

How to Prepare Yourself to Get the Most out of Your Training School Trip

Up until thirty years ago, if you wanted serious training in the use of firearms for self-defense, you had only one choice, which was to join the police force and go to the police academy! Such training simply wasn't otherwise available to civilians in any way, shape, or form. In fact, in those days, civilians weren't even allowed to shoot at human silhouette targets in NRA sanctioned matches!

That all changed in 1977. Ray Chapman, who became the first IPSC World Pistol Champion in 1975, opened the Chapman Academy in Columbia, MO. Its purpose was to teach serious defensive pistol techniques to any good guy, be he military, law enforcement, or civilian. A year later, in 1978, Col. Jeff Cooper opened what is now probably

the most famous and influential such school in the country, the American Pistol Institute at Gunsite Ranch in Paulden, AZ.

Today there are numerous schools and instructors all over the country. Some teach pure marksmanship and gun handling and some teach tactics, the combat mindset, and/or self-defense law as well. Most offer courses in defensive shotgun and defensive rifle or carbine, as well as pistol. Basic, intermediate and advanced level courses are common, and some schools offer some very advanced courses. Precision Long Range Rifle and Close Quarter's Battle (CQB) are a couple of examples.

It's now possible for a dedicated shooter who's willing to invest the time and money in training and practice

to reach a level of proficiency to rival that of a SWAT cop. In fact, SWAT cops and military personnel spend their own money to attend some of these schools! But you don't need to have an interest in taking things that far to justify attending one of these schools. Anyone who carries a pistol or keeps a gun to defend his home should give serious thought to taking one or two of the basic courses. As Col. Cooper once famously observed, "Owning a gun doesn't make one a gunfighter any more than owning a Stradivarius violin makes one a concert violinist."

WHAT YOU NEED

First of all, you need to pick a school and course. These days, they all have websites that describe their course offerings and schedules. You also have the option to write to them and get their latest catalogs through the mail. The sole criterion for attending one of these schools is that you are a certifiable good guy, and all you will need to prove that is a CCW. If you're one of the unfortunates that live in a state that won't issue a

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CCW, there are ways around that as well. Ayoob's Lethal Force Institute (to use one example) will also accept a letter of reference from a local official: police chief, sheriff, district attorney, judge, etc. or a letter from a practicing attorney stating that you have no police record or history of institutionalization for mental health care.

Most schools expect you to have some minimal familiarity with your gun. The NRA's excellent basic safety courses take care of that nicely. Some schools will take you even if you've never touched a gun before. My personal opinion is that paying a big name instructor to teach you the basic stuff, such as how to load and unload your gun, is not the most cost effective way to acquire such fundamental skills, but alas, sometimes your local conditions make this necessary. Take the local NRA courses first if at all possible. If not, then discuss this with the school that you are interested in before you sign up. Be sure that you know how to break down, clean, reassemble, and lube your gun. You will almost certainly need to do so every night during your course, so you will need a cleaning kit.

MINIMIZING THE COST

You will need to pay for tuition, and you will need to bring or buy ammunition, which will be anywhere from several hundred to a couple of thousand rounds, depending on the course. You will also have to pay for transportation to and from the school, and probably for meals and some place to sleep.

Obviously, your choice of school will affect the overall cost of attending.

If you have to fly half way across the country, stay in a motel, rent a car and eat in restaurants, you can expect to add hundreds or even thousands of dollars on to the basic costs of tuition and ammo. On the other hand, if you can find (or organize) a course close to home, you can reduce those travel expenses down to just the cost of the gas needed to drive back and forth to the range.

Many of the best known instructors: Massad Ayoob, Chuck Taylor, John Farnam, Louis Awerbuck, Ken Hackathorn, etc., travel around the country teaching. If you can't find any courses scheduled close to your home, perhaps you can arrange for one. If you belong to a gun club, or otherwise can arrange access to a suitable range in your area, and can talk a dozen or so of your friends into signing up for the class with you, many of these instructors will be happy to schedule a class there.

