982

