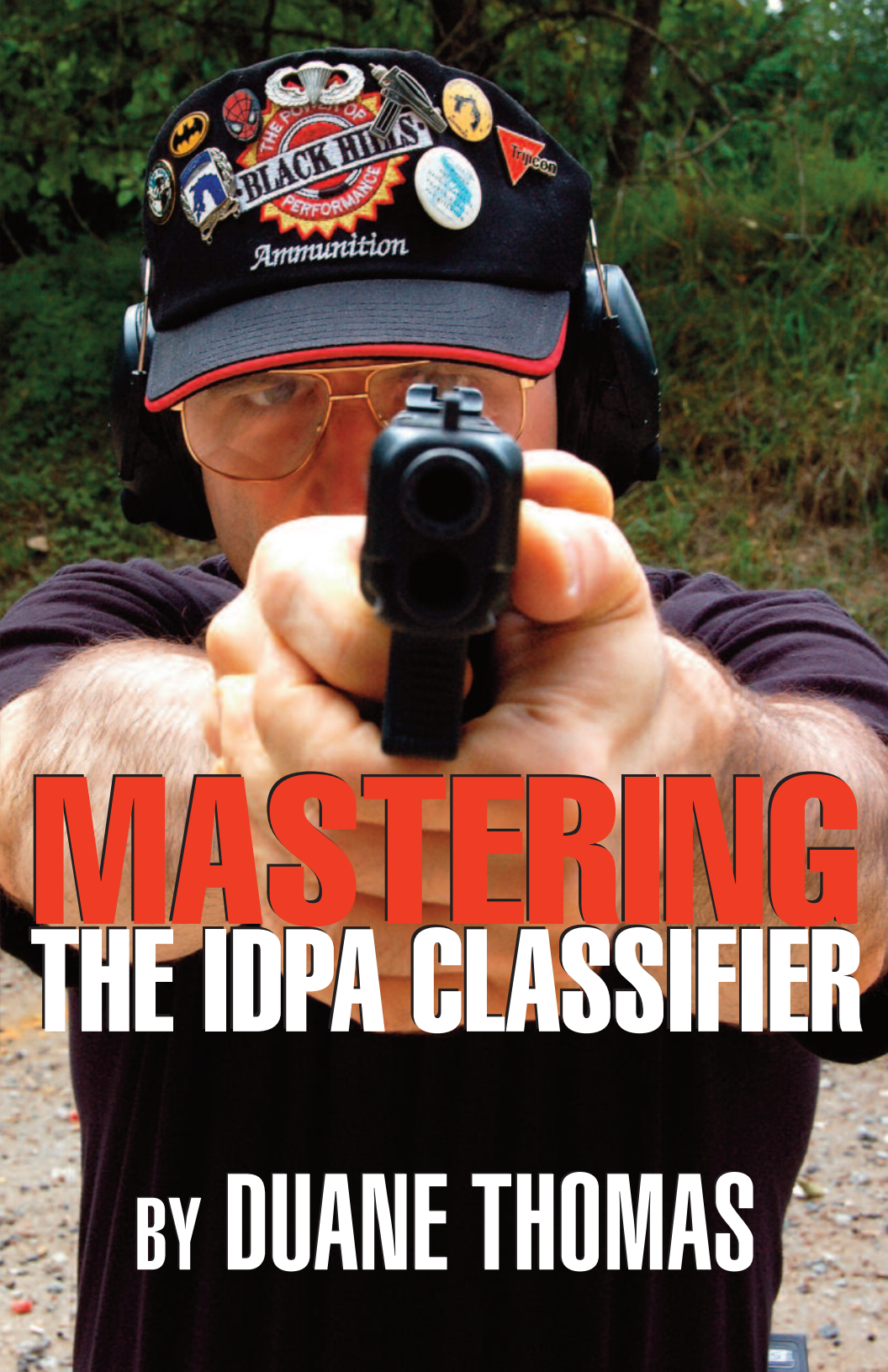

MASTERING THE IDPA CLASSIFIER

BY DUANE THOMAS

MASTERING THE IDPA CLASSIFIER
by Duane Thomas

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DISCLAIMER:

Many of the techniques presented in this book are advanced-level skills requiring a great deal of dry fire practice before attempting them in a live fire environment. While it's pretty to think one can learn a particular technique simply by reading about it, the hard, cold fact is that shooting well requires LOTS of hard work in the form of practice. Please don't read this book and imagine you can safely attempt any of its techniques without practicing them extensively in a dry fire situation first. Duane Thomas and any other individuals, companies and organizations mentioned in this book assume no liability for property damage, injury or death resulting from attempting the techniques presented in ***Mastering the IDPA Classifier***.

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCING THE IDPA CLASSIFIER

The International Defensive Pistol Association, as those of you reading this book are no doubt already aware, is an organization dedicated to running matches for self-defense oriented shooters to compete in using their carry guns and gear. Guns used for IDPA must be street appropriate; legal modifications are kept to a minimum; stages of fire, ideally at least, are set up to mimic realistic self-defense scenarios. Carry gear, the holster and mag pouch(es), must be suitable for all-day concealed carry and worn in a concealable fashion. "Rank" i.e. recognized levels of shooting skill, analogous to an unarmed martial art's colored belt system, is earned by shooting the IDPA classifier, a 90-round course of fire requiring you to do many things with a gun in your hand. How to complete the IDPA classifier with a good final score is the topic of the book you now hold in your hands.

The IDPA classifier is the best, most comprehensive, systematized test of self-defense shooting skills, marksmanship, and fast gun handling available to the normal citizen shooter. Just speaking for myself, very few things in my shooting career have had a more profound, positive impact on my overall level of shooting skill than pushing myself to be better at the IDPA classifier.

I shot the first IDPA match ever held in Washington state, back in 1997. I scored Expert on the classifier at that match with my daily carry gun, a 9mm Glock 19. These days I am a former Washington state IDPA Champion in Custom Defensive Pistol, IDPA's .45 ACP auto division, with a Wilson Defensive Combat Pistol 1911, and a Master class shooter in Stock Service Pistol, the division for non-single action autos, with a Glock 34 9mm.

Get your equipment sorted out. The IDPA classifier is not the place to be fighting your gun, holster or mag pouch. Thomas made SSP Master with his daily carry gear: a lightly modified Glock 34, Blade-Tech Standard Belt Holster and double mag pouch. Ammo was Black Hills reloaded "blue box" 124-gr. ball.

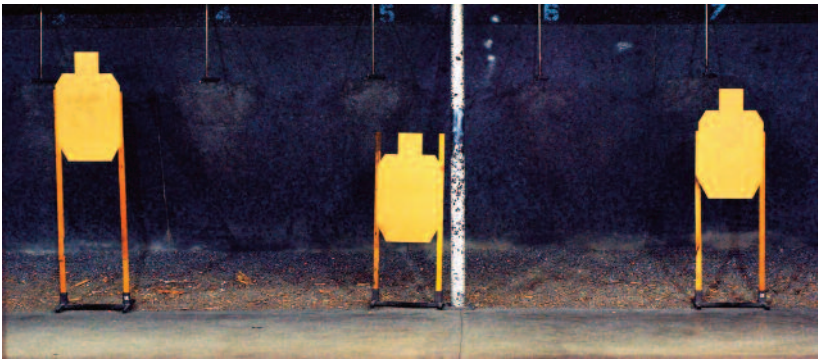
HISTORY AND RANGE SETUP

When IDPA was starting up in 1996, its founders needed to figure out how to rank their competitors' skill levels. They wanted that method to be one simple though fairly comprehensive, easily set up and scored test of shooting skill. What they developed was a 90-round classification course incorporating draws from the holster, rapid fire on multiple targets, slidelock reloads (or as IDPA calls them, "emergency reloads"), Tactical Reloads/Reloads With Retention, failure drills (i.e. "the Mozambique"), head shots, one-hand only work (both left hand only and right hand only), a presentation from the Low Ready position, a couple of demi-*El Presidentes*, shooting while moving both toward and away from the targets, barricade work and shooting from low cover, those last two from moderately long range.

The classifier is shot on three cardboard IDPA targets, set up with six feet between targets edge-to-edge, and target heights

from left to right of six, four and five feet. Scoring is by a system called Limited Vickers Count, named for Larry Vickers, the ex-Delta Force troopie, USPSA Grand Master and IDPA Master who developed it. (We will get into the difference between Vickers Count and Limited Vickers Count shortly.) There are three stages of fire in the IDPA classifier, each requiring 30 rounds to complete. In Limited Vickers Count, your stage score is the cumulative time to complete all strings of fire, with a half second added for every point down from possible, and three seconds per procedural penalty (of course, we'll have none of THOSE). At the end of the classifier, you add together all three stage scores for a total classifier score. Since your score is your time plus penalties, the lower the resulting number, the better you did.

