



The dry desert air helps this arthritic senior keep training.

Arthritis and Defensive Handgun Training

[BY BRUCE N. EIMER, Ph.D.]

As discussed in my previous article, once you have purchased your chosen handgun, it is time to train.

In order to develop into a competent, defensive shooter you must master the fundamentals of marksmanship. The good news for those of us who have physical challenges such as arthritis is that there is no such thing as “advanced marksmanship,” because all marksmanship is basic. Advanced combative handgun techniques are the application of the fundamentals at an advanced level in different situations. Mastery of the fundamentals of marksmanship forms the basis for advancement as a combative shooter. This requires commitment and smart training.

Smart training is all about *quality* as opposed to *quantity* of practice. This is

good news because those of us with arthritis have limited endurance. When yours truly goes to the range, he aims to train smartly. Therefore, I run drills designed to strengthen my fundamental marksmanship skills and their applications to tactical situations. I don't worry about how many rounds I send down range, nor should you. After all, ammunition is expensive these days! Remember the truism that “practice does not make perfect; perfect practice makes perfect (not that true perfection exists!).

We are all physically challenged in one way or another. However, many of us with arthritis in its various forms may have to deal with diminished grip

strength, decreased arm and shoulder strength, persistent physical pain, limited range of motion and mobility, diminished endurance, and in many cases loss of visual acuity. Clearly, these physical problems will affect how one trains, performs, and ultimately fights. Since it is a fact that we will fight as we have trained to fight, we should train to use our brain because our mind is our greatest weapon. After all, if you use your brain, you may be able to avoid a fight. However, if the fight is unavoidable, you do want to think. Typically, the more intelligent fighter will be the winner. What follows are some intelligent training tips.

The six fundamentals of marksmanship

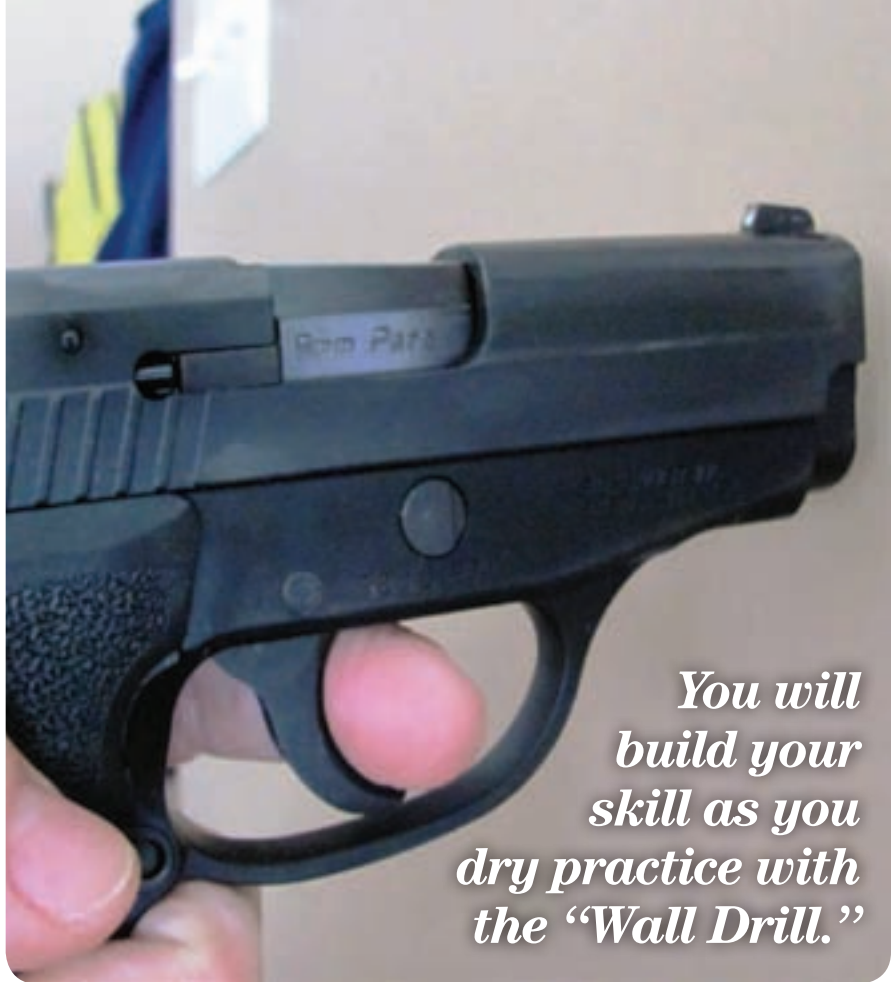
The six fundamentals of marksmanship are *grip, stance, sight alignment,*

sight picture, trigger control, and follow-through. The two most important of these are sight alignment and trigger control because accurate shooting is all about keeping your muzzle on target as you work your trigger. Your first shot and follow-up shot accuracy will be a function of how well you use your sighting system (iron sights, laser sights, red dot, top of the slide, silhouette of the handgun, or other technique) and control your trigger before, during and after you take each shot. The defensive shooter should regularly practice these six fundamentals. Every trip to the range should involve work on basic marksmanship skills.

