


SPEED SH

WITH INSIGHT'S TRAINING CENTER

*Learning To Do What You
Never Thought Was Possible*



Instructor Greg Hamilton manipulates the trigger on a student's pistol to give the shooter a tactile understanding of proper trigger control.

SHOOTING

BY DUANE THOMAS



Self-defense shootings involving handguns tend to be very close-range, short-time-frame affairs. Given the paltry levels of real wounding potential offered by handguns, in all probability it will require multiple accurate shots to end the threat to your life, and you're not exactly going to have all day to do it either. Thus, the ability to fire a handgun with a combination of speed and accuracy is a very important skill to have for self-defense. There are many training classes that can teach you tactics, but if you just want to learn to *shoot*, to take your level of speed with accuracy up to the next level (or up several levels, actually), I've never found anything even approximately as good as the Intensive Handgun Skills (IHS) speed-shooting course from InSights Training Center. IHS is not a tactics course—InSights has other classes for that. The emphasis in IHS is on pure shooting skill. Nor is this a beginner-level course. You must have attended at least one of InSights' lower-level courses before being cleared for IHS or received equivalent training elsewhere.

My latest trip to InSights was actually the third time I've gone through IHS. The first time, years ago, was like a religious experience for me. Back then I was, like so many of us, almost entirely self-taught. I had developed my technique through reading books and magazine articles, trying to mimic the techniques I'd read about and the photos I'd seen. By my standards today, I wasn't very good.

I'd been through several classes with various schools before IHS, but while they all had something to offer, none of them had really improved my shooting technique. By the end of the second day of the two-day IHS class, I could do things with a gun in my hand that would have been impossible the previous morning. Toward the end of training, IHS Instructor Greg Hamilton had me doing consistent .17-second splits (the time

interval between shots) with a Browning Hi-Power on a steel plate at seven yards, and hitting with both shots. It was, as the saying goes, a lights-on day.

There was a time, maybe 12 years ago, when I attended a lot of firearms training classes, most of them relating to the defensive handgun. In the space of just a few years, I attended around 20 different classes with a variety of instructors. I was Mister Firearms Training Class. Eventually, I got out of that and went off into the wilderness to work on my skill levels, in the process winning a fair share of IPSC and IDPA matches, getting a IDPA Master rating in Stock Service Pistol division and winning an IDPA state championship in Custom Defensive Pistol. Now I find myself segueing back into student mode, as I realize I may well have been cutting myself off from an important source of information and further improvement.

In April 2009, I reported to InSights Training Center to retake the Intensive Handgun Skills speed-shooting course. Since the last time I attended this class, it had evolved into a three-day event instead of the two-day job I shot in the past. I had my carry gun, a lightly modified Glock 17, and my daily carry gear, which consisted of a straight-drop Blade-Tech Standard Belt Holster with matching double-mag pouch from the

“Too often we focus on the negative in our performances... That’s how losers think. Focus on the things that went right.”

same maker, threaded onto a 1 3/4-inch-wide black sharkskin-and-horsehide dress gunbelt from Kramer, and a whole lot of 17-round magazines.

The aforementioned IDPA Master rank was attained with a Glock 34, Glock’s semi-longslide 9mm. I carried that pistol as my daily concealment gun for about four years. However, in recent months when firing the IDPA classifier in training, I learned a very interesting fact: I can turn

in identical scores with a plain Jane Glock 17 as the competition-oriented Glock 34. So I switched to the G17 as a carry piece. I’m more willing than most people to carry a large handgun and dress myself around the gun with concealment in mind, as long as it has the attributes I want. However, when you can shoot the smaller gun just as well as the bigger gun and the capacity is the same, it does become hard to make a case for carrying the big one.

Ammunition for the class was the same stuff I normally use for personal practice sessions and matches, the Rainier Ballistics 121-grain Round Nose bullet over 4.2 grains of VihtaVuori N320, all lit off with Winchester Small

Pistol primers. Normally, I use Federal primers, but the Great Primer Drought of 2009 has even forced the gun writers to run what we can get.

