

## ***FUNDAMENTALS OF DEFENSIVE HANDGUNNING***

*By*

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Especially since the events of September 11, 2001, the American shooting public has taken increased notice of the need for effective self-defense. Though it's certainly true that much information on the subject has always been available, most gun owners and shooters merely paid lip-service to it, believing way down deep that they knew how to defend themselves with firearms, particularly handguns. After all, all you have to do it point it and pull the trigger, right?

Wrong.

The art and science of self-defense handgunning has been continuously evolving and improving for over two hundred years. And for the last forty years, its developmental pace has increased dramatically. Perhaps due to deteriorating social conditions, or maybe economic concerns – who knows for sure? – the citizen's awareness of the need for effective self-defense has burgeoned.

And yet, much of what has appeared in the last four decades is relatively worthless for self-defense because it's the result of competitive target shooting in one form or another. From good old-fashioned bullseye competition, to PPC shooting, to IPSC and its related endeavors, competition has contributed little to useful self-defense.

Not surprisingly, a number of instructors from the realm of competition have also surfaced, presenting the concepts and techniques they've used to win pistol matches as being state-of-the art. However, inasmuch as their methods were developed solely with that in mind, they tend to reflect a lack of cognizance, a lack of knowledge and a lack of perspective

on the critical fact that competition bears absolutely no resemblance to combat.

Competitive shooting allows the participant to examine the course of fire, determine how to best deal with it and even practice it in advance until he feels he has reached an acceptable efficiency level. In other words, he has the luxury of pre-solving his problems.

In combat, the opposite is true, which is why for well over a hundred years, competition shooting techniques have always failed to save lives when applied to life and death situations. Self-defense is serious business, a business in which ego-drive, the primary motivator of all forms of competition, can quite literally get you killed.

I hope you won't misunderstand. I have nothing against competition. In fact, I was once a world-class IPSC shooter myself. But my involvement in sport shooting did not teach me how to stay alive in the multiple gunfights I've been in during my lifetime. Though I'd shot small bore competition as a boy and Service Pistol Bullseye for a while in the U.S. Army, I subsequently discovered in the jungles of southeast Asia that such endeavors had no semblance whatsoever to reality.

Were they fun? Yes, absolutely. Did they demand skill, perseverance, dedication, time and energy? Yes, of course, and I admire all of those things, regardless of the activity to which they're applied. Still, the artificiality of it all – the known chronology of events, the failing to properly balance accuracy and speed, the irrelevant targets, foot-racing and a total lack of tactical awareness and understanding invalidates competition as an effective combat training tool.

A police officer I once knew always asked any instructor whose class he attended if he carried a gun for a living. If the answer was no, he'd then ask why the instructor thought he was qualified to teach him anything. Invariably, the instructor's reply was that he'd been a championship competitive shooter and his techniques were thus superior. The officer would then ask him, "In what way? You can't pre-solve self-defense problems." Invariably, silence followed.

Am I anti-competition? No, in spite of what some competition shooters think, I'm not. On the other hand, having been both a successful competitor *and* survivor of multiple gunfights, I'm uniquely qualified to judge the difference, which is nothing less than extreme – *night and day*, even. And as such, I can't in good conscience recommend to anyone that they pursue training with anyone whose background, concepts and techniques are based upon competition alone. Competition is fine, but let's not call it combat. To do otherwise is just plain wrong – *dangerously* wrong, in fact.

To train for self-defense (where the only prize is the right to keep on breathing!), one must learn techniques intended not only to win the fight, but keep him out of jail and minimize civil liability concerns as well. This means that KISS (Keep It Simple, Stupid) applies irrevocably. The three forms of liability – tactical, criminal and civil – demand that the participant in any deadly self-defense confrontation conduct himself within their defined parameters or disaster will result.

These days, it's also common to see instructional programs based entirely on shooting, some to the point of actually being detrimental to skill-building. Time and time again, I get students here at ASAA who've recently attended schools that utilize this concept. To a man, their trigger control, general weapon-handling and resulting efficiency has been negatively affected.

The shoot-shoot-shoot school of thought simply fills time. What it does *not* do is teach and refine skill. Anyone can simply have students shoot until their hands hurt, but all that does is reinforce errors. *The more you shoot utilizing deficient techniques, the harder it will be to correct them.* You can't learn new techniques or correct problems simply by shooting – that's a sub-conscious function and is the result of evaluation, disclosure and repetitive dry-practice of correct procedure. Shooting merely validates the dry-practice. As a professional instructor, it seems curious to me that so many who teach appear to be unaware of this glaring, yet critically important, fact.

So, when you choose a place to get that professional training, be careful – shooting 1000-rds. a day might be fun, and it certainly fills out the day, but it won't *teach* you much. I

even tell my students, "if all there is to training is shooting, what do you need me for?"

