

Don't Bee A Cheeken!

Trigger control is the most difficult part of shooting to execute in a truly detached manner. It's such an emotive subject. I expect a good deal of mail on this one...

Imagine this. A bright blue sky. Just a hint of a breeze to keep the summer heat somewhere between "pleasant" and "delightful". A spotless row of new targets set up on the 50 meter line. You raise your pistol, breathe in, settle onto the target as you slowly exhale and sit the crystal clear sights below the wonderfully fuzzy black. The sights sit in perfect alignment. They still sit there. Nothing's moving. What an awesome hold! Sometime soon it's going to break just nicely. Sometime soon. It's going. To break. Some. Time. Soon... Dang!

The dreaded chicken finger has struck again.

Later, in that same match. You're a little tired now. Much of it because you wasted so much energy while admiring your sights early on. Your hold has deteriorated somewhat. Now, on arriving in the area of aim, you wait for a favorable picture before applying that last pressure on the trigger to make it break. Yes, yes, no, no. Yes, no, yes, no, YES! Oh, NO!

Does this sound awfully familiar? The good news is, you're not Robinson Crusoe, my old sputnik. Repent now and you may yet be saved. Like all good reformed drinkers will tell you, the first important step is admitting you have a problem. Those who have no idea of what I'm talking about, you might as well stop reading this right now and go back to polishing the bulging contents of your trophy cabinet. Leave us jerkaholics anonymous to our own devices.

Now I have your attention as fellow sufferers of, shall we say, trigger control that has room for improvement, let's see if we can understand the cause instead of wailing over the symptoms.

We're too darn fussy. We want to shoot a ten with EVERY shot we put down range. There's something about Western civilization that fosters control freaks. This encourages us to do two things. First, we take far too much notice of the position of the sights on the target. This makes our shooting eye tend not to want to stay so rigidly with the sights, sneaking more and more to the target. After all, our subconscious WANTS to see a shot in the center of the target and hasn't ever been really convinced that it can magically happen by IGNORING it! (Remember how much we inwardly scoffed when Obie Wan told Skywalker to turn off his ballistic computer and "Trust in the Force, Luke!")

But our mortal sin is that we really don't want the pistol to go off without having a perfect sight picture. So we teeter on the brink of firing as we jockey our bucking colts for better position, never really happy unless we've attained the happy coincidence of aligned sights on THAT spot as the shot broke. While we're being honest here, does it ever occur to you (like it often does to me) that there was a certain element of LUCK in that shot? Sure, we still feel smug that we've just shot a ten, but are you listening to that other voice in your head who butts at your ego by chiming in "Tin arse!" My inner voice has an annoying nasal quality about it, kind of like an off key kazoo. For this reason I tended never to listen too much. But that was a mistake. He was right.

Tennis commentators on television never tire of berating players for making a "low percentage shot". Instead of keeping a rally going, a player might lose patience or lack confidence in his ability to win a long point, resulting in him trying a backhand looping passing shot that has little chance of coming off.

In the same way we, as shooters, lose our patience and hold for a little longer in the hope of a miraculous or lucky shot, when we should cancel out and start again. When was the last time you ran out of time in a match? We also lose confidence in the basics when we feel things aren't going our way. We convince ourselves that we can over-control the shot and force a ten by sheer willpower.

Because shooting in a match is worlds away from shooting on our home turf. When no sheep stations are at stake trigger control is not such a big issue. Nervousness and heightened tension rob us of our fine motor skills and all of a sudden what was so easy in the basement of our house becomes so difficult that we believe there is something wrong with our equipment. I'm here to tell you something you may already suspect. Do you know what the variable is that's most responsible for your poor performance? Take a look in the mirror. You're looking at him.

The point to my story so far is I believe we approach the act of breaking the shot in a negative manner that's doomed to provide us with low percentage shots – especially in the heat of a big match.

Typically the first thing we seem to do when raising our pistol to the target is take up the first stage of the trigger. By doing so we are seemingly convinced that if we take away the first stage we will end up having less trigger weight to complete the shot.

Lighter trigger equals better shooting, right?

