

THE TRAINING INDUSTRY'S DIRTY LITTLE SECRET

By [Grant Cunningham](#)

There is a dirty little secret that has been suppressed for decades, a secret so volatile that virtually no one in the defensive shooting community dares mention it. At the risk of being shunned by my peers, I'm going to tell you that secret now:



These four women confronted and captured an equal number of male predators in 1950. According to some, they shouldn't have been able to do that without "advanced" training – yet they did!

All over this country, every day, people successfully defend themselves with firearms – despite having never taken any sort of formal training in defensive shooting!

That's right, people save their lives with guns without having been exposed to the latest and greatest in tactical-ninja-sheepdog-warrior-operator-high-speed-low-drag methodology. This has been going on for more than a century, yet we're told, time and time again, that training is an absolute requirement if we're to even hope to prevail against an assailant. I've read statements from trainers who insist you can't possibly be safe until you've taken an "advanced" defensive shooting course – just a regular course isn't enough!

There's obviously a dichotomy here: we supposedly need all kinds of training to keep ourselves safe, yet people without that training regularly manage to do so despite their "handicap." If these people didn't need to train, why should we? Is there a real benefit, or is it all a scam to line instructors' pockets?

Why Carry in the First Place?

Ultimately, we carry a gun to reduce our risk of injury or death when we're attacked. I resist saying that we carry to "keep us safer," because a firearm itself doesn't prevent an attack, which really would be keeping us safer. What it does do is give the carrier the means to prevail in the moment, saving him or her from injury or worse.

This brings us back to the point I made at the beginning: untrained people carrying guns successfully achieve that goal every day. They've reduced the risks associated with the attack – but is that the best they could do? What if they could reduce their risk even further?

That's where training – good, relevant, realistic and contextual training – comes in. Proper defensive shooting training will reduce the risks in the attack to their smallest. Not only that, it will also make risk reduction more consistent over a range of likely scenarios. The person with training will be less likely to suffer injury during an attack and will be more likely to end it successfully in his/her favor.

No, it's not necessary to train in order to defend yourself with a firearm – but it does increase the odds of your prevailing without injury to yourself or others!

Cognizance of Risk

Solid, relevant training gives the defensive shooter exposure to the risks involved in, and in responding to, a criminal attack. Even those who have been around guns all their lives or have exposure to personal weapons through military service have a rather skewed idea of how a criminal ambush attack happens. Training helps dispel the myths that sometimes surround defensive shooting encounters.

Real stabbings don't usually look anything like this sensationalized image. This comes as a surprise to a lot of untrained people.



I've watched the faces of students change dramatically as they see just how fast – and how violent – a knife attack is. If you've never seen an all-out stabbing, it looks nothing like the stylized upraised arm attack we see on television and at the movies. Someone once described it as a “sewing machine,” and that's a pretty good analogy. That realization drives the skills and techniques the student needs to learn and practice, and it's almost always an eye-opener.

Knowing the risks we face from an attack – and the risks attendant in our response – is one of the often overlooked benefits of training.

Techniques in Context

Learning the context of techniques – the situations to which they are applicable – goes hand-in-hand with the cognizance of risk. There are techniques one can find in old shooting books (or even in some current gun magazines) that really don't fit the reality of the fight as we know it today. Learning what not to do, or what doesn't work, is as important as learning what does.



This isn't a realistic – or effective – self-defense technique. A reality-based class in defensive shooting can show you why.

For instance, the speed rock looks great on paper – or against a paper target. When looked at in the context in which it's supposed to be used, which is an attack that happens within two arms' reach, it becomes obvious why it has largely disappeared from most curricula. The same goes for many other close-quarters techniques, like the ever-popular “shove and shoot,” which one sees repeated in article after misinformed article.

Take even a simple technique: reloading the pistol. There are many different ways to reload a pistol, and some of them are quite

impressive. But when factored against the body's natural reactions to a threat, they become much less impressive. A well-trained instructor who is versed in physiology as well as the realities of violence can illustrate why some techniques are objectively better than others.

Hardware in Context

Just as there are some techniques that are objectively better once the parameters of use are properly identified, there are some guns and accessories that are more efficient – or reliable – than others.

A comprehensive shooting class can point out dangerous reliability issues with your gun or other equipment.



Anyone can go to the range and fire off a box of ammunition every week and declare that their favorite shootin' iron is the perfect machine to ward off evil. Anything works when you've got all the time in the world and your body's threat reactions haven't been activated, but in an actual encounter, that gun might prove to be less than efficient.

While no class can actually put you into those conditions, a well-crafted curriculum can introduce you to techniques and tactics that have been designed to work well when those natural reactions have been activated.

