DON'T LET YOUR TRAINING KILL YOU

Some Common Sense Observations On The Myths

& Realities Of Weapons & Tactics Training

by

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For some years, a good many people, yours truly included, have offered what is termed "combat," or "practical" handgun training to the public. The approaches taken by various instructors differ considerably, often radically, giving rise to a good deal of controversy.

So much controversy, in fact, that we often wonder who really knows what they are talking about and whose instruction, therefore, is the most useful. I've been in the writing /consulting/training business for more than twenty years now and during that time I have recurrently encountered a number of concepts with which I take serious issue.

Concepts come from perceptions, and the techniques that evolve from those perceptions quickly illustrate whether or not their creator(s) understood the issues involved before they endeavored to develop a means of dealing with them. In short, did they really define the problem before they sought a solution?

Not always. The Deadly Delusions instead rear their ugly heads.

For example, what about the differences between competitive and "real-world" philosophies? Many are unaware that there is a vast gulf between them or that most competitive techniques are suicidal in a real gunfight. By far, the majority of instructors of so-called "combat" handgunning have a competitive, rather than a real-world, background. Unfortunately, this means that the methods and techniques they espouse were developed and intended for use under controlled conditions -- e.g. the firing range.

In contrast, a gunfight is anything *but* a controlled environment. In fact, the very *purpose* of the defensive handgun is to provide its wearer with the means by which to regain control of his environment. The tactics and physical techniques by which this task is best accomplished must come from a real-world perspective if survival is the goal.

Nonetheless, competition-oriented methods are often presented as a solution to real-world tactical problems. The result is that those who utilize them are unwittingly placed in serious -- and unnecessary -- danger.

The reason this occurs is multi-faceted, but it can be irrefutably stated that it does happen -- too often. However, imagine the consternation a student feels when he discovers that his instructor's expertise -- and the perspective from which that expertise was created -- is inappropriate for the student's needs. And imagine the aggravation experienced when he considers the time and money he spent in obtaining that instruction.

As a result, in my teaching endeavors, I discourage the competitive approach. Please don't misunderstand. I fully recognize that competition for its own sake isn't necessarily bad. However, it is a less than valid training/evaluation tool unless the tactical problem it is supposed to simulate is clearly defined.

Sadly, this requires considerable real-world knowledge and experience, which is largely lacking in the competitive sector. As a result, course diversity and "beating the game" for its own sake has become a higher goal than tactical realism and, by implication, gunfight survival.

Being a full-time instructor who has on multiple occasions "been there and seen the elephant," I naturally have some strong opinions about life and death. It is thus my opinion that, viewed from a real-world perspective, failing to understand the true goals of PPC/IPSC competition might -- and has on a number of occasions -- cost someone their life.

As a responsible professional, ignorance of this critical fact is a luxury I simply cannot afford. And, like it or not, competition and combat shooting are almost diametrically opposed to one another. On the other hand, the successful pursuit of any goal requires complete dedication; anything less guarantees failure. And since competitive and combat shooting have so little in common, a decision must be made before any actual participation begins or you're courting disaster.

Practical or "action" shooting has now been in full swing for in excess of two decades. Naturally, after this long, certain trends begin to show. Those parts of IPSC/PPC/IDPA shooting that can actually be dangerous if utilized in an anti-personnel situation have now

surfaced on a number of occasions, causing some unnecessary injuries and more than a few actual deaths.   Among these potentially deadly errors are:

    1. The emphasis upon highly-specialized "race" equipment rather than service guns, leather and ammunition, to gain a competitive "edge." Yet, no one actually uses such equipment in the real world.

    2. Always firing two shots per target, even when multiple targets are involved.

    One of the few changes in the trends illustrated by the FBI Uniform Crime Report is an increase in multiple assailants. Thus, shooting twice at each attacker gives them too much time to get you. A more intelligent response is to hit each target once, assess the situation and if re-engagement is needed, do so on a Failure-To-Stop basis.

    While the two-shot burst remains the best solution for a single target, multiple-target situations demand a compromise between tactics and shock to the target's nervous system prior to involuntary shutdown. Adding to the confusion, one writer recently stated his opposition to the Two-Shot Burst/Come to Ready/Assess thesis by citing a so-called failure in which the victim shot his assailant twice in the chest, then supposedly lowered his weapon to Ready, only to be killed by a rifle shot to his head in return.

    Whoa now; wait just a minute! Sounds like a clear case of .38 SPL failure to me, not faulty tactics. There is perhaps a twenty-to-one ratio of cases where even emptying a .38 SPL

into someone's chest failed to neutralize him. So, this particular criticism of the two-shot tactic is hardly representative of any true deficiency.