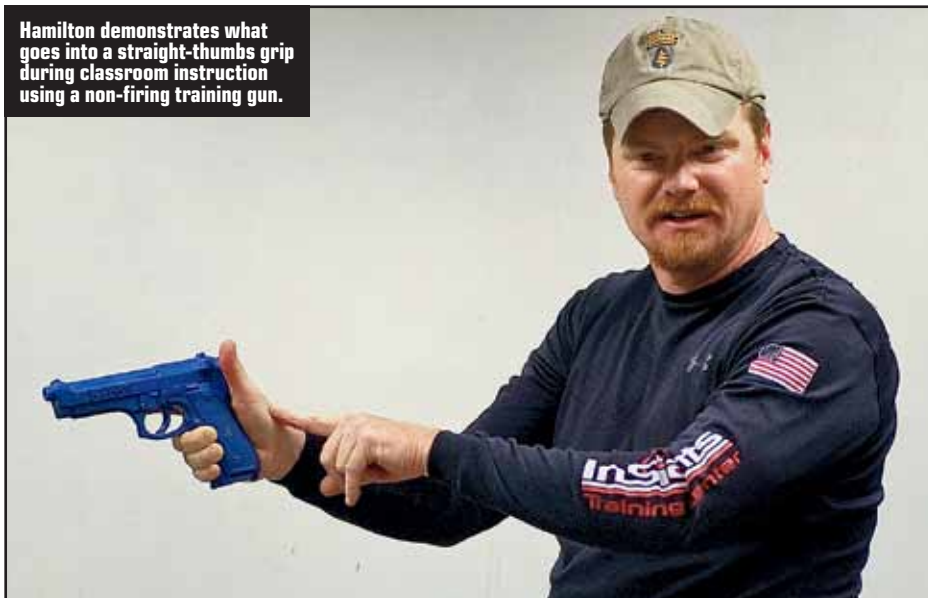
Getting reliable ignition with Winchester primers, which are less sensitive than Federals, entailed switching from the lightened Wolff striker spring I’d been running in my G17 to the heavier stock Glock part. This increased trigger pulls significantly. The primary purpose

of the lightened striker spring is to lower trigger-pull weight. Also, I decided to install a “New York” trigger in the gun, which upped trigger pull weight even further. I was looking at IHS as a golden opportunity to run significant quantities of ammo through the gun and get grooved-in on the heavier trigger pulls.

I made a conscious decision before showing up at this class to always run the gun as fast as possible. And aside from some diagnostic “shoot the best group you possibly can taking all the time you need” stuff or when burning in a new technique slow fire, that’s exactly what I did. There wasn’t a shot-to-shot split during this class, when left to my own devices, that didn’t run in the high .1s up to mid-.2s. Two hands on the gun, one hand on the gun, standing in place, moving, it didn’t matter. This is a speed-shooting course, right? Why not run the gun as fast as possible all three days?

You might be surprised to hear a lot of tips from Greg Hamilton that come from sports psychology and studies on peak athletic performance. For instance, “Too often we focus on the negative in our performances. We’re trained from an early age to criticize ourselves, to beat ourselves up when we do something wrong. Because if we do it first, then no one else will, right? So you’re shooting a drill, the draw goes great, the overall time is great, most of the hits are great, but you pull one shot. What do we do? We ignore all the stuff that went right and we focus on the one bad shot. Don’t do that. That’s how losers think. Focus on the things that went

Hamilton demonstrates what goes into a straight-thumbs grip during classroom instruction using a non-firing training gun.



right. Say to yourself, 'The draw was great, the time was great, look at all those great hits! You rock!' Let the shot that wasn't quite where it needed to be go away. It didn't happen."

Another tip: "Smile. Before you shoot, consciously smile. The instant you smile, you relax. As soon as you're relaxed, your vision and coordination improve. Tension prevents peak performance."

How about this one: "Pat yourself on the back when you do something right. I mean, literally, physically, reach around and pat yourself on the back. Tell yourself out loud as you're doing it, 'That was great.' OK, maybe you don't want to do that when other people are around. But when you're all alone on the range practicing? Hell yeah. Losers are scared to be proud of their accomplishments. Winners glory in their skill level. They like being good."

