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## Articles And Info

# *THE FUNDAMENTALS OF HANDGUN SHOOTING*

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## THE FUNDAMENTALS OF HANDGUN SHOOTING

There are actually eight fundamentals of handgun shooting. Each of the eight fundamentals is equally important as far as shooting safely on the range. However, only four of the eight fundamentals are important when it comes to making the shot. If there is a weakness in any one of the four it will reflect in your shooting. The reason most people don't like to shoot handguns is because they can't hit what they are shooting at. And it is no fun shooting when you can't hit your target.

Most people, including instructors, cannot name in order the fundamentals of handgun shooting. In order to be a good shot with a handgun, you must first know what it takes to make the shot every time you pull the trigger. You must know what the fundamentals are so you can practice and perfect them. This is what makes an excellent shooter. **An "expert" is one who has mastered the fundamentals.** This is what makes the difference between the guy that shoots pretty well and the guy that stands out above everyone else. The guy that stands out above everyone else has understood and perfected the fundamentals. **Shooting is a perishable skill.** In order to shoot and shoot well, it takes a lot of work and dedication.

Everyone is built differently, shaped differently and made differently. Some people may have to modify a particular stance or position to allow it to fit their physical make-up. This is why I don't try to put everyone in the same mold. Each individual may have to make slight adjustments to do what fits his or her

physical make-up or to compensate for an injury, etc. The following are some guidelines that will help you with the fundamentals:

### **(I.) Stance/Position:**

When I am talking about stance, I am primarily talking about while on the firing line at the range. I realize that in an actual gun fight you may be kneeling, prone, etc. while behind cover. This is why I put stance/position.

#### A. Isosceles/Modified Isosceles Stance:

The name is taken from the Isosceles triangle - a triangle with two sides that are equal in length. In shooting, the Isosceles is referring to the shooter's arms being locked straight out making them the same length. However, one may modify this technique and bend one or both arms slightly to fit his/her physical make-up.

(1) Face square to the target. Arms locked out or slightly bent.

(2) Feet approximately shoulder width apart. Strong leg can be slightly back.

(3) Leaning slightly forward.

(a.) Do not stand too erect. The recoil even on a small caliber will move you to the rear. If your toes are coming off the ground or being lifted even a little, this should tell you that you are standing too erect, simply lean forward a little more.

**Remember this is a fight, so get in an aggressive posture.**

(4) One or both knees slightly bent.

#### B. Several advantages of the Isosceles or modified Isosceles:

(1) It provides a good base for shooting platform.

(2) It allows you to move and react quickly.

(3) Allows you to draw with efficient movement.

(4) Shoulders square to target, presenting strongest part of body armor toward threat (for cops).

(5) Allows upper body to move 180 degrees

(6) It's a very natural position.

### **(II.) The Grip:**

**The grip is established in the holster.** From the time you

draw until the time you re-holster, the grip should not change; it should remain the same. It is critical that the grip is the same every time you draw your pistol. The only exception to changing the grip is if you have to clear a malfunction or do a mag change.

The way you become a skilled shooter is through **consistency** in everything you do. Your stance must be the same, your grip must be the same, your draw must be the same, your sight alignment and sight picture must be the same, your trigger press must be the same, your follow through must be the same. Every thing you do must be done the same way every time you do it.

You can not grip the pistol one way one time, another way the next time and a different way the time after that and expect the same results in your shooting. It just doesn't work that way.

**If your grip is different every time when you draw, your pistol will recoil differently every time you shoot.** In order to control and manage recoil, you need **consistency in recoil.** The way you achieve consistency in recoil is to have **consistency in your grip.** If you grip the pistol the same way every time, the pistol will recoil the same way each time it is fired. Gripping the pistol the same way every time will allow you to do two things: (1) have better recoil management, which will allow you to: (2) obtain a second sight picture quicker, thus faster recovery shots. I cannot stress enough to be consistent.

(A.) As you reach for your shooting grip with your strong hand, simultaneously bring your weak hand up approximately stomach or solarplex high. Never leave the weak hand dangling by your side; when drawing your pistol your weak hand should always move when your gun hand moves.

