

Handgunning Today

HOW TO GET IN PISTOL

by J. MICHAEL PLAXCO

This world-class shooter tells how to handle your auto pistol for best results at any speed.



IF YOU WANT to learn how to get the most from your handgun (which means getting the most from yourself), the following material will get you started. If you've ever wondered why some people seem to excel in handgun shooting, the answer is that good shooters have a mastery of the fundamentals.

The material in this article is strongly influenced by my background as a "practical" handgun shooter. By my definition, practical handgun shooting is not limited to organized IPSC-type events, rather it is being able to hit your target in the necessary time frame while adhering to the fundamentals required to hit the target. An IPSC competitor may need to hit his targets in fractions of a second; a hunter needs to hit his target while the target is available; an Olympic shooter might have hours to fire all his shots—yet all three share the same, common fundamentals.

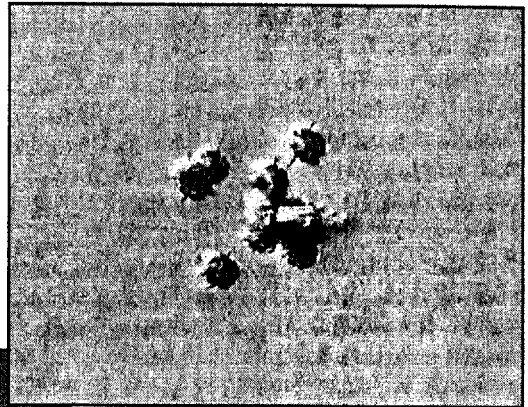
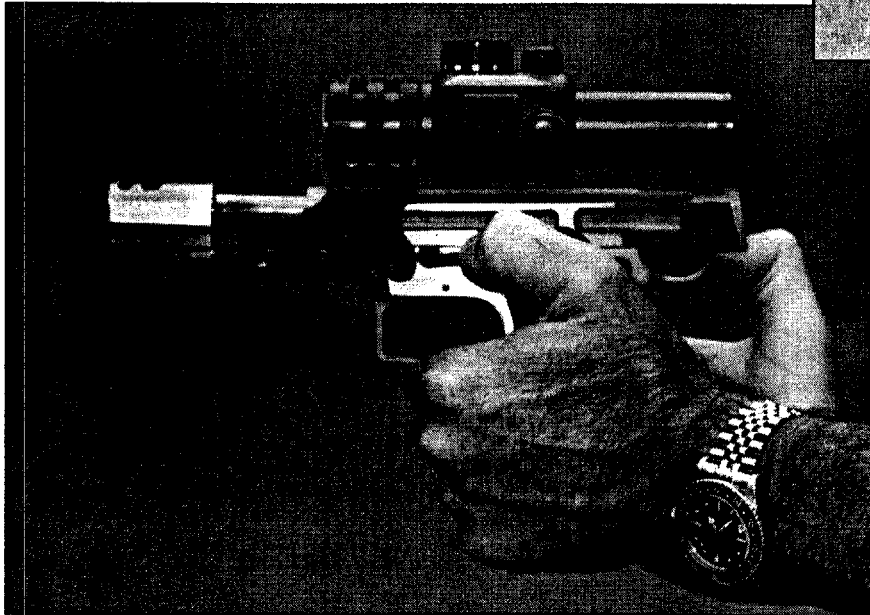
Getting Started

Range Safety

There is no more important skill than safe gun handling. Obeying or violating a safety rule can, literally, be a matter of life or death. *Safety is a state of mind.* Your actions regarding firearms safety must become a habit, but they must also never be taken for granted.

- Treat every firearm as if it is loaded! Repeat—*firearms are always considered loaded!* Do not point a firearm at anything you are not willing to see destroyed.
- Eye and ear protection are mandatory.
- The best safety is your trigger finger (which is connected to your brain). If you can see the sights, your finger should be on the trigger; if you cannot see the sights, your finger should be off the trigger.
- At the conclusion of a shooting exercise, unload your pistol and verify that it is empty by *looking into the chamber.*

STARTED SHOOTING



Accuracy is the foundation of a shooting education. Without developing the ability to place shots exactly where you want them, you will not progress to the higher levels.

The safest way to load an auto pistol is to hold the hammer back while releasing the slide on a full magazine. Remember that safety is a state of mind—pay attention!

Loading the Auto Pistol

At all times during this process, the trigger finger is off the trigger and is held outside the trigger guard.