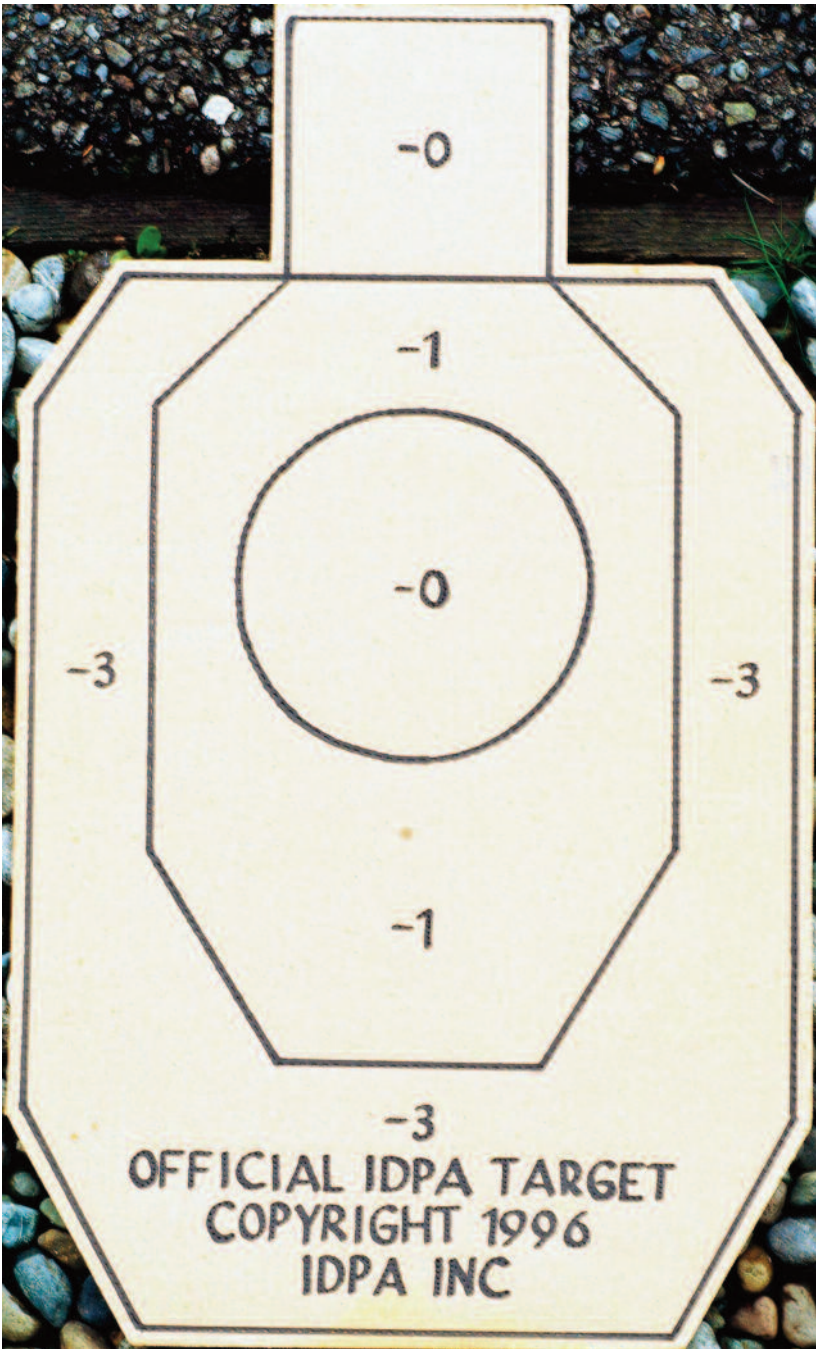
One of the goals of the IDPA classifier's developers was that it be something any shooting club could run, easily, without requiring a lot of specialized equipment. They succeeded. This is not an equipment intensive course of fire. If you have 20 yards of shooting range, three IDPA targets with target sticks and stands, a 55-gallon drum and a Bianchi barricade, you can run the IDPA classifier.



The IDPA classifier is shot on three targets, set up with six feet between targets edge-to-edge, and target heights from left to right of six, four and five feet.

THE TARGET

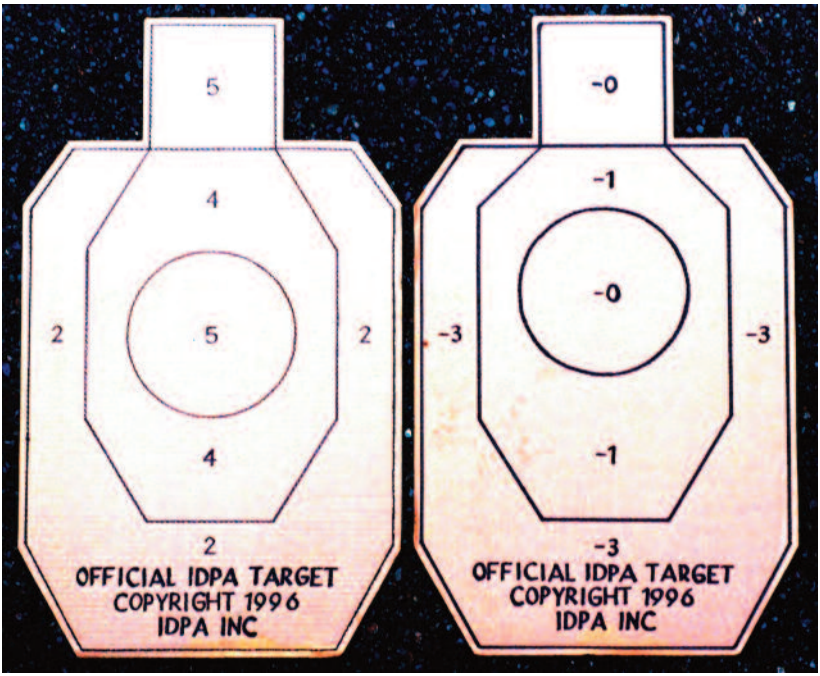
In its overall external shape, the IDPA target is very similar to



The current IDPA target.

the United States Practical Shooting Association (USPSA) target, however its scoring areas are different, though similar. The two highest scoring areas on the IDPA target are the head box, which measures 6" x 6" square, and an 8" circle set up in the center chest area. The 8" circumference and location of this circle is deliberate, as it correlates to the location of the heart, and its size is equivalent to the heart and its surrounding arteries and veins.

When IDPA first started up, this circle was, for a brief period of time, actually centered in the "body" of the target. This first-ever IDPA target only lasted in service a few months. Then IDPA HQ, responding to criticism that in a realistic self-defense scenario this placement would equal a gut shot which is, in the parlance of self-defense, a "non-dynamic wound," i.e. it will not swiftly, predictably disable a determined attacker, in short order moved that circle into the much more realistic upper chest area where it has remained ever since.



The briefly seen original IDPA target (left) with the current version that swiftly replaced it (right).

Shooters can have lively and long discussions about which is the "harder" target, USPSA or IDPA. Honestly, in my experience, I think they're about the same, six of one, half a dozen of the other, flip a coin. What ARE significantly different are the scoring systems used in the two sports. As we are about to see, IDPA's Vickers Count and Limited Vickers Count systems absolutely punish sloppy accuracy. By the same token, however, they greatly reward shooters who can fire with speed while keeping their shots together.

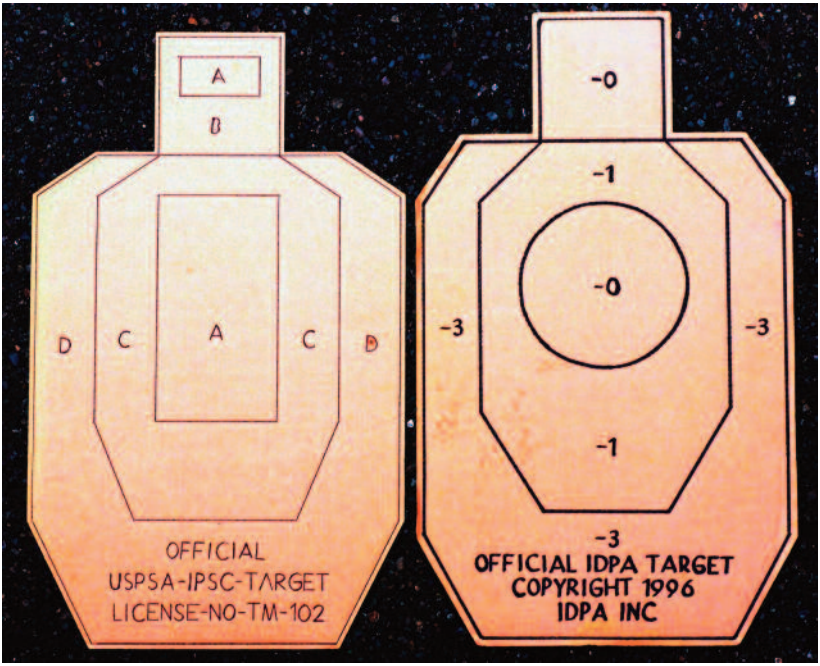
SCORING

In Vickers Count and Limited Vickers Count your score is your time to complete a string of fire, with half a second added to your score for every point down from possible. A hit in the head box or center chest circle is worth five points. Since this adds no time to our score, we refer to the head box and center circle as "down zero" areas. Look at the target, you'll see those areas are actually marked with a "-0". I have always felt, by the way, that since in IDPA we add points and time, not subtract, the target should be marked "+0" and so forth instead of "-0", etc., but hey, I didn't design the target.

In the body of the target, surrounding the down zero circle, is a generous center mass area, almost identical in shape and size to a USPSA target's C-zone, that is worth four points. This is referred to as the "down one" or "-1" zone. A hit in this area adds one half second to your score. Finally, surrounding this, we have a peripheral body hits zone, analogous to the USPSA target's D-zone, that is worth two points; this is the "down three" or "-3" zone. A hit in this area adds 1.5 seconds to your time. Missing the entire targets adds 2.5 seconds. Though why anyone would ever want to do THAT is beyond me.

At the end of each stage you add up your times to complete every string to get your raw stage score, you count up your points down from possible then add to your raw score half a second for every dropped point. This gives you your total stage score. At the end of the classifier you add up all three stage scores to get your total classifier score.

It's actually a lot simpler and easier than it may sound.



The IDPA target's overall shape and scoring zones are similar to but different from the USPSA target.

RANK

In order to get the time standards for each rank, according to IDPA president Bill Wilson when I interviewed him for an article early-on in the sport's existence, he got together a bunch of people he considered Master pistoleros and had them shoot the classifier, averaged out their performances to get the Master standard for each division of competition, then made each lower rank a particular fraction of the Master score. Ranks go, from lowest to highest, Novice, Marksman, Sharpshooter, Expert, and at the top Master.

