

SHOOTING SECRETS OF A WORLD-CHAMPION HANDGUNNER!



This sequence shows world champion Seyfried applying the basics to the challenge of hitting hand-thrown aerial targets—with a handgun!

G&A's shooting editor offers invaluable tips, for novice and expert alike, that will improve your performance with these trickiest of firearms.

By Ross Seyfried

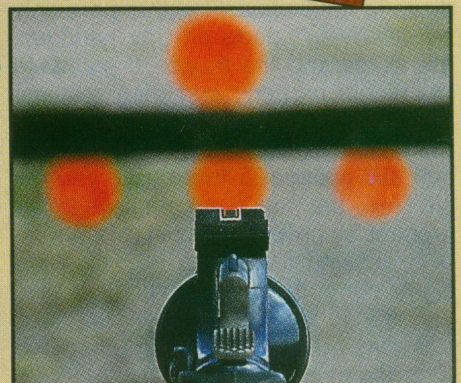
The handgun can be an intimidating machine. I am sure that a lot of people would like them a lot better if, when they fired them, they hit what they were shooting at. Reaching a moderate degree of proficiency with a handgun is certainly more difficult than getting to the same place with a rifle or a shotgun, but it is far from impossible. In fact, by following a few simple "rules" almost anyone can learn to hit with a handgun.

Possibly the most important things one can do to hit with a handgun are a few "do nots." First, do not try to shoot a handgun like they do on TV. Old cowboys and modern heroes alike use techniques that work well with blanks on film, but they fail miserably in real life.

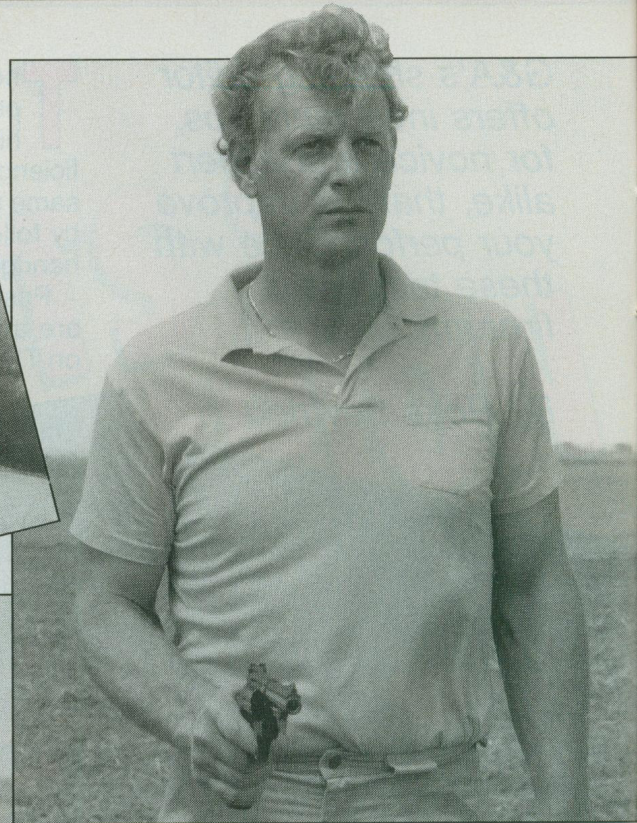
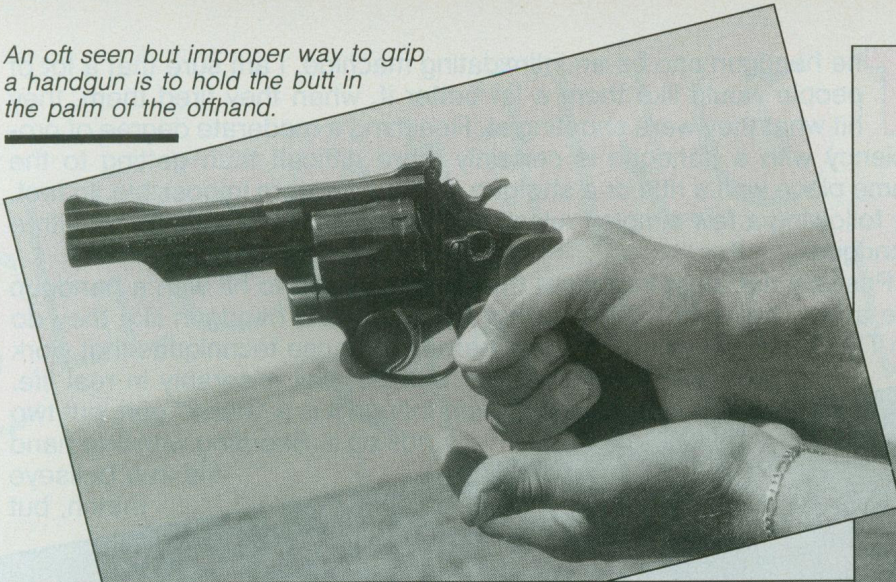
Second, even though it is a "hand" gun, put two hands on it. Shooting with one hand fits in a bullseye match, but