Hmm... 'nuff said.

Some say, "It ain't simple and you ain't stupid!" but they're wrong – *dead* wrong! The debilitating effects of deadly stress are more than just noticeable, they're the most controlling factor in the altercation. In fact, they're *so* pronounced that you can expect to perform at perhaps 50% of the level you can demonstrate when you're not under that kind of stress. This means that no matter how good you are, when you're chock-full of adrenaline with heart pounding and lungs heaving, you won't be so hot.

So, yes, in comparison to how you perform when not under deadly stress, we're *all* stupid. We shake, we quake, we sweat profusely and tend to have trouble focusing on even the most elemental tasks.

Moreover, history repeatedly shows that the dynamics of handgun encounters nearly always follow a pattern of taking place at close range, so the time-frames involved tend to be *very* fast (3-seconds or less) and involve only a few rounds (3 rounds or less) of ammunition. Complex running gun battles with handguns are *extremely* rare, certainly rare enough to be considered an exception, not the norm. Moreover, when they occur, such situations are invariably the result of the participants failing to bring the encounter to a definitive conclusion during the initial confrontation.

So, yes it's simple. The event occurs too quickly for anything more complex to happen. For this reason, shooting and weapon-handling techniques, weapon/ammunition/equipment selection and tactical concepts and protocols must be kept simple.

A handgun fight is close to the ultimate in uncontrolled environments, but the competitor has no way of knowing that. His activities all take place in the most controlled environment possible – a shooting range. How can he possibly understand the dynamics of deadly force?

The answer is simple – he can't and that's why competitive techniques and instructional programs prove to be less than optimum when the bullets fly for real. The very mission of the handgun tells it all, even though few realize it. *The purpose of the handgun is to provide its wearer with a reactive close-range response when control of his immediate environment is threatened.* So when you seek professional training – a *great* idea, no question about it – get it from someone who can truly teach you what you need to know. Otherwise, you'll need a lot of luck to even survive, much less stay out of jail and not lose everything you own afterwards.

Even before you seek training, a number of fundamental tasks must first be completed. Bearing the considerations of tactical, criminal and civil liability in mind, you've got to select a handgun, holster, means of carrying spare ammunition, and find ammunition suitable for your needs. Many tend to let others make these decisions for them, via articles, classes or discussions, but the fact is that people's life styles – and thus their needs – are different. What works for one person may not work for another, so consider your needs carefully before you try to satisfy them.

The single-action (SA) self-loader (auto) is the easiest to shoot well under stress, but of late it suffers from being thought by some to be unsafe. This comes from the fact that for imminent use (carry), it's carried Condition One (cocked & locked – round chambered, hammer cocked, thumb safety engaged). The hammer back position of Condition One understandably frightens many people, especially novices, but in reality, it's quite safe.

In theory, the double-action (DA) auto remedies this by allowing the carrier to lower the hammer on a chambered round and simply press the trigger to fire, much like with a revolver. However, once this process is complete, the weapon self-cocks from that point on and reverts to the SA mode, forcing the shooter to learn two different types of trigger control.

The long, heavy DA pull required to fire the first shot forces the shooter to either "blow the shot off" (get rid of it by firing it without control) or take *much* more time with his trigger pull to insure control. This is perhaps the DA auto's biggest weakness.

To correct the problem, some of the gun manufacturers have modified their guns to what's called "Double-Action-Only" (DAO). With DAO, all trigger pulls are double-action – reversion of the piece to the SA mode after the first shot is fired is eliminated.

The double-action revolver is your fourth possible choice. In concept, it's by far the simplest and thus has much merit, especially for the novice. Unlike the self-loader, it has no separate magazine, making it easy to determine whether or not it's loaded. Its cylinder swings out for handy reloading, too, either by hand or with a speed loader.

The problem is that, like the DAO auto, the DA revolver can only be used quickly in the DA (trigger cocking) mode. Therefore, the inherent difficulties noted with the DA auto apply here as well. Trigger control is everything and although it's a simple weapon to understand, the DA revolver and auto are *much* tougher to shoot well under stress than a SA auto.

If you prefer the DA revolver, avoid the shorter-barreled versions because their sight radius makes them tough to use well, especially under stress. Simple geometry dictates that the closer to point of alignment are (front and rear sight), the more aggravated alignments errors become. As well, the snubbie's shorter barrel limits bullet velocities to the point where frangible bullet expansion is nearly impossible. This, in turn, reduces the weapon's efficiency as a manstopper.

Don't pick a handgun because it has a large capacity magazine. This is one of the great myths of combat handgunning. Remember that the dynamics of anti-personnel confrontations do follow a trend – they're close and they're fast, so you won't have time to shoot the extra ammo anyway unless you sacrifice marksmanship. And if you don't hit what you shoot at, you'll lose anyhow, no matter how many shots you fire.