- With the gun pointed in a safe direction, hold it with the shooting grip and cock the hammer with the thumb of the weak hand.
- Pull the slide to the rear using the weak hand and engage the slide stop with the master thumb.
- Insert a loaded magazine, making sure the magazine locks into place.
- Holding the hammer back with the thumb of your shooting hand, release the slide stop with the thumb of the weak hand.
- Engage the thumb safety.

This is the safest way to load an auto pistol. This process fully protects the hammer and sear from damage and should be followed anytime the gun is being loaded. Never

allow your hand to pass in front of the muzzle as you are loading or unloading the gun. When removing a round, do not place your hand on the top of the slide so that it covers the ejection port. If your gun has an extended ejector, it is possible for the tip of the ejector to fire the round as it is extracted.

Attaining Accuracy

Hitting your target on demand starts with sighting in. It takes more than two or three shots close to the center of the target to say the gun is "sighted-in." It takes a minimum of ten shots carefully fired at a target, with the ammo you're planning to use, to verify point of impact. After shooting these ten shots, note the impact point and make your sight corrections based on this. Disregard any shots that are well outside that point—wild shots, or flyers, are the result of shooter error, not improper sight adjustment.

Sight Adjustments

When you make a sight correction, make a *positive* correction. For example, if you're shooting a 6-inch group, move a minimum of 3 inches at a time (half the group size) so you can see a definite shift in the location of the next group.

I zero my pistols to hit point of aim at 35 yards for general shooting—from IPSC competition to plinking. At this distance, most shooters will be able to shoot a good enough group to confirm zero. A scoped pistol for hunting might need to be zeroed at a longer range. If I'm shooting a scoped pistol that's in a standard handgun caliber, I'll zero at 75 yards.

To help verify your zero, shoot at the same set of targets for an entire practice session. Afterward, study the patterns to see where the majority of your shots are grouping.

The Base of Accuracy

Accuracy is the foundation of a pistol shooting education. Without it, you will never progress to the higher levels. The inability to fire an accurate shot on demand will hold you back in mastering every other skill you need to acquire. It is critical to any shooting situation. Shooting accurately, and quickly, at extended distances (25-plus yards) is normally the difference between good and great shooters.

Shooters who want to learn how to quickly hit targets must condense the process of firing an accurate shot down to a very short time frame, but the process should be the same as for precision shooting. The faster the shooting speed, the more important it becomes to fire each shot without disturbing the stability and alignment of the pistol.

The ability to hit your target and execute various gun handling skills—such as a draw, reload, engage moving targets, etc.—must coexist. Don't try to develop them together. Each skill has to be developed and practiced separately. Begin and end each range session with precision shooting practice to confirm your ability to place a bullet exactly where you want it.

Some specific skills are more easily acquired through dry firing. Recoil can mask some problems. For instance, you can send your shots left or right by changing your grip pressure as you pull the trigger, which may be hidden by recoil. Dry firing reduces the possibility that feedback from other variables might be misinterpreted and allows you to concentrate on the skill you're learning.

Using the Sights

Sight alignment and sight picture are often confused, but they are not the same. Alignment refers to the relationship between the front and rear sight; the picture is what you see when the gun fires.

Alignment is correct when the top of the front sight is the same height as the top line of the rear sight blade and there is an equal amount of light showing on either side of the front sight. (With optical sights, alignment consists of seeing the dot in the scope—no matter where it appears.) Aligning the sights is a matter of knowing what you need to see, and then seeing it. In order of clarity from best to least, the "classic" sight picture is front sight, rear sight, target.

Next time you handle your gun, notice how clearly you can focus on the front sight. Do you just see it, or do you see it in detail? The front sight should be crystal-clear to fire an accurate shot. This probably isn't the first time you've been given this description of the classic sight picture, and it's a pretty easy concept to understand, but can you see it on demand? Are you fully aware of when you see it and when you don't see it? You must see it well as you fire the shot.

For optical sights, the same principles apply. To fire your most accurate shot, you must focus on the dot, or crosshair, rather than on the target.

Firing Techniques

Prepping the Trigger

You can have the best sight alignment possible, but if you jerk the trigger you'll probably miss the target. Pulling an auto trigger has two steps: prep and squeeze. I've found the weakest area in most shooters is the ability to prep the trigger.