There are five divisions of competition in IDPA, based on the type of gun you shoot. I will not get into, in this book, exactly what each of these divisions entails. If you're an IDPA shooter, you already know. Here are the rank standards in IDPA for each division:

Enhanced Service Pistol	
Master	89.00 or less
Expert	89.01-109.00
Sharpshooter	109.01-138.00
Marksman	138.01-190.00
Novice	190.01 & over
Stock Service Pistol	
Master	91.00 or less
Expert	91.01-110.00
Sharpshooter	110.01-140.00
Marksman	140.01-192.00
Novice	192.01 & over
Custom Defensive Pistol	
Master	92.00 or less
Expert	92.01-111.00
Sharpshooter	111.01-142.00
Marksman	142.01-195.00
Novice	195.01 & over
Enhanced Service Revolver	
Master	101.00 or less
Expert	101.01-122.00
Sharpshooter	122.01-155.00
Marksman	155.01-212.00
Novice	212.01 & over
Stock Service Revolver	
Master	102.00 or less
Expert	102.01-124.00
Sharpshooter	124.01-158.00
Marksman	158.01-218.00
Novice	218.01 & over

In late 2013, and for the first time since it began in 1996, the IDPA classifier standards were updated. The three major changes were (1) they did away with the fractions of a second in the time standards. For instance, the 89.41 second standard to make Master in ESP became a flat 89.00 and so forth. (2) The time standards to make rank in SSP were considerably tightened up to bring them more in line with ESP and CDP. (3) The standard for

SSP is now faster than for CDP; previously this was the other way around.

At the time IDPA started up, it was accepted as a truism that a single action auto pistol's short, light, consistent trigger pulls (legal in ESP and CDP but outlawed in SSP) gave it a huge advantage over other types of trigger actions like the "short double action only" Glock, or double action/single action autos like the Beretta 92, the SIG P220 series and such, and classifier standards reflected that. However, once IDPA started up, and considering that SSP has always been the most popular division, suddenly for the first time we had really good shooters armed with DAO and DA/SA auto pistols going head to head with other really good shooters using SAO autos. What we found out is that trigger action, providing you're grooved in on what you're using, actually makes very, very little difference in the final scores. Another treasured myth gums the big one.

POWER FACTOR

In IDPA, in order to compete in a particular division, your ammunition must make a certain power factor. This is a number derived by taking your bullet's weight in grains and multiplying that number by its velocity in feet per second. For instance, a 124-grain 9mm bullet travelling 1,100 feet per second would generate a 136,400 power factor. Here are the power factors necessary to compete in each of IDPA's five divisions:

Enhanced Service Pistol:	125,000
Stock Service Pistol:	125,000
Custom Defensive Pistol:	165,000
Enhanced Service Revolver:	165,000
Stock Service Revolver:	110,000

These power factors are meant to be easily attainable with standard pressure factory ammunition from the short barrels found on many carry/self-defense handguns. In Enhanced and Stock Service Pistol, since by far the most popular cartridge in both divisions is the 9mm Parabellum, the 125,000 pf is built around easily available, standard pressure 9mm ball out of a carry

gun. Custom Defensive Pistol is for .45 ACP auto pistols only, so 165,000 pf comes from .45 ball out of a short carry auto. Since the most popular gun in Enhanced Service Revolver is the .45 ACP chambered Smith & Wesson Model 625, again, as in Custom Defensive Pistol, we're back to a power factor built around .45 ACP. Finally, in Stock Service Revolver the most popular cartridge is .38 Special, and 110,000 pf can be reached by standard pressure ammo in that caliber.

In IDPA, if you handload, you want your ammunition's power factor to be "plus 5,000." In other words, take the power factor necessary for your division and add 5,000 to that number. This will give you enough of a cushion you can be sure of making the power factor if they chronograph your ammo at the match, but not enough more that you pick up a lot of excess recoil. So the standard for the 125,000 divisions is actually 130,000. In the 165,000 divisions you want 170,000. In 110,000 pf Stock Service Revolver you're looking for 115,000. Don't sweat it if you go a bit over that. My current match ammo goes 133,000-ish.

STAGES

Let's talk a bit about terminology. A "stage" in a combat pistol match is a complete drill. In the case of a scenario-based stage, usually there will only be one portion to the stage, one shooting problem, however many shooting positions or shots that might entail. Run through it once and you're done.

However we also have what are called "standards" stages. While scenario-based stages are freestyle – you can, within the rules of what's legal and what's not, solve them any way you choose, and fire as many shots as you want – standards are tests of pure shooting skill, gun handling and marksmanship. Standards measure your ability to execute certain, very specific skills. You are given a sequence of events (for instance, "From the seven yard line, draw from the holster and fire two shots to the body and one to the head of T1." There is no "freestyle" about it, that's what you do, period. I mean, you can shoot from whatever stance floats your boat, but the bottom line is you have to draw from the holster and fire two to the body and one to the head on Target 1.

No extra shots, no makeups.

In IDPA, Vickers Count is used for scenarios, Limited Vickers Count is used for standards. The difference between the two is that in Vickers Count you are allowed to fire however many shots you feel are required to solve the problem, including makeup shots; in Limited Vickers Count by contrast you may only fire the number of shots in the course description, no more, no less, no makeup shots. The IDPA classifier is, in essence, a long, multi-part standards exercise scored using Limited Vickers Count.

A lot of people hate standards exercises, because they expose the fact that, on a basic level, they have never learned to shoot particularly well. On the other hand, if you know you have a good basic skill set, you LOVE standards exercises, you start wiggling your toes inside your little fuzzy bunny slippers the moment you see one come up at a match, because you know that means you're going to out-perform almost everyone, if not everyone period, who's there.

STRINGS

Within a stage, we may have discrete "strings". For instance our first three tasks to complete on the classifier are a series of three failure drills/Mozambiques, for each rep of which we will draw from the holster and fire two shots to the body and one to the head. Thus we do that on T1, then reholster. This is String 1. We do the same thing on T2, and reholster, that's String 2. We do the same thing on T3 for String 3. Within a larger, encompassing stage, we may have any number of strings. Stage 1 on the IDPA classifier has seven strings, Stage 2 has four, Stage 3 has three, for a total of 14 strings overall.

Stage descriptions will commonly use the abbreviations "T1", "T2", etc. which stands for Target 1, Target 2 and so forth. For the purposes of the IDPA classifier, T1 is the far left target, set up at a height of six feet. T2 is in the center, with a height of four feet (commonly referred to by IDPA shooters as "the little pygmy guy") and is the target on which we will center ourselves for Stages 1 and 2. T3 is to the far right, with a height of five feet.

As we go from Stage 1 to 2 to 3, distance progressively increases. Stage 1 takes place from the seven-yard line. Stage 2 is at ten yards. Stage 3 occurs at both a barricade from 20 yards and low cover at 15.

TO CONCEAL OR NOT TO CONCEAL?

Strangely enough for a sport built around the idea of using concealed carry guns, concealment is not required on the classifier. Of the 14 strings of fire on the classifier, 13 of them begin from the draw. I don't know about you, but I'll take every advantage I can get, especially when I'm trying to move up in rank. There is nothing in the IDPA rules that prevents you from shooting the classifier wearing a concealing garment. I don't, and I've very rarely seen anyone else do so either. We will run the classifier without concealment. We can be Tactical Tommy later, AFTER we get our IDPA Master rank.

TIPS AND TRICKS

In the forthcoming chapters I will be giving tips on how to improve your performance for every string on the IDPA classifier. The info in these chapters will not by itself make you an IDPA Master. But if you're close to moving up, whether a Novice dreaming of Marksman, or an Expert wanting Master, if you're willing to practice what I preach here, these tips can push you up and over the edge.

HOW WELL DOES THE CLASSIFIER SYSTEM WORK?

Pretty darn well, actually. I have heard the idea put forth by some folks, "Practice the classifier and you'll get really good at shooting the classifier, but that doesn't necessarily translate over to doing well at the match." This is simply untrue. Thing is, with the exception of engaging moving targets and lateral movement between cover positions, there is very, very little they can throw at you during an IDPA match that is not covered in the classifier. It really is, within its developers' goal of setting up a test of shooting skill that could be easily run with a minimum of props, an amazingly comprehensive set of shooting drills. In order to turn in a good score on the IDPA classifier there are a LOT of things

you need to be able to do really, really well.

I look at the score sheet after any match at my local IDPA club, and what I see is all the Masters at the top in a block. Followed by all the Experts in a block. Followed by the Sharpshooters. Followed by the Marksmen. Followed by the Novices. Not to say that, occasionally, we might not see a really great Expert who's having a good day beat a Master who's not, a great Sharpshooter beat an Expert, and so on down the line, but that doesn't happen very often. In general the rank structure, that systematized awarding of titles based on demonstrated skill level, translates over amazingly well to what you see on the score sheet. The IDPA classifier system really does work.

THE PURPOSE OF THIS BOOK

I am not, in this book, going to try to teach you how to shoot. I assume you already know how to do that. The purpose of this book is to share with you the little tips and tricks I have developed, over coming up on two decades of shooting the IDPA classifier. These are the things I see shooters, over and over again, get wrong at the lower skill levels. It's not that they can't shoot. It's not that they don't have the skill set already in place to be scoring in the next rank above where they will actually, finally wind up placing. Most people are actually much better shooters than they realize. It's that they don't know the little tricks that can carve huge chunks of time off any particular string. These are the things IDPA Masters know, that maybe you don't. However, when you've finished reading this book, you will know them, too.

CHAPTER 2

STAGE 1, STRINGS 1-3: MOZAMBIQUES

Draw and fire two shots to the body and one to the head, T1.
Draw and fire two shots to the body and one to the head, T2.
Draw and fire two shots to the body and one to the head, T3.

We will begin, logically enough, with Stage 1, which incorporates seven different strings of fire. Every string on Stage 1 is shot from the seven-yard line. You will begin, and stay, centered in front of T2. Strings 1-3 are identical, the "failure drill" i.e. the Mozambique. From the holster, fire two shots to the body and one to the head. String 1 is shot on T1, String 2 on T2, and String 3 on T3.