Look at the sights and let the target be blurred—this is the most basic handgun principle.



An oft seen but improper way to grip a handgun is to hold the butt in the palm of the offhand.



Fast draw and shooting from the hip are fine for the movies, but they won't do a thing to improve a beginner's chances of hitting properly with a handgun.

Another incorrect gripping method is to grasp the wrist of the shooting hand with the offhand—it may seem steadier, but in reality it isn't.

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if you want to hit don't cut your chances in half. Finally, don't try to learn with a "magnum." I learned how not to hit with a .44. That I ever reached any degree of skill is a minor miracle, when I look back at how I went about it. Only the return to a .22 saved my hitting.

When you start to think about hitting with a handgun you need to get right down to the basics. First there are only two "moving" parts on any handgun: the sights and the trigger. If you align the sights properly and then manage the trigger in such a manner that lets the bullet get out of the barrel with the gun still pointed at the target, you will hit. Now, the handgun complicates the process by having a very short sight radius, making it easy to not align the sights correctly. It is also very "mobile" and is very apt to move while you pull the trigger. In short it is extremely unforgiving of slight errors on our part. To

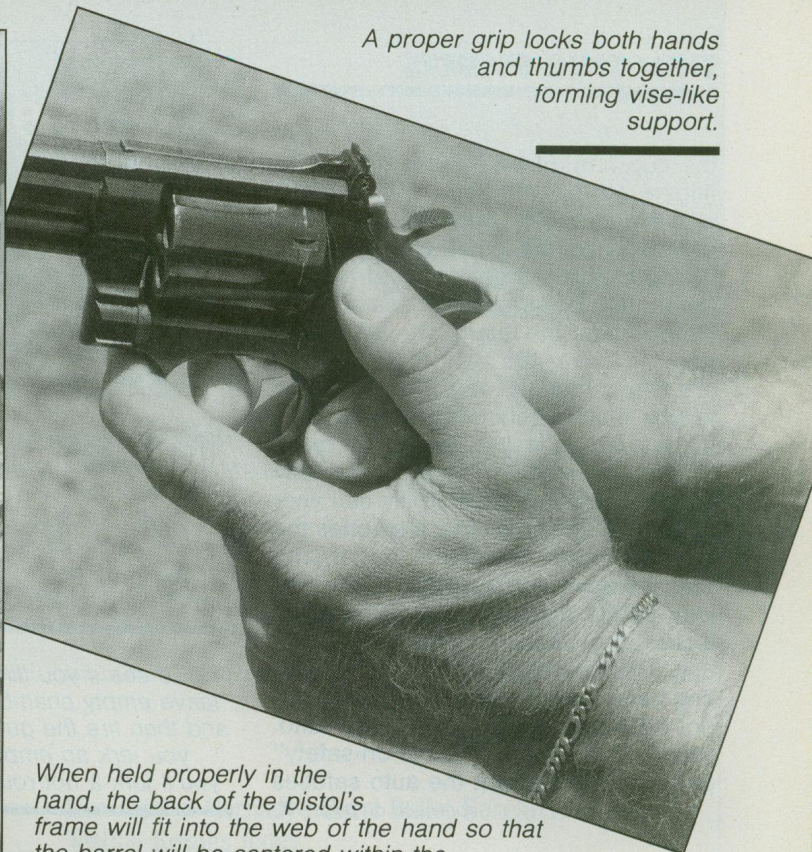
hit with the handgun we must do things just about right. By correctly applying some basic techniques hitting really isn't very hard.