Hardware also needs to be reliable. Put into a defensive situation when the gun has been carried for a few weeks without maintenance, when the lubricants have migrated off operating surfaces and the gun has collected lint and dirt, it might malfunction at a very inopportune moment.

Taking a course where your gun fires several hundred rounds during a day's training is a very good test of reliability. Remember that it's not what the gun can do when it's clean and fresh, it's what it can do after it's dirty and in need of cleaning. A good class is the firearm equivalent of the "accelerated aging" tests done in laboratories: it puts the gun into the condition under which it might easily find itself and allows you to see what might happen. The results are often surprising!

Dealing With Distractions

A defensive shooting is a messy affair in more ways than one. There's a lot going on, you won't know what's going to happen next, and there are a lot of distractions. These include bystanders screaming or running, lots of people in the immediate area, and perhaps even physical obstacles around which you must maneuver or which block your view.



Distractions are going to occur in a defensive shooting. Proper drill design, like this Combat Focus Shooting Figure-Eight drill, introduces many distractions and forces the student to process seemingly conflicting information before firing his gun

It's in this chaotic environment that you'll be forced to process information. You need to positively identify your threat and locate any additional threats, all while not mistaking innocents for attackers and still getting those combat-accurate hits on target!

Training can help you learn to process all that information quickly before you draw your gun or trigger the shot. This may be the most vital aspect of defensive shooting, and it's something that is difficult (if not impossible) to do on your own. Skills are easy; processing information prior to the execution of a skill is much harder.

Safety – For Others

You're responsible for every round you fire. While in the heat of a fight, you probably won't think specifically about that, but good training in realistic defensive shooting will allow you to confidently put your rounds on target under the most trying circumstances. That reduces the liability caused by rounds that do not reach their mark.

A skilled instructor helps the student understand why stray rounds occur, and gives the necessary feedback to help correct the issue.

This goes well beyond pure marksmanship. Training realistically gives you the correct amount of confidence to shoot effectively and efficiently. If a shooter is under-confident, he might shoot at a slow pace that gives the attacker more time to hurt him or innocents, or he might not shoot when he needs to. Over-confident, and he might spray bullets all over the area, hitting his target only by chance. Those stray rounds? They might hit something – or someone – that he never intended to hit.



Good training gives you the optimum level of confidence – the level needed to efficiently deal with the threat you might face without having to think about it consciously.

Evaluating Your Skill

Once you've learned a new skill, you need to verify that you can use it properly, in the context in which it is intended to be used. Without some sort of method to do this, you never know if you really "own" that skill. Different trainers have different methods to do such an evaluation, but all serve the same purpose: to show you not just what you can do, but also what you need to work on.



An engaged instructor helps you learn a new skill, then gives you the tools you can use to evaluate your grasp of that skill. Rob Pincus monitors his students during a one-handed shooting drill.

The evaluation shows where you need more practice, but it's the training you've received that shows you how to do that practice. Once you've learned a skill, you enter into a continuous process of practice and evaluation, always checking yourself to be sure that you still have a good grasp of the skill. This isn't a new concept; why do you think serious musicians practice constantly?

Your training should give you the means both to practice and evaluate your skills. After that it's up to you, but without knowing the "how," you can't even get started!

Knowing When Is As Important As Knowing How

The legal aspects of using a defensive firearm are an important and often overlooked part of training. While there are very few courses that focus solely on legalities, most courses – especially those oriented toward concealed carry – will usually cover the basics relevant to their locale. Knowing the local laws with regard to carrying and using a personal firearm may not affect how you react in a defensive situation but may keep you out of trouble afterward.

Massad Ayoob is perhaps the foremost authority on the judicious use of lethal force. Here he makes a point to a student on the tactics used by police interrogators and prosecuting attorneys.



The legal part of the equation isn't something that needs to be re-trained, and there are no "advanced legal issues" classes (at least, none of which I'm aware). This training is useful and important, and doesn't require a lot of time or money to keep current once taken. Membership in an organization such as the Armed Citizens' Legal Defense Network is a good way to keep up on the latest legal developments in the world of defensive shooting.

"We Don't Need No Stinking Training"

I know it's tempting to dismiss the need for good defensive shooting training. Using a firearm seems so easy, and after all, people have been successfully defending themselves for generations without such training.

Then again, people survived without antibiotics for centuries before they were discovered. Should we abandon our modern life-saving drugs simply because our forebears didn't need them? Of course not! Today we know that using antibiotics dramatically reduces the chances of dying, or losing or damaging vital parts of our bodies.

In the same way, learning the proper way to handle a defensive shooting encounter makes it more likely that you'll walk away unscathed. The best way to learn those skills is to train with a qualified instructor who knows both the material and how to teach.