Tip #1: Learn to shoot with both eyes open. Also learn to shoot with your head erect. On this drill we have to fire three shots from the draw, per string, in a reasonably short time frame. The only way we're going to be able to do that, and be accurate, is if we aim every shot. This means seeing the sights for every shot, and being able to track the sights between shots. Which will be impossible if we've lost our depth perception through closing one eye; similarly we will not be able to track the sights if shooting with the head leaned forward. In recoil the front sight will actually flip up out of our field of vision, because our eyesight is being blocked by our upper orbital ridge. By contrast, with practice, shooting with both eyes open and the head erect, tracking the sights and shooting accurately at speed becomes something we can do easily.

Tip #2: On the draw, prep the trigger before the gun gets to the target. Take up the slack in the trigger, hit the "link" resistance point, then apply almost enough pressure to the trigger to fire the gun but not quite. Do that on the draw, we can fire the gun as

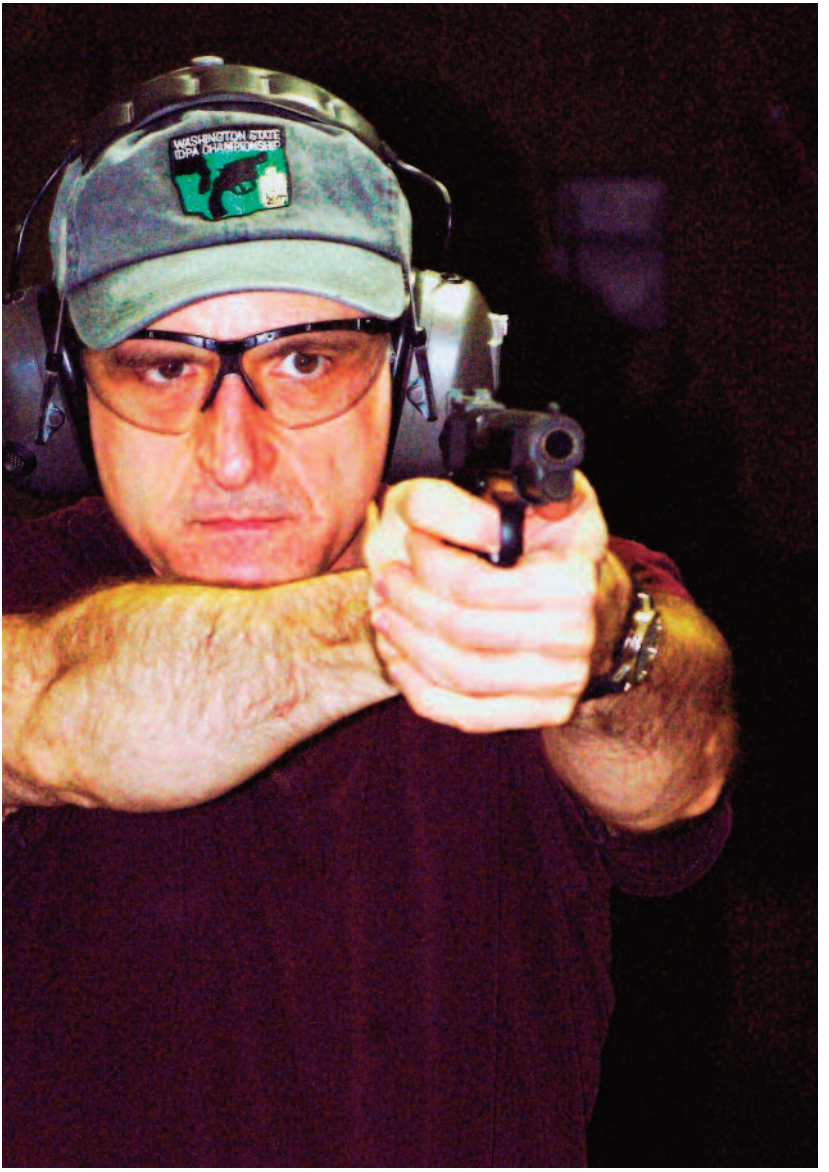
Learning to shoot with both eyes open allows better depth perception, faster focal shifts, and a wider field of view. Shooting great Brian Enos shows excellent both-eyes-open/head erect technique. (Of course, what did you expect?) Photo by Nidaa A.

soon as it stops moving. This is much faster than getting the gun out there and THEN beginning to pull the trigger. Trigger prep on the draw is a technique that takes quite a bit of practice to do safely, and if you're not already used to doing it you MUST put in significant dry fire practice before ever attempting it with live ammo in the gun.

Personally, I dry fired prepping the trigger on the draw for hours every day, for a solid month at home before I ever went to the range and did it with live ammo in the gun. And when I finally did go out on the range with live ammo, I executed the draw and prep technique REALLY slowly.

Here is a good example of what trigger prep looks like: the trigger has the slack taken out, it's hard up against "the link" resistance point, and almost enough pressure to fire the gun (but not quite) is applied.
Gun is Thomas' Glock 34.

While the author switched to shooting with both eyes open years ago, his skill at shooting with the head erect is still a work in progress. In this photo, his head is tilted forward enough that his glasses, hat brim and upper orbital ridge could all block his view of the sights in recoil. Gun is an STI VIP 9mm.



This image, taken years later, shows much better technique, though there is still room for improvement. Gun is a Rock River Arms Limited Match Pistol .45.

Tip #3: Let recoil from the second body shot lift you up to the head box, rather than recovering from recoil THEN using your muscles to lift the gun. The first way is fast, the second is slow. You can tell the difference just by listening to people using either technique. Way #1 sounds like BangBangBang, one continuous string of shots. Way #2 sounds like BangBang….Bang with a significant and noticeable pause between the second and third shots.

CHAPTER 3

STAGE 1, STRING 4: HEAD SHOTS

Draw and fire two shots into each head box, T1-T3.

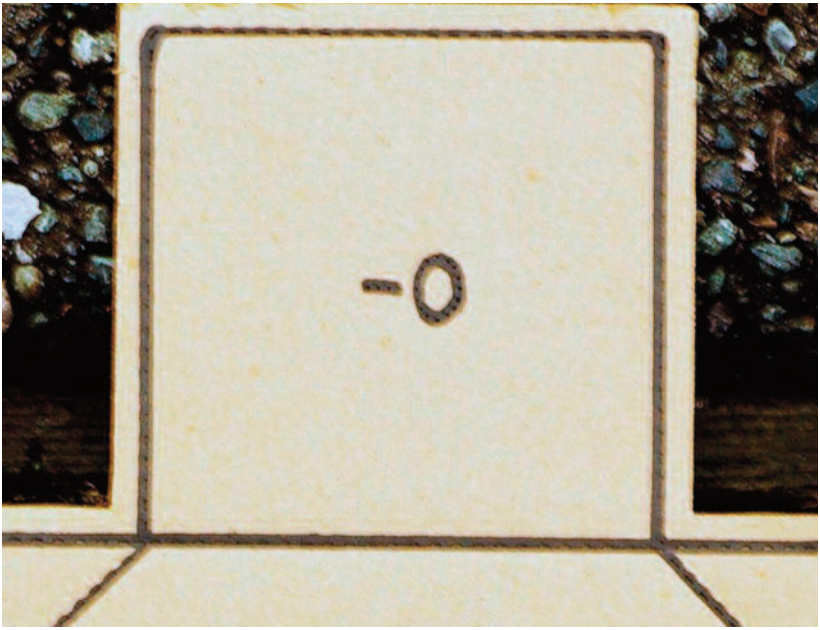
Tip #1: Again we see (pun intended) the advantages of shooting with both eyes open versus closing the non-dominant eye and shooting only with the master eye. Both eyes open gives us a much wider field of view. This is important on any string in the classifier requiring transitions (movement between targets) like this one.

The ability to fire a handgun with both eyes open is critical on many shooting skills, including Stage 1, String 4 of the IDPA classifier.

Tip #2: Relax your vision, begin seeing much more of what's out there in front of your face instead of having a super-hard front sight focus. At the instant the last shot on a target fires, SNAP your eyes over to the next target and look right at where you want the gun to go. The gun will follow your eyes. This will all be much easier to do if you have your eyesight relaxed and both eyes open.

Tip #3: Stage 1, String 4 is probably the single most accuracy intensive task in the IDPA classifier. (Some might say it's the entirety of Stage 3 at 15 and 20 yards, but I would argue for Stage 1, String 4.) The head box on an IDPA target is, in the overall scheme of things, fairly small, a 6" square. Also, unlike the 8" chest circle, it's not surrounded by a large area of lower scoring cardboard that will give us at least some points if we miss it; over the head box's top and to either side there's only air – which gives no score. On String 4 even a shot that goes low, down into the target body, gives no points, it counts as a complete miss of the target. This is fair, since on this string your target is the head.

Every head shot is worth 5 points; at half a second per point each Miss adds 2.5 seconds. There are nine head shots in Stage 1: three (one per target) on Strings 1-3, six (two per target) on String 4. At half a second per point down, that's 22.5 seconds we could possibly add to our score. Thank you, no. We CANNOT afford to miss the head shots on the first four strings. Take whatever time is needed to make those shots. Even if it takes us an extra second to nail a shot, we'll still come out way ahead versus a 2.5 second miss. (Having said that, obviously the faster is our "taking our time" speed, the better we'll score.)



The head box on the IDPA target is a fairly small target requiring decent technique to hit multiple times, fast.

Tip #4: Prep the trigger while the gun is moving toward the target. This will allow a much more accurate and faster first shot versus getting the gun out there and aligned, THEN beginning to pull the trigger. As mentioned in Chapter 2, prepping the trigger on the draw is an advanced level skill, and requires much dry fire practice to master before ever doing it live fire.