And yet another: "Set high standards. I don't believe in the concept of minimum standards. Minimum standards means minimum performance. What happens if you're just trying to meet the standard and you slip up a little? You fail. Set yourself a performance standard one

level above what you need to succeed. You're trying to put all your bullets into an eight-inch circle and you pull a shot a bit. What happens? You miss the eight-inch circle. What if your standard is that you're going to put all your bullets into a four-inch group in the center of the eight-inch circle and you pull a shot? You're still inside the eight-inch circle. You have failed into success."

Greg Hamilton is also into avoiding what he calls "prey mentality" and "prey behavior" and maximizing "predator mentality" and "predator behavior." That doesn't mean we want to prey on people. It means that, for the purposes of shooting in combat, it would be really nice if the techniques we use, our overall stance, maximize a strong will to survive rather than foster a victim mentality. Thus Greg does not believe in the common technique of lowering the head to the gun. His advice: "Face the target squarely. Keep your head up, look at the problem. What looks at the ground? Herbivores. Prey. As soon as you drop your head, subconsciously you go into submissive mode. What looks around itself, head

high, with the attitude 'I own everything I see'? Predators. They're looking around for something to eat."

He also recommends the Isosceles stance for combat as a technique that fosters the predator mindset. "What happens when predators get attacked? They instantly square off to the problem because they're ready to fight. Anything stupid enough to attack them is going to get killed. That's why I don't like the Weaver stance. Predators don't stand sideways to a problem. We're issued programming at birth. If we're going to fight, we automatically face the problem squarely. Why train in a technique that goes again that instinct?"

Greg's recommended shooting technique stresses symmetry and neutrality. In other words, if your technique causes the gun to point naturally wherever you look, and you're not generating forces onto the gun during recoil that stop it from returning right back where it was, the gun will snap right back down out of recoil and basically re-aim itself right back at the same spot with no extra work on the shooter's part. This is far faster and more



Guns used at the Intensive Handgun Skills course reflected the reality among serious shooters.

SPEED SHOOTING

efficient than fighting the gun and trying to make it do what you want. Thing is, what the gun wants to do, if you'll just let it, is already what you want it to do: come right back to the same spot.

Greg heavily hits trigger control in this class. He is the only instructor I've ever seen who wants shooters to feel what good trigger control is like. Thus one of his first drills has each shooter aim-in his gun, totally relax his trigger finger, then Greg puts his hands over the shooter's and pulls the trigger himself, with his trigger finger over the shooter's. Not only does this teach the shooter proper trigger control better than simply being told, "Do this," it also shows him that what is stopping him from putting the bullet right where it should go is not an aiming error, it's bad trigger control. With the shooter doing the aiming and Greg manipulating the trigger, generally the shooter finds himself printing better groups than he could if he were doing both the aiming and the trigger pulls himself.

Greg also discusses the aikido technique called "the unbendable arm," the idea that there is for everyone a particular arm position, for most people with a slight flex to the elbow (the amount of flex can vary from person to person), at which the muscles lock up and the arm literally cannot be either flexed farther or extended. This is the position you want your arms in when shooting.

Another key component to Hamilton's shooting philosophy is "Do everything as soon as you can, so at the end there's very little left to do. Therefore, what's left to do is very easy." You know you have to get the sights in line with your eyes in order to aim the gun. Draw high and get the gun in line with your eyes, then press it straight out toward the target so you can be visually aligning the sights the entire time the gun is moving forward. Don't draw in a straight line from the holster to the target, which will cause the sights to suddenly appear in your vision at the end of the draw stroke.

You know you need to pull the trigger at the end of the draw stroke to make the gun fire. You would like to do this without wasting time or disturbing the sights. Get as much of the trigger pull over as soon as possible. As the gun is moving toward the target, take up the slack in the trigger and prep it with almost as much pressure as it takes to fire the gun, but not quite. Thus, when you get to the end of the draw stroke (the amount of pressure required to fire



the gun), the amount of energy that could possibly pull it off target is very slight, and it requires much less time to execute versus getting the gun up on target, *then* beginning the trigger pull.