Have a plan. Always have a plan when you go to the range. Maximize the use of your valuable training time. Basic marksmanship can be drilled at the range by running the “one-hole drill” as described by fellow Concealed Carry Magazine columnist, George Harris, who is the Director of the Sig Sauer Academy in Epping, New Hampshire.

The “One-Hole Drill.” Begin at a set distance (3 to 7 yards), choose an aim point, and present your handgun from the ready position or from your holster. Observe the six marksmanship fundamentals, “float your front sight blade or dot, and make each shot.” Re-acquire your sight picture after shot number one, and continue to aim all of your remaining shots into your first hole. Take as much time as you require. With practice, speed will come, but for this drill, pinpoint accuracy is most important. The importance of sight alignment, sight picture, trigger control and follow-through cannot be overemphasized. Also, breathe normally. I am not a believer in holding your breath. Recognize that your most important shot is your first shot, but make every shot count. Don’t throw shots away. Gunfights are usually won by the person who hits first and hard.

Dry practice. Develop a dry practice regimen that you can practice at home. George Harris’s “wall drill” is designed for dry practice. Following all dry practice safety precautions, pick a spot on a safe wall. Present your unloaded and triply checked handgun within an inch of



*You will
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that spot. The drill is to acquire a proper grip on your gun, assume a proper stance, align your sights, obtain a good sight picture, and work your trigger smoothly while you maintain a steady sight picture. You will build your skill as you dry practice smoothly pressing and working your trigger as you keep your sight picture steady. Make sure to follow through after each dry shot by prepping your trigger for another shot. With hammer fired, trigger cocking, double action handguns such as double action revolvers and semi-auto pistols such as Sig Sauer, Heckler & Kochs, and third generation Smith and Wessons, you will not have to move your handgun to reset the trigger. With striker-fired slide-cocking semi-automatic pistols such as Glocks, Smith and Wesson M&Ps, and Springfield Armory XD’s, you will have to manually cycle your slide after each dry press of the trigger. If your handgun design allows, keep your trigger finger on the trigger to let the trigger travel forward to its reset point and then dry fire it (press it all the way rearward) again. Make sure to acquire a perfect sight picture each time you bring your gun back on target (an inch from your chosen spot on the wall).

Lasers

Laser sights such as the laser grips manufactured by Crimson Trace Corporation and the internal lasers manufactured by LaserMax can be great training aides. The laser dot right behind your front sight can help you see your front sight and also verify proper sight alignment. In addition, the laser dot projected on your point of aim can help you see your “wobble zone” and help you work on reducing it so that you improve your ability to keep your muzzle on your point of aim before, during, and after operating your trigger. That laser dot can also help you reduce flinching and other bad trigger operation habits. Furthermore, for those of us with diminished visual acuity and ocular motor accommodation, laser sights can improve our speed and accuracy of shot placement.

Pace yourself

Maximize the effectiveness of your practice time. It is important to pace yourself and to know when to take breaks and when to end your training for the day. Your concentration is likely to be constrained by problems focusing on your sights and possibly the pain of

working your trigger finger, maintaining a consistent grip on your handgun, keeping your arms extended to keep your sights and muzzle on target, and standing still and “playing statues.” The solution is to limit your number of shots for each string of fire. Start with two-shot strings and then build up.

Do not let your practice session be governed by pain. Determine beforehand how long you intend to practice. Don't be overly ambitious. Be realistic, given your pain tolerance and your physical limitations. If you can extend your practice session, by all means do so, but do not push yourself to the point of re-injury. You'll regret it tomorrow when you do not feel up to another training session. Know when to stop.

Reduced recoil loads

Save your hands, wrists, and arms. Use reduced recoil loads in the smallest possible caliber for realistic training. For example, if you carry a Smith and Wesson M&P semi-auto in .40 caliber, perhaps you should train using this same pistol in 9mm and employ reduced recoil loads such as those manufactured by Federal Cartridge Company.

Holster choice. You will probably be able to drill longer if you work from a holster as you'll place less strain on your arms. In a previous article, I covered holster selection. Make sure your holster is of the type that has a reinforced mouth so that you can holster with one hand. Also, make sure your holster rides on your hip where it is easy for you to acquire a good grip on your handgun.

Targets

Choose targets that allow you to quantify your accuracy. U.S. Target, Inc. manufactures and sells a wide variety of scoring and qualification targets. This gives your training session focus, reinforces good results, and enables you to quantify your progress. Don't just plink. Make training interesting. Set goals.