Tip #5: Trigger prep is key on transitions, but especially so on anything requiring fine accuracy and fast transitions. Grand Master Bruce Gray has said, "The answer to every shooting question is 'Prep the trigger!'" Well, I wouldn't go quite that far, but it's certainly the answer to this string. How do we do fast, accurate transitions on a small head box at seven yards? Answer: prep the trigger while the gun is moving between targets, take up the slack, get the trigger hard up against the "link" resistance point, and apply almost as much pressure as necessary to fire the gun but not quite, so that, when the gun does get to the next target, it's only a matter of stabilizing the sights in the head box

and applying just that last bit more pressure to fire the gun. If, by contrast, we wait to begin pulling the trigger until the gun is already on the next target, we are WAY behind the power curve.

When prepping the trigger for an accurate shot, the slack is taken out of trigger travel, the trigger is hard up against "the link" reset point, and almost enough pressure to fire the gun but not quite has been applied to the trigger.

Tip #6: Stop thinking of shooting for "the head" and replace that with "the very center of the head box." Your target is not that entire 6" x 6" area but instead a bullet hole sized circle in the very center of the box, your goal to put both shots through that same hole. Think of it that way, and even if your shots are somewhat off that goal, still they will both land inside the box. As Mel Gibson said in *The Patriot*, "Aim small, miss small."

Here is what it looks like live fire on the IDPA classifier. The gun is out of the holster and oriented downrange, the hands have almost completely met in the two-hand grip, and the index finger is beginning to slip into the trigger guard to begin trigger prep while the gun is moving toward the target. Note the knees are bent for smooth transitions without affecting upper body set.

Tip #7: When transitioning between targets, isolate your upper body from any tension that could generate weird forces onto the gun causing it to do a hula dance in recoil. In other words, in order to move the gun between targets, don't leave your lower body immobile and bend at the waist, instead everything from the hips up stays the same and you move at the knees. For wide transitions like these, consciously flex your knees, drop your butt down toward the ground a bit, and have all movement happen in your legs, everything from the hips up stays the same. You can think of it in any way that works for you. "Move at the knees." "Don't change your upper body." Whatever mental trick gets you to do it. I think of it as "Keep your hips square to any target you're shooting." However you think of it, the results are impressive indeed. Once you get your stance set up on the first target, thereafter IT NEVER CHANGES. There is simply a sensation of moving that perfect stance from target to target.

During this (simulated – note the lack of hearing protection) draw, Thomas has the gun a few inches from full extension and the trigger is already prepped.

During final lockout, the gun reaches full extension, the sights align and stabilize, and the last bit of pressure necessary to fire the gun is applied to the already prepped trigger.

Here the gun is almost at full extension during a live fire draw, the trigger is prepped, all that is necessary is to "float" the gun out a few inches more, stabilize the sights, and fire the shot.

CHAPTER 4

STAGE 1, STRING 5: SUPPORT HAND ONLY SHOOTING

Begin with gun in support hand, muzzle depressed in Low Ready position, fire one shot apiece T1-T3.

Stage 1, Strings 1 thru 4, all incorporated head shots. After String 4 there are no more head shots, from String 5 thru to the end of the classifier it's all chest shots.

Tip #1: What I am about say is true for every shot on the classifier, but especially so for the one hand only strings where errors of technique are magnified. We will decrease that phenomenon immensely if we simply look hard at where we want our bullets to go. There is a tendency when shooting at large IDPA targets to think of the entire target as the goal. At a more refined level we think of the 8" circle as our target, which does improve matters. Instead of either of those options, think of the very center of the 8" circle as your goal, especially when firing one hand only. LOOK AT IT. Try to burn a hole right through the very center of the target with your laser beam eyes. Even if you're a bit off from your aiming point, you will still be inside the 8" circle. Look at it before you draw, then switch your eyes back to the sights, which, you will find, have gone right where you were just looking.

Tip #2: Raise the gun in a smooth, controlled fashion. Don't try to be fast, just put the gun on target, taking up the slack and prepping the trigger as the gun comes up. As soon as the gun stops moving, the shot fires. (Because we're not wasting any movement, we will of course be fast – without trying.)

Tip #3: If you shoot support hand only with the gun canted,

then as you wait for the start signal with the gun at Low Ready, already have it canted. It's a much simpler movement to raise a gun that's already canted than to raise and twist simultaneously.

Stage 1, String 5 begins with the gun in the support hand, muzzle depressed. If you are going to shoot with the gun canted, have it already canted at this point, then simply lift to fire.

Tip #4: Lean forward into the recoil. I used to blade my body severely. Then I figured out that really wasn't necessary as long as I still leaned forward. Shooting from a more "normal" stance, with my upper body parallel to the target, since I am cross dominant (right master hand, left master eye), using a less bladed stance means I actually have to turn my head to the right when shooting right hand only, and rest my cheek on my shoulder, to bring my left eye in line with the sights. Hey, it works for me.

Tip #5: Move the gun toward the centerline of the body when transitioning, which is where it wants to move in recoil anyway. If right handed, when shooting left hand only start on T1 (the far left target) and move toward the right.

Here the author fires left hand only with the gun canted on the IDPA classifier.

Tip #6: Ride the recoil between targets. Let the gun move itself for you. Shoot a target, the gun rises in recoil, it should come down on the next target, instead of coming down on the last target, then using your muscles to move it to the next. This should happen on every string, but it cuts absolutely HUGE chunks of time off the one hand only strings. Cant the gun slightly inboard to start and it'll begin moving in the desired direction all by itself. Honestly, as time has gone by I have, in addition to blading less, found myself canting the gun less as well, but it's still a technique that works well for some. Try it, see how it works for YOU.

Tip #7: If you let the arm not holding the gun just dangle by your side, then recoil energy and the movement of your body as you transition the gun will cause that arm to swing forward and back like a pendulum, moving your entire body and severely impacting your ability to fire the gun fast and accurately. Instead, get that arm stabilized by curling it in, hard up against your body, and anchor your hand at the centerline. Some people recommend

placing the hand flat against the body, some say to make a fist, some say the contact point should be the belly, some say the chest. Honestly, as long as you're stabilizing your arm versus letting it flop around, I don't think it really matters. For myself, I tend to make a monkey fist and hold it right over my xiphoid process, but that's just me.

Tip #8: So much of our performance in shooting is mental. How you hold your mind is frequently more important than how you hold your body. I really dislike the terms "weak hand" and the not quite as hideous but still not great "off hand" because they condition us to expect inferior performance from that hand. I call my left hand "the support hand" to differentiate it from the hand that primarily holds the gun which is "the master hand." And y'know, sometimes I just call my left hand "my left hand."

A year later, Thomas fires on the support hand only string of the Firearms Academy of Seattle's Handgun Master test. The gun is now much more vertical but he is still severely bladed to the target.

We are not shooting a weak hand only stage here. We are shooting a stage with our support hand, with which we have practiced to the point that we can shoot one hand only better than most people can shoot with two hands on the gun. We LOOK FORWARD to opportunities to shoot one hand only, because we know we have put in the time to be good at it. When we see a one hand only stage at a match, or we get to shoot Stage 1, String 5 on the IDPA classifier we are happy because we know the opportunity is coming up to do something at which we are better than the vast majority of other shooters.

CHAPTER 5

STAGE 1, STRING 6: MODIFIED *EL PRESIDENTE*

Begin facing uprange. Start with three rounds in the gun; turn, draw, fire one round each T1-T3, slidelock reload, one more round each T1-T3.

String 6 is a modified *El Presidente* drill. This is, by IDPA classifier standards, a long, complex string of fire. Thus we have many tips here, many opportunities to carve off huge chunks of time with improvement to our technique.

Tip #1: We begin facing away from the targets. When turning to engage, we want to turn toward our strong side: i.e. if right-handed turn clockwise. We want to turn around the gun, which actually moves very little because it's right over our pivot foot. This makes it much easier to draw the gun fast; otherwise we wind up chasing it with our hand as the piece moves in a big circle.

Tip #2: We turn fully around BEFORE the gun begins its extension, otherwise we'll still be swinging our body as the gun moves forward, leading to shots pulled wide. To ensure we begin our fast turn correctly, at the instant the timer buzzes, we SNAP our head around and look right at the center of the 8" circle on the first target. Our body will swiftly follow our head. If we incorporate the head snap into our technique, along with a few other tricks we'll discuss shortly, we will turn so fast there's literally no way we could complete the draw before our body has fully turned around and is stable.

Demonstrated live fire, a key to a fast pivot is, at the start signal, swiftly snapping the head around to look at the center of the first target. The hands have already begun moving toward the gun.

The turn is completed before the gun is out and both hands on the gun.

After the turn is completed, the gun is extended toward the target.

Tip #3: Also to facilitate our fast turn, while waiting for the buzzer we slightly lift the front of our right foot (assuming a right handed shooter) off the ground. This is very subtle, no one watching would be able to tell we were doing it. (I mention that to indicate how little movement is required, not to indicate we're doing anything sneaky; this is quite legal.) At the buzzer, having unloaded the weight on the front of our foot, it's very simple and easy to just pivot on the heel. By contrast if we pivoted on the front of the foot, that would require lifting up the heel then lowering it back down after the turn; this imparts a lot of movement to the entire body that unbalances us, giving our body after the pivot a back-and-forth, side-to-side swing that makes it seriously difficult if not impossible to fire that first, accurate, aimed shot fast, and is just generally a loser of a technique. By contrast, turning on the heel does not require lifting our body up, then back down; the contact portion of our body to the ground, and therefore our body as a whole, stays on the same level throughout the pivot. This allows the body to stabilize after the pivot MUCH faster.

IMPORTANT: The front of the right foot does not touch the ground until after the body is completely turned around.

A good, fast pivot is largely a matter of footwork. Start with the feet parallel to each other, toes pointed forward, most of the weight on the offside foot, lift the front of the master hand side foot off the ground (exaggerated in this shot to make the point).

