

Training for International 10 Metre Air Pistol

The following is a basic but practical guide for anybody who wants to improve his or her air pistol scores. Air pistol is the best match for learning the basic skills of shooting accurately. Lack of recoil means you get to see exactly what effect your trigger release has on sight alignment (since we are watching the sights, aren't we?), and lack of noise and concussion builds confidence in novice shooters who are not yet accustomed to "real" guns.

General Fitness

Good general fitness and a healthy lifestyle are a big advantage to the competitive shooter. This is not to say a physique like Arnie's would help. But in high pressure situations such as major competitions a healthy and fit body will handle stress more effectively.

When in training I swim about 5km per week and try to do some light gym work as well. Smoking is not a good option. The occasional beer won't hurt you, but too much alcohol is also not ideal.

Special Exercises

Warming up before a match can be a great idea. Nothing too exotic, just a five minute routine to get the muscles loose, drain some tension and get the circulation going.

I have seen all sorts of special "shooters'" exercises for strengthening the muscles critical for good shooting performance. Many may well work, but the only routine I managed to stick with involves a pair of 5 lb dumbbells. One circuit involves the following:

1. Stand upright with hands at your sides (holding dumbbells). Raise both arms to 90 degrees, hold for the count of two, then return to sides. Repeat ten times.
2. With right arm raise dumbbell to 90 degrees, similar to your shooting stance. Slowly trace a vertical figure-eight ten times. Then slowly trace a horizontal figure-eight another ten times. Return to side.
3. Hold both dumbbells out at 90 degrees. Rotate both arms together in a forward rotary motion ten times. Then rotate 10 times in opposite direction. Return to sides.

Keep the dumbbells near the television and try to complete half a dozen circuits per day. Suddenly your pistol will seem lighter and more stable, and your arm won't be tired after a match. Exercising both arms means you won't end up looking like a genetic experiment.

Training Techniques

It is a common misconception that merely shooting a lot will result in becoming a master grade shooter. Practice makes permanent, and unless you constantly monitor and assess your training you may well be reinforcing bad habits. It is not necessary to be constantly coached as such, but it is very important to bounce ideas off a fellow shooter, discussing the pros and cons of various techniques and then recording the result of any changes. I'll get to the importance of a diary later.

Developing a Sequence

A successful shot is no accident. It should be planned, step by step, each action following logically into the next, until the shot breaks and follow through completed. Take a notebook to the range and record your steps. I found it a great help to number them; my sequence goes to eleven, which I mentally count off as I shoot.

One of the greatest killers of a good shot is the uninvited idiot thought. The "I wonder what's for dinner tonight" or "Gosh that young lady has a nice figure" - then BANG - the shot has gone and you have no idea where it went. Mentally checking off the steps of a sequence for every shot means your mind is on the job at the critical time. If the system breaks down, cancel the shot. Simple.

Dry Firing

This is a great means of reinforcing a sequence, strengthening the shooting arm and improving trigger control. There are a few golden rules to keep it enjoyable (and viable).

1. Don't overdo it. There's no future in putting in hour-long sessions that bore you senseless. I dry fire for 15-20 minutes, a couple of times a day if I'm keen.

2. Do exactly the same things you would do to live fire. Same clothing, footwear, glasses and tempo.
3. Use an aiming mark. Anything will do, I use a black patch on the wall. Not so much to aim at, but it's great practice for teaching the body to retain a constant line to the target. Try not looking for the target until you lower the pistol into your aiming mark. With a little practice you will find you are instinctively going back to the same point every time.

Shooting Diary

I hate paperwork and as a result resisted keeping a diary for more than 20 years. Largely because of this I continually made the same mistakes, often realising halfway through a match that I had solved this particular problem before but forgotten. We are all human. We make mistakes. But if we can refresh our memories we may not feel such gumbies after an unsuccessful match.

It is also handy for assessing changes in technique. If you change something, write it down. When something works well, highlight it. If you shot a PB after dry firing for ten minutes half an hour before your match, make a note of it. You can learn a lot from what you would normally forget.

On the other hand, try not to get bogged down in recording endless patterns of shots and figures. By all means comment on a tendency (such as flinging shots high right). You can then plan to work on this particular problem at your next training session. But page after page of numbers and dots on targets will not encourage future reading. Keep it relevant and interesting.

Just a Few Tips

If you're having trouble holding focus or attention on your sights, try not looking at them until you settle in the aiming area and are ready to shoot. Focus on the hairs on the end of your arm, the woodwork on the grip, anything close. We have only a limited attention span - like it or not - and you must coincide the breaking of the shot with your undivided attention.

Use your ten minutes preparation time to dry fire. You'll settle yourself down, establish a rhythm, and should only need three to six sighters before you're ready to start the match.

Be very aware of your trigger finger position on the trigger shoe. Not only laterally, but vertically. Many shoes have a slot machined halfway down for trigger testing; this makes for an easily felt familiar landmark.

Learn to call your shots. Your scope is a useful tool, but can make you score-crazy if all you do is quickly check to see if you have shot a ten. Take some thought about the shot, mark it on a card if you can, then check through the scope - to confirm your call.

Set goals. Whether it be achieving a score, holding the black, sticking to a training programme, it doesn't matter. Make them realistic and set new goals as soon as you achieve them.