Before we start to worry about the sights and the trigger we have to grip the gun properly. It is often surprising to me just how many odd ways people use to wrap their mits around handguns. Some make good shooting difficult, others are innocently unhelpful, and a few are downright dangerous. The wild-west notion of resting the barrel over your forearm is worse than ludicrous. The worst way to actually "grip" with both hands is to grab your right wrist with your left hand. This may seem like a good idea at the time, but it won't help your hitting; and if you are shooting an auto the slide is going to try to tear your left thumb off. At all times when you are shooting an auto you must keep all parts of your free hand away from the rear of the pistol. Gripping the barrel/frame with the left hand is also useless and dangerous. The gun receives very little support and

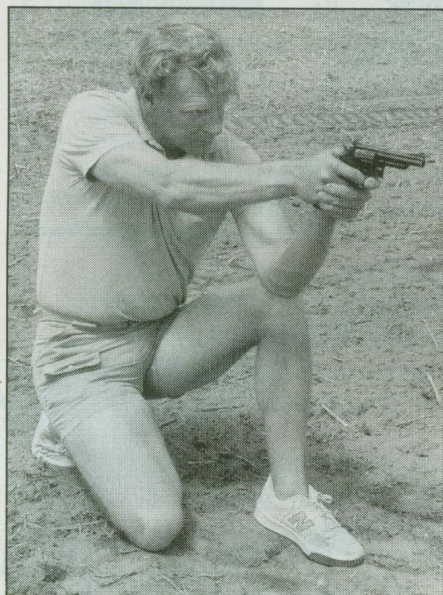
you expose your hand and wrist to the "cutting torch" of gas that escapes out of the cylinder gap on a revolver.

Another very common grip is to place the right hand and gun in a cup formed by the left hand with its palm facing upward. This does help support the gun some but is a long way from reaching full potential. The correct grip brings the full strength of both hands and arms into full play. Start with the gunbarrel in a straight line with your right forearm. The right trigger finger (index) is straight along the triggerguard and the rest of your fingers curl around the grip. Get as high up on the grip as possible. Your second finger should be pressed firmly against the bottom of the triggerguard. Now extend your left arm forward so that it is directly in front of and about 18 inches away from the center of your chest. Hold your left hand so that the thumb is pointing straight up and your palm is facing to the right. Curl your fingers gently, forming an open cup. Now bring the gun hand and pistol forward into

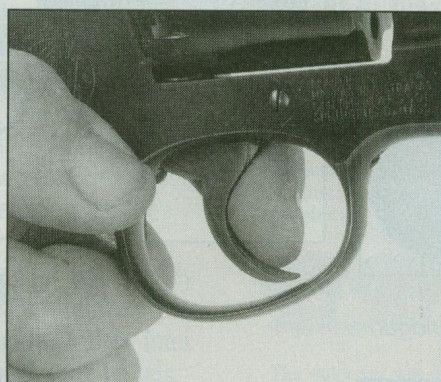
A proper grip locks both hands and thumbs together, forming vise-like support.



When held properly in the hand, the back of the pistol's frame will fit into the web of the hand so that the barrel will be centered within the "V" formed by thumb and fore-finger.



The field shooting position favored by the author is kneeling. This offers good support and visibility, both of which are important to hitting.