(B.) While your hands are coming up, keep your eyes focused on the target where you want the bullet to hit.

(C.) Place the "V" (the web of the hand between the thumb and index finger) of your strong hand high on the back strap of the pistol.

(D.) As the pistol is being drawn from the holster, wrap fingers (middle, ring and little finger) around the grip of the pistol and below the trigger guard.

(E.) Keep the index finger straight along the slide of the pistol and off trigger.

### **(III.) The Draw / Presentation:**

(A.) As the muzzle clears the holster, it is pivoted toward the target and brought up about solarplex high. This position is known as the "close guard position."

(B.) Weak hand meets gun hand approximately solarplex high to establish a two handed grip on the pistol. The heel of the weak hand should be placed on the open portion of the weak side pistol grip. You want as much of the pistol grip enclosed with both hands as possible. Weak hand fingers wrap around gun hand fingers, **below the trigger guard**. Strong hand thumb lies underneath the safety and on top of weak hand thumb. Both thumbs should be relaxed and parallel to the slide. (Be sure not to allow contact with thumbs and slide stop of pistol during the operation of the pistol or you can and will cause a malfunction.)

(C.) As you push the pistol out toward the target, safety now disengages. Bring the pistol up to eye level to establish sight alignment and sight picture. Your index finger should be on trigger ready to fire.

(D.) Both arms can be straight or weak arm can be slightly bent. All this should be done in one smooth fluid motion.

Note: While on the range always draw from your shooting position, not into your shooting position. When you draw, if you are going to shoot with knees slightly bent, then they should be slightly bent before you draw not while you are drawing. Do not drop your head position while you are drawing, get your head in position before you draw. Do not squat or lean as you draw, get into your position and then draw. Always get into your shooting position first. Then draw from it without moving your body. Again, remember we are talking about while on the firing line. I see people all the time draw and squat. Squatting has no significance whatsoever. It does not help you shoot more accurately or faster. It is added unnecessary movement. If you are squatting as you draw, it is probably due to you watching too much T.V.

Note: If weak hand index finger is allowed to rest in front of the trigger guard, you could easily steer the gun off target during recoil without realizing it. If you start pushing shots off to one side, check the placement of your weak hand index finger, and make sure it is below the trigger guard.

Another reason to keep the index finger off the front of the trigger guard is for putting a light or laser on the rail. A lot of people have a rail on their pistol for a light or laser, but they shoot with their weak index finger in front of the trigger guard, this makes it impossible to mount the \$300.0 or \$400.00 light and laser on the pistol, unless you change your grip. Another thing you will want to avoid in the shooting grip is interlocking your thumbs. Again, if you put a light on the rail you will have to change your shooting grip in order to work the light. The last thing you need to do in a gun fight is change to an unfamiliar shooting grip in the dark when there is a 50% chance of multiple

adversaries.

#### **(IV.) Sight Alignment:**

##### **Definition:**

Sight alignment - the front sight evenly spaced in the rear sight and level at the top of the rear sight.

Sight alignment is another one of the critical parts of the fundamentals. The slightest movement of the front sight can result in a miss at surprisingly close ranges.

#### **(V.) Sight Picture:**

##### **Definition:**

Sight picture - the front sight is center mass of target, evenly spaced in the rear sight and level at the top of the rear sight. The front sight should be crystal clear and the target fuzzy.

The reason the target needs to be fuzzy is because the human eye cannot focus on two objects at different distances at the same time; one or the other will be unclear or fuzzy. You must see your front sight. You have to know where it is in reference to the target. Trust me: if you have a clear front sight you will be able to see the target beyond with your peripheral vision.

Several years ago, I was deer hunting and I saw an eight point buck. I looked through the scope and kept watching his antlers. As I squeezed the trigger, the deer just kept walking. I kept waiting for him to fall. Then I realized what had happened, I never looked at the cross hairs in the scope, I just looked at the target (the deer) when I squeezed the trigger. I totally missed the deer. Luckily for me he didn't run off. The next shot I watched my cross hairs in the scope, placed them where I should have, squeezed the trigger and killed the deer. This same principle applies with the pistol. The front sight on the pistol is what the cross hairs are to your scope. You must see the front sight clearly every time you shoot. This is probably another one of the main reasons most people can't hit with a handgun. One time they see the front sight clearly and the next time they don't. You can't have a clear front sight one shot and not the next shot and expect good results every time. Again you have to be **consistent** in everything you do. Front sight, front sight, front sight. This is so vital to having good shot placement. Always be aware of your front sight, its relationship to the rear sight, and its clarity.

