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"Armed Senior Citizen" - The Value of "Dry Practice"

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If you go to shooting school or study with a qualified firearms instructor and learn a basic set of good marksmanship, gun handling and tactical skills, you need to practice a lot to imprint those skills into your subconscious and into your muscle memory. Then you have to keep on practicing regularly in order to maintain those skills and keep them sharp.

As we age past 50, for many of us, it typically becomes progressively more difficult to learn new physical skills in the first place. As a psychologist, a shooter and a person over 50, I know professionally and firsthand, through my own experience, that it has become harder for me to acquire and hone new physical skills in the self defense and shooting arenas. I have to work harder at learning skills; and I have to practice more to refine my skills and keep my edges sharp.



Unfortunately, most of us cannot get to the range enough to keep our shooting skills sharp enough. If we can get to the range once a week, that is great. However, the reality is that we may not be able to get to the range more than once or twice a month!

Fortunately, there is a solution for senior citizens and younger folks alike. It is called “dry practice.” Dry practice is a term that refers to practicing at home, in a safe area, with an unloaded gun. It includes much more than just “dry fire,” which means aiming at a safe target and pulling the trigger on an unloaded gun.

Dry practice refers to working with a doubly and triply checked, unloaded gun, in a designated safe area; and practicing the gamut of gun handling and tactical skills. These include marksmanship, drawing the gun from concealment, performing reloads, strong hand and weak hand shooting, shooting and moving, moving to cover, using cover and concealment, barricade shooting, clearing malfunctions and just about any other skill you need to know how to do smoothly and quickly, in order to survive in a fight for your life.

For us senior citizens, dry practice has some great benefits. In the safety of our home, it gives us exercise, it costs little to nothing and it keeps us sharp. Also, it is a lot easier on the joints, without all that recoil!

You can practice most gun handling procedures “dry” and reserve your time at the range for marksmanship and for validation and reinforcement of your dry practice. You will save money on ammunition; and more importantly, the practice may save your life one day because you’ll ingrain good habits into your muscle memory.

“Perfect Practice” It is important to remember however, that practice in and of it self does not make perfect. Perfect practice makes perfect. If you practice poor or sloppy technique, then it’s poor or sloppy technique that will come out when you most need good technique to survive. Garbage in, garbage out. So what makes for perfect practice when it comes to gun handling, marksmanship and tactics?

The answer is that you first need to learn viable skills and techniques; then practice, practice, practice. This may not get you to Carnegie Hall, but it may just save you from an early trip to Kingdom Come, should you ever need to employ those skills and

techniques during a life threatening attack.

Because dry practice is so invaluable to those who are serious about carrying a concealed handgun for self defense, you should be dry practicing at least three to five times a week. Furthermore, dry practice in your home will help you in training to defend against a home invasion!

I am of the belief that one size does NOT fit all, especially for us senior citizens. Aging brings with it physical limitations; and they need to be gotten around, adapted to, compensated for and overcome.

I have been a student at a number of shooting schools. All of them were excellent — the instructors first rate. It was my job to figure out which techniques and ways of doing things worked for me and which ones did not, given my physical limitations, because each excellent instructor and each school had their own way of doing things. As I suffer from arthritis-based stiffness throughout most of my body, I had to figure out the simplest, easiest and most natural ways for me to do things. I have been able to do this through dry practice, which has been validated by trips to the range. In the remainder of this column I will describe my basic dry practice routine.

My Basic, Dry Practice Routine Most significantly, with dry practice, I have improved my endurance; my draw stroke from concealment; my quickness and precision in acquiring and maintaining good sight alignment and a good sight picture; my trigger control and shot to shot follow-up; my strong and weak, two-handed and one-handed shooting dexterity; my malfunction clearing; my reloads; my ability to shoot and move off of the line of fire; and my use of cover and concealment. I do my dry practice with my belt holstered, IWB holstered and pocket holstered, concealed carry guns. My belt and IWB holstered carries are: my compact, 9mm Glock 19 and .40 S & W Glock 23; and my sub-compact, 9mm Glock 26 and .40 S & W Glock 27. My pocket carries are: my sub-compact, 9mm Kahr Arms MK9 and PM9, my .40 S&W MK40, my 9mm Kel-Tec P-11 and my .38 Special S&W J-frame snubbies.

Safety First First and foremost, you must establish a designated, safe area for dry practice. You should be alone and undisturbed. There should be no live ammunition of any sort in the room. The direction in which you aim should be a safe backstop. That means that if there ever were a negligent discharge, the wall should be able to absorb and stop the bullet. I use the stone foundation wall in my below ground basement, in front of which I have filled bookcases.

Sidebar: I've modified and marked as training magazines, several old, "low capacity," 10-round magazines for my two compact Glocks and several old magazines for my two sub-compact Glocks. I've done this by removing the follower, spring and magazine insert, then replacing the floor plate. Thus, I know that these magazines cannot hold ammunition. (I still status check the gun anyway, each time I pick it up.)

Also, this modification allows me to keep a magazine in the gun and still be able to rack

the slide without the slide locking back. After each dry shot, I can rack the slide to re-engage the trigger bar with the striker so that the Glock trigger resets. Thus, I can practice trigger reset drills and reloads.

Structuring the Session Before you begin your session, you must have decided how long your session will last. I have found that 10 to 15 to 20 minute sessions are best in order to avoid fatigue and the resulting sloppy practice. Before you begin, you must doubly and triply verify that your gun is indeed empty and safe.

The picture shows the magazine made safe for dry practice with the mark on the magazine floor plate.