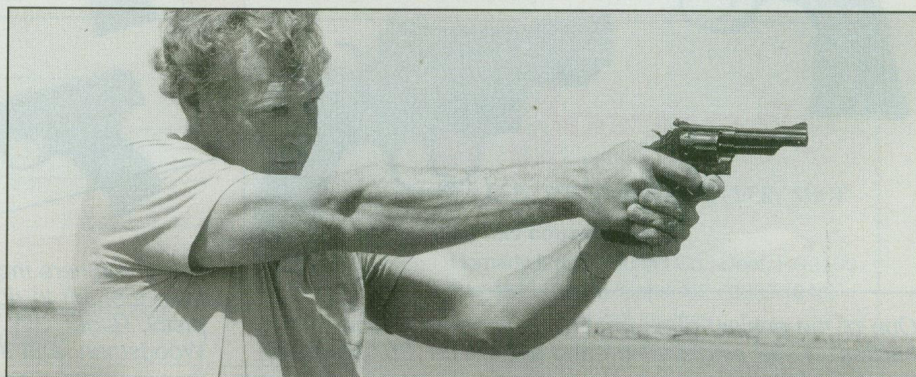


Proper finger placement upon the face of the trigger is to put just the tip of the index finger's pad upon the trigger; this will give you both sensitivity and control.



The author feels the most stable shooting position is the rollover prone. This is the way he personally accuracy-tests his handguns to evaluate their true potential.

Here, author Seyfried demonstrates a perfect Weaver-style stance. Note the wrapped-hand grip; the straight, elbow-locked strong-hand arm; and the slightly bent weak-hand arm—all indicative of a classic Weaver.



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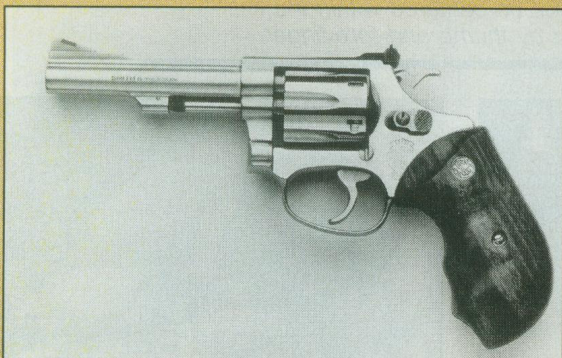
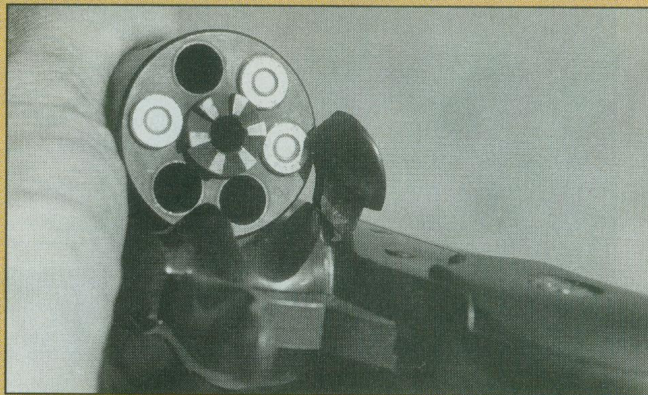
the cup formed by the left hand. The fingers of your left hand should mesh with the "grooves" between the fingers of your right hand. You may grip with the left index finger forward on the front of the triggerguard or use it immediately under the guard. The left thumb now laps over the right thumb. There are two schools of thought here. One leaves the right thumb high on top of an auto safety or just behind the recoil shield of a revolver. The other plan, my recommendation, is to tightly curl your right thumb down so that it touches the second finger. Then the left thumb presses down and forward on the first joint of the right thumb. This practice locks both hands together in a solid unit. This keeps your thumbs from getting hammered by heavy recoil and will not interfere with the slide on an auto. Proponents of the "thumb-on-safety" grip use it to prevent the auto safeties

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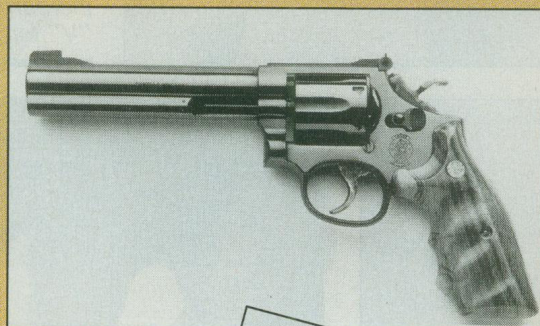


These rounds are well-suited for learning how to hit; from left: .22 LR, .32 S&W, .32 Mag, .38 Spl. wadcutter, and the .45 ACP 185-gr. low-velocity match.

