

Standing Position

Improving your scores using dry-firing practice

Bill Bowling

Standing Position Dry-Firing Technique

I'm no expert. In fact I'm just an average shooter who is still learning and improving. That is why I decided to put this information together. I still have fresh memories of frustration and can remember the techniques that have helped me improve. If you regularly shoot standing scores in the 90's you may not benefit from this information. But, if you are shooting 80's, 70's or less, I think you will benefit. Read on.

Standing scores separate the pack. Usually, if you find the shooter with the best standing score, you have the match winner. At first, many shooters don't even practice the standing position. They try to improve their scores in the more stable positions and let their standing scores fall where they may. This may be understandable for confidence building, but to shoot matches well, you have to shoot well standing up.

DRY-FIRING:

Done correctly, dry-firing can help you a lot. Done incorrectly, dry-firing will only further ingrain poor technique and frustrate you. This information will help you do it right.

Practicing indoors is the best way to maintain a consistent routine. With weather out of the equation, you have no excuses. You should plan to practice a little on a regular basis rather than a lot the day before a match.

Any decent sized room can be used with reduced targets and good lighting. You need good light over your sights to simulate shooting outdoors. This is very important to keeping your shooting eye focused properly. Direct a shaded lamp at the target to brighten it up. The rest of the room should be lighted normally. Avoid any distracting lighting. Noise is fine, you definitely have to learn to deal with noise.

Reducing a target to simulate the correct sight picture is simple math. Measure the distance from where you plan to hang the reduced target to where your eye will be in shooting position. Divide this dry-fire distance by the live-fire distance and multiply the result by the full-size target dimension. Just keep the distance numbers in the same units. Here are some examples.

- a. To reduce a 200 yd SR target that is 42 inches square for a 6 yd dry-fire distance: $6 \div 200 \times 42'' = 1.26''$
- b. The black bull's-eye on the 200 yd SR target is 13'' across. To scale the bull's-eye for your 6 yd dry-fire distance: $6 \div 200 \times 13'' = .39''$ or about a $3/8''$ dot.

A quick and easy dry-fire target can be made with an index card cut to reduced size with a dot drawn in the middle with a black marker. Mount the index card to a larger piece of paper with a contrasting color. Green is usually good for simulating shooting ranges. Hang the target at eye-level.

EQUIPMENT:

You should use the same equipment that you will use to shoot in a live-fire match. Your sling, shooting jacket, hat, glove and earmuffs, if you prefer them over earplugs, will all affect how you shoot. You can practice without getting all geared up, but you will notice a difference when you get to the range.

Some firearms do not like being dry-fired over an empty chamber. Get a Snap-Cap. Don't use a fired cartridge for safety's sake. You don't want your brain to get used to seeing a normal brass case in the receiver and thinking it's OK to pull the trigger. Dry-fire devices are available for some rifles.

CONDITIONING:

You don't have to be a body builder to shoot well standing. You only need to be reasonably fit. If your position is good, your muscles are used only to steady the rifle. Stamina is more important than super strength. You want your last shot to be as steady as your first. For conditioning exercises, the US Army Field Manual, "FM 21-20 Physical Fitness Training" has a set of four Rifle Drill Exercises that have been used for many years to strengthen recruits. The exercises combine stretching with a light workout. Do an internet search for the manual to find downloadable copies. This workout should be done after practice or at another time as it will likely tire you too much to be able to hold steady.

Do some stretching and light cardio type exercises before dry-fire practice. You want to loosen up your body and get the blood flowing, but not become exhausted.

Muscle memory like mental memory requires repetition. Once in standing position, your muscles have to know how to make very tiny movements to stabilize your sight picture. To train your muscles to hold steady, do some holding exercises. Assume your standing position, but instead of trying to break a shot within a dozen seconds, try to keep your sight picture on target for a minute or so while breathing shallowly. Take the rifle down, take four or five breaths to get your oxygen level back up, and repeat. Try this about ten times, then take a short break before dry-firing to let your body recover.

SAFETY HABITS:

Even when dry-firing you must maintain good safety habits. The rifle must always be pointed in a safe direction. The rifle must be unloaded. Don't assume this; CHECK the CHAMBER. Place your finger on the trigger only when you have your sight picture.