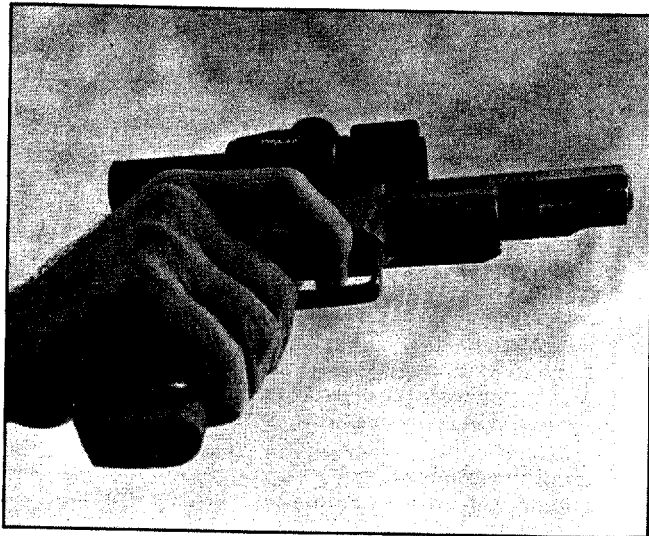
A single-action auto trigger has some amount of pre-travel, that little bit of free movement until the trigger stops against the hammer/sear engagement point. Prepping the trigger means learning to pull through that free movement and hold against the weight of the hammer/sear engagement. You should be aware of this on every shot you fire, no matter how rapidly you shoot. For instance, in a "double tap" (two shots on one target in rapid succession), the gun fires and goes up in recoil, so you prep the trigger as the gun returns back into alignment for the next shot.

It takes time to learn this, and it is a progressive skill: You'll first be able to do it while dry firing, then on one-shot draws, then between shots on double taps. Eventually, it will become a conditioned reflex. Prepping the trigger gives you the best assurance of executing proper trigger control.

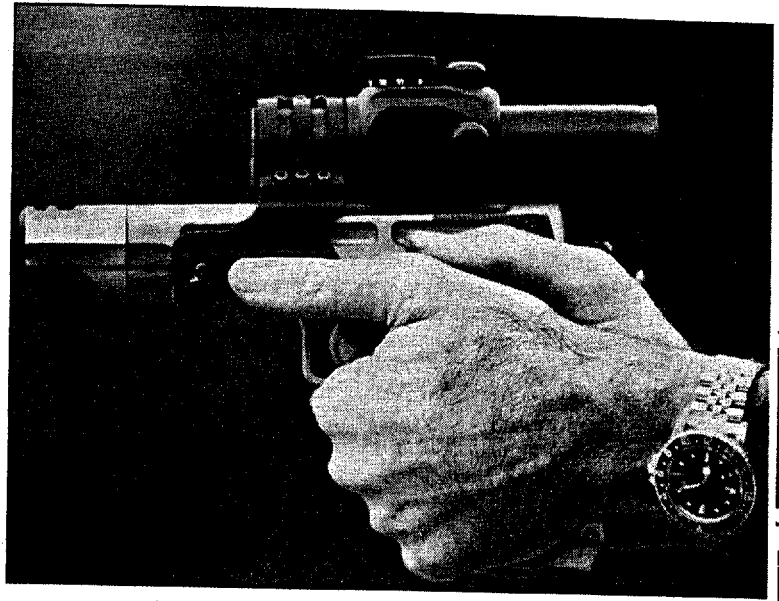
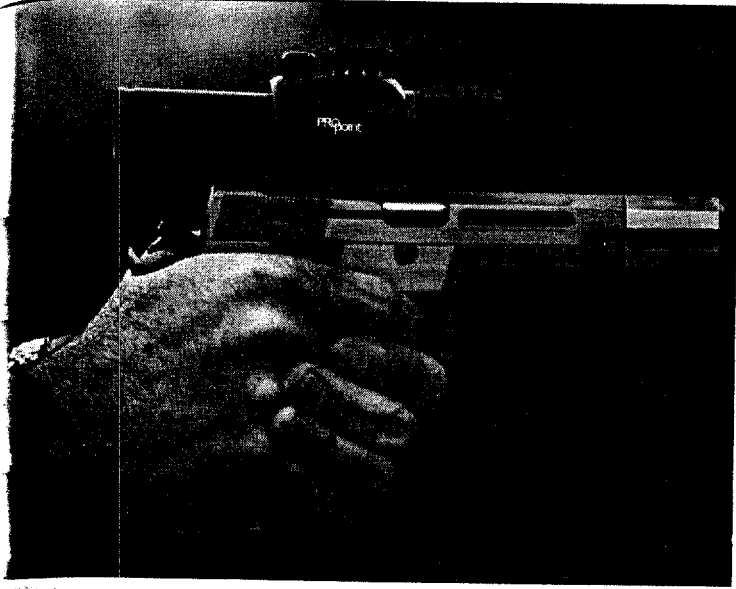
Squeezing the Trigger