If you must travel and you have access to a camper (or a tent and camping gear), you can save significantly over staying in a motel and eating in restaurants. Some schools will let you park right on their grounds. (There will be information about this at their websites or in their catalogs.) You will certainly have no trouble finding a commercial campground close by to most schools, and the savings over a motel (and restaurants) can be significant. If you have a family, the campground option can make for a great family vacation. Take the whole family along, and while you're in class all day, they can be enjoying the recreational activities and playing tourist in the surrounding area. Personally speaking, on various occasions, I've spent

several weeks in a very pleasant New Hampshire campground while taking courses at Ayoob's Lethal Force Institute. The campground was full of families with kids. There were swimming, boating, several ball fields and other recreation areas. The surrounding area was full of antique shops, old bookstores, and ample tourist information about all of the nearby local attractions.

Okay, so you've picked a course and a date. Now you need to start planning what you need to bring, checking over what you

have and deciding what you need to beg, borrow, or buy. I will discuss this in general terms, but keep in mind that you will also receive a specific list of items from your instructor that he believes are necessary, which you should pay careful attention to.

WHICH GUN SHOULD YOU TAKE?

You're going to gun school, so naturally, you need to bring a gun, right? Well, not necessarily. For example, Sigarms Academy advertises that if you sign up for one of their courses, you can borrow any model Sig pistol that you'd like to use in the course, and they will also provide necessary holsters and such. And I've seen at least one instance of a student from Boston who made arrangements to borrow a snub .38 from the instructor. But in general, you will probably be bringing your own gun. And this is a good thing. If at all possible, you want to take the course with the actual gun and holster that you will actually be carrying. If your hunting shotgun sits near your bed and doubles as your house defense gun, then that is the shotgun that you want to take to your combat shotgun course. Of course, if you've been looking for an excuse to buy a nicely tricked-out, new defensive shotgun or tactical carbine, taking a course that needs such a gun can be a dandy justification!

As you study the various schools and their course offerings, you will note that many have a minimum caliber requirement, perhaps .38 Special, .380 ACP or 9mm. A few schools will let you bring anything you want, even the little calibers. This may be a factor in choosing a school. The gun should fit your hand. The safety and other controls should be easy for you to manipulate. The sights should be easy for your eyes to see. Obvious, right? Well, I once witnessed a woman struggle through an entire course with a Browning Hi-Power that was way too big for her hands. The gun had great sentimental value. It had belonged to her deceased father, and she was determined to master it. Sadly, she didn't. I hope that she learned from the experience and retired it to a place of honor and moved on to another gun.

The trigger should be light enough to be easy to shoot, yet not so light (or hair-trigger) that the gun fires before you intend it to, which is known as an unintentional discharge, an accidental discharge or a negligent discharge. In

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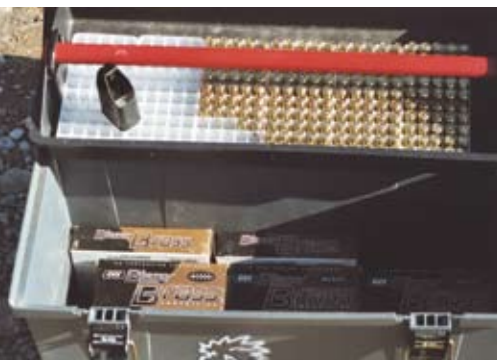
short, whatever gun you bring needs to be mechanically safe.

It also needs to be mechanically reliable. Many classes call for 500 rounds in two or three days, and some of the advanced classes can call for 2,000 or more. Round counts like these quickly separate the good guns from the junk! I've seen a number of guns fail while taking courses. Most schools expect problems like this. Usually, the instructor or one of his assistants is a qualified armorer, and minor problems like sights that have shot loose can be corrected in short order and with minimal disruption to the rest of the class. Major problems may not be correctable.

If at all possible, consider bringing a second, spare gun. Otherwise, if your one and only gun fails and can't be corrected or fixed, you may be forced to withdraw from the course. It will simplify your life considerably if it is the same caliber as your primary gun. Otherwise, you will also have to bring a separate ammo supply for it, as well as a spare holster, magazines, etc. Obviously, this would be a lot easier to do if you drive than if you fly!