I begin my dry practice by verbally saying to myself out loud, “I am now beginning my dry practice session. My gun is safe [checking it again to verify] and there is NO live ammunition in this room.” I terminate my session by verbally saying to myself out loud, “I am now ending my dry practice session. My gun is safe [checking it again to verify] and there is NO live ammunition in this room.” Then I leave the room and secure the gun.

My friend and personal firearms instructor, Steve Silverman, President of Firearms Research & Instruction [a traveling, shooting school that offers basic and (handgun and shotgun) advanced firearms training courses throughout the country], has helped me to develop my dry practice program and routine. His website, www.f-r-i.com, contains much useful educational and reference information on training, tactics and handgun maintenance, as well as a description of FR&I’s classes and the annual class schedule.

Drill #1: Steps for Practicing Sight Alignment, Trigger Press and Trigger Reset I doubly and triply check to make sure that my gun is unloaded.

1. I pick a spot on the wall on which to visually focus as my aim point.
2. From low ready, with my two-handed grip, I bring the pistol up on the target and get a sight picture.
3. I take up the slack in the trigger and continue to smoothly press the trigger rearward to break the dry shot, all the while concentrating on keeping my front sight steady on the target.
4. After the dry shot breaks, I hold the trigger to the rear, keep the gun extended and “pointing down range,” use my weak hand to rack the slide in order to get the trigger bar and striker to re-engage.

5. I re-establish my two-handed grip and let the trigger go forward until I hear the reset click (and no further), as I re-establish my sight picture and press the trigger rearward from the reset point to break another dry shot.

6. Then I keep repeating steps 4 and 5 for about 4 to 5 minutes. It's click-bang, click-bang, click-bang and so on.

When you do this drill with a Glock or any type of single action, 1911 style pistol, you need to make sure that you don't put too much trigger finger on the trigger. It's best to touch the trigger with the mid-tip of the first pad of your trigger finger so that you can press the trigger straight back. If you are using a traditional, double action or double action only pistol, such as a SIG, HK, Smith or a revolver, you may want to use a little more trigger finger, up to the first crease of the finger.

Drill #2: Drawing the Empty Gun Out of the Holster and Firing One Shot This drill is for practicing the draw stroke you've been trained to use. Doubly and triply verify that your gun is unloaded. Cock your empty pistol before holstering it. For every shot you fire, you should take two sight pictures. Your second sight picture is your follow-up to the shot. It counters jerking the gun in anticipation of recoil and keeps the barrel and muzzle on target, thus giving the bullet enough time to exit the muzzle.

1. Pick a spot on the wall on which to visually focus as your aim point.
2. Perform your draw stroke, drive your empty gun to the target and press the trigger. Make sure to hold the trigger rearward and maintain your sight picture as a follow-up to the shot. With live or dry fire, every shot should have two sight pictures, before and after.
3. With your finger off the trigger, rack the slide to cock your empty pistol before re-holstering.
4. Repeat steps 1 through 3 twenty-five times. Modify the number of draws according to the amount of time you've allotted.

Drill #3: Draw and Fire While Moving Off the Line Laterally to the Left and Right This drill is for practicing drawing and firing at the target while moving laterally. Alternate moving laterally off the line of attack to the left and to the right. First, doubly and triply verify that your gun is unloaded. Cock your empty pistol before holstering it.

1. Pick a spot on the wall on which to visually focus as your aim point.
2. Perform your draw stroke, drive your empty gun to the target, and press the trigger, while you are moving properly, laterally to the right (as you've been taught to move laterally off of the line of attack. Make sure to keep your front sight on your aiming point as you move and press the trigger. Also, make sure to hold the trigger rearward and maintain your sight picture as a follow-up to the shot as you are moving. Again, moving or stationary, with live or dry fire, every shot should have two sight pictures, before and

after.

3. Finger off the trigger and rack the slide to cock your empty pistol before re-holstering.
4. Repeat steps 1 through 2, only this time, moving laterally to the left. Hold the gun and move laterally to the left as you've been taught.
5. Repeat steps 1 through 4 ten times or modify the number of draws according to the amount of time you've allotted.



Drill #4: Practicing Emergency or “Empty” Reloads and Tactical Reloads This dry practice drill is for practicing magazine changes as are required in performing emergency reloads (or “empty reloads”) and tactical reloads. First, doubly and triply verify that your gun is unloaded. Cock your empty pistol before holstering it. Make sure that you have two modified, spare, training magazines on you as you carry them on the street, to keep it real.

To practice your emergency reload . . .

1. Lock your slide back on your empty pistol.
2. Keep your out-of-battery/locked-back pistol in your line of sight. [As master trainer, Gabe Suarez, points out, so you can reload the weapon, while keeping an eye on ‘the battle’ in front of you.] Press the magazine release button and drop the “empty” magazine.
3. Simultaneously, grab your spare replacement magazine and bring it up and tap it into the empty magazine well.
4. Rack the slide into battery (as if you are chambering a round), using your support

hand.

5. Drive your pistol back on target, assess and scan.

Repeat this exercise 10 to 15 times.

To practice your tactical reload . . .

1. Keep your in-battery, empty pistol, with training magazine in it, in your line of sight, so that as above, you can reload the weapon while keeping an eye on what's happening in front of you.
2. Grab your spare, replacement magazine and bring it up to the pistol.
3. Rip the magazine out of the pistol and retain it, as you replace it with your spare magazine. Use whatever technique you've been taught that works for you.
4. Drive your pistol back on the target, assess and scan.

Repeat this exercise 10 to 15 times.

Have Fun and Stay Sharp! If you perform this routine 3 to 5 times a week and you hit the range at least twice a month, you will be doing well. In future articles in this column, we shall cover dry practice drills for other important skills. What is described above is just the bare-bones minimum for staying sharp.

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