Once an auto's trigger is prepped, pulling through to fire the shot must be done quickly and without disrupting sight alignment. Your trigger finger should pull straight back and not touch the frame of the gun at any point. Ideally, the middle of the pad of the fingertip should be 90 degrees to the trigger, which enables you to pull the trigger straight to the rear. Then, release the trigger at the same speed in which it's squeezed, keeping the finger in contact as it returns. The term "squeeze" should not be misinterpreted as being a slow-moving process. "Squeeze" implies that increasing the level of pressure against the trigger is done as a smooth acceleration.

As you're learning trigger control, pay attention to sight alignment when putting pressure on the trigger. Both must be done at the same time. After you've acquired the ability to squeeze the trigger without moving the sights, start decreasing the time frame. Experiment to see how quickly you can squeeze the trigger without disrupting alignment.



For optimum trigger control, the first pad of the finger should touch the trigger at a 90-degree angle. Make sure that no other part of the trigger finger touches the gun. The trigger pull itself is a smooth acceleration.



The correct shooting grip has both hands as high on the gun as possible and both thumbs extended forward. The pressure should feel like holding a hammer while driving a nail. The master hand grips the gun front to back, and the support hand grips the gun side to side.

As an illustration, think of two balls rolling down two inclines, one steep and one shallow. In both cases, the balls would start at zero velocity and then accelerate to maximum velocity by the time they reach the bottom of the inclines. Although the time frames would be different, both balls would exhibit a predictable, progressive rate of acceleration. The trigger squeeze must also be a predictable pattern, regardless of its time frame: Pressure increases progressively until the shot breaks.

The characteristics of a good trigger are predictability, repeatability and safety. In general, I prefer my pistols to have a single-action trigger pull weight that's approximately half the weight of the gun itself. If proper trigger control is used, it is not necessary to have an extremely light pull.

Double-Action Revolver Triggers

For revolver shooters, almost all of the same principles apply. When shooting double action, it is imperative that you keep your finger in contact with the trigger on the pull and release stroke. The most important fundamental is fluid acceleration in the trigger pull, described earlier. Prepping an auto trigger *does not* apply to double action revolvers. Many try to "stage" a double-action trigger by pulling it through until they sense the point just before the hammer falls. Then, they stop their pull and squeeze out the last bit of travel when the sight picture is correct. If you find you need or want to pull the trigger in that fashion, you'll be better off cocking the revolver before each shot and shooting it as a single action. It takes a lot of dry firing to master a double-action trigger, but when you can quickly stroke the trigger without disturbing the sights, you're on your way.

To improve double-action trigger control, move your finger in until the first joint contacts the trigger. Also, while a wide trigger might make the pull seem lighter, you'll find that a narrow trigger gives better results.

Shooting Grip

Most people over-grip the handgun. The proper grip tension is about the same pressure you'd feel when holding a hammer to drive a nail. Also, the pressure in both hands

must be equal, to help ensure the gun tracks consistently straight up and down during recoil.

Many believe a death grip on the pistol will prevent recoil. However, no matter how tightly you grip it, the handgun will still recoil—you don't have the strength to prevent it. Gripping the gun with correct tension will allow the hand to recoil intact with the pistol and the pistol then to return back into alignment. With practice, the recoil pattern should become predictable and the handgun should track more consistently.

Concern over the amount of muzzle rise should not be your sole focus. When you're shooting well, you may be aware of more muzzle rise, but with proper recoil control, you should see the gun travel throughout the full arc of movement. Normally, most shooters see the gun start up in recoil and then in several stages as it cycles. As you relax and see a predictable pattern, you will start to see the sights throughout the full arc of motion.

Shooters often have the misconception that locking down the gun to reduce muzzle rise will let them shoot faster, but it's really the speed and consistency with which the gun *returns* to the target that determines how quickly the next shot can be fired. With practice, the sights will return back into alignment after each shot. This is the key to accurate high-speed shooting.