At the start signal, pivot the master side foot toward the outside on its heel.

The foot continues to pivot around on its heel; its front is still not touching the ground.

The foot continues to pivot on its heel; front still not touching the ground, the offside foot comes off the ground and begins to swing around.

The front of the master hand side foot hits the ground oriented toward the target, the offside foot continues to come around.

The offside foot hits the ground; now the shooter is in his normal shooting stance but faced in the opposite direction.

Tip #4: When reloading, keep the gun high, in line of sight, don't drop it down. We're just going to have to bring it back up again to fire after the reload anyway; why add all that excess movement and time by going up then down?

Keep the gun high when reloading. In this sequence, Thomas begins aimed-in…

Fires a shot, the slide locks back, his support hand goes for a fresh magazine…

The old magazine falls free, the gun is moved backward and turned, the fresh mag comes up…

The magazine is inserted and seated…

The support hand thumb is placed on the slide stop, the gun begins re-extension…

The slide snaps forward, the arms are almost at full extension…

The next shot fires. This process, with practice, takes less than two seconds.

Tip #5: Drop the slide with the support hand thumb on the slide release; it's faster than slingshotting the slide.

Drop the slide with your support hand thumb, it's faster and easier than jacking the slide.

Tip #6: Again we have an instance where shooting with both eyes open becomes very important. With both eyes open we'll be able to see the next target in our peripheral vision even as we're moving the gun to it, rather than having it suddenly appear in our vision.

Tip #7: Prep the trigger between targets. It saves immense amounts of time if, when the gun arrives, it's ready to fire instead of having to complete that first trigger pull on the next target from scratch AFTER it gets there.

CHAPTER 6

STAGE 1, STRING 7: MASTER HAND ONLY SHOOTING

Master hand only, draw and fire two shots each T1-T3.

Tip #1: On String 5, support hand only, we began with the gun in hand; on String 6, master hand only, we start from the holster. When shooting master hand only from the draw there is a tendency to really punch the gun out hard at the target. This leads to a lot of what I call "the tuning fork effect" where the gun bounces up and down for awhile before it settles. Thus we have a choice: wait until the sights stabilize or rush the first shot and probably miss the target – which in this case, let us remember, is not the entire target but the center of the 8" circle. Instead, what you want to do is begin the draw fast but then SLOW DOWN, float the gun out there those last few inches while prepping the trigger, and you can fire the first, accurate, aimed shot as soon as the gun stops moving. This is good advice on any draw, frankly.

Tip #2: Again we move the gun toward the centerline of our body when transitioning in one hand only shooting. Thus if right handed, on this string we begin on T3 (far right) then shoot right to left.

The evolution of a technique: (1) Thomas fires right hand only on the classifier. Note extreme blading and canted gun.

(2) Shooting the FAS Handgun Master test a year later, still bladed and canted, but having no trouble passing the test with a .45 auto.

(3) Fast-forward again to the Intensive Handgun Skills speed shooting course at InSights Training Center, the body has begun to unblade, the gun is much more upright. Note two empty casings right above the Glock 17's ejection port.

(4) Finally, invited to shoot a local PD's qualification, the body has come even more unbladed but still leaned forward to resist recoil, hand anchored to chest to prevent "pendulum effect," gun upright, cheek on shoulder. Note the shooter in the background, and differences between his and Thomas' technique, specifically that his support side arm is simply hanging loose instead of solidly pinned to the body.

Tip #3: On String 5 you only fired one shot per target, on String 7 you must fire two shots per. Make your goal to put that first shot right into the very center of the target, then hit that bullet hole with the second shot. Now, that's probably not going to happen (though it will certainly be cool if it does) but if you think of it that way you will put both shots well within the 8" circle.

Tip #4: Other than that, all the tips for String 5 apply to String 7, too. For that's all that String 7 is: String 5 but done with a generally more dexterous hand and with two shots per target instead of one per. Play that mental game with yourself when String 7 rolls around. Say to yourself, "I've already done this once with my support hand, now with my master hand this is comparatively EASY." (Not that support hand only wasn't easy too, natch.)

CHAPTER 7

STAGE 2, STRINGS 1 AND 2: SHOOTING WHILE MOVING

All of Stage 1 occurred at seven yards. We now continue on with Stage 2, which begins at 10 yards. We will cover both Strings 1 and 2 together since they both entail shooting while moving.

Start at 10 yards, draw and fire 2 shots each T1-T3 while advancing with a forward fault line at 5 yards.

Tip #1: There are two basic ways to hold your upper body while moving. (1) Lean forward into the recoil, (2) a much more upright stance, almost leaning backward while moving. Try both, choose what works best for you.

Tip #2: Bend at the hips to get your center of gravity (butt) closer to the ground.

Tip #3: Think about why your upper body moves, causing shots to go wide, when moving forward. It's because as you step forward with one foot your body leans to that side, then when your foot hits the ground there's an impact that causes your body to vibrate, then you take the next step and all that movement and vibration happens again in the other direction. Side-to-side, up-and-down with every step. This does not lead to much accurate shooting while moving. We need to minimize that effect. To start with, while moving keep your knees close together, put your feet one in front of the other, like walking a tightrope, to avoid side-to-side body and therefore side-to-side gun movement.

Tip #4: To minimize up-and down muzzle bounce, we also need to deal with that whole "impact" thing when our foot hits the ground. The key, I find, is to, as much as possible, minimize body movement above the knees, and do all your movement with

the lower legs. Think in terms of taking baby steps, where the heel of one foot lands barely in front of the toes of the other foot with each step.

When we're developing and executing techniques, we come up with little mental images, ways of thinking of things that allow us to do them. I think of the baby steps technique as "Mexican skirt walking." We've all see the stereotypical scene of the Mexican dancer in a cantina, wearing a skirt so tight at the knees she can only take these little shuffling steps because she can't move her knees very far forward. You could do worse than to tie your knees together with a short piece of rope while practicing your shooting-while-moving skills. You can tell a shooter who's good at shooting while moving if you ever see a photo of them, because as they take a step forward their lower legs look like a pair of scissors opening and closing, that's all that moves.

Minimize movement above the knees. As much as possible nothing moves but the lower legs. Note that Thomas' lower legs look like a pair of scissors opening and closing.

Tip #5: There are two common approaches to how to integrate your forward movement with the draw. (1) While drawing, move fast toward the targets, to get yourself closer, but as the gun comes up on the T1, slow your forward momentum so you'll have less muzzle bounce than you would with spastic forward movement, then you can machine gun the targets at close range. There are people who use this approach well, but I find it leaves me little space before I hit the forward fault line in which to engage targets, so I'm thinking about the fault line when I

should be thinking about shooting. (2) Start moving and drawing at the same time – while moving forward at a slow continuous pace.

There is a third method, which is the way I do it. I almost hesitate to mention this, since it's so different from how I've ever seen anyone else attack Stage 2, String 1. Still I feel I must include it since it works for me so much better than anything else.

The third method is to stand flatfooted as you draw, get the gun out and sights stabilized THEN take your first step forward. The rules don't say you have to begin moving right at the timer's buzzer, only that you must be moving while shooting. It is much easier to stabilize the sights while you're not moving. Then you can focus on not disturbing that great sight alignment while taking your first step forward. By the time your foot hits the ground for your first step you have dealt with T1. There can be a definite vibration through your body when your foot hits the ground, so frankly I prefer to shoot WHILE taking a step, with one foot off the ground. I know this is different than what many other people do, but it works for me. By the time my foot hits the ground for the second step, I have dealt with T2. By the time I've taken my third step, I have dealt with T3. Thus we can shoot all three targets by the time we've taken three steps.

Through the distance at which we're shooting the targets is longer than with the other techniques, I find the advantage of being able to stabilize the sights while I'm not moving, and THEN begin my smooth, slow movement, instead of suddenly having to slow down after dashing toward the targets with Method #1, or even continuing on with the same forward movement while beginning to shoot with Method #2, more than offsets this, allowing me to shoot much more accurately.

I have tested myself using all three methods. My raw times with all three are about the same, but I'm am quite a bit more accurate with Method #3, thus add much less time to my score with dropped points. Try all three methods, see which works best for you.

One way to integrate forward movement with the draw on Stage 2, String 1 is, at the timer's buzzer, begin forward movement and the draw at the same time.

Another technique for dealing with String 1 is to begin moving forward fast while drawing, then slow your forward movement and machine gun the targets at close range.

The third technique for integrating forward movement with the draw on Stage 2, String 1, and the one preferred by the author, is to stand flatfooted, draw, stabilize the sights, then begin shooting while taking your first step. Note two shell casings in the air when Thomas has taken only the first step.

Tip #6: Step off with your support hand side foot. If right-handed, step off with your left foot first and vice versa. Every time you step forward with a particular foot, that hip also moves. You want to step off with the offside foot so your gun hand hip, and therefore the holster, isn't moving around during the draw, thus your hand can go right to it, swiftly and surely.

On String 1, step forward with the offside leg, i.e. if right handed step forward with the left leg and vice versa.

Start at 5 yards, draw and fire 2 shots each T1-T3 while moving to the rear.

Tip #7: Draw while standing in place, THEN begin moving. This keeps you closer to the targets. There is a tendency on this string, because you're so close to the targets, to really hammer them fast without reference to sight picture and thus drop a lot of points. Focus on the points; the speed will naturally follow on this stage.

At 5 yards, draw THEN step back to keep yourself closer to the targets.

When drawing and moving to the rear, the author always steps back with the offside leg.

Tip #8: As at 10 yards, we begin by moving our offside foot, i.e. if right handed we step with our left foot first. At 10 yards, righties stepped forward with our left foot. At 5 yards we are going to step rearward with our left foot. Though arguably it's unimportant on this string, since we're going to draw before moving therefore immobilizing the holster is not an issue, still always stepping off with the non-gun hand side foot is a good habit to cultivate because in many (most) situations it IS important.