To see if you flinch, leave empty chambers and then fire the gun; if you jerk an empty—you'll jerk a hot round!



Smith & Wesson's Model 631 six-shot .32 Mag fitted with a 4-inch barrel is a fine handgun for the beginner to learn with.



Another excellent choice for the beginner is a K-frame S&W in either .22 LR, .32 Mag, or .38 Spl. These guns combine weight and balance of the big-bores while delivering light recoil.



One of the easiest guns to shoot compared to one of the hardest. A .32 single action and a 2.5-inch .357 Magnum.



Good teachers include from top, left to right: F65 air pistol, Ruger .22/.32, S&W J-frame .22, Colt Woodsman, and an S&W K-frame .22/.32/.38.

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from being left on or jumping on. My opinion is that the auto safety should be properly constructed so that it won't jump on and that you shouldn't forget to take it off. The high thumb grip gives up about 20 percent of the strength that my low thumb grip has when it comes to controlling recoil.

With the gun held in this manner you squeeze the grip with your right hand and in turn squeeze your right hand with the left. The pressure should be moderate for general shooting. Later, when you want speed or control over massive recoil, you increase the tension until the juice starts to run out of the grip panels.

With the gun held securely in your hands, you begin to address the position of your arms. This in turn controls the relationship between the gun and the rest of your body. The idea is to use every possible physical advantage that helps you hold the gun on target and to control recoil after the shot. The gun should not be held perfectly centered in front of your chest. This is the old isosceles position. Instead, the gun should extend more or less in front of your right shoulder, with your shoulders

at an angle to the target, right just behind the left. You apply "spring tension" by pushing forward with your right hand/arm and pulling back with the left. This needn't be a great force, possibly enough to smash a plum, but not enough to cause trembles. You can either lock your right elbow or bend it as I do. Both systems have produced world champions. The bent elbow is

"... 'flinch' ... is the more or less violent tugging of the trigger to make the gun fire."

more at home with extreme recoil, the locked elbow removes one point of movement.

The next stage in the process is sight alignment. Sight alignment is relatively simple. Assuming your gun has a good set of handgun sights, square post front and notch rear to match, you simply fill the rear notch with the front sight. The top of the front sight must be *exactly* level with the top of the rear and the "daylight" on both sides of the front sight must be even. To best achieve this your eyes must focus on the sights, more specifically on the

face of the *front* sight and not the target. If you are having trouble getting both eyes to cooperate at the same time, close your non-master eye. With a handgun it is even possible for a right-handed person to shoot with his left eye. While with shotguns and rifles this practice would be a severe handicap, a handgun doesn't mind at all. Tom Campbell shoots that way and he is simply one of the most complete masters of the handgun that has ever lived. This sight alignment is so critical that your eyes must see it in crisp focus to achieve the necessary degree of accuracy. The target can be a dim blur; with crisp sights superimposed on it you will hit perfectly. See the target in focus, with fuzzy sights, and a miss is almost a certainty. In actual practice, especially under the dynamic conditions of game shooting, your focus will shift back and forth from sight to target, with the final focus on the sights as the shot breaks.

The sights should be adjusted so that the bullets hit right on top of the front sight. When I mention sight adjustment, it is not in passing. The sights must be correctly adjusted so that the bullets hit in correct relationship to the sights. At the learning stages of hitting with a handgun you may not be skilled enough to sight-in your gun. Here we

have a chicken-and-egg problem. You can't learn to hit until your sights are adjusted and you cannot zero the sights unless you can shoot the pistol accurately. Here you should ask for help. Get a veteran pistol shot to check your zero for you and help with the sighting-in process. The most important point here is to not ignore the sight adjustment on your handgun. The idea that handguns are so inaccurate that they don't require the same care in sighting-in as a precision rifle is exactly the kind of thinking we are trying to overcome.