#### **When aiming with the front sight, do not use the dots!**

I always get funny looks when I mention this in class. When using the front sight you should use the very tip top of the sight where

it breaks over and is flat. That should be your point of aim. So, what are the dots for? They are for low light conditions to give you a reference point so you can see their relationship to each other. In the dark you will not be able to see front sight evenly spaced in the rear sight and level at the top of the rear sight. But you will be able to see front dot evenly spaced in the rear dots and level with the rear dots. That is what the night sight is for: so you can reference the front and rear sights' relationship to each other in low light or dark conditions. Yes, in low light conditions you have to use the dots for aiming, but not in the day time when you can see the sights clearly. If you use the dots in the day time for aiming at close range, it will not matter so much; but if you want to shoot smaller groups, use the very top of the front sight.

#### **(VI.) Breathing:**

Let's be real honest: in a gun fight none of **us**, myself included, are going to be breathing properly. If you think you will be, you are sadly mistaken. Professional boxers who box for a living and train every day know they have to breathe; but when they get back to their corner, one of the first things the trainer will tell them is to breathe. So, do you think any of us (my self included) are going to have the clarity of mind to breathe properly when someone is trying to kill us? I really doubt it. The best advice I can give is to take deep breaths throughout the encounter. It's not that I don't think it is important, I just highly doubt if any of us are going to do it properly. The main thing is to keep the oxygen flowing through the blood stream.

You want to try to avoid holding your breath. If you do that, you will rob oxygen from the major muscle groups in your body and several things will happen: (1) your eyes will quickly lose their ability to stay focused, (2) you will get the shakes, and (3) your fine motor skills will rapidly diminish. You must breathe to keep the oxygen feeding your body. Breathing helps oxygenate the body and helps reduce the effects of stress. When under stress, the abilities that we need the most will disappear first.

(A.) Ocular focus (especially for those of us who wear glasses.)

(B.) Tunnel vision will likely occur.

(C.) Thought process may be affected (Things may seem like slow motion.)

(D.) Manual dexterity/Fine motor skills will be affected. If your fingers are already cold, it will make it worse. Things like loading bullets in a mag or just doing a mag change may become difficult.

(E.) Speech may be impaired.



(F.) Hearing may be diminished or lost.

(G.) Muscle tremors begin. You get uncontrollable shakes.

Breathing will help you recover. Take long deep breaths.

For snipers and long range target shooters, breathing is as important as trigger control. A man in a handgun fight at close range does not have the luxury to take his time to breath properly. The best he can do under that much stress is take deep breaths through out the encounter to keep the oxygen flowing throughout the body.

### **(VII.) Trigger Control:**

**Definition: "The skillful manipulation of the trigger which causes the pistol or rifle to fire while maintaining sight alignment and sight picture."**

(A.) Even, crisp pressure applied to move the trigger straight to the rear of the pistol, isolating the movement of the trigger finger.

(B.) Maintaining sight alignment and sight picture, do not stop, hesitate or pause. Make one smooth press. Let the shot surprise you.

(C.) When the shot is fired immediately, regain sight alignment and sight picture and prepare for the next shot in precisely the same way.

Not only is the trigger press itself crucial, but also the placement of the trigger finger as well. For the semi-auto, about the middle of your finger print on the index finger should be about where your finger placement should rest on the trigger. Earlier under the section about the grip, I mentioned that the if weak hand index finger is allowed to rest in front of the trigger guard, you could easily steer the gun off target during recoil without realizing it. If you start pushing shots off to one side, check the placement of your weak hand index finger, and make sure it is below the trigger guard. This is also true about trigger finger placement. When you are shooting, if you notice shots off to one side or the other check where your trigger finger is resting on the trigger. Too much trigger finger on the trigger (Trigger finger too far inside the trigger guard) can pull shots toward your strong side. Too little trigger finger on the trigger can cause shots to be pushed to your weak side.

