

Been there, Done that!

By Jim Conway

“The Anatomy of One perfect Shot”

A massive amount of material has been written on how to fire a handgun accurately. If you have read very many of these articles and books, you would surely be confused by the widely varying opinions. The emphasis of this article is defensive shooting and assumes that the shooter has a gun that fits their hand, with good sights and a reasonable trigger. It also assumes that the shooter has zeroed the firearm with ammunition that the shooter plans to use.

This article will not deal with how to shoot fast, since it would be pointless to discuss speed until the shooter can place his bullets with reasonable accuracy, each and every time, on demand. I will, however, discuss how to shoot faster in a future article. Those of you that have taken the NRA Basic Pistol course will remember basic elements of shooting which include Stance, Grip, Breath Control, Sight Alignment/Sight Picture, Trigger Control, and Follow Through.

The most important of these elements, from a defensive shooting perspective are sight alignment/sight picture, trigger control and follow through.

Stance is the position that you place your body in to shoot. I will not get into the relative merits of the Weaver or Isosceles stances because they are not very important. The important thing to keep in mind is that defensive shooting is fighting for your life and, as such, a fighting stance is needed. By the term fighting stance, I mean that the shooter is well balanced, braced for a possible collision with the firing side slightly to the rear and their weight on the balls of their feet. This is an aggressive stance that allows the shooter to move in any direction as the situation demands. If you prefer to shoot in a Weaver Stance, an Isosceles Stance or something between, it simply does not matter as long as you maintain a fighting stance. This is one aspect of shooting where a shooter must do what works best.

Just so that we are using the same terms, a grip is what you do with your hands to hold the firearm and what you hold on to is the grip panels and/or the frame of the firearm. There are two major questions that need to be addressed to cover how to grip a firearm. Where does the shooter hold the firearm? How strongly does the shooter grip the firearm?

The shooter must hold the firearm centered on the web of their firing side hand with the hand as high as possible under the tang of a semi-automatic or the grip panels of a revolver to minimize the amount of muzzle flip. When we come to the subject of how strongly the shooter should hold the gun, we will find a world of differing opinions. There are those that claim that the shooter should hold the gun so tightly that the gun shakes and then ease their grip enough to stop the shaking. On the other extreme, there are some that strongly state that the gun should be held as if it were a baby bird. In classes that I teach, I often demonstrate shooting a 1911 with the gun supported by only the web of my hand and my trigger finger. How strongly or weakly you hold a firearm is unimportant as long as you can freely move your trigger finger without changing the grip pressure of the other three fingers that are holding the gun. Only you can determine how much strength to use in gripping your gun. For me, I grip the gun about the same as if I were shaking your hand.

Before we leave the subject of gripping the gun, there are two other aspects that should be mentioned, including how to use your support hand and where to place your thumbs. The purpose of your support hand is, you guessed it, to support the gun more steadily. As such, the support hand should be wrapped around the firing hand with the support hand index finger touching the underside of the trigger guard. Do not, I repeat, do not put the support hand index finger on the front of the trigger guard. Now that we have the support hand almost in place, the last item to address is where and how to place your thumbs.

The three good places to put your thumbs are thumb on thumb, thumbs up and thumbs forward. There is one poor place which is often called thumbs down and one painful place which I will call support thumb on top of the firing side hand behind the slide. The thumb on thumb position places the firing hand thumb on the safety with the support side thumb on top. The thumbs up and the thumbs forward positions place the support side thumb below the firing side thumb with both thumbs pointing upward or toward the target. Please note that for the thumbs up and thumbs forward positions that the support side thumb must not touch either the frame or slide of the gun.

For defensive shooting, the most important part of breath control is that you continue to breathe normally. The one exception to this is that some shooters find that some form of breath control can be helpful for either a very precise shot or a very long shot.

Now that we have covered the less important aspects of shooting, it is time to get into the most important issues. Before we get into these issues, I am going to let you into two important secrets of shooting well. Your eyes can only focus intently on only one thing at a time. Your mind can only focus intently on only one thing at a time. I will be explaining how to use these two secrets to improve your shooting as we get into the subjects of sight picture and trigger control.