AMMUNITION CHOICES

Ammunition is heavy, and if you are flying, it will be impossible to legally take as many rounds with you as you will need. In some instances, you can arrange



A tool box can be a handy way to deal with a case or more of ammunition.

to ship your ammo directly to the school via UPS, and they will hold it for you until you arrive for the course.

Buy quality ammo for the course, which is available from a good company like CCI, Federal, Remington or Winchester. It need not be their premium, expensive stuff. They all have economy lines as well, which are perfect for training. I've used Federal's American Eagle, Winchester's White Box and CCI's Blazer Brass at different times, and they've all worked well for me. I would urge you to stay away from the cheap, imported brands. Some of the imported ammo is loaded with very "dirty" powder that can foul your gun and cause malfunctions. Some is loaded in steel cases. Steel case ammo has been known to damage extractors on some guns. Quality control is not always up to what I would consider acceptable standards.

If you reload, you should know that while some schools have no problem with you bringing reloads, some will strongly try to discourage you. This is usually because they have had a number of bad experiences with students using reloads in the past.

At some schools, it is possible to arrange to buy the necessary ammo directly from them. However, the Smith & Wesson Academy warns that Massachusetts law makes it illegal to sell any ammunition to non-Massachusetts residents. So you will not only be prohibited from buying it from the Academy, you will also be prohibited from buying it from a local K-mart. I've run into a similar situation in Illinois. No IL Firearms Owners Identification Card (FOID), no ammo sale.

On the other hand, Sigarms Academy requires lead free ammo and provides all needed ammo, with its price included in the tuition. However, they only have 9mm, 40 S&W, and 45 ACP, so your gun needs to be one of those three calibers to take a course there.

CARRY GEAR

You will be expected to provide spare magazines or speedloaders, their corresponding pouches, a holster, a belt, etc. Many basic level courses will discuss and demonstrate such equipment choices, so it might be wise to hold off on buying new leather until after taking such a course, provided that you have or can borrow something that will get you through your first course.

Ideally, your holster and your gun should be the ones that you carry on

the street every day. However, that's not always possible. If you favor a cross draw or shoulder holster, drawing from it may allow your muzzle to cross another student standing in line next to you. Neither your instructor nor the student standing next to you are going to be happy about that! If you are the only one with such a rig, it may be possible to accommodate you by putting you on the end of the line. You might want to discuss it with the school before you sign up if it is important to you.

To be on the safe side, you should have a strong side belt holster. You also need a good, heavy gun belt and it should be matched to your holster. If your holster has slots for an inch and three quarter belt, you shouldn't be wearing an inch and a half belt. You will also need a magazine or speedloader pouch, and if the course requires a flashlight for low light shooting, you should have a carrier for that.

EYES AND EARS

Eye and ear protection are mandatory at all good schools. A separate article could probably be devoted to the fine points of choosing these. Here's a short and sweet summary instead: If you wear regular prescription eyeglasses, they will suffice. Otherwise, you will need one or more pairs of either shooting glasses or safety glasses. If your prescription is for distance, you may need bifocals in order to also see the sights clearly. If you wear contact lenses, be sure you bring your spare eyeglasses with you, and I mean in your range bag and not in your suitcase back at your motel. Many ranges are dusty, and if it gets windy, you may find yourself needing to switch to the prescription glasses. I always take two pairs with me, one pair with dark gray sunglass lenses for use in bright sun, and one pair with clear lenses for use in dim light and for night shooting classes. I've tried the yellow shooting glasses and I just can't get used to the unreal look they give to the whole world. They do, however, make dandy driving glasses for use in the fog. Speaking of fog, I always carry a spray bottle of anti-fog liquid with me, and treat my glasses every day that I am shooting. How long have I done this? Ever since my glasses fogged badly on a hot, muggy August day during my final exam qualification shoot at LFI!

