

Dry Fire Practice

How to train vital skills without firing a shot!

The lack of fun notwithstanding, dry-firing allows a shooter to really focus on the relation of the gun's front and rear sights as well as the mechanics of the trigger press. Further, it permits you to work on skills most ranges won't let you do, particularly drawing.

This training is called dry-fire for a reason: It starts with an unloaded gun. But this safety aspect doesn't end with you unloading your pistol - making a visual and tactile check to confirm its unloaded and fully emptying all magazines you'll be using for your training.

It's also important to establish a regular dry-fire area, one that provides a safe area with no live ammunition. Always unload your gun and magazines before entering this area, or better yet, have a designated dry fire magazine loaded with snap caps.

Your established dry-fire area should be off limits to live ammunition at all times, a precaution that further ensures it's unlikely a real cartridge can find its way into your gun. You should use snap caps for dry-fire and they should always be kept separate from live ammo.

The target you choose could be anything from a light switch to a regular target or even a miniaturized target specifically intended for dry-fire. Some dry-fire practitioners use USPSA-type targets, which because they lack detail helps some people focus on the front sight.

A shot timer, whether commercial units or smart-phone or tablet apps, is a key element in successful dry-firing. It helps you determine how quickly you can perform a certain task, and where they really shine is their ability to set a "par" time. Let's say you wanted to know if you could draw and fire in less than two seconds. Simply set the par time for two seconds and when you hear the beep, execute the draw; the second beep at the two-second mark will let you know whether you reached your goal.

When you're able to hit a time goal consistently, drop the par time a few tenths of a second and work on that. Obviously, the goal is to perform the skill correctly and not get too hung up on time, but meeting continually reduced *par* times will show your improvement. And when you start competition against yourself to see how well you can do, you'll find it makes dry-firing into something you look forward to.

And that's the reason most high-level shooters keep a training log. Your training log might reflect things such as the date, the gun with which you practiced, the length of the training session, the skills practice and, of course, your times for each repetition or at least your best time for a particular evolution.

With all this in mind, let's take a look at skills you should dry-fire every week. Of course, dry-fire is not the be-all and end-all way to prepare for a gunfight. You need to be familiar with the sight, sound and recoil associated with actual gunfire. You also need to know how quickly you're able to shoot accurately. Therefore, dry-fire training should be considered a supplement to live-fire training as opposed to a substitute for it.

DRAWING PRACTICE

There may be no better way to work on your draw than through dry-fire because the ranges on which we shoot typically don't allow draw-and-fire training.

Start with a relaxed posture and your hands at chest level, as though you were conversing with someone. At the shot timer's beep, draw and present your gun to the target. When your sights are properly aligned, press the trigger to the rear to simulate firing one round.

Since at this stage you don't have to contend with an over-garment, a par time of about 1.5 seconds is reasonable. With a little practice, you should be able to shave off at least half a second. Remember, though, you need to be in control. It does no good to drive your gun to the target so quickly that it takes you two seconds to acquire your sights.



It is imperative when dry-firing that the pistol remains unloaded of live ammo and no live ammo should be in the area, inert snap caps are great tools for training.



Let's say you're worried about your ability to draw your gun from concealment. With an unloaded gun and the actual cover garment you typically wear, imagine being accosted by an armed assailant who presents an imminent deadly threat.

With the assailant clear in your mind, perform several draws until you're confident in your ability to manage that particular gun, holster and garment. If something doesn't work, it's far better to diagnose the problem in the comfort of your home than when you desperately need your gun in a real-world scenario.

Start with a par time of two seconds until you get used to sweeping away the garment, then drop it to 1.5 seconds.

RELOADING PRACTICE

A "tactical" reload is performed when you've fired your gun but are no longer facing an immediate threat, and because you want to retain the magazine if applicable, which still has rounds in it, it's a relatively complex skill. To dry-fire a tactical reload for a semiautomatic pistol, put on your duty or carry gear: firearm, holster, magazine pouch, spare magazines, and insert snap caps into your empty magazines.

Start with your gun on target and a magazine in the well. At the beep, grab a magazine and cant the pistol so the mag well is easy to get to. Drive the magazine forward the magazine well and eject the depleted magazine into your hand. Then insert the new one.

The drill ends when the magazine is fully seated. Initially, set the par time for two seconds. After several repetitions, you may find that 1.5 seconds is attainable.

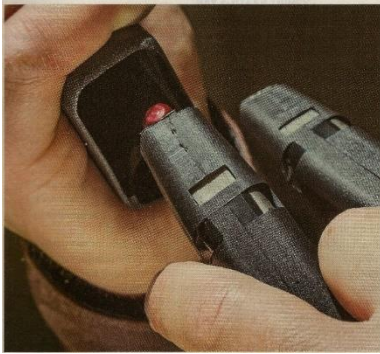
When your semi-auto pistol is at slide lock during a gunfight, you've got a problem. Of course, the solution is to replace the empty magazine ASAP. To set up a "speed" or "combat" reload, lock the

slide of your pistol to the rear on an empty chamber, with an empty magazine in the well.