When I first heard the term sight alignment, I had to wonder because when I looked at any of my guns the sights always seem to be aligned. What is meant by the term is that the sights are aligned with your eye, the top of the front sight is even with the top of the rear sight and there is an equal amount of space on either side of the front sight when viewed through the rear sight. A sight picture is simply a sight alignment with the top edge of the front sight positioned on the desired point of impact on the target.

Over the years trainers have found that most shooters can shoot better with only one eye open. If you are one of the minority that can shoot well with both eyes open, that is great and you can skip the rest of this paragraph. If we are to shoot with one eye closed, we must determine our dominant eye. This is very easy to do. Make a circle with your thumb and index finger and look at some small object across the room with both eyes open. Close first just your right eye and then just your left eye. Your dominant eye is the eye that saw the same image that you saw with both eyes open. For most people, their dominant eye is the eye on the same side as their firing hand. For those of you that are right handed with a left dominant eye, you have a cross dominant eye but do not despair. I am aware of a number of top shooters that are cross dominant. There are two solutions for a cross dominant eyed shooter to consider. First, you can simply close your dominant eye and use the eye on the same side as your shooting hand or second, you can turn your head slightly and shoot using your dominant eye.

Remember that I told you that your eyes can only focus intently on one thing at a time. Your sight picture has three items that you could focus on. They are the rear sight, the front sight or the target. The secret of shooting well is to have an intent focus on the top edge of the front sight. The rear sight and the target may be slightly blurry, but that is what we want. When we discuss how to shoot faster in

a future article, we will alter this slightly to read “See what you need to see” to quote a top competition shooter named Brian Enos.

Now that you have read all of the above, we can begin our discussion of trigger control. We must understand that it is not natural for any of us to set off a small explosion in our hands and our subconscious mind will try to protect us by causing all sorts of unwanted body movements. It has been stated that trigger control is simply pressing the trigger to the rear without disturbing our perfect sight picture. While this is true, it is also the most difficult aspect of shooting well. The second secret that I mentioned is that the mind can only focus on one thing at a time and the way that can use this is the to make a perfect shot is the surprise break. A surprise break means that you first take up the slack in the trigger, visually focus on the top edge of the front sight, mentally focus solely on the top edge of the front sight, while pressing the trigger and not knowing exactly when the shot will happen. Gabe Suarez often uses the example of putting eye drops into your eye. We line up the eye dropper with our eye and press slowly until a drop hits our eye. If we try to do this fast the result is often eye drops anywhere but in our eye. So remember - front sight – preeesssssss.

It is also equally important that the shooter press the trigger without moving or adding any pressure to the middle, ring or little fingers holding the gun. There is one other thing that I should mention is that, no matter how skilled you are, your front sight will move back and forth a small amount across the target. It is important the you ignore this and keep pressing the trigger slowly. If you try to break the shot (often called ambushing) when the front sight is just right, you are almost guaranteed to miss. To close out the subject of trigger control, I would like to tell you about a simple exercise that Jim Crews showed me that I know helped my shooting. Start this exercise with your firing hand relaxed and then bend your thumb down to simulate a trigger. Place your trigger finger onto your folded down thumb (trigger) and slowly press the trigger without any movement of the other three fingers. Then you can relax and repeat as necessary until you can always press the trigger without any other fingers moving. This is a great exercise, in that you can do it almost anywhere.

The final, and least understood, aspect of making a perfect shot is follow through. Follow through consists of those things that you must do in the time between when the gun goes bang (this a technical term) and the next shot. Follow through consists of the following actions, in order of occurrence. After the gun goes bang, you must first hold back the trigger, reacquire the front sight, get a sight picture and finally reset the trigger. To reset the trigger, simply allow it to move forward until you hear and feel the sear reengage with the trigger. Learning the technique of trigger reset (No you can not reset the trigger on a revolver.) will become a major part of your ability to learn to shoot faster. It should be pointed out that removing the trigger finger from the trigger after the shot before completing the follow through will usually result in a miss to the right for a right handed shooter.

The most important aspect of follow through is to condition the shooter's mind to be ready to take a second shot. An important benefit of follow through is that the shooter is taught to never to try to look for where the shot hit before completing the follow through sequence.