These two strings are where most people drop an immense

amount of points. Get good at them by following these tips, and you can IMMENSELY improve your score on the IDPA classifier.

CHAPTER 8

STAGE 2, STRINGS 3 & 4: 10 YARD WORK

The last two strings of Stage 2 both take place at 10 yards. You will notice that Stage 2, Strings 3 and 4 are basically Stage 1, Strings 6 and 7 over again, only at 10 yards instead of seven, and with two shots per target required on the Modified *El Prez* instead of only one per as we did in Stage 1.

Begin facing uprange, start with six rounds in the gun: turn, draw, two rounds each T1-T3, slidelock reload, two more rounds each T1-T3.

Tip #1: This stage is mostly about trigger control. There's no reason you can't put every shot on an *El Prez* at 10 yards into the 8" circles, and that should be your goal.

Tip #2: The two shots you're most likely to pull on this string are the first shot on T1 after the turn, and the first shot on T1 after the reload. Knowing that, really focus on those shots. Taking a few extra hundredths or even tenths to get those shots in there is better than two half second penalties.

All the other tips for String 6 apply to this string as well.

Master hand only, draw and fire two shots each T1-T3.

Tip #3: Basically the same problem as Stage 1, String 7 with more precise trigger control required. As you move further to the rear on each stage of the classifier, quality of trigger control becomes progressively more important. Again, there's no reason you can't put all six shots inside the 8" circles from this distance, and that's your goal.

We have completed Stage 2. Now we move on to the most complex, challenging and (I think) fun part of the IDPA classifier,

Stage 3 which incorporates 20 yard shooting, barricade work, movement, and shooting from low cover.

Stage 2, Strings 3 and 4 are mostly about trigger control. This close up of Thomas' hand live fire indicates the concept of trigger prep – all the slack has been taken out of the trigger and it is hard up against the "link" resistance point.

CHAPTER 9

STAGE 3, STRING 1: BARRICADE WORK

We are done with Stages 1 and 2. We now move on to Stage 3, most of which is fired around a barricade at 20 yards. This is where most people screw up – even those who've done well on the first two stages – because they can't hit the 8" circles from 20 yards while off-balance, leaning around the barricade. They kill themselves with dropped point time penalties. This is the stage where people do the most things wrong, thus it will also be the one with the most tips.

STRING 1: Draw and fire 2 shots each T1-T3 from one side of barricade, reload, fire 2 shots each T1-T3 from opposite side of barricade.

Tip #1: Shoot around the master hand side of the barricade first. It's a shorter, easier, more directional movement to draw to the side of the barricade on which you're wearing your holster. Thus if right handed, draw to the rightmost target, T3, instead of having to simultaneously lean and draw to the leftmost target, T1.

Tip #2: A common error is crowding the barricade, forcing shooters to actually lean backward while shooting. Thus every time they fire the gun, recoil rocks their body backward, destroying both shot-to-shot speed and accuracy. If shooting from inside a Bianchi barricade, get as far back in the box as possible to start, with your heels against the back of the box.

Don't crowd the barricade. Get so far back in the Bianchi barricade your feet are against the back of the box. Thomas' early barricade shooting foot position, shown here, minimized footwork but sacrificed balance.

Tip #3: While waiting for the buzzer, already be leaning significantly forward. The forward lean stops recoil from rocking you backward. Already being in this position saves you time and movement versus acquiring it AFTER the buzzer.

While waiting for the start signal at the barricade, already be in your shooting position: knees flexed, leaned forward, looking around barricade to visually acquire the first target to be engaged.

Tip #4: Flex your knees; consciously drop your butt toward the ground. Be in a slight but definite crouch. This will allow you to get much further around the barricade and still be well-balanced (immensely important when engaging the far left target from around the right side barricade, and the far right target from around the left side). Barricade shooting with legs straight by contrast forces you to lean your upper body radically to the side to engage targets; you'll find it difficult to get far enough around the barricade to engage T1 from the right and T3 from the left. With knees flexed, you can get around the barricade much further and still be well-balanced doing it.

Tip #5: If the Safety Officer (SO) allows it, while waiting for the buzzer, lean out around cover and visually acquire the first target, then simply draw to it. This is quite legal and the SO should allow it because IDPA rules define "behind cover" as exposing no more than 50 percent of your upper body and none of your lower. You can begin the stage looking at the first target and still be behind cover to start.

Tip #6: Some SOs have their own definition of "behind cover" that has nothing to do with the IDPA Rule Book and absolutely insist you begin Stage 3, Strings 1 and 2 standing fully behind the barricade. You can still draw straight to the target by, as you assume your position behind the barricade preparatory to shooting, leaning slightly around it, one side then the other, visually acquiring T1 and T3, then memorizing points on the barricade that are right in line between your eye and those targets. It may be a knot in the wood, staple, splinter, whatever. At the timer's signal, consciously draw the gun to that pre-chosen point as you lean out, then to the opposite point after the reload. This ensures that when you draw the gun, and then bring it back to a firing position after the reload, the gun moves right where it needs to be to instantly fire your 1st and 7th shots.

For a fast first shot at the barricade, if it's not possible to visually acquire the first target, pick a point on the barricade right in line between your eye and that target, and simply draw to that point. (Don't actually point with your finger; the author is only doing that for purposes of instruction.)

Tip #7: Prep the trigger for the first shot while the gun is moving toward the target; don't wait until the gun is already there THEN start the trigger pull. This one change will save you immense time on your first shot.

Tip #8: For best accuracy at distance, prep the trigger for every shot. Prep the trigger between shots on the same target, and prep it while moving between targets. By the time you complete a transition, be a fraction of a pound away from firing the next shot. This is the single most important tip I can give you to increase both speed and accuracy from the barricade.

Tip #9: Okay, we have to do either a Tactical Reload (TR) where we draw and insert a fresh mag before putting away the old mag, or a Reload With Retention (RWR) where we store the old mag before grabbing a new, while moving to the opposite side of the barricade. Do a RWR on Stage 3, String 1 since it's a simpler, faster sequence of movements than a TR.

Tip #10: As you've just fired your sixth shot and begin to come back behind cover to RWR, punch the mag button as soon as possible. In IDPA all reloads must be started and completed behind cover, however remember "cover" means no more than 50 percent of your upper body exposed. You don't have to wait until

you're back 100 percent behind the barricade to begin the reload. Your goal is, by the time your body is all the way behind the barricade you should have the old magazine stashed. That won't actually happen, in reality you'll be back 100 percent behind cover before you can even depress the mag release button, however thinking of it this way will still cut major time.

Tip #11: Another advantage of not crowding the barricade: it'll give you much more room to execute the reload without the barricade interfering with it. Keep the gun up at eye level while reloading instead of dropping it down as so many people do. It wastes time to lower the gun. It wastes time to have to bring it up again. So don't do either.

When doing a RWR at the barricade, get the magazine out of the gun and stashed (the author puts it in the waistband) as fast as possible. Keep the gun high, move it in a straight line across the barricade to the other side rather than dropping down low then coming back up. At the beginning of this sequence, notice how off-balance having a wide stance behind the barricade forces the author to be, a technique deficiency he has since rectified with a much narrower stance.

Tip #12: When shooting around the barricade, keep the gun, as much as possible, straight up-and-down; don't cant it in an attempt to get it further around the barricade. You'll have much more natural sight tracking; with resultant better shot-to-shot speed and accuracy, if you have your front sight right over the gun's barrel versus having it to one side.

Tip #13: Do not let any part of your arms, hands, or the gun touch the barricade, or recoil during firing will cause the gun to jump violently away from the barricade, destroying your shot-to-shot speed and accuracy.

Tip #14: This next piece of advice actually came from watching the former president of my IDPA club and current IDPA Area Coordinator for Washington state and Alaska, Rick Breneman, shoot the classifier. Rick is 6'5" therefore dealing with the barricade is disgustingly easy for him. He just leans very slightly to either side, there is no significant body torqueing involved, and shoots. Not off-balance at all. I died of envy.

I, on the other hand, am 5'8". Even using the trick of staying as far back in the box as possible, even using the bent knees approach, shooting around the barricade was not easy for me. In order to get around the barricade far enough to engage T1 from

the right side, and T3 from the left, I had to bend the outside leg much more than the other one, and really lean into it. So when shooting around the right side barricade I wound up with most of my weight on my right leg, from the left barricade I had most of my weight on the left leg. It was uncomfortable, but more importantly that leg invariably started vibrating, and that movement got passed up my body, through my arms and hands and into the gun. Holding the gun steady with my body cranked that far around the barricade and the gun straight up-and-down was HARD. Impossible, actually.

My original approach to body positioning on Stage 3, String 1 was to widen my stance, put my right foot against the right side of the Bianchi barricade's box, the left foot against the left side. Economy of motion, I could transition from right to left with no foot movement at all. A decent theory that just didn't work very well. It would have worked great…if I was 6'5".

All that didn't stop me from getting my IDPA Master rank, but over time I thought and I pondered: how could I stay as balanced as Rick while shooting around either side of the barricade? In other words, how could I get the advantages of being 6'5" at 5'8"? How could I shoot around either side of the barricade with the gun straight up-and-down, and with very little body lean required, without all that excess weight on the outboard leg, therefore none of the added, uncontrollable gun movement that came from being off-balance with most of my weight on one leg, then the other? How could I make shooting around both sides of the barricade, getting far enough around it to engage T1 from the right side, T3 from the left, EASY instead of hard? And eventually I figured it out.

Begin standing off-center. I will assume you are right handed in the following description of movements. (Sorry, lefties, I know it sucks.) Still put your master hand side foot right up against that side of the Bianchi barricade box, but consciously close up your stance. Have your feet only about six inches apart. Suddenly you'll find you can get around the barricade to engage T1 from the right, easily. You can keep the gun straight up-and-down; you

won't have to cant it. You'll be well-balanced; you won't have all that weight on the outside leg. Shooting at distance just got a LOT easier.