At present, it's considered vogue to denigrate the revolver because of its lesser ammunition capacity, but to do so is a serious mistake. Revolvers have been around in more or less their current form for over a hundred years and have amassed a good efficiency record. Don't dismiss them just because they only hold five or six shots.

Likewise, don't pick a handgun that's too powerful for you to use well under stress. From an operator standpoint, combat shooting involves speed and accuracy in equal measure, so weapon controllability is crucial. If you opt for a handgun that produces excessive recoil, muzzle blast and penetration, you'll never reach your full potential. However, you *will* increase your tactical, criminal and civil liability concerns to potential catastrophic levels.

Antiques, machine pistols and single-action revolvers should also be avoided. An antique might be had for a few dollars less than a more modern gun, but is often less than reliable. How much is your life worth? A machine pistol is clumsy and does nothing a standard handgun doesn't do better, and the average person will find single-action revolvers are too slow to shoot and reload.

For it to reach maximum efficiency, the fighting handgun needs four fundamental things:

1. Sights you can see quickly as high speed, but of low profile to prevent snagging in concealment clothing. They don't need to be adjustable, since adjustable sights are more complex and thus more damage-prone.
2. A clean crisp trigger. Considering the elements of tactical, criminal and civil liability, 4-5 lbs. is about right. Avoid wide triggers and trigger shoes, since they merely give the illusion of a lighter trigger. To enhance the DA revolver's trigger control, narrow, round and smoothly polish its trigger face.
3. Removal of any sharp edges, because they abrade skin and damage concealment clothing. To find them, simply rub your hand briskly all over the gun.
4. A finish appropriate for the natural environment in which you plan to carry and utilize the weapon. There are many such finishes available – Metalife, Armoloy, NP-3, Roguard, Electroless Nickel, Hard Chrome, et al. However, keep the sights black for best contrast and quick acquisition.

Holster designs, too, bear scrutiny. There are many different types available these days, from fanny packs, to inside-the-pants, to strong-side, to cross-draw, to shoulder rigs. However, any holster should exhibit two critical characteristics. It should:

1. Allow the shooter to obtain a proper firing grip with the weapon in the holster.
2. Cover enough of the gun's trigger guard area to prevent inadvertent entry of the trigger finger or other foreign object.

Along with spare ammunition carriers, the holster should possess a balance of security and acquisition speed. Today, there are more holsters available than ever before. Bearing your projected needs in mind, look them over carefully before you choose.

Grip and stance are perhaps the two most critical fundamentals of shooting, particularly when fast target engagement and shooting are involved. For best results:

1. The weapon should be placed in the shooting hand so as to be as straight as possible in relation to the forearm.
2. The middle of the first pad of the trigger finger is placed across the trigger face to allow a straight-back pull.
3. Within the limitations of the weapon's configuration, both thumbs should be kept as high as possible.
4. The supporting hand is wrapped around the back of the fingers of the shooting hand. It then presses lightly rearward to seat the shooting arm into the shoulder socket and "firm up" the stance.
5. All fingers of the supporting hand should be kept beneath the trigger guard. The "finger forward" concept may look stylish, but it raises the supporting



hand an inch closer to the axis of the bore, making it less able to exert control in contrast to the force exerted.

As for stance, there are two worth considering – Weaver and Isosceles. At present, there is controversy as to which is best, but it's a sure bet that one or the other is by far better than anything else. I prefer the Weaver, because it's more flexible and provides more weapon control with less energy expended. It does so because it brings the whole upper torso into the equation, whereas with the Isosceles only the arms are involved.

Invariably, criticisms of the Weaver come from two sources:

1. Those who fail to understand it and base their analysis on an incorrect version of it. Since they know little of the stance itself, they can't discern the difference.
2. Competition shooters with extraordinary upper torso strength and above average motor skills who fail to realize that they are not the norm. Thus, though their techniques work well for them, they do not produce better results when used by the shooter with average strength and motor skill.

Weapon presentations from both Ready and From Holster should be mastered as soon as fundamental weapon-handling skills (Condition Checking, Loading, Unloading, Grip and Stance) are mastered. And, if you intend to carry your self-defense handgun concealed, such presentations should be done from beneath a "cover" garment.

Typical self-defense confrontations involve a quick presentation of the weapon, followed by one or two quick shots aimed at the opponent's thoracic (chest) cavity. Once this is complete, the gun should quickly be brought back to Ready to allow full view of the target area and subsequent evaluation of what happened. You're then in the best possible position to re-engage if he's not incapacitated or has accomplices.