### **(VIII.) Follow Through:**

(A.) There are three stages to follow through:

(1) Watch the front sight until the weapon is fired.

(2) Re-establish sight use immediately (both sight alignment and sight picture) and prepare to shoot again if necessary.

(A.) The attacker you shot may require multiple shots to stop life threatening activity.

(B.) Just because you shot does not mean: (1) that you hit your attacker. (2) That you incapacitated your attacker to the point that he /she no longer poses life threatening activity.

How many shots should you fire at someone who is trying to kill you? There is no set number of shots to fire. You shoot until that individual no longer poses life threatening activity to you. **You shoot until the problem is solved.**

Every person that is shot will react differently. Your attacker may be drunk or on drugs and may never feel the impact of the bullet even on a well placed shot. It may take 12 – 15 seconds for him/her to bleed out and they could still be cutting at you with a knife or shooting at you with their pistol. Even if you make a well placed shot or two, that doesn't mean the fight is over and you have won! Make sure the problem is solved before you re-holster!

Ask yourself: do I need to take another shot? If so will I hit my target? Assess the situation.

(3) Scan the surrounding area immediately for other life threatening targets.

(A) Remember that in approximately 50% of all gun fights there will be multiple adversaries.

Even if you shoot and neutralize the bad guy that was trying to kill you, this still does not mean the fight is over! There is a 50/50 chance he has another accomplice or two with him. Do not re-holster thinking the fight is over. I recommend that you keep your pistol or whatever weapon you have drawn until the cops arrive (do not meet the police at the door with a weapon in your hand) and of course when they get there, do exactly what they say. Remember: when the cops arrive on the scene, they don't know what the situation is. They don't know who you are, who the bad guys are or anything else. Co-operate fully be patient, and they will sort it all out.

This should give you a better understanding of what the fundamentals of handgun shooting are all about. If you have trouble in your shooting, it will be in one of the following four areas: sight alignment, sight picture, trigger press or follow through. Of the fundamentals these are what matter. I can have a



sloppy stance, a sloppy grip, and a sloppy draw stroke and still make a good shot if I have sight alignment, sight picture, trigger press and follow through. I often demonstrate this on the range in most all my courses by holding the pistol upside down in my hands and hit a head shot out to 25 yards. My stance may not be the best, my grip definitely is not best, and the draw stroke does not matter; but in order to make a 25 yard shot with the pistol upside down in my hands, I have to have sight alignment, sight picture, trigger press and follow through. I am not saying that stance, grip and the draw and presentation are not important; but I am saying that they have little to do with you hitting your target. The last four fundamentals have every thing to do with you hitting your target.

Again, if you are having some problem in your shooting, it is more than likely in your sight alignment, sight picture, trigger press, or follow through. Start first with your trigger press. The vast majority of the time that is what you will find to be the problem. Make sure you are pressing the trigger in “slow motion” as slow as you possibly can. This, for some reason, is the hardest thing to get people to understand. Everyone seems to think they can slowly take up the slack in the trigger and then hurry up the trigger press when they have all the slack out. **You can not hurry the press at any time.** A good drill to do is put a coin out on the end of your muzzle and dry fire the pistol and see if you can press the trigger with out the coin falling. That is what you should be able to do every time you press the trigger.

Next, check your follow through. Make sure you are watching the front sight until the pistol is fired. Let the gun surprise you. It is what is known in the shooting world as the “surprise break.” The gun should surprise you each time it goes off.

The next thing you should do is make sure you are watching the front sight and not the target. Remember: the front sight is to the pistol what cross hairs are to the scope. You must see the front sight each time you shoot.

It takes one thing to shoot any handgun and that is fundamentals. If you practice and perfect the fundamentals as discussed here, you should be able to pick up any handgun and shoot a very good group with it. I sincerely hope this article helps you. Train hard, Train safe. Greg McLaughlin

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