Getting back to the problem at hand, we have a gun held correctly in both hands, the sights in the proper relationship to each other, and we know the bullets will hit where the sights are "looking." Now the bloody gun wanders all over the place, cutting a swath much wider than the object we are trying to hit. How on earth are we to hit the target? First, accept that no man or woman can hold a handgun "still" on target; not Bill Blankenship, Mickey Fowler, or even Rob Leatham can keep the gun from weaving and bobbing about. Admittedly they will hold their guns a lot more still than most, but their sights will almost always move considerably in relationship to the mark they want to hit. Long ago the phrase

"trust your wobble" was coined. It simply means that the gun is going to move and that you cannot expect it to stop, glued to the target, so that you can pull the trigger. What you can and should do is constantly use your muscles to push the sights toward the exact place you want to hit and at the same time *keep those sights aligned perfectly with each other*. The sight alignment—left, right, up, and down—

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represents angulation. If we change the *angle* of the barrel, relative to the target, even a few tiny parts of a degree, that change represents a wide miss out at the target. On the other hand, if the sights are perfectly aligned—that is, the barrel is pointed at the target—the gun and your hands can move a considerable amount and still hit very close to the aiming point. In perfect theory you could move the gun in a 6-inch circle, while maintaining perfect sight alignment, and shoot a 6-inch group at 100 yards. When I speak of

maintaining this sight alignment I mean before, during, and after the moment of trigger release.

Keeping the sight alignment *after* the shot sounds redundant, but it is the way we avoid "quitting" *during* the shot. If you learn to hit a golf ball correctly a great emphasis is placed on what you do after the ball is gone, the follow-through. Now it seems useless to worry about how you move the club after you hit the ball, but unless you establish a pattern of correct movement after striking the ball things go wrong in the middle of the swing. The same with shooting rifles, shotguns, and handguns. The follow-through with a handgun is very simple. You make sight alignment paramount and you strive to maintain that even while the gun recoils. Of course that is almost impossible, but you can return to perfect alignment immediately after the shot. This practice teaches us to not stop in the middle of the shot and check to see if we have hit. Unless you work to ward off the habit it becomes quite natural to lower the gun the instant you fire to see how the shot went. What will actually happen is that you will rush the process and lower the gun while the bullet is still in the barrel. If you do that, you are certainly wasting your time looking for

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a hit—it won't be there! The prevention is easy. You align the sights, fire the shot, and realign the sights on target immediately after the recoil. Then take a moment to enjoy your hit or fire another shot.

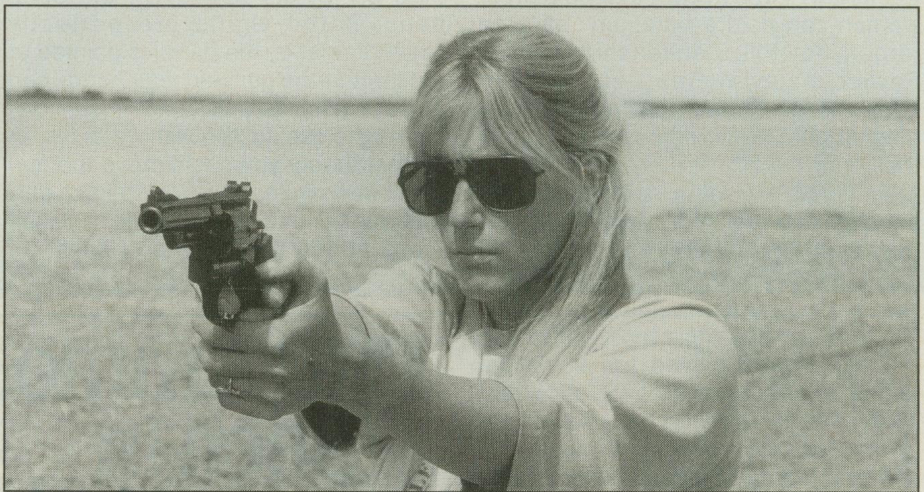
Which brings us to the second moving part, the trigger. I can draw or photograph a perfect sight picture, but I cannot illustrate trigger control. Poor trigger control is where 90 percent of handgun bullets go awry. To beat it you need to grasp the concept of trigger control and then concentrate on that concept for every shot you fire. The best way to "see" trigger control is by dry-firing, without ammunition in the gun. The goal here is to get the hammer to fall without disturbing the sight alignment in any way. Smooth, constantly increasing pressure on the trigger is the basic movement. Your trigger finger must work independently of the rest of your body. All must stay still while the trigger finger moves. You can teach this finger the necessary "independent thinking" by tightly gripping an object with your hand and then having your trigger finger draw the alphabet in the air...while the rest of your hand and arm remain perfectly still. It is quite possible, but you won't get much cooperation in the beginning.

