

A Winning Hand

When it comes to defensive pistol shooting, the author says one hand often beats two.

By Mike Conti

Over the past several decades, one of the hotly debated issues regarding the use and employment of the pistol for other than bullseye or conventional pistol competition has been whether a one- or two-hand grip is preferable to the other. The two-hand grip has clearly been declared the winner by the majority of those in the mainstream gun press as well as in "practical" handgun competition circles. In fact, the two-hand grip in all its variations has become such a standard component of handgun shooting that one-hand shooting has become regarded by many as either a strictly advanced technique or a negligent and irresponsible practice.



When confronted by a threat, the natural reaction is to crouch while pointing whatever weapon we have toward the threat--often with one hand.

This is no less true in the vast majority of law enforcement training programs, as the influence of the practical pistol and other competition-oriented shooting disciplines has been significant for many years. But perhaps the main reason the two-hand grip has come to be so widely accepted as the most stable and effective method for firing a pistol is quite simply because it is.

However, when preparing to use the handgun for real-world, defensive applications, common sense and reality dictate that not only should more emphasis be placed on firing and manipulating the pistol with one hand, but the majority of training time should be directed toward the development of one-hand pistolcraft skills.

Before diving into this aspect of pistol shooting, I would like to provide a little background. This article marks my first return to commercial magazine writing since my last "In the Line of Fire" column was published in *Guns & Ammo* back in 2001. At that time, I had written extensively about the work I was then involved with as director of the Massachusetts State Police Firearms Training Unit.

The "new paradigm" police firearms training program developed during my tenure with the FTU--and the subject of a book I wrote, *Police Pistolcraft*--has since been widely studied by many members of law enforcement around the globe. It has been adopted in whole or in part by several agencies as of this writing and is being evaluated for adoption by many more. Now, back to our discussion.



While there are handgun techniques that permit the use of a flashlight in a two-handed hold, gripping the pistol with one hand allows more options for using a light that's not mounted on the gun.

Capt. W.E. Fairbairn and Capt. E.A. Sykes observed in their classic treatise, *Shooting to Live with the One-Hand Gun*, that the pistol--revolver or automatic--is used primarily for two distinct purposes. One is target shooting for sport or pleasure; the other is combat.

They also made it glaringly clear that while the two activities shared similar characteristics, they were as different as "chalk and cheese." When used for close- or long-range target shooting, a proper two-hand hold provides the shooter with an optimum amount of stability, consistency and control, allowing for careful sight alignment and aiding in precise trigger manipulation.

The fact that the target presents no threat to the shooter means that the shooter, with some practice, can learn to focus his vision on the front sight, while the rear sight and target, kept in alignment, become slightly blurred. A steady trigger press is then applied, and if the "surprise shot break" is achieved, the shot hits the mark.

Since people are also able to develop the ability to draw the pistol rapidly from a holster, acquire the sights and fire using a two-hand hold while achieving solid hits on paper, plastic or metal targets, the two-hand hold is generally considered to be superior.

As far as shooting at targets that present no actual immediate threat is concerned, I could not agree more. However, over the years, the differences between engaging non-threatening targets and actual combat have been forgotten or confused on many levels.

The entire concept of the Modern Technique was based on the belief that the core components of the system were as universally applicable for actual combat situations as they were for target shooting on the range. This concept was validated by anecdotes from Modern Technique adherents who had been involved in some type of violent person-on-person incident, stories that were often reported in magazines and books.

For the past couple of decades, though, law enforcement has documented a less-than stellar performance record during documented, real-world gunfights. In fact, studies conducted by the FBI and other police organizations have consistently indicated that in actual gunfights, on average the police miss the threat suspect they are shooting at with as many as 85 percent of the rounds they fire--this despite years of documented training using primarily the two-hand hold and other Modern Technique-based practices.

Whenever this disparity between training methods and standards and actual real-world performance is brought up, proponents of the Modern Technique are quick to blame the individual officer for failing to adhere to his training or to condemn the members of the law enforcement profession as a whole for failing to adequately train their officers "enough" in the Modern Technique.

After having studied this matter in some detail over the past 20 or so years, I've come to the conclusion that it's time for us to rethink our dependence upon the two-hand hold, sight-focused school of pistol training because it apparently does not adequately prepare the average, armed individual--police officer or law-abiding private citizen--for the realities of violent, close-quarter spontaneous events.

It is critical to remember that while these two-hand techniques may reign supreme on the target range or when hunting, they were not developed for use against armed and dangerous human beings presenting an immediate threat at near to touching distances. For those who desire specifics, let's say distances from seven yards to breath-in-the face close, since statistics also indicate that more than 80 percent of police-involved shootings occur in this zone, most of these within five feet.