If holding the rifle between shots, cradle it in both arms with the muzzle pointed downrange and angled toward the ground. This is also how you must hold the rifle if you have taken it down from your shoulder with a live round in the chamber. In this case be especially careful. Look at the safety and engage it. Don't grope around for the safety. You might just touch something else.

If grounding the unloaded rifle butt between shots, keep the muzzle angled away from you and pointed downrange. Never place any part of your body over the muzzle of a grounded rifle. Never ground the butt of a loaded rifle.

During live-fire, you do not want to chamber a round until you are ready to shoulder the rifle. Keep the bolt open and your next round in your hand or some other convenient place until you are ready to fire. While dry-firing you will not be loading live rounds but you should simulate a loaded rifle. Do not cock the striker/hammer until you are ready to shoulder the rifle.

In the following technique sections, the term firing side or hand refers to your right if you are right-handed. Support side or hand refers to the left hand if you are right-handed, vice-versa for southpaws.

TECHNIQUE-1, POSITION:

Place your feet about shoulder width apart. Let your feet point naturally. Stand straight upright but not stiffly with the shoulder of your support side toward the target.

High-powered military rifles have significant recoil. To transfer this energy to your body consistently, the rifle buttstock should be placed into the shoulder pocket the same way every time. The elbow of your firing side should be elevated so that it is parallel to the ground. This will make the shoulder pocket form better.

Your firing hand should have a medium-firm hold on the wrist of the rifle stock. Pull the rifle into your shoulder snugly enough to get stability. You don't want to use excessive muscle tension anywhere. Your firing hand should be positioned so that your trigger finger pulls straight to the rear. The standing position is the least stable of all and trigger technique is most important.

TECHNIQUE-2, BREATHING:

Take full even breaths in between shots. Take one last deep breath as you shoulder the rifle and let out air to a comfortable level as you lower the rifle onto the target and then; hold your breath, break the shot, resume full even breaths.

TECHNIQUE-3, SIGHT ALIGNMENT:

Sight alignment is the positioning of your shooting eye inline with the rear sight and then centering the front sight within the rear sight. No target is required or desired. Cheek weld is the position of your cheek on the rifle buttstock relative to the rear sight. Cheek weld must be consistent from shot to shot for best accuracy.

Fit the rifle buttstock into the pocket of your shoulder with the muzzle slightly above the target line. The stock should be against your cheek before you look through the sights. Adjust your cheek weld to align the sights using the sky or some other uniformly colored background. Move your head as little as possible to get sight alignment. Canting your head over the rifle to position your shooting eye behind the rear sight affects your balance. Raise the buttstock higher in your shoulder pocket to minimize canting your head.

Once you have your sight alignment, move your upper body as a solid unit and your sight alignment will be maintained.

TECHNIQUE-4, SIGHT PICTURE:

Sight picture is the image formed by the rifle sights and the target. The front sight will be in sharp focus and the target bull's-eye will be a little blurry. The rear sight, while still visible, should not given much attention except as a reference for where your front sight should be.

After getting your sight alignment against the sky, lower the muzzle to the target level. The elbow of your support side should now be resting against your side. Shift your focus quickly to the number boards, locate your target, then fix your focus back on the front sight. Your sight alignment is good, don't worry about it. The target is anchored to the ground, don't worry about it. Your front sight, however, has a mind of its own and will wander off. Keep your focus intently on the front sight as you maintain sight picture.

TECHNIQUE-5, Natural Point of Aim (NPA):

Your natural point of aim is simply where the rifle is pointed when you are comfortably in position. If you use muscle tension to aim the rifle in a different

direction, there is a tendency to relax back toward the NPA just as the shot breaks. Here is how to check and adjust your NPA. Do this during your prep period before starting a string of fire and anytime you have shifted your feet in the standing position.

NPA WINDAGE CHECK: Once you have your sight picture, close your eyes and slightly rotate your upper body left and right a few times. Steady yourself and open your eyes. You should still have proper sight alignment, but your sight picture may be off sideways. You want the front sight to be close to the target's black bull's-eye. Keeping your support side foot planted, move your back foot a half step forward or back rotating your entire body. Check your NPA again. Repeat until it is good.