The “shoot ‘til the target goes down” philosophy heard so often these days reflects a lack of understanding of both what happens when people are shot and the influences of tactical, criminal and civil liability. First, when you shoot someone, you’re essentially racing his nervous system to shutdown. A little less than a second after your first shot hits, the nervous systems begins an involuntary protective shutdown process. That’s why when confronted with a single target, you hit it twice. The idea is to inflict maximum trauma before the shutdown process is complete, with the hope that it will be sufficient to produce “sensory overload” and quickly incapacitate him.

Given the extremely short duration within which the shutdown process occurs, you have time for one or two shots. If they fail to “put him down and out,” shooting him repeatedly again and again usually fails because the target no longer feels anything. Better to have a “Plan B,” such as a quick shot to the cranio-ocular (brain/eyes) cavity to bring the altercation to a close if “Plan A” doesn’t work.

Some opine that you should shoot at the pelvic girdle, but since you can’t see it clearly, it’s too easy to shoot high and hit the assailant in the abdomen, (where there is little central nervous system presence). Initially, the pelvic shot was intended only to stop a rushing attacker armed with an edged or blunt weapon, but somehow with time, it became a “cure-all” response.

In truth, it causes as much trouble as it prevents. Though if the pelvic girdle is struck, the target generally does fall, he is not in any way prevented from continuing to fight from the ground. As any forensic pathologist will tell you, if he’s struck in the cranio-ocular area, it’s instant “lights out!”

It’s also tough to stop shooting once you start, making the criminal and civil implications of the pelvic shot an issue of concern. My feeling is that if you find yourself in a handgun fight, you’re already in trouble. If you have a Failure To Stop, you’re now in *big* trouble. Why make it worse?

Since multiple target attacks are on the increase, practice hitting them, too. Shoot each

target once, swinging from the strong to weak side (toward the body) to maintain strength and target visibility, then return the weapon to Ready, assess the situation and re-engage any targets still lethally functional, but on a Failure To Stop basis.

In the event the situation continues to deteriorate, it's also a good idea to learn how to hit small targets at close range, too. Because the potential for a Failure To Stop, angled or partially obscured target or hostage situation is very real, ignoring the possibility would be a grave error.

While they're a lot of fun, moving targets, "Jungle Lanes," "Kill Houses," and the like are of little fundamental use. I've been a professional instructor, consultant and writer for nearly thirty years now and found that typically the student doesn't even remember what he did while in a shooting house or on a "Jungle Lane," much less whether it was right or wrong.

The law forbids shooting at fleeing targets (they're not a deadly threat) and they almost never move laterally while continuing to face you, so moving target training is best accomplished with a target rushing at you.

Extreme close-in emergency responses like the Stepback and Speed Rock are very useful, but should be taught at a more advanced level. Rapid body movements combining gun handling can be physically dangerous if attempted by someone who has not yet achieved mastery of the basics.

Last, learn the principles of tactics. All the shooting skill in the world won't do you any good if you don't see the target in time. In fact, adherence in sound tactic principles can usually keep you out of a fight because you'll see it coming. If you *must* fight, you do so on terms most advantageous to you, not the other fellow.

Here are my tactical rules:

1. Use, really *use*, your eyes and ears. If you do, you'll see things early enough to exercise options you won't have if you don't see them.

2. Maximize the distance between you and a potential threat. Danger and distance correlate exactly. The closer you are, the less time you have to make judgments and react.
3. Stay away from corners. A corner is anything beyond which there is visual dead-space. It could be a copse of trees, a car in a parking lot or a physical indoor or outdoor building corner. When you negotiate them, "Slice The Pie," to maintain maximum visibility of what lies beyond and retain the initiative.
4. Keep your balance. In spite of what you see in the movies, television and on IPSC ranges, you can't fight effectively while "dancing around." Maintain a solid platform from which to fight by never crossing your legs or bringing your feet too close together and move in a smooth "shuffle" with your weapon held at the Ready.
5. Don't assume anything. Check it out and be certain!
6. Watch your front sight. It not only produces hits, but provides you with a positive focal point in a maelstrom of confusion. If there is time to shoot, there is time to use the sights because only solid hits count and you can't guarantee them any other way!

These, then, are the major fundamentals of self-defense shooting. Practice them religiously and you'll be surprised how quickly your skill level will increase. In addition, get proper professional training and pursue a consistent dry-practice program.

Choose your weapon, holster, ammo and other equipment carefully and learn how to use it to its fullest potential and remember most of all that the fundamentals of marksmanship – sight alignment, sight picture and trigger control, in balance with target acquisition and engagement speed – are what makes it happen. Gadgets, gizmos, competition and simply shooting until your hand bleeds don't.

The fundamentals aren't especially tough to understand, once the myths and fantasies are stripped away. Pursue them, understand them and utilize them and you'll save yourself a great deal of time, energy and money, not to mention aggravation.

And most important, you might just save your life as well!