Should you train with a timer?

A timer can be a useful training tool when you have attained a skill level such that you are ready to incorporate it into your live fire training. It can also be used in dry practice to increase your speed



of presenting your handgun on target from your concealment holster. Once you have achieved a basic mastery of the fundamentals of marksmanship, you can employ a timer at the range to put yourself under time pressure. The beep of the timer is analogous to the “balloon going up” in real life. As tactical firearms trainer Patrick McNamara says in his book, *Tactical Applications of Practical Shooting*, in reference to the real world, “You do not know when that pro-timer is going to ‘beep.’ It may not be for 20 years.” Keep this in mind as you train.

When you train, do not speed up your shooting beyond your capabilities. Accuracy comes before speed. Emphasize smooth movement, proper technique and accurate shot placement in your training. Speed comes with smoothness and repetition. However, you should vary your target distances for different drills. Close-in targets (three yards and less) should be shot faster than targets placed farther out. As dis-

tance from the target increases, the size of your target will become smaller in relation to the silhouette of your gun and your sight picture. Proportionately, you will need to take more time to acquire a sight picture. However, keep in mind that most gunfights occur close in at distances of less than 10 feet. At such close distances, you cannot afford to take your time. Your goal should be to shoot fast and accurately so that you can gain distance from the threat and gain the advantage. Recognize that greater distance favors the well trained.

Training videos

Watch training videos. We learn best by modeling experts. The psychologically and scientifically valid training steps are: (1) watch a good video demonstrating a grand master performing drills, exercises and maneuvers, (2) after watching the entire video to get the big picture, go back and work on each drill or exercise, (3) watch the grand master

perform an exercise, (4) visualize the grand master performing the exercise, (5) visualize being in the grand master's body performing the exercise yourself from the first person perspective, (6) watch yourself in your mind performing the exercise, (7) perform the exercise "dry" while following all "dry practice" safety precautions, (8) perform the exercise live at the range. Concealed Carry Magazine writer Gabe Suarez has produced a library of firearms training videos ranging from the basics to advanced tactics for handgun, shotgun, and rifle, as has George Harris of Sig Sauer Academy. In addition, Paladin Press has a large selection of training videos.

Working out

Staying in shape physically pays off

left: This comfortable, leather inside-the-waistband Professional Carry Holster or PCH by Alessi is easy to put on, position, and take off. The holster mouth stays open and the holster stays where you position it, so you can holster your Roscoe with one hand without looking.

below: A comfortable, secure and concealable ankle holster such as this one from Alessi Holsters with thumb break holding a Glock 23, can be therapeutic. When it's comfortable like this one, it feels like you're wearing a warm ankle wrap. The weight of the Glock will strengthen your ankle and leg muscles. If don't want weight training, carry a Kel-Tec P3AT or P32.



with dividends. Start an exercise program under the supervision of an experienced personal trainer who has experience working with people who have arthritis. Make sure to get checked out by your physician first. Build up your physical stamina and strength through both cardio exercise and lifting weights under supervision. Start with short workout sessions and light weights. The following types of exercise should be included in your workout at a level appropriate for you. This is not medical advice. My recommendations are for educational and informational purposes only.

Cardio. Walk outside if the weather permits, or walk indoors on a treadmill. Use an elliptical trainer or a stationary bicycle. Use an upper body exerciser.

Weights. Under the supervision of a qualified personal trainer, develop a lifting program to strengthen your shoulders, arms, hands, upper and lower back, hips, and legs.

Stretching. Stretch after you are slightly warmed up. Stretching regularly increases your flexibility and makes you more resistant to injury.

Grip strength. You can use hard rubber weighted palm size balls or grip strengtheners available at sporting goods and athletic stores to strengthen your grip. You can perform wrist curls with light dumbbells to strengthen your wrists.

Fine motor dexterity. Perform finger isolation exercises to improve your fine motor dexterity. This will increase your

ability to isolate your trigger finger so that you can work the trigger without "milking" with your entire hand.

Medicines for pain

Recognize that opioid analgesic medications typically slow your reflexes and can negatively affect your coordination. This is also true for many anti-depressants and sleep medicines. In fact, all of these drugs typically have warnings on their labels that they may negatively affect your ability to operate machinery. A better bet from the standpoint of being less impaired mentally is to judiciously take non-narcotic, over-the-counter pain medications such as acetaminophen and ibuprofen, which falls into a pharmaceutical category called non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (NSAIDs). The latter helps to reduce inflammation, which is a disabling symptom of most forms of arthritis. Make sure to take all ibuprofen related medications with food to protect your stomach. You'll want to maintain a "strong stomach" if you are ever in a real fight. ★

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