Other tips: "Instead of thinking of it as 'thrusting the gun at the target,' which will give you too much vigorous forward momentum and a lot of up-and-down gun movement at the end of extension, memorize where your elbows are when you're in your shooting stance, then just put your elbows where they need to be. If you approach it like that, you'll find the gun no longer bobs up and down at the end of the draw stroke. Instead of gripping the gun with your support hand as it extends toward the target, *pull* the gun toward the target with the support hand."

I tried that last technique myself in

personal practice sessions after the class. For years my draw-and-fire times at seven yards have run in the high 1.2s, even into the 1.3s, and not all of my shots would result in center hits. Using the technique of pulling the gun toward the target with the support hand, suddenly all my draws were in the 1.15 to 1.18 range and non-center hits became few and far between indeed. To an observer, my draw stroke may look externally the same, but it's not. It's faster, more consistent and effortless. I got that from this course.

To some people that level of improvement might not sound like a big deal, but experienced shooters will tell you that any simple change to your technique that instantly cuts .10 to .15 second off your draw *and* makes you more accurate in the process is something special indeed.



To learn movement skills, shooters moved forward on-line with another student's hand on their shoulder. This provides tactile feedback for both proper and improper movement.

In order to teach students how to move smoothly while shooting, he has another person stand slightly behind the shooter with his hand on the shooter's shoulder, then move forward with him. Thus the shooter can *feel* from the pressure of the varying, or, if you do it right, non-varying, pressure of the hand on his shoulder whether his movement technique is causing him to bob up and down. Also, it lets the non-shooter during the drill feel what it's like to do it wrong. He can then give the shooter verbal feedback. When I was doing this drill as the non-shooter, within just a few reps I could feel the other student's technique smooth out and the up-and-down pressure against my hand disappear almost completely.

Hamilton is very into building kinesthetic awareness and believes

that if shooters develop their index (the totality of grip, stance and arm position that makes the gun point naturally wherever they look) to the point that they really don't even need to use their eyes to aim, then add their eyes to the equation, their shooting will really rise to a higher level. To illustrate this, he demo'd starting with his own carry gun, a Glock 19, aimed in at a small target dot seven yards away, then had a student put his hand between Greg's eyes and the target. Greg fired two shots, fairly slow, but with absolutely no visual acquirement of sights or target. Both shots hit well inside the dot. Then he said, "OK, let's see what happens if we do it fast." He fired a double tap. Both shots hit inside the target. "You can even do it from the draw." He closed his

eyes, drew, and fired a double tap. Two hits went into the target dot.

In practice later, I tried that. I haven't gotten to the point where I can do it on the draw yet, but I can start with the gun aimed in, fire two shots and keep them both within a small dot at seven yards just going on tactile feedback from the pistol. I haven't added real speed, or the draw, to the equation yet, but I will. Greg commented, "This is such a powerful technique. I can't tell you how powerful it is. I can even stand with my back to a target, turn, draw and hit it. It's amazing."

Final tip: In order to train yourself to process time faster so that you can watch the sight through its entire arc of recoil, keep both eyes open and check for brass coming out of the ejection port. In short order I could see the brass exiting the gun. This is not the first time that this has ever happened to me but I have to admit that it's been awhile. One thing I learned through this training is that I was, indeed, dropping my head while shooting instead of keeping my head up. It's kind of hard to see much of anything when your upper orbital ridge is cutting off a significant portion of your vision.

I realized that one reason I've been having trouble tracking the front sight in recoil is that I've been narrowing down my cone of vision until it's about the size of a nickel around the front sight. Aren't we told, again and again, "Focus on the front sight"? By relaxing my vision, widening my field of view to pick up brass exiting the gun and raising my head to face the target squarely, suddenly I found that I could also see the front sight through its entire arc of recoil. I could also see the targets at the same time as the sights. It was like spending your life looking through a paper-towel tube and suddenly having it blow open to Cinemascope. From that point, shooting fast and accurately got easy.

What I took away from this class is that I have been wasting huge blocks of time not trusting myself, not trusting my speed. By taking off the brakes and simply shooting as fast as I could with open vision, I found that I literally can't shoot faster than I can see. I can't pull the trigger faster than the gun comes down out of recoil and re-aims itself. I can't pull the trigger during transitions between targets before the gun is on the next target. That is the hallmark of really efficient shooting, the sense that you're always waiting on the gun. 