Also, correct grip tension allows proper trigger control. When the hand isn't locked down on the gun, the trigger finger is free to move smoothly, quickly and precisely.

Grip Mechanics

Grip the gun as high on the frame as possible with the shooting hand indexing against the beavertail and making full contact with the rear of the frame.

If I'm shooting a gun with a conventional thumb safety (such as an M1911 Government Model), my thumb rides on top of the safety. Otherwise, the thumb of my shooting hand lies on top of the thumb of my support hand. Extend both thumbs toward the target. Be careful not to press them inward against the slide or frame. This can influence the tracking of the gun in recoil and cause malfunctions.

Place the index finger of the support hand under the trig-

ger guard. You may get a higher hand position if you place it on the front of the trigger guard, but that technique makes it difficult to equally distribute the mass of the support hand on each side of the gun. Having the proper weight balance on each side allows the gun to track more consistently in recoil. The shooting hand squeezes the gun from front to rear; the support hand squeezes side to side. This "clam-shelling" effect puts four-way, equal pressure on the gun.

Placing the finger under the trigger guard positions the hand/wrist for holding the gun down and forward against muzzle rise. Correct grip tension allows the gun to lift and return smoothly; the correct grip position allows the gun to return quickly and consistently.

All fundamentals of the proper grip apply to revolvers as well as autos. With a double-action trigger, get the trigger finger and master thumb as close as possible to parallel.

Shooting Stance

The correct stance is a *progressively aggressive* stance: shoulders in front of ankles, ears in front of shoulders. This posture ensures that the majority of the body weight is forward, braced against the rearward recoil of the gun. In the correct stance, there is an overall feeling of balance. It is an athletic position of readiness.

Your spine should be relatively straight, while your knees are flexed and the upper body bends slightly forward at the ankles, not the waist. If you're doing it correctly, you'll feel tension in your calf muscles. The wider the swing needed to shoot multiple targets, the more the knees should be flexed. It is important to remain flat-footed while the upper body is leaning toward the target.

A common mistake is putting too much weight on the balls of your feet, which causes you to sway back and forth. While shooting, you should feel as though you're walking into a strong headwind. As a test, have someone hold his hand against your upper chest and push. You will have to take a progressively aggressive stance to resist the push and maintain your balance. The upper body must be flexed as if you were anticipating a punch. In a good stance, you won't see the effects of recoil in the shooter's lower body; the recoil is contained by his upper body.

Your feet should be shoulder-width apart. A stance that's too wide will inhibit your ability to swing and shoot multiple targets. A too narrow stance can cause you to lose your balance upon recoil.

Use a neutral body alignment—face straight downrange with your upper body directly facing the target and the gun straight out from the body's centerline. Being square to the target allows equal range of motion to the left and right, which makes it easier to shoot widely spaced targets. Since the arms and shoulders form a triangle with the gun in the

The principles of handgun shooting must always be adhered to, no matter how fast you're shooting. Even at this speed, I am aware of each fundamental described in this article on every shot.

center, the gun recoils back toward the master eye rather than off to either side. But most of all, this is a more natural way to direct a gun toward the target: The eyes are looking straight ahead; the head is erect; the gun is centered.

While my upper body faces the target and my shoulders and hips are parallel in alignment, my feet aren't exactly parallel to the rest of my body. My left foot is slightly forward of my right (for a right-handed shooter, the toes of the right foot should be approximately in line with the ball of the left foot). This gives me a slightly more aggressive stance.

Your arms should mirror each other as much as possible in the degree of bend and the relative levelness. This helps ensure the gun recoils consistently. Arms should be extended, but not locked. It may feel stronger to lock the elbow joint, but your arms are actually in a stronger position when they're not locked. When a joint is locked, it loses its strength throughout the full range of motion.

