

# A Do-It-Yourself Guide to your First Air Pistol Session

*If you've never shot target pistol before, you have no local club or experienced shooter to give basic instruction and you want to give it a whirl – you've come to the right place. In this article I'd like to outline all the basics from safety to sound shooting technique. Follow these steps and you can begin a sporting career of distinction, or at least find out what Olympic style shooting is all about.*

## Safety

This is and will always be Number One on the list of priorities. Remember that there is NO SUCH THING as a shooting accident. Follow these simple rules and live by them – you will see what I mean.

1. Always point your pistol in a safe direction. On a range (even a basement range at home) this means down range towards the target. Always MEANS always – when taking your grip, cocking the action, sighting, dry firing – ALWAYS. Even when casing your gun, there is no reason not to be aware of where it is pointing. A short firearm like a pistol is so easy to swing into an unsafe position. Never forget it.
2. Always assume your pistol is loaded until you have proven otherwise – by opening the action (NOT by pulling the trigger!). This includes when you first take it from its case; it doesn't matter that you KNOW you put it away unloaded, PROVE it to yourself. This is a good rule to adopt for any firearm you ever pick up, even if you are handed one, NEVER assume it's unloaded, ALWAYS assume it is loaded until you prove otherwise.
3. Never attempt to use any firearm if you don't understand how it works BEFORE you pick it up.
4. When your pistol is loaded you will retain complete control over it. Never lay it on the bench and walk away unless you first open the action to make it safe. There is no possible use for a safety catch in target pistol shooting. Your pistol is either loaded or it is not, there is no "safe" halfway point between.
5. When you walk forward of the line to change targets the pistol should always be on the bench, untouched, pointed downrange and unloaded with the action open.

Responsible use of your pistol means it is used as a tool, not a toy or weapon. Pointing it at anything but your designated target is a cardinal sin. Target shooting is one of the safest sports in the world because the rules are always followed. Failure to do so results in immediate expulsion from the range. Feel free to check out our safety record – accidents on ISSF ranges around the world are unheard of.

## What do you need?

I'd recommend starting with an accurate air pistol with adjustable sights. Match pellets probably aren't necessary for a start, but at least use a good brand of flat-nosed wadcutter pellets. They are the most accurate at target velocities, plus they cut much cleaner holes in the target than round nose. You will need a space about 36 feet long, with provision for a pellet trap. It also should be certain to have no human traffic crossing or appearing anywhere in front of the firing line. A basement or garage is ideal. A hallway may be safe if you live alone. The target trap should be designed to retain the pellet with no chance of having a ricochet come back towards the firing line. If you have nothing made specifically for this purpose, take a deep wooden box and stuff it solid with compacted newspaper. The immediate area around the target trap should also be rebound proof – something like plywood is great for a safe backer.

Regardless of this you should have some eye protection, ideally something that is optically correct. A bench is handy to rest your pistol on between shots. And of course regulation targets for 10 meter (33 feet) ISSF Air Pistol would be nice, but for your first outing they aren't really necessary. The black bull measures about 3 inches across (this is the 7 ring), anything that comes close would be fine. Hang the pellet catcher around 55 inches from the floor and you have something pretty close to what they shoot at the Olympics.

## How to hold the pistol.

It's important that you grip the pistol the same way every time you take aim with it. Slight changes in the position of your hand, gripping tension, thumb pressure and even the positioning of your finger on the trigger will make a big difference to where the shots end up on the target.

Hold the unloaded pistol in your left hand (assuming you're a right handed shooter) somewhere around the trigger guard. Push your right hand firmly so that the web of your hand between thumb and first finger fits against the upper rear recess of the grip, centralizing as best you can so that the pistol will become an extension of the line of your arm. An orthopedic grip will make it easier to reproduce your hand position, but with care and by paying attention to detail you can do okay with even a basic

molded grip.

A lot is said about how tightly you should hold on to a target pistol. There is no need to try to squeeze the sap out of the wood, neither will you be able to control the beast if you relax your hand. Firm enough to take control is best. The second and third fingers should do all of the gripping, and this should be limited to straight rearward pressure of the middle section of these fingers between the first and second joints. The thumb itself should have no sideways pressure as such on the pistol, although it is necessary to press forward a little with the very base of the thumb to give a contra pressure against the gripping fingers. Again, it must be stressed that the pressures exerted are straight back and forward.

Of course this will feel quite awkward at first. With practice it will start to feel natural. When the pistol is gripped in the shooting position, the wrist should also be locked. This means you make a conscious effort to make your wrist rigid to prevent the wrist from swiveling in any direction. The reason for this is simple when you think about it – imagine letting the wrist move freely – this will allow the line of the pistol's barrel to deviate in an arc. The area that you might hit will be the size of a dinner plate, or larger, at 10 meters. Lock the wrist and you will of course still be moving about on the target, but by keeping the line of the barrel constant with your arm you will greatly reduce the probable impact area.