While you're doing your RWR, step over with your left foot and put it all the way over touching the left side of the box, then bring over your right foot, reacquire your closed up, barricade shooting stance. This will cost you no time since you're using the interval that would have been taken up just doing a RWR anyway. You are now in position to easily shoot around the left side barricade.

Begin standing all the way to the master hand side of the Bianchi barricade's box, outside foot hard up against the side of the box, feet close to each other in a narrow stance.

While doing your RWR, step over with the support hand side foot until it hits the opposite side of the box and then plant it.

Bring over the other foot and reacquire your closed up, narrow, well-balanced, long distance barricade-shooting stance. At this point only a slight bend to the left knee allows a right-handed shooter to engage even T3 around the left barricade while retaining good balance.

With the narrow stance, a shooter can engage all three targets, even T1 from the right side barricade and T3 from the left, while remaining nicely balanced. Look at the difference between this photo and the first shot in the RWR sequence, both of which show Thomas with his gun aimed all the way to the left as necessary to engage T1 around the right side barricade, to see what a difference this technique makes.

So your movement/positioning for Stage 3, String 1 goes: if right handed, begin by standing as far back in the box as it will allow, heels touching the back of the box, right foot hard up against the right side of the box, left foot maybe six inches to the side. Draw, engage the targets. While doing your RWR, move your left foot over, one small sidestep, until it hits the left side of the box, then plant it. The right foot then comes over into your narrow stance. You have just moved your long distance barricade shooting, well-balanced stance from one side of the box to the other. You will be nicely balanced when firing all 12 shots. This approach really takes a lot of the challenge out of Stage 3, String 1.

Tip #15: One reason many people screw up on Stage 3, Strings 1 and 2 is they're just not used to shooting at distance. This gives them a huge mental barrier; because they've never done it, they don't realize that getting good hits at this distance is easy.

If at all possible, set up Stage 3 and practice it. You'll find in short order it's really not that tough a nut to crack.

CHAPTER 10

STAGE 3, STRING 2: BARRICADE WORK, MOVEMENT & LOW COVER

Stage 3, String 2 of the IDPA classifier is shot from around a barricade at 20 yards, and from low cover, almost invariably represented by a 55-gallon drum, at 15 yards.

STRING 2: Draw and fire 2 shots each T1-T3 from side of barricade, reload, advance to low cover and fire two shots each T1-T3 around its side.

Tip #1: Standard advice for Stage 3 is, "On String 1 do a Reload With Retention (RWR), where you put the old magazine away before you draw the new one, as you're moving the gun from one side of the barricade to the other, because it's a simpler, faster sequence of movements than a Tactical Reload (TR) where you have to put the old magazine away before you can draw the new one, HOWEVER on String 2 do a TR so you can be storing the magazine as you're moving to the barrel instead of having to stay behind the barricade until you've put it away. This can save you a couple of seconds versus having to complete an entire RWR before you move out."

Some people think this is just the slickest, sneakiest, time saving trick ever. Or is it? I've timed myself using both methods. For me at least, the time difference between the techniques wasn't nearly what's promised. Measuring only the time between the last shot at the barricade and the first shot at the barrel, I was consistently a half second faster using a TR versus a RWR – when everything went right. The problem was, everything didn't always go right. Trying to do one sort of reload for String 1, then another for the very next string would often screw me up, I'd hesitate

during one or both strings because I couldn't remember which reload I was supposed to be doing. Also, sometimes on the TR I wouldn't be able to get the mag put away as fast as I wanted while running forward. I was practically to the barrel before I had the mag out of my hand and could reacquire my two-hand grip on the gun. This led to me feeling pressed for time, really rushed when I reached the barrel.

Finally, I decided to do RWRs on both Strings 1 and 2. The simplicity and surety that comes from doing the same reload on both strings, to me outweighs a theoretical time advantage that often doesn't materialize. Actually, with the "which am I doing now?" fumble factor I was often slower with a TR. Also, when I've already put the magazine away behind the barricade using the RWR, I can complete my run to the barrel with both hands already on the gun the entire time. Thus I feel less rushed, much more in control when I arrive at the barrel.

Tip #2: As you move forward, RUN. I mean really hit the accelerator. Though that seems self-evident, I see people all the time loping forward slowly, or actually walking, between barricade and barrel. (These are usually the people simultaneously trying to stuff a magazine into their pocket after a TR to "save time".) You can save yourself entire seconds here if you'll simply haul ass.

When moving between barricade and barrel, move fast. You can save yourself entire seconds here if you'll simply RUN.

Tip #3: Keep the gun high while moving. You're just going to have to raise it up again before you can fire, so why lower it in the first place? I keep both hands on the gun. This is only a five-yard run, too short to get any real advantage from dropping one hand off the gun and chugging my arms. It's far more advantageous to move with both hands already on the gun so I don't have to break and reacquire my grip. One less thing to worry about. Simplicity is a virtue.

Running for the barrel, keep the gun high, both hands on the gun.

Tip #4: Two steps before you reach the barrel, slow down so you can move smoothly into position instead of having to screech to a halt right at the barrel.

Tip #5: Also two steps before the barrel, extend the gun out with your arms almost-but-not-quite in their shooting position. This will allow you to save time versus having to extend all the way out after you're down behind the barrel, also it gets the front sight up into your line of sight, you can visually acquire it before you're even at the barrel.

Tip #6: You've arrived at the barrel. How close to crowd it, and which knee to drop to? As opposed to the barricade where there are major advantages to staying back from it, with low cover and wide transitions it works best to get as close to the barrel as possible. Whichever side of cover you shoot from, put that knee on the ground. I shoot around the right side of the barrel so I put my right knee down. This allows me to get much further around the barrel, while still keeping my entire lower body behind cover, than if I went to the left knee.

Tip #7: When you arrive at the barrel, get down into position

FAST. Some people try to synchronize lowering themselves into position with extending the gun to get it on target as fast as possible. It's never worked for me to do it that way because the gun completes its extension about the same time my knee hits the ground, causing the gun to bounce around like one of those little spring-loaded Chihuahua heads. Then I have to wait until it stops if I want to be accurate. It works much better to get down fast with the gun up in front of my face, front sight already in focus, arms almost fully extended but not quite yet, THEN present it out that last little bit after I'm down, and I can fire as soon as my arms hit full extension.

Tip #8: While in the last chapter I discussed the advantages of not canting the gun, instead keeping it straight up-and-down while shooting from the barricade at 20 yards, here I will seemingly reverse myself and admit that I do cant the gun while shooting around low cover on Stage 3, Strings 2 and 3. Since we're now (a) closer to the targets at 15 yards instead of 20, and (b) having our knee on the ground severely limits how much we can move our body around the barrel in any sort of acceptably swift manner, the angle of our arms, and the gun, around cover is much more severe. I find it an acceptable tradeoff for me to cant the gun, allowing me to get it around the barrel faster, versus the slow process of trying to slide my knees around on the ground in an attempt to maintain a body position that will allow me to keep the gun straight up-and-down.

The author cants the gun to get it farther around the barrel.

CHAPTER 11

STAGE 3, STRING 3: LOW COVER

The last string on the classifier takes place from around low cover at 15 yards.

STRING 3: Draw, kneel, fire two shots T1-T3 from around side of low cover.

Tip #1: As you wait for the timer, already have your feet in the position they'll need to assume when you kneel. At the end of String 2 you were already down in a crouch shooting around the barrel, with your feet exactly where they needed to be. As you ready yourself for String 3, simply stand up but leave your feet in the same position. At the buzzer, just lower yourself down again, *voila!* you're right back in the same low cover shooting position you just were.

For the last string of the classifier, begin with your feet already in the position they'll need to be when crouching.

Tip #2: Get down FAST. Don't try to synchronize gun movement with your downward movement. By the time you get the gun up and out, you should already have been down behind cover for a considerable amount of time.

Get down behind low cover FAST. By the time the gun begins its extension you should have been down behind cover for, relatively, a long time.

We have now completed the IDPA classifier. And it all went GREAT.

CHAPTER 12

THE BLACK BELTS OF SHOOTING

Years ago two friends of mine, one of whom was a lifelong unarmed martial artist, the other a serious "combat" pistol match shooter, and I had a conversation where we attempted to analogize the USPSA rank system (yes, that "other" shooting sport) to martial arts belt ranks. What we came up with was that B class in USPSA is the equivalent of a first degree black belt, for the following reasons:

In both cases, B class and first degree black belt, this is the level that average, reasonably dedicated practitioners can eventually reach if they just stay with it long enough. You show up to martial arts class a few times a week, you practice at home occasionally in a non-obsessive fashion, eventually you're going to be a first degree black belt. You shoot matches a few times a month, you dry fire at home occasionally, you go to the range every so often, eventually you're going to be a B class shooter.

Also in both cases, this is the level that most people will never go beyond, for a couple of reasons. One, these are the levels that, to move past, require more time and dedication than most people have on tap to give. Two, since they know this is the level at which they have a decent skill set (you're not setting the world on fire but you basically know what you're doing), in both cases this is when most people figure they're done. "I got my black belt." "I got my B card." "Now I'm done."

I would say that in IDPA this level comes right around high Sharpshooter/low Expert. There simply aren't that many IDPA Masters. Because to become an IDPA Master requires work. It requires time, repetition, honing your skill level, whittling away those little chunks of time that, at the end of the classifier,

translate into a huge difference in your final score. It requires getting really good at all the things we have just discussed in this book.

If you have questions, on anything in this book, or anything else for that matter, feel free to visit my website, http://www.Self-Defense-Handguns.com, and ask them on the message board. There are people there, including me, who can probably answer those questions, who can help you along your journey. Just because you've reached the end of this book doesn't mean we're done. Improving your shooting skill set is an ongoing, lifelong project. The Path never ends.

And really, would we ever want it to?