My conclusion is further reinforced by another fact: to deliberately shoot someone in the head with a rifle takes time, proving that the whole unfortunate incident could well have been just a fluke. Why? Because if it weren't, what would the victim have been doing? Yep, you guessed it. He would have already brought his weapon back up from Ready and re-engaged. Since this didn't happen, it is obvious that he was killed by his attacker's fire while his initial response was still in progress.

3. Excess physical movement during competition, e.g. so-called "assault courses," involving the shooter moving distances from firing point to firing point. This is a violation of the fundamental premise that the handgun is a reactive, defensive weapon. In short, we carry them so we don't have to run!

4. Disproportionate emphasis upon speed loading -- the unnecessary abandonment of magazines and ammunition. In a combat situation, the shooter may well find himself desperately in need of both only moments later. Here, my Tactical Reload is a far better solution to the problem of keeping control over ammunition expenditure and is the reason I created it in the first place.

5. Constant use of courses of fire that do not realistically simulate reasonable tactical scenarios. Yet, the use of silhouette targets inherent to competition clearly connotes an anti-personnel situation.

Why do these deadly errors repeatedly occur? Stated frankly, egos and perspective; that's why. Everyone wants to be "top gun" and win that trophy, even if nothing of real-world value is gained. Recognition is a powerful thing, to all of us, and the ego-satisfaction of being the Champion Of The Day is immense.

I know; I was once a World-Class IPSC competitor myself who placed highly in three consecutive IPSC National Championships and a member of the 1978-79 U.S. "Dream Team."

Placed in the wrong environment, competitive concepts can be deadly and should thus be studiously avoided in tactical training except for carefully thought-out and controlled simulations. So, consider your interests carefully and don't enter into competitive shooting if your true goal is real-world defensive skill. The reverse is also true. I discovered early in my shooting career that I could not do both well and had to make a choice as to which field of expertise -- competition or combat -- I truly wanted to pursue.

Target scoring systems, too, should be examined with care. While administration must certainly be taken into consideration, any serious combat target should also feature a reasonable representation of those portions of the human anatomy that are important. Sadly, few targets fulfill this critical requirement and this is why I designed both the Taylor Combat and Police Combat targets to fill this clearly evident, but curiously ignored, void.

 One writer created a scoring system that requires the shooter to amass a given score to

consider the target neutralized -- and if necessary to achieve that score, additional shots are required (a clear representation of a Failure-To-Stop), then so be it.

Sounds great, until we consider that we cannot readily see bullet holes in human adversaries and that within a second or two of the initial trauma of being shot (about the time it takes to shoot twice), the human nervous system involuntarily shuts down to protect itself. Thus, additional shots to the thorax are a waste of time -- time better spent utilizing proven effective ways of dealing with a Failure-To-Stop -- head shot, pelvis, whatever...

Target reaction or lack of it tells you what you need to know, not wasting valuable time trying to find bullet holes you can't reasonably expect to see. If the target fails to collapse after being quickly hit twice in the chest (Plan A), then consider him a Failure-To-Stop and initiate Plan B (head or pelvic shot, etc.).

To continue Plan A when it has clearly failed doesn't make sense. Concepts like this are downright dangerous and cannot even survive a serious logical examination, much less an actual field test in which people get killed when things go wrong. Stop for a moment and consider how many times we've seen newspaper articles on police officers who were killed after emptying their service weapons into their adversary's chest!

Obviously, the concept doesn't work and this is the point at which the controversy started in the first place! So, it turns out that the scoring system in question fails to correctly identify the problem. Thus, the solution it poses is equally invalid -- and dangerous.

Yet another writer disparages the two-shot controlled pair and claims that we should immediately upon engagement expend one-third of our weapon's ammunition supply into the target. This means that if we are using a six-shot revolver, the two-shot burst is okay, but if we are utilizing an 18-shot Glock M-17, we should shoot the target six times.

In other words, the weapon's ammunition capacity should be the determining factor. Hogwash! Target neutralization (stopping power) is controlled by shock to the central nervous system, not weapon ammunition capacity.

And when we add into the equation that:

    1. The nervous system quickly (1-2 seconds/1-2 shots) and involuntarily shuts down to protect itself upon sustaining the initial trauma of organic damage.

    2. The controversy originally began because there were too many instances in which assailants were not neutralized by even emptying the weapon into their thoracic cavity. Since the invalidity of this concept was apparent in the first place, what has happened to change anything? Nothing; absolutely nothing. Thus, the idea itself exhibits only its originator's lack of understanding of the elements inherent to target incapacitation. In short, someone didn't do their homework.