### **How to Stand**

There is no perfect stance for pistol shooting. Your own stance will evolve as you become experienced enough to recognize your natural point of aim. So for a comfortable starting point, place your feet at about shoulder width apart, not too splayed and not too pigeon toed, about 45 degrees from the line to the target. Body shape may dictate a slight modification to this, a slender frame may start facing a little further from the target while a more full figure will probably need to be a little squarer to the target.

Within a short period of time you should be able to find a natural point of aim by assuming your grip on the pistol, straightening your arm, closing your eyes (or looking away) and raising your pistol as if to shoot. When you then check the line of the pistol against the actual position of the target you can adjust the position of your feet until a "blind lift" consistently brings your pistol in line with the target. If a slight adjustment is needed, try moving the rear foot a little at a time.

Balance is quite important, as if you are swaying while aiming you have another handicap you really could do without. Try to keep the balance equal between the balls and heels. If you allow the weight distribution to be too far one way or the other you will be quite unstable. It's also a good idea to anchor your non-shooting hand in a trouser pocket or hooked into your belt, this will be another aid to steadying the ship.

### **How to breathe.**

Bet you never expected to be told how to breathe. After all, you've been doing it for years. But good breath control will make holding the pistol much easier. A good supply of oxygen to your body will improve muscle control, give clearer vision and keep the mind clear of minor distractions like having your face turn blue while you wait for the shot to break.

Rest between shots. You don't gain any bonus points for being the fastest to throw ten shots down range, so you might as well rest your arm and take a couple of deep leisurely breaths. As you raise your arm to shoot, take a full breath. As you lower the pistol into the aiming area, expel about a third of the breath and hold it there. You will receive the maximum benefit from your oxygen intake without the discomfort of holding full lungs. Take advantage of the next five to seven seconds, this will be about as steady as you will ever get.

### **What to look at.**

It's most illogical and hard to accept for a new shooter, that the last thing you want to focus on is your target. After all, you want to see where you hit, and how can you hope to hit something unless you can see it clearly?

But you'll have to abandon your natural instincts and take a different tack. When playing golf, don't you look at the ball instead of the pin as you take your shot? It's the same for all ball games, you must keep your eye (and attention) on the ball, not the target area. You'll find out soon enough where the shot lands. With pistol it's *so* much more important to watch the sight picture because if your attention wavers for just a second or two you won't even see the misalignment that results in a shot missing the target.

So look at the sights. You'll know you're doing it right because the target will be fuzzy (it's physically impossible to have both sights and target in focus). Then when you squeeze the trigger smoothly you'll be surprised when the shot breaks, and pleasantly surprised when you see the results on the target.

### **How to correct your sights.**

Sighting in your pistol may take a little time. It's best to shoot for a group when you first start, don't be tempted to go whirring on the sight adjustments as a result of a shot or two. Fire a *minimum* of ten shots, then take an average of the group and make your adjustments accordingly, to move the *center* of the group to the middle of the target. Always consult the manual to learn which way to turn your adjusting knobs as some of them can be a little tricky. Just about anything German will be backwards, you will turn the screw towards the R *if* your shots are going right - this is the opposite to what most of us expect. If you have no manual try our [TenP Files](#) as we have a database including most target pistols you're ever likely to come across.

### **How to score your targets.**

A useful format to start with is a 40 shot match, shooting four targets of 10 shots. When you become used to the weight of the pistol you might extend it to a 60 shot (although for women 40 shots is their regular course of fire). You should comfortably fit 10 shots on a single bull, although if you're shooting paper (rather than card) targets you might have to limit yourself to five shots per target.

Better quality targets will cut a clean hole and allow for easy scoring. If the arc of the pellet hole cuts or touches the line of the next higher scoring ring, it scores as the higher value. It's a good practice to score down rather than up if there is any doubt - that way you will likely gain points in matches when it's scored using gauges. There's nothing so bad as feeling as though you've been cheated.

### **Why is this so hard?**

For the same reason that it's such a satisfying sport. It is challenging, you're holding a weight in a completely unnatural position, fighting your base instincts to concentrate on seemingly unrelated factors in order to hit the same spot time and time again. It goes against our logic to shoot this way, and it goes against our nature to concentrate on performing the same task over and over without allowing stray thoughts to distract us. If it were easy, then possible scores would be commonplace, but a 100/100 in air pistol is extremely rare and I doubt a 600/600 will ever happen.

Your first concern will be how much your sights move on the target. It is very disconcerting to see them wavering all over the place like a drunken sailor. As you get used to holding this weight in such an unnatural position your hold will improve. But even the best of shooters have movement. It's really a *good* thing. The day you stop shaking will be the day you die, so feel good about it!

So just how well should a rank novice perform? If you are an average beginner you might keep all ten shots in the scoring rings of the target. If you have done some target shooting before and take careful note of what is written above, you may get close to holding the black. Most beginners will take some time to get to this stage, however.

The great thing about pistol shooting is the fact that almost anybody can become competitive at the highest levels. If you are reasonably fit you will be able to learn to hold nine ring within a relatively short time. If you can learn enough self discipline to perform well under pressure there is no limit to how far you can go.