

Sight Watching

In which our intrepid seeker of the easy ten explores the most basic of shooting basics. Or is it?

What exactly do they mean when they tell you to “watch your sights”? This has always been one of the two golden rules for pistol shooting, the other being to “squeeze the trigger”. Maybe I’m a little slow, but for several years I did just like I was told. I focused on those sights and watched them bounce all over the target. I was a junior at the time, very young for the sport, but my scores just never seemed to progress. But one day I must have got tired of peppering the entire target and I tried what seemed to me to be a unique concept. What if I tried to hold those little black blighters together by force of will, instead of praying that the shot would break as the front sight wobbled somewhere near the middle of the notch of the rear sight?

Thus I discovered the difference between being a spectator and a participant.

“Duh!”, I hear you saying. Well maybe I am slow on the uptake, but I wonder how many others who are trying to learn the fundamentals of pistol marksmanship take the advice too literally. I also wonder just how many shooters out there have strings of shots that widen from time to time because they “forget” the importance of controlling rather than watching their sights.

Before we get any further into this let me clarify what I mean by “control”. I hasten to stress that I don’t mean you should try to pin your sights to a point on the target. My sights remain moving about the area of aim under the black, and that movement is quite normal and acceptable. What is NOT acceptable is movement of the front sight within the rear. When the pistol moves around the area of aim the sights must move as a matched set. Together. As if they were one. This requires most of my attention and a rigidly locked wrist. It then only requires the release of the trigger within a reasonable time frame without upsetting that sight formation. Sounds simple? It is... but with our human failings such as limited attention span and a tendency to think of other things we sometimes overlook the easy way. If not we’d all be shooting Master scores.

So these days when I feel my tenuous grip on self control slipping I try to tell myself to stop being a spectator. I might as well be sitting in the stands watching a tennis match if all I’m going to do is watch my sights wave about in the breeze. Take control of your life! Don’t be a chicken!

The second part of controlling the shot comes with trigger control. Some days I hold those sights so tightly I just can’t help but admire them. Take the shot? No way! Look at that sight picture, ain’t it purty? Partly from fear of upsetting the sights and partly from a physical difficulty in operating the trigger finger with the wrist locked solid I find I have to play mind games to smoothly release the shot.

The first important thing to remember is not to let your hand get cast into the grip. Let the blood circulate by releasing the grip every four or five shots - shake it a little if you have to. If you don’t do this you will find it increasingly difficult to independently operate your trigger finger.

Of course you must release the trigger with a positive gradual movement of your trigger finger, but this positive movement must NOT cause a conscious release. In other words, if the shot does not take you by surprise it probably won’t be a good shot. Some shooters assure me that they can make the shot by holding near the point of release and tweak the final few grams when the sights look good. All well and good when you’re shooting on your home turf. This is not so easy under big match pressure when your fine motor skills desert you and the trigger suddenly feels like it’s ten pounds.

You must find a repeatable method of controlling your shot release that suits you. It may be that you will not know whether it will work until you find yourself shooting a Final for the first time. If your heart rate is up (and distinctly audible inside your ear muffs), if your hands are trembling, if your breathing is short and shallow, if you can’t think clearly - in short, if you’re as nervous as a skinny dipper in a piranha pond - then, and only then will you know if your technique will give you adequate control of your shooting.

The secret is to combine the focus on a tight sight formation with a positive finger movement pulling straight back on the trigger so that the shot breaks within a reasonable time frame. I find it helpful to have a mental image of using the trigger shoe as a means of steering the front sight, and guiding it as I pull it straight back through the “goal posts” of the rear sight. I know other shooters use similar mind games. Whatever works. The point being they make a positive decision to produce the shot. They become part of the action, they participate, instead of sitting back in the bleachers hoping the home team will do well.

So don’t ever tell yourself to “watch” the sights. Watching is for passive poodles. Limp wristed wimps. Grab those sights by the scruff of the neck and make them look like a fixture. Enforce your will on them. Be the master of your own destiny and you’ll swear off spectating forever.