How does that explain that High Master Bullseye pistol shooters shoot equally high scores with their three and a half pound triggered forty fives as their twenty twos with two pound triggers? And shouldn't Free Pistol scores be at least comparable with Air Pistol since there is no trigger weight restriction?

What I believe we achieve is a defensive approach to taking the shot. We only half commit, always leaving the door open to abort when the hold wanders a little, then coming back as it drifts to the center again. This is how we convince ourselves that we are working hard to fire a good shot. From a practical sense it's amazing we get the scores we do sometimes, since there is a much easier method that East Europeans have been using for many years with great success. Easier in a physical sense; but mentally so much harder for us control freaks since it involves taking an immense leap of faith with each and every shot.

Imagine if you were not to take any trigger pressure at all until two to four seconds before the shot breaks. Imagine if you could then be fully focused on your sight formation before your poor human mind had a chance to become distracted by some irrelevant stray thought. Imagine if you could be firing within the window when your actual focus was at its height, before the sharp edges of the front sight had started to blur. Imagine if all of this happens when you have a good supply of oxygen to your bloodstream and your hold is tight within the aiming area. You may say I'm a dreamer. But I'm not the only one...

Thirty years ago the Russians used an electronic training device that gave a beeping sound in a set of headphones whenever the pistol was aimed at the ten ring PLUS the diameter of the bullet. It was purely a dry fire device, but it taught shooters that the sight picture need not look perfect to still score a ten. In this manner a whole generation of Eastern Bloc shooters had sufficient confidence in their hold to produce a shot in a positive manner soon after coming into the aiming area.

Obviously every shot will not be a ten. But just as obviously the technique is far more sound than the low percentage efforts detailed above.

It was not until I was being taught (by a coach from Belarus) how to cycle the trigger in Standard Pistol that I understood their whole philosophy of trigger control. He was most annoyed at my habit of flicking my trigger finger to take the first stage for the next shot while I was still under recoil from the previous shot. He made me maintain trigger pressure while under recoil (and therefore in follow through), and I was not to release the trigger and start on the next shot until I had regained the aiming area. This was HARD as it broke habits of fifteen years or more. But what I started to achieve was a POSITIVE release for each shot as it was so much easier not to freeze on the trigger. Far from causing me to panic about wasting time it provided the basis for a smooth rhythm and deliberate shot-by-shot control.

In the same way precision shooting should be a positive and rhythmic action. In my first major Air Pistol Final I psyched myself up to follow this method. I was so nervous I wanted to crawl out of the building and hide. My heart was racing and I was shaking so badly I had serious doubts I'd hold the black. Contrary to what many people say, it did not go away after two or three shots. To be honest I was in seventh place, so I was in no potential winning position. But having a noisy gallery of perhaps two hundred people crammed behind us only added to my already acute anxiety.

My plan was to start my trigger squeeze with the Range Officer's count of "one", just before "Start." Under no circumstances would I stop squeezing until the shot broke. In every case I was first to fire, and on the sixth shot I was in danger of taking an early shot, as I fired before the echo of "Start" had died out. That was a ten, by the way. I ended with a 100.6 for the Final, the highest on the day. It took courage that was akin to desperation to have the faith in my hold and simply produce a good technical release. Since that day I have often tried but never succeeded in regaining that magic for more than a few shots at a time.

But I remain convinced that here lies the path to success.

There really is nothing difficult about shooting a ten. Our own fear of failure is our greatest enemy. It makes us freeze on the trigger and overhold. If we can overcome our own human frailty and have faith in what we know to be true, there is no limit to what we can achieve.

Do you know what the best piece of advice was from my friend the coach from Belarus? I cherish it to this day and repeat it to myself at critical times on the firing line: "Don't bee a cheeken!"

I dedicate this column to my former coach Vladimir Galiabovitch, who suffered the incomparable culture shock of leaving conformist Eastern Europe for apathetic Australia. I don't know to this day if he understood the "she'll be right" attitude that drove him to despair of ever teaching our shooters how to behave (and perform) like world class athletes. He knew what he was talking about; the tragedy was few of them wanted to accept that they were indeed big fish in a tiny pond and they had a lot to learn. He no longer coaches professionally, leaving many shooters in the care of more comforting minders who tell them what they really want to hear.