And again, it surfaces -- failing to define the problem before endeavoring to determine a solution.

Another deadly delusion is the tendency of some instructors to "improve" upon proven techniques just for the sake of being different or so they can put their own name on it rather than give due credit to its originator. A recent example of this unethical practice is the so-called "contact ready" position, in which the weapon is held only low enough to see the suspect's hands, rather than kept down at a full 45 degrees below horizontal.

The theory here is that any resulting presentation will be faster and that once the target is engaged, the weapon will then be lowered to a correct Ready position. However, those who are now espousing this idea fail totally to take into consideration human thought processes under stress.

You cannot expect to successfully program the sub-conscious mind to use the "contact ready" at the start of the confrontation and a correct Ready during the post-shooting assessment period. Instead, the "contact ready" becomes sub-consciously programmed and ends up being used universally, replacing the correct Ready position entirely.

How does this happen? Since paper targets on firing ranges do not react to being shot, starting from and returning to the "contact ready" appears legitimate because it works on things that remain immobile. However, under such circumstances, people move. And you can't re-engage them if you've lowered your weapon to "contact ready" because you can't see them due to gun/hand obstruction.

There is yet another reason the "contact ready" is so dangerous. If your initial target engagement is successful, where will the target be? On the ground, right? Returning to the "contact ready" keeps the weapon excessively high, obscuring your view of the target.

So, how can you quickly and accurately assess the effect of your shots when you cannot see the target? If your target is "down, but not out," an event that often occurs in handgun fights, he is still a deadly threat to you, but how can you know this when you can't see him?

You can't, which means you're dead! Therefore, examined realistically, the "contact ready" isn't an improvement at all. It's just a good way to get yourself -- or someone else -- killed unnecessarily. To advocate techniques like this shows a lack of understanding of the tactical issues involved and how the human mind functions under stress.

How does it happen? An attitude, a mind-set, if you will. I call it the Firing Range Mentality – the inability to see the consequences of actions and decisions past the moment. FRM comes from a lack of real-world experience and understanding, thereby forcing the would-be expert to instead extrapolate entirely upon theory.

As the original inventor of the Tactical Reload, I also find similar "improvements" of my technique grimly amusing. The modification of which I speak is the act of keeping both the partially expended and fully loaded magazines in the weak hand during the procedure. The claim is that the "improved" way is faster, but is it, really? Not when you perform it on a wet, cold night, or when you try to do it without looking at the gun!

And what kind of mental state will you be in when you execute a Tactical Reload? You've just fired that weapon "for blood," meaning that your pulse and respiratory rates will be sky-high and your nerves jangling, causing your hands to shake.

Even simple logic shows that the so-called "improved" way isn't really an improvement at all. In fact, this exact process is the one with which I began, but changed it to preclude the possibility of: (1) re-inserting the partially spent magazine back into the gun; (2) dropping one or both magazines on the ground.

How did I know these two things might happen? I tested shooters of various skill levels from novice to Master and was able to induce both errors by simply placing them under time-pressure. If I could cause such errors with nothing more than a stopwatch, how do you suppose real-world environmental conditions and/or the post-shooting "shakes" would affect them? That's why I refined the procedure into what subsequently became the Tactical Reload. Interestingly, the error-percentages immediately dropped to insignificance. Which would you rather bet your life on -- the original or so-called "improved" method?

Last, as basic as it might at first appear to be, many shooters fail to select weapons, ammunition, holsters, spare ammunition carriers and/or modifications to them that are appropriate for their needs. One doesn't use a Mercedes to run the Baja 1000, nor does a dune-buggy perform satisfactorily in the Indianapolis 500. Everyone's needs are different, as are their skills, but a crystal-clear definition of those needs must precede weapon/equipment selection or you're casting your fate to the wind.

These errors and misconceptions are why I often find myself at odds with some of my colleagues. To me as a full-time weapons/tactics professional, life and death -- your's and mine -- are serious business, demanding a logical, realistic approach. As far as I'm concerned, egos and commercialism have no place in a profession where life and death are at issue.

Please don't misunderstand. My sole intent here is to save lives, and only a clear perspective on the subject will allow the development of techniques, tactics and equipment that accomplish that goal. If I appear feisty while pointing out these deadly fallacies, so be it. But remember that they have, in fact, already caused a disconcerting number of unnecessary deaths and injuries.

Whether or not you agree with my analysis isn't important; however, understanding the issues upon which you're betting your life is critical. The graveyards are full of those who didn't realize or understand this. All-encompassing fact.

I, for one, don't intend to join them. How about you?