In one of my "In the Line of Fire" columns, I reported on some research which indicated that one of the primary reasons sights were not used during actual or simulated close-quarter spontaneous events was because the operators reported that they had an overwhelming feeling there was "not enough time" to access and use them.

This apparently raised the ire of a few gun writers, one of whom noted that he thought this issue had been put to rest years ago and that of course there was enough time to access the sights if there was enough time to draw and present the pistol to full extension. But the writer missed the point. It wasn't that the interviewed officers didn't actually have enough time to access the sights. They did have the time, but in their minds they were convinced they did not--despite long, documented histories of being successfully trained to use the sights on the target range.

What the detractors missed was the difference between training for the range and training for the real world. For in the real world, we operate in what Prussian military philosopher Carl von Clausewitz described as the "element of danger." And in this element of danger, the vast majority of human beings facing an armed and dangerous opponent at close quarters will be naturally and forcefully compelled to stare at that threatening human being during those few fleeting and

terrifying moments. More than 13,000 years of evolution--during which human beings often squared off against one another with sharp, pointy sticks--pretty much ensures it.

We will also tend to crouch, and if we have something small and dangerous in our hand--whether a sharp, pointy stick or a handgun loaded with sharp, pointy bullets--we will more than likely stare open-eyed at that threat while we try to drive our weapon straight toward and into him, usually with one hand.

Instinct aside, common sense dictates that we must be extremely comfortable, competent and confident in our ability to control a pistol and fire accurately while employing a one-hand hold because when operating in the real world we usually need our other hand to do something else. Holding flashlights comes immediately to mind, as do other activities not commonly performed on the range but required while moving through tactical environments. Some of these activities include opening doors; moving and holding vegetation, draperies or other such impediments aside; and defending yourself from close-quarter physical attack while maneuvering with a pistol in your hand.



Just as the argument for gun-mounted lights goes, using a one-hand grip frees the non-firing hand for such chores as opening doors and moving aside obstacles such as drapery or vegetation.

The review of numerous videos capturing police-involved shootings also indicates that, in the vast majority of cases, officers confronted with a surprise, close-quarters spontaneous attack do not leap into a classic Weaver-like, bladed-away stance and present the weapon using a two-hand hold. Instead, they spring into a low crouch, body squared toward the adversary, while extending and firing the weapon with one hand.

So while I do teach (and recommend) a two-hand hold and the use of the sights to allow greater stability of, and accuracy with, the pistol when time, distance, cover, situation and/or environment allow, I steadfastly believe the primary training focus must be on the development of one-handed point-shooting skills because that's what people will most likely need while actually engaging a threat at close range.

Drawing, holding and firing the pistol accurately with one hand at combat distances while focusing on the threat is easy when these skills are learned correctly. In my opinion, these skills

should also be learned first by the new or prospective pistolero--introducing two-handed, sighted shooting only after one-hand point-shooting skills have been established.

When teaching people previously trained in the Modern Technique to do this, I've found there that there are two big obstacles to overcome. One is to ingrain in them that the pistol is indeed a handgun, not a "handsgun," and can be effectively employed as such if the proper technique is used. It's also difficult to wean them off their reliance on using the sights at all but contact distances during training.

Firing the pistol using the one-hand grip is usually the easier of the two obstacles to overcome for most people. If the pistol fits their hand properly, people will readily develop this skill with a bit of instruction.

Shifting the focus from the sights and maintaining it on the target is often more difficult because it's only natural to want to hit the target in training using the skills you've already established. And for so many people, two-handed, sighted fire is deeply ingrained. However, when these targets are replaced by an actual or realistically simulated, immediate threat, these target-oriented skill sets tend to dramatically degrade for all but the smallest minority of individuals.



The two-handed grip certainly has its place, but the single-hand hold is, in the author's opinion, a vital technique that really should be the first thing that defensive pistol shooters learn because it's what they'll most likely need.

That's why it's critical to use realistic, immediate threat stimuli instead of paper, plastic or metal targets when training. That might involve the use of Simunitions or blanks and a role-playing person holding a weapon and attacking the student--or through the use of a House of Horror target that moves toward the shooter.

The target needs to present some type of simulated danger in order to induce the physiological and psychological effects caused by the stress of an actual violent and spontaneous attack. And these effects--which range from experiencing the aforementioned overwhelming feeling of not having enough time to increased heart and respiration rates, tunnel vision, auditory selectivity and automatic behavior--are core components of the "element of danger" that do not generally surface in controlled training-range environments.

If these components are not present, then we are not actually training to prevail in the fight. Rather, we are simply training to become more proficient at shooting targets and achieving high scores on the range. And while these are both admirable endeavors, they are still as different as "chalk and cheese."