As you reach for a snap-cap loaded magazine, hit the magazine, hit the magazine release, allowing the empty magazine to fall to your hand, then put it in your dump pouch or your pocket. Then cant the gun so the magazine well is oriented to accept the magazine. Insert the magazine completely into the well, then rack the slide to chamber a fresh cartridge.

With the slide locked to the rear on an empty chamber, set the par time on your shot timer for two seconds. At the buzzer, execute a speed reload. Was that easy? Was it too difficult? Adjust the par time as appropriate and try it again.

In the beginning, set the par time at two seconds. Then see if you can get it to 1.5 seconds or less.



With snap caps loaded into the magazines to approximate the weight of the real thing, dry-firing is a great way to work on a tactical retention reload.

MALFUNCTION PRACTICE

For most defensive shooters, the immediate action drill to clear a malfunction, sometimes referred to as "Tap, Rack, Assess," is relatively easy to recall and execute. However, as is often the case, the devil is in the details. There's a difference between executing this technique adequately and executing it as efficiently as possible.

Start with your unloaded pistol and magazine full of snap caps inserted into the gun. To ensure you're timing only the immediate action drill and not your trigger press, start with the gun on target and the trigger to the rear. At the beep, tap the magazine to ensure it is properly seated, rack the slide, and assess the situation by scanning.

The double feed is a different animal – one that tap, rack and assess won't fix – and is a great candidate for dry-fire practice. To set up a double feed using snap caps, lock the slide to the rear and insert a snap cap directly into the chamber. Insert a magazine loaded with several snap caps then ease the slide forward to induce a double feed.

Here's how I train to remedy double feeds. On the signal, lock the slide to the rear. Rip the magazine from the gun, then cant the pistol so that the ejection port is facing downward. As a right-handed shooter I prefer to rotate the gun counterclockwise and grab the slide with the thumb and all four fingers of my off hand. Cycle the slide three times (or until the cartridge is ejected from the chamber). Insert a fresh magazine and, finally, cycle the slide once more to chamber a fresh cartridge.

Start with a par time of at least four seconds. With patience and quality reps, you should be able to chip away at that time. On a good day, I can clear a double feed in about three seconds.

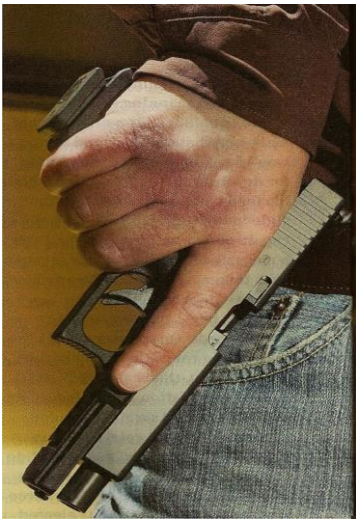
ADDITIONAL SKILLS

A few other techniques that you can safely master with dry-fire practice are transitioning your pistol from one hand to the other, cycling the slide one-handed, using your belt, shoe or other object to rack the slide, and shooting from retention. These don't require set drills, nor do you need to do them on the clock. The goal is to simply rehearse the actions until you can do them smoothly and easily – TRAIN UNTIL YOU CAN'T GET IT WRONG!!

To safely transition from hand to hand, keep the gun pointed "down-range" and release your grip with your support hand. Place the web of your support hand over your shooting hand, high on the backstrap, and slowly release with your master hand, as you assume a shooting grip with your support hand. While working on this, be mindful that your fingers remain indexed along the frame and don't migrate inside the trigger guard.

If you're operating a semi-auto one-handed due to injury or because one hand is performing another task, a reload or malfunction clearance may require you to hook your pistol's rear sight on something to cycle the slide. Practice this technique with an unloaded pistol and the belt/rig you typically wear with your carry or duty gear. Can you cycle the slide one-handed, without pointing the pistol at yourself? Can you cycle the gun on the edge of a table or other object, while keeping the muzzle pointed in a safe direction? You won't know if or how you can accomplish this until you've tried it, and doing it with an unloaded pistol is absolutely the only way to learn.

In the real world, you may be required to fire your pistol in very close proximity to your adversary. If so, you need to be able to shoot from a retention position. Keep the pistol indexed to your chest, with the slide canted away from your body so it doesn't snag on your clothing. With an unloaded pistol, you can practice indexing the pistol to your body consistently and ensure that your support hand does not cross in front of your muzzle.



Can you rack the slide one-handed via your belt or other object? The only way to work on this critical skill is with an empty gun or one loaded with snap caps.

It is easy to set up the double-feed malfunction with snap caps; then practice clearing the jam. You should be able to get this accomplished in about three seconds.