Hearing protection breaks down into plugs that are put into your ears (which I hate) and muffs that are worn over your ears. Simple muffs are fine for



Necessary Safety Gear. Clear and dark glasses, range hat, active hearing protection.

just shooting, but for going to school, I strongly urge you to spend the money for "active" muffs. These contain speakers, microphones, batteries and electronic circuits. The microphones pick up all outside sounds and relay them via the electronic circuits to the speakers inside of your muffs. The electronic circuits amplify quiet sounds, but attenuate any loud noises like gunshots. They permit you to hear everything that is said around you, which can be an important safety feature when you are surrounded by a crowd of people with guns, and more importantly, they permit you to hear everything that your instructor says, which you are paying hundreds of dollars for the privilege of hearing in the first place. I bought my pair from Dillon Precision, but you can find them from a number of manufacturers and sources, including both Cabela's and Gander Mountain.

CLOTHING CHOICES

Clothing should be comfortable, and suitable for the temperatures that you expect. Days that start out cold but get hot require a layered outfit, which is shed bit by bit as the day warms up.

Shorts are not usually a good idea, even if it's very hot. They offer no protection from insects or sunburn. They also offer no protection for your knees if the course includes shooting while kneeling. Some tactical style pants have knee pockets to hold pads, and some experienced students have the same external knee and elbow pads that the SWAT guys wear. They're not really all that expensive and are a nice touch if the course will include a lot of shooting from the ground. Finally, pants need belt loops to hold your gun belt and holster in their proper place, so sweat pants and the like are also out.

Shirts should be fairly close fitting around the neck to minimize the possibility of someone else's freshly ejected, very hot cartridge case (hot brass) from going

down your neck and getting trapped against your skin. And trust me; once you are standing on a firing line with a dozen other people, you are going to be hit with hot brass sooner or later. If it hits outside of your clothing, it will bounce off. If it gets trapped between your skin and your clothing, it's going to burn! How do I know this? Trust me, I know this!

For the same reason, a cap with a visor is a virtual necessity. Otherwise, there is a real possibility that hot brass may slip between the top of your shooting glasses and your face and get trapped between your glasses and your eye(s).

Shoes need to be comfortable enough to stand around in all day, and suitable for use off of pavement. Some (particularly police and military) wear combat boots or derivatives thereof. Personally, I wear a pair of New Balance running shoes.

Into each life some rain is going to fall, and most schools are going to shoot through the rain. Rain gear is a necessity. Experience has taught me that a Gore-Tex rain suit is the way to go if you are going to be standing around in a heavy rain all day. This is supplemented by a pair of Tote's type rubbers pulled over the running shoes.

COMFORT ITEMS

The rain suit will keep water off of your outside, but the one thing that you desperately need to do on a hot day is to keep pouring water into your inside! Dehydration is no joke, and I consider a personal cooler full of some suitable, non-alcoholic beverage an absolute necessity at the range. Likewise, a folding chair will give you a comfortable place to rest your weary body during breaks in what can otherwise be a very long day.

Your range bag should include the following comfort items:

1. A good sunscreen with a high SPF rating. It's either this or a good sunburn cream to treat the painful sunburn that you will get if you don't use a sunscreen.
2. A good insect repellent. The stronger, the better.
3. Bandages for dealing with the inevitable cuts and nicks that a lot of gun handling and magazine loading are going to cause to your hands. I've tried a lot of them over the years, and I've finally settled on Johnson & Johnson's® Active-Flex. It's a clear one that sticks amazingly well in spite of all of the gun handling, it's waterproof, and it's even thin enough to use on your trigger finger if needed.

4: Over-the-counter pain relievers and rubs for aching muscles. You don't need to be in super-good physical shape to take a course like one of these. I would rate it as equivalent to a long day spent doing yard work. But if you mostly sit at a desk all year, you are probably going to find yourself with sore, tired muscles towards the end of the day. But trust me, the great feeling of accomplishment you get from finishing a course like one of these more than compensates for a few muscle aches!



The well stocked range bag will include spares and comfort items.

John Perz lives in upstate New York. He's had a CCW since 1972 and has completed a number of training courses over the years with Massad Ayoob, John Farnam, Tom Givens and others.



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