

skills maintenance drills

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Given the fact that I am physically challenged with neck and back pain, arthritis, and spinal inflexibility stemming from some injuries, I am often asked how I keep my shooting skills intact--that is, how I regularly train. In this article, I shall address this question. I will discuss several skill maintenance exercises that I have learned over the years for both live and dry fire practice. Keeping in mind the old adage, "use it or lose it," I incorporate shooting skill drills into my lifestyle. They encompass daily visual-motor coordination drills without a handgun, dry fire practice drills with my carry and home defense handguns, and live fire drills at the range.



Visual-Motor Coordination Exercises

First off, I frequently practice the following two visual-motor coordination exercises without a gun. In Visual-Motor Exercise One, you pick a spot to aim at, you visually focus on that spot, and then you point [your finger] at it. That's the

exercise. It's one smooth flow. In Visual-Motor Exercise Two, you pick a spot to aim at, and you keep your visual focus on that spot as you simply imagine drawing your handgun and acquiring a sight picture on that spot. Both of these exercises build muscle memory.

Dry Practice Drills

The next step is to work at home with a triple-checked unloaded handgun. Make sure you have a safe backstop and that there is no live ammunition in the room. In Dry Practice Exercise One, you pick a target or point at which to aim, visually focus on it, and then bring your unloaded handgun up, with your finger off the trigger in the register position along your handgun's frame. You focus on your front sight and acquire a sight picture (your front sight is centered in the rear sight notch) and superimpose your sights over your target. You repeat this drill ten times. Please understand the sequence as it is the key to hitting what you are aiming at when you are firing live. Also, see Tom Perroni's online article, "Being Able to Hit What You Aim at with a Handgun" at www.USConcealedCarry.com for an excellent exposition of the fundamentals of accurate handgun shooting.

In Dry Practice Exercise Two, you practice an additional ten repetitions, but now you bring your finger onto the trigger and slightly press the trigger rearward without taking the shot; take up the trigger slack but do not press the trigger all the way back to the point where the shot breaks.

In Dry Practice Exercise Three, you practice ten repetitions of acquiring your sight picture and fully working the trigger. If your handgun is a double action revolver or a double action only (DAO), trigger cocking, semi-automatic pistol with a hammer--such as the DAO Sig Sauer, Heckler & Koch, and Smith & Wesson pistols, you can simply and easily dry practice double taps. A double tap refers to firing two shots in rapid succession. On the other hand, if your semi-automatic pistol is like a Glock or Springfield Armory XD series pistol, you must manually cycle the slide to simulate the gun's slide cocking action in order to dry practice double taps and trigger reset drills.

Keep in mind that you can set up your favorite range targets at home against a safe backstop and conduct these dry practice drills. I like to follow Jack Weaver's advice quoting from the May/June 2008 issue of American Handgunner (page 109): "Your [dominant] eye, the back sight, front sight and the target don't have to be perfectly lined up," he says, bending his head down slightly and

bringing the gun up to eye level, "but you can see the sights, and as you squeeze the trigger, you correct them as best you can. Pretty soon, you get to the point where you come pretty close every time." (www.weaverstance.com) Practice, practice, and practice.

<http://www.weaverstance.com>

Safe Room Dry Practice

Another exercise that you can do at home is to simulate working within your safe room. I am talking about visualizing home invaders breaking into your safe room. First, unload your home defense handgun. Triple check it and sequester all live ammunition. The sequence entails verbalizing appropriate commands from behind cover: "STOP! DROP YOUR WEAPON! I'M ARMED. GO AWAY! LEAVE THIS HOUSE NOW!" Acquire a sight picture on your imaginary home invader and dry fire if necessary. You should practice this drill with your trigger finger in register, taking up the trigger slack, and both with, and without dry firing. Remember, you hope that you do not have to fire, but you must be prepared to do so if the threat does not back down.

Perceptual Awareness

Learn to really notice and study your targets. Practice tracking multiple targets. This involves scanning and verifying each target in an array. As you verify each target, you establish an aim point and acquire your sight picture. This type of practice builds your visual-perceptual and observational awareness skills. It also transfers to live fire drills.

Live Fire Drills

I try to get to the range for skills maintenance practice at least twice a month. When I go, I try to make the most of my time and ammunition. With my carry handgun or home defense handgun, I have found the following live fire drill to be an excellent way to keep my skills intact. The drill incorporates multiple skills: stance, grip, draw from concealment, trigger control, sight alignment and sight picture, varying distances, follow-up shots, speed, and accuracy. It is not a beginner's drill. It is not a skills acquisition exercise. It is a skills maintenance drill. It requires just 50 rounds--one box of ammunition. It does not require a shot timer. To paraphrase Clint Smith, when have you ever found a shot timer in a gunfight?

The Drill

The target is a humanoid silhouette target, either a Q, a B-27 or equivalent. I like to paste a five-inch diameter orange circle at high center of mass (HiCOM). All shots are taken from my concealment holster.

Ten rounds are shot at each of the following distances: five, seven, ten, fifteen and twenty yards. That makes for a total of fifty rounds. At each distance I clear my covering garment, draw and fire a double tap at the HiCOM orange circle. That's five draw and fire double taps (10 rounds) at each distance. That's the drill.

Secondary Live Fire Drills

Tracking Drill. Here's a second tracking drill that I find useful if you have the time and ammunition. Tracking means that you visually scan and shoot multiple targets. The set-up consists of four five-inch orange circles in a square numbered one through four. The drill requires a total of 56 rounds. Seven rounds make a complete cycle. You acquire Target One and fire. Then, you move your eyes to Target Two, your muzzle follows, you verify your target, you acquire your sight picture and then fire. Then, you move to Target Three and fire, and then on to Target Four.

Then, you track backwards counter-clockwise to Target Three, and from Three to Two and then back to One. That makes a total of seven rounds. Two complete cycles are shot at each distance. That's fourteen rounds. The distances for this drill are five, seven, ten and fifteen yards. That makes for a total of 56 rounds. If you started with three boxes of ammunition, you are now left with 44

rounds with which to practice your rhythm and become one with your gun. That's the third drill.

Rhythm Drill. The Rhythm Drill entails loading your handgun to capacity and discharging your loaded gun as quickly as you can, maintaining a rhythm, and keeping all of your shots in a respectable grouping on your target. I like to perform this drill at distances of three, five and seven yards. Thus, with 44 rounds, I can shoot the Rhythm Drill nine times with my five-shot J-frame revolver. I can shoot the drill three times with my 13 + 1 capacity .40 caliber Glock 23 and three times with my 17 + 1 capacity 9mm Glock 17. You get the idea. The Rhythm Drill also entails doing emergency reloads--nine [speedloads] with my J-frame using either a Bianchi Speed Strip or HKS Speed Loader, and three with my Glocks.

So there you have it. We've spent 150 rounds--three boxes of ammunition--and we've gotten a great shooting workout. However, if you can only do one drill, do the first one with one 50 round box of ammunition. The other drills are very valuable, but optional if you have limited time, energy, or ammunition.