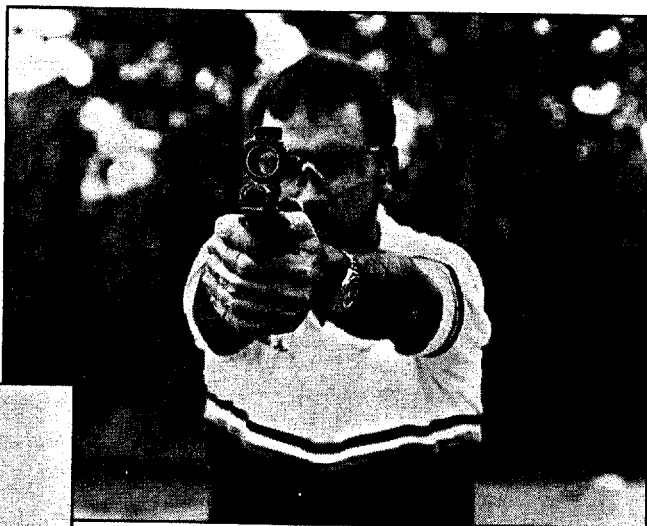
Gun Mount

The term "gun mount" defines the entire upper body form in its final, ready position. Mounting the gun means indexing on a target in preparation to shoot.

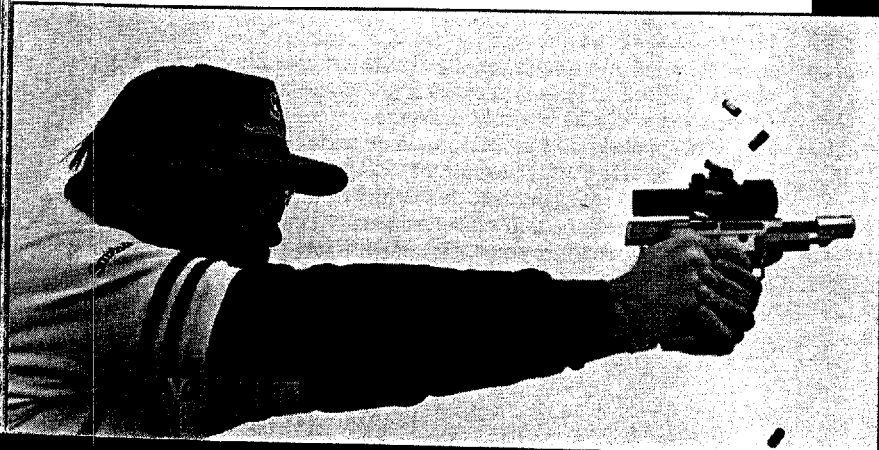
The shoulder area, which includes the large muscles around the back of the shoulder, not just the joint, supplies the majority of your upper body strength while shooting. The shoulders should be slightly adducted—drawn together and pressed inward—for maximum strength. This stabilizes the shoulder area by bringing the strong pectoral and upper back muscles into play.

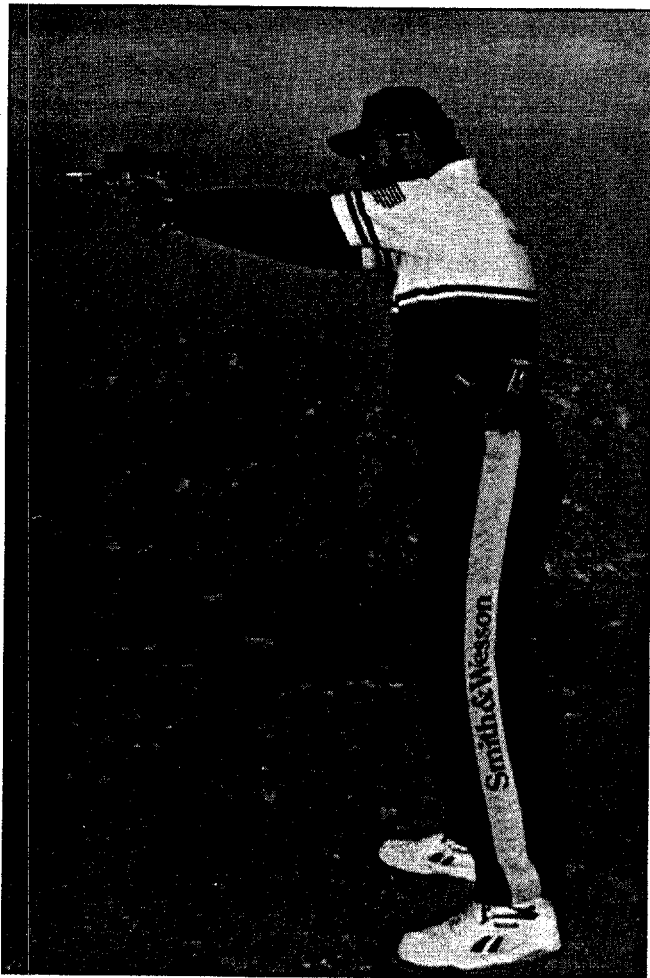
Shooting Index

Stance and gun mount combine to determine your shooting index, as it is called in practical shooting. Your index results in a natural point of aim where the sights automatically align on a target that's straight ahead. To find your natural point of aim, face the target and assume your shooting stance. Mount the gun and move it left and right a few times to get a feel for where the gun centers. If you are consistently off left or right, you need to shift your entire stance alignment.



