



The ABCs Of Handgun Marksmanship

Shooting a handgun well is a complicated skill that requires solid fundamentals. A veteran shooter, the author explains and shows you how to apply his five basic steps to being a successful handgunner.

BY WILEY CLAPP, Field Editor

A

t some unknown point in time, an instructor stepped before a group of men and began to speak about the management of a curious artifact known as a pistol. It may have been a Texan speaking to a company of Rangers who had just received their new Patersons. Or maybe it was later or even much earlier—I don't know, because I wasn't there. But I do remember with crystal clarity the voice of my late father as I stood before a target and lifted a loaded Colt pistol for the first time. His message stays with me to this day: "There's not a reason in the world to shoot unless you intend to hit. You hit when you line up the sights."

He had more to say of course, but I will spare you further wistful remembrances of a .22 Ace in a basement range. The matter at hand is a simple one—the principles by which you hit a distant target with a bullet fired from a handgun. The essence of what I was taught then and what is taught at a good school today is the same. Happily enough, our understanding of what to teach and how to teach it has evolved a bit. That is particularly true in the light of many new handgun sports, as well as new types of handguns that have come into common use in modern times.



The basic message remains the same—stick to the principles, apply them to the situation. I must note that many books and manuals on the subject do exist, just as there are hundreds of good instructors doing their work for the uninitiated. The message from the good ones is pretty much the same, but the principles might sometimes be organized and/or taught differently. I

believe there are five principles: Grip, Stance, Aiming, Trigger Management and Follow-Through. They are the “ABCs of Handgun Marksmanship.” They should be viewed not as five principles, but rather as five steps on a stairway to success. See them as a linked chain of controlled and codependent events that produce on-target hits.

A Grip

Pistols have handles by which their users grasp them. Invariably, the handle is below and behind the greater mass of the gun. When the handgun fires, a bullet of specific weight leaves the gun with great speed and that invokes the Laws of Motion. The gun recoils away from its point of support, coming back and up, thereby producing perceived recoil, or “kick.” Also, the gun tends to rotate in such a way that the frame drives into the web of the shooter’s hand. Stocks of varying materials and densities can partially ameliorate the sometimes-painful motion, but it can never be eliminated. Therefore, the way the shooter grips his or her handgun does several things, the most significant of which is to manage recoil. The goal is to grip the gun in such a way that recoil is the same for every shot. Since gun movement begins before the bullet exits the muzzle, consistent recoil management contributes to accuracy.

The grip also has a direct bearing on the shooter’s ability to manage the trigger. This has become a more complex topic with the introduction of so many different kinds of triggers. But proper grip still involves placing the hand directly behind the pistol or revolver. This helps one pull the trigger straight to the rear. Today’s typical double-action fire-control system uses a trigger that pivots on an axis at its top, so there is a fair amount of motion. For that reason, a grip that is as high as possible is best because it gives the greatest leverage for the trigger finger. That is doubly true of a double-action revolver trigger pull, during which the pressure must also turn the cylinder so that each chamber can index with the barrel. Unfortunately, the contours of most semi-automatics don’t permit a great deal of options, so get as high as possible on any handgun and grip with a consistent, hard pressure.

B Stance

This is undoubtedly the most hotly debated aspect of handgun shooting, particularly in defensive or combat handgunning. It is the way the shooter orients the body as he or she presents the handgun to the target, with a view toward delivering accurate shots. Leaving the kneeling, prone and various barricade positions out of consideration for the moment, it should be obvious that any standing position needs to first be balanced—with the weight of the body equally distributed on both feet. For many years, conventional wisdom held that since a pistol could be fired with one hand, it should be fired with one hand. Therefore, many shooting games require one-handed manipulation of the gun. Here, the shooter faces slightly away from the target, then raises a straightened shooting arm with the pistol aimed at the target. The position is surprisingly natural and, if yours doesn’t line up with the target, simply move the feet to turn more or less into or away from the target.

Using two hands to control the gun makes much more sense. The dominant hand grasps the gun, and the other supports it. The best-known two-handed shooting position is the one developed by the late Jack Weaver, an L.A. County deputy sheriff and associate of Jeff Cooper. Weaver advanced the support side



foot slightly, straightened the shooting arm and used the supporting arm and hand to grasp the shooting hand. Feet were shoulder-width apart, knees slightly flexed and the torso leaned just slightly forward. The key to making the Weaver Stance so great was the push-forward motion of the shooting arm against the pull-back motion of the support arm. Properly executed, the Weaver Stance turns the shooter's upper body into a gun turret that can swing through a wide arc. It also permits accurate delivery of shots and, best of all, excellent recovery from recoil, thereby facilitating accurate subsequent shots. As techniques have developed, today's Weaver shooters are facing the target more squarely, and some have gone to the isosceles, which orients the shooter squarely downrange with both arms fully extended. Most shooters find the Weaver Stance quite natural and easy to learn. It is the same general position as the prizefighter, NFL cornerback or Judo practitioner.

While no particular grip or stock material can completely ameliorate the effects of handgun recoil, proper grip technique—as shown with both a pistol and a revolver (far l.)—can at least mitigate the worst of the “kick.” Whether Weaver (below) or isosceles (bottom), a proper stance nowadays dictates equal weight on the feet and a two-hand hold.

C Aiming

Easily the most important aspect of pistol shooting, aiming is often a neglected topic. In-depth studies have established that the human brain can only concentrate on one thing at a time. If it's shooting, then the brain had best be completely focused on aiming. All else—grip, stance, trigger management and follow-through—must become habit through prior training. Aiming is a function of your vision, and you can't see unless there is oxygen in your lungs and bloodstream. Students of the game have established that you cannot hold your breath for more than seven or eight seconds at the most. Breathe naturally as you shoot a string of shots, but if you have a long, hard one to make, inhale and hold the breath.