NPA ELEVATION CHECK: Close your eyes and take several breaths. Take a final breath and exhale until you are comfortable, then open your eyes. You want your front sight to be on your target. If your sight picture shows your front sight too high or low you can improve it in several ways. These are listed in order of preference. Avoid changing posture if possible.

1. Shift your support hand toward the muzzle to lower your NPA or back toward the magazine well to raise your NPA.
2. Change your support hand grip; open palm, open palm rotated, fist, finger tips, etc. There are many variations; find what works best for you and positions your NPA on target.
3. Widening or narrowing your stance will have a slight effect. Move your back foot only and not too far. Avoid extreme stances, they will affect your stability.
4. Try a different shooting glove. Some are thicker than others.
5. Lean your upper body slightly toward the targets to lower your NPA or away from the targets to raise your NPA.
6. DON'T lift the rifle by elevating your support arm. Keep the elbow of your support arm resting against your side.

Once your NPA is good, don't move your feet again. Your ammo and spotting scope should be close enough to reach while keeping your feet planted. Take the rifle down, take some full even breaths and get ready to shoot.

TECHNIQUE-6, TRIGGER CONTROL:

You will not be able to keep a perfect sight picture in standing position. This is your wobble factor. Everyone has one. How you deal with it is a choice. While holding your breath you have only a dozen seconds or so of clear eyesight

and steady muscles. After this time your wobble factor will most likely become unacceptable.

1. Don't be a Jerk! It's OK to take your finger off of the trigger and lower the rifle. Don't give in and try to yank the trigger when you see something black flash past your front sight. A good straight squeeze of the trigger is the only way to get a clean shot off.
2. Method 1, Continuous trigger pressure. Using this method, you will begin applying steady pressure to the trigger as soon as you get a reasonable sight picture. You will hold your wobble factor to a minimum and break the shot somewhere between 3-8 seconds. With proper technique your shots will break within your wobble area. This is the best method for people who can never get their sight picture to stop moving.
3. Method 2, Intermittent trigger pressure. Using this method, you will begin applying pressure to the trigger as soon as you get a good sight picture. When your sight picture deteriorates, hold the trigger pressure steady until you regain a good sight picture and then continue the trigger squeeze. This method only works if you are able to maintain a good sight picture for a few seconds. If the shot doesn't break after two or three squeezes, you must take the rifle down and start over. You must be very familiar with how your trigger breaks to use this method. Only practice will do.

TECHNIQUE-7, FOLLOW THROUGH:

There is a brief fraction of a second after the sear releases and before the bullet leaves the muzzle. You must hold steady during this time. Jerking the trigger, pulling the trigger off centerline, taking focus off of the front sight, twitching any muscles, etc., all have the potential to ruin the shot. During dry-firing hold your sight picture for 2 seconds after the trigger release to form this habit. If you have a little wobble, then it must stay little. If you had a good stable sight picture, then it must stay that way. Your sight picture must not change immediately after the shot breaks.

TECHNIQUE-8, CALLING YOUR SHOTS:

With your focus fixed intently on your front sight, you can develop the ability to "call your shot." You will learn to take a mental snapshot of your last

sight picture when you feel the shot break. This is only possible if your focus is on the front sight. With good trigger technique, each time a round is fired you should have a pretty good idea of where it will strike the target. You will know; a little left, or high and right, or Oh crap! I hope that hits the paper. These are all good calls. When you think you fired an X and it is actually a 6 at 4 O'clock, you did not call your shot. You lost focus. You can learn to call your shots when dry-firing.

TECHNIQUE-9, MATCH TEMPO:

During a match, you will have a time limit to fire your standing shots. You should have a timer running so that you can see how much time is left. Try to pace yourself to get all shots off with a couple of minutes to spare. That way if you have to take the rifle down due to excessive wobble, you won't run short of time and have to rush. Develop this tempo when dry-firing.

Good Shooting,

Bill Bowling
Vintage Military Match Director
Crosse Creek Rifle and Pistol Club
Fayetteville, NC
Email: VMShooters@nc.rr.com