It is important to develop a neutral alignment: Face the targets and center the gun. Combined with a neutral grip, this allows for a predictable recoil pattern. Ideally, the gun will recoil and return consistently on target.





The correct shooting stance is a progressively aggressive stance—shoulders in front of ankles, ears in front of shoulders. This ensures that the majority of the body weight is forward, bracing the body against recoil.

Shooting Skills

Handgun skills can be separated into two main categories: shooting skills and gun-handling skills. The former is what you use to actually fire each shot, while the latter is what you use to get to the next shot. Depending on the application, gun handling skills can include the draw, magazine reloading, single-hand shooting, target acquisitions, etc. I don't have enough space in this article to discuss each gun-handling skill. To learn these, I recommend you purchase books and videos on the subject or take a class taught by a qualified instructor.

As far as shooting skills go, develop them first. Learning to shoot accurately on demand is the most important skill you need to develop. This is the basis for all other necessary skills. Regardless of the application, hitting the target always comes first. No matter if you've been shooting for years or are just beginning, don't start practicing gun-handling skills until you can shoot accurately.

Following are a few basics you must be able to apply. No matter what classification level you've attained, if you can't do these things on demand, learn to do them. (Note: Optical sight users should replace "front sight" with "dot or crosshair.")

Focus on the Front Sight, Not the Target

One of the most common mistakes made in pistol shoot-

ing is looking at the target instead of the sights. Sometimes you think you're looking at the sights, but you're really looking through them. As you aim, you should be able to see the front sight in perfect detail. If you see holes appearing in the target as you're shooting, you're looking through your sights.

Learn to Read the Sights

Recognize where the sights are the exact instant the gun fires—this is the sight picture. You are never able to hold a handgun perfectly still; you have to squeeze the trigger as the gun is moving within an area near the center of the target. You must overcome the movement and concentrate on sight alignment and trigger control. If the sights were positioned 2 inches high and right, and the bullets hit there, you had proper sight alignment and trigger control as you fired the shot. The gun was just pointed at the wrong place. Through practice, you will improve your ability to hold longer on the center of the target.

It is very important that you call the shot when the gun lifts in recoil. Don't call the shot when you start the trigger pull. Unless you can call the shot at the instant of firing, you may not see if your trigger pull influences the sights.

Focus Throughout Its Arc of Recoil

By watching your front sight you should be able to diagnose what is going on during recoil. Is the front sight moving straight up and back down, or is it lifting to the right or left? The gun must travel up and down at the same speed, allowing the sights to come back into alignment on target at the end of the recoil cycle. Many shooters stop the gun at the highest point in the arc of recoil and look to see if they hit the target.

Execute Proper Trigger Control

Prep and squeeze the trigger when shooting an auto; stroke the trigger through in one smooth motion when shooting a double action. Regardless of the trigger type, once you start your trigger pull, continue to smoothly and progressively accelerate the pressure until the gun fires, pulling straight to the rear. Don't try to start and stop your trigger pull depending upon what your sights are doing. When your sights are aligned on the target within the aiming area, start your trigger pull. Trying to "freeze" the gun and "pick off" the shot will never allow you to develop the fundamentals of sight alignment and trigger control. ●

About the Author

The preceding was a specially adapted excerpt from *Shooting From Within*, by J. Michael Plaxco. For more than fifteen years, Plaxco has been a world-class shooter, winning the World Speed Shooting Championship (Steel Challenge), USA National IPSC Championship, World 3-Gun Championship, Soldier of Fortune 3-Gun Championship, Canadian IPSC National Championship, four NSSF Sportsman's Team Challenge Championships, International Revolver Championship, and Second Chance Grand Champion title. He's also been Team Captain of the World Champion USA IPSC Gold Team, of which he's been a member for twelve years. In addition, Plaxco is a renown pistolsmith, author and shooting instructor, and was a member of Team Smith & Wesson (S&W's professional shooting team).