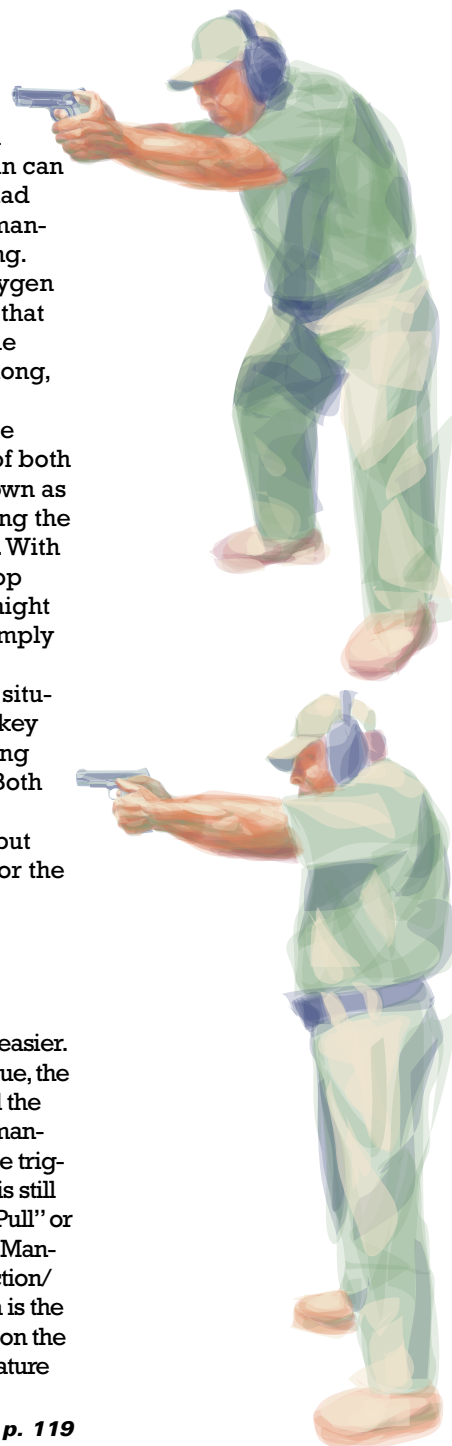
Concentration is very important, and the point of concentration is the front sight. It must be aligned with the rear sight notch—with the tops of both sights even and the front sight centered laterally in the rear. This is known as sight alignment. The instructor who says “get good alignment” is missing the point, because sight alignment is like pregnancy—either it is or it isn't. With practice—thousands of repetitions of the presentation—you will develop an ingrained feel for where the front sight actually is. As strange as it might sound, you can achieve blinding speed in aligning your sights. Then simply put the aligned sights on the desired point of impact.

Here we have sight picture. Sight picture varies with the terrain and situation. It's one thing for an IHMSA shooter who is working on his last turkey at 150 meters with a T/C Contender in .357 Mag., and quite another thing for a field shooter with a .44 who's trying for a feral hog trotting away. Both must align those sights to have any chance of hitting. The argument for point shooting in close-quarters confrontations may have some merit, but aimed shots invariably hit the target. I do not believe that can be said for the pointed ones. Always work toward an aimed shot—always.

D Trigger Management

If I were writing this article a few decades back, it would have been much easier. The triggers were a lot easier to analyze, describe and teach in those days. True, the trigger on the venerable Colt Government Model has not changed and is still the grand old gun's major virtue. In the '60s, when I first tried competitive marksmanship, instructors used to say that you “pressed” or “mashed” or “squeezed” the trigger straight to the rear until the gun surprised you with boom and buck. That is still pretty much the case, but those days would have called this section “Trigger Pull” or “Trigger Control.” As a general term in today's handgunning world, “Trigger Management” is better. We have a lot of new guns with various types of double-action/single-action triggers and some with double-action-only units. The basic idea is the same—press the trigger straight to the rear while keeping the sights aligned on the target. But a lot of today's semi-automatic pistol triggers have an additional feature that can be a positive advantage. It is short reset.

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When the striker-fired Glock pistol hit the U.S. market in 1985, it was hailed as a breakthrough because it had a polymer receiver. The trigger system was actually a greater innovation. When the Glock slide moves to the rear, as in chambering a cartridge, the mechanism catches the internal striker and holds it in a partially cocked position. When the shooter wishes to fire, part of his or her work in retracting the striker is already done, so just a little pressure fully loads it, then releases it to fire the cartridge. The shooter can fire again by releasing the trigger back to the reset point and not all the way forward. Other modern guns have similar systems and there are others that have double-action/single-action systems. Once you learn where the reset point is on your gun, you can deliver very fast pairs. Trigger Management simply means learning to use today's increasingly diverse systems to their best advantage.

E Follow-Through

Handgun instructors of days past seldom mentioned this, but it has become extremely important in current teaching. When Reggie Jackson took a cut at a fastball, he continued that powerful swing well after the ball had come off the bat, and he had no more influence on where it was going. That's because he knew that what he did after contact would impact the power of what he did before. In handgunning, follow-through is very important and really consists of holding sight alignment until the bullet is gone—literally thinking the bullet into the target. But there is even more to the follow-through process. You could say that you never break concentration on the front sight, even when the gun fires. Realistically, you may briefly lose the front sight, but the immediate effort should be to re-acquire it and get it back in alignment with the rear sight. At the same time, reset the trigger and get ready for another shot.



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