The greatest trap in trigger control is the "flinch." This is the more or less violent tugging of the trigger to make the gun fire. It can be caused by "fear" of noise or recoil but is most apt to happen simply because you want to hit. The more you want to hit, the more apt you are to slap the trigger. The most basic cause is seeing the sights right where you want them and "grabbing" at the chance to hit. The jerked trigger bends the sight alignment and you miss. You must fight off the urge to "get it!" as the sights go by the target. Instead, continue to increase the load on the trigger, push the sights toward the target, and let the hammer fall when it may. With practice you will be able to control the situation to a great degree, keeping the sights very close to the mark and being able to finish that last tiny degree of trigger squeeze when your brain says "fire."

Flinching is a bit like substance abuse; it is often difficult to get yourself to know or admit you are doing it. You can carve in stone that almost everyone who has ever touched a handgun flinches to one degree or another. The trigger abuse is often hidden by noise and recoil. The best way to dramatically show yourself that you are chopping the trigger is to load a revolver with

three unevenly spaced cartridges. Close the cylinder and rotate it so that you don't know where the live rounds are. Carry on shooting normally, trying to hit a difficult target. If more than a hammer fall happens when you hit an empty chamber you need to work on your trigger control. I expect if you totaled the time spent practicing that basic trigger control by the 20 great pistol shots on earth you would get an average human lifetime. Perfect mastery of any great athletic skill is never easy; the "ton" of weight it takes to correctly manage a 3-pound handgun trigger is a perfect example.

With a basic plan in front of you, you must choose a sensible handgun as your teacher. Again, do not have anything to do with a full-power magnum until you can hit with a more manageable arm. If there is a perfect handgun trainer it would probably be a .22 with a barrel between 4 and 7½ inches long.



Airguns are also very good to learn with, but unlike their rifle counterparts only a few air-handguns combine the size, shape, and realistic accuracy to lead you directly into firearms. If you already have a handgun that isn't a .22 and want to learn with that, start with the lightest ammunition available. The .38 Special mid-range wadcutter load's behavior is much like a .22's. Light 9mm loads will suffice in the current-rage crop of autos. Just be sure to avoid the high-power "magnum" loadings in any caliber, as well as barrel lengths under 4 inches. The snubbies are the most difficult of all to hit with. They are absolutely unforgiving of any error on the shooter's part. They are in fact "graduate study." When you think you can shoot a handgun, pick up a short-barreled magnum and get a lesson in humble pie. Then use the little gun to really refine your basics, but don't ruin your confidence and hopes by studying nuclear physics before you understand multiplication tables. We want to learn to hit and the best way is

with an arm that makes it as easy as possible.

It is also important to not let any handgun "damage" you in the learning process. Even some .22 autos will bite the web of your hand and all handguns are very noisy. A fingerless shooting glove like the P.A.S.T. will take care of any kind of bite. The noise factor of even a .22 is considerable. While common sense dictates that we should always wear hearing protection whenever we shoot, handguns simply demand it. The noise generated by a handgun is far more apt to cause a flinch than any amount of recoil. Our nervous systems are very clever. They are designed in part to keep us from damaging ourselves. When something hurts, even when our conscious levels aren't astute enough to notice, our subconscious "safety-valves" take over. While "we" might not mind the banging of a .22 handgun, our ears and our nervous

Once the novice has mastered the small-bores, he or she can move on to the harder-to-shoot magnums.

systems do. The safety valve tells your finger, "Do not pull the trigger—that hurts." A fight develops between the yes and no signals and our reluctant finger jerks the trigger to end the struggle. Simple solution: always wear plugs and/or good muffs.

Beyond the grip, sights, and trigger, the final step in hitting under a variety of conditions is the shooting positions. You should always "cheat" as much as you can to make a hit. Use your bones and muscles along with the good solid Mother Earth to your advantage. The most basic position is the standing off-hand as described earlier. Your feet should be shoulder-wide, with the right toes about even with your left instep. Shoulders should be slightly forward, allowing your center of gravity to be in front of your ankles. Most important, be comfortable. No strained, clawing gun-

fighter crouch. Put your body in a natural position that uses your strength to best advantage.

Kneeling is the most useful of the "rest" positions. The grip and arm positions are almost exactly the same as standing, but you use your left leg as a direct contact point with the ground. Kneel on your right knee with your right hip "sitting" on your right heel. Place your left elbow on top of your left knee, then use the push/pull tension as you would standing. Only this time add downward pressure to your left elbow. In essence you are "resting" the gun and hands on the ground, using solid bone as the support. This is a very useful position for field shooting. While it is much more steady than offhand, you are still high enough to shoot over most grass and low brush. I expect that 80 percent of my big game has been shot from kneeling.

If there is no obstruction between you and the target, the prone position is extremely solid. More correctly called rollover prone is the position I use to evaluate handgun accuracy.

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basic you must be."**

While it is unusual to find a perfectly clear field of fire that will let you use this in game shooting, it happens. When I have the chance to make a game shot from prone, I take it. Here you lie on the ground, with your body angled about 20 to 30 degrees, feet to the left of the center line. Roll slightly over onto your right side, resting your right cheek on your right bicep. Your hands, using the basic grip, rest on the ground. By altering the position of your body, both the degree of roll and angle, you can find a place where your eye lines up perfectly with the sights and target. Now "everything" is supported by the ground and rock-solid shooting is possible. Quite often I can shoot smaller groups from prone than I can over a bench rest.

A variation of prone would be the reclining or back-rest positions. Elmer Keith was a great proponent of this handgunning advantage. Today it is extremely common with silhouette shooters. There are lots of variations, but you basically lie on your back, using your legs in one way or another to support the gun that is held in only one hand. I personally have never had great results shooting this way, but it certainly does work for many shooters.

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Many of the descriptions here are entirely too brief. In fact, how to hit with a handgun should be a small book, not a short story. I hope that a picture will be worth a thousand words, the photos answering most of the questions that my words have left unanswered. Finally, to those who will complain that this is too basic, for beginners only, I will try to explain with a tale.

To date in my handgunning career I have fired more or less a million shots. A handful of them have been extremely important, highly sophisticated ones, even for the most advanced master. One was the final round at an electronic stop plate, in a man-against-man match that would seal the world championship. Another was at a wounded Cape buffalo that had decided to come and bite me. I pounded his shoulders twice while he swiveled in the brush, getting his course set. I was in a tiny clearing, about 6 feet wide and 15 feet long. To get me he had to come into the open spot. When he did, one shot would decide the contest. If I failed, my friend Hugo Seia would have to tell this

“With a handgun it is even possible for a right-handed person to shoot with his left eye.”

story. The bull was giving it his all, when he hooked his right horn on a small tree. As he twisted his neck to break the tree, a tiny spot behind his ear became the target. Dust, blood, bellows, life and death—no time for beginner's basics here...or was there? In fact there wasn't time for anything else. A perfect grip, front sight, and a butter-smooth trigger squeeze, in about a quarter second total, were the way out of the mess. While all of this was happening my mind had two thoughts—sights and trigger. The bullet hit the spot and the dust settled. I hit the steel plate the same way.

Basics? Yes! The more advanced and difficult the shot becomes, the more basic you must be. Even shots at moving or aerial targets require absolute concentration on the sight picture and trigger while you calculate the lead. Trick shots with mirrors or upside-down guns still simply require you to get the sights lined up and cut the bullet loose with the trigger. The tools, boringly basic as they may seem, will let you make any handgun-hit that can be made. 