By Duane Thomas, Photo by Ed Leavitt

Shooting Tip: Accurate or Fast...or Both? Accurate or Fast...or Both?

What separates the very best “combat” handgun shooters from their less-skilled counterparts is the ability to fire with a great combination of speed with accuracy. This is not something most people can do – they have to choose one or the other. There are two basic approaches to becoming a person who doesn’t have to make that choice, who can do both at the same time, and these two groups of people approach the problem with very different mindsets. Group A is terrified of missing, so their attitude is, “I will learn to shoot accurately first. Then I’ll worry about becoming faster once I’m accurate.” This is by FAR the most common approach. Then we have Group B, a much smaller group, which says, “I want to shoot fast. I’ll put some effort into becoming accurate later...as long as I don’t have to slow down to do it.”

I started out a Group A shooter, and tried that approach for, oh, 20-plus years. I could shoot accurately slow fire but when I turned up the speed the accuracy went out the window. At this point, if you are an accuracy-oriented shooter, the overwhelming compulsion is – and I’m sure you’ve all heard this advice before – to “slow down and get the hits.” The problem with that approach is that it builds an either/or mentality toward speed and accuracy. And that’s unacceptable. Eventually I did figure out my problem: I was spending most of my time shooting accurately but (in the overall scheme of things) slowly. I wasn’t pushing the speed as much as I could. How are you ever going to get really good at something you never, or very rarely practice? Even when I was firing fast, there was always that control freak part of my mind that just couldn’t let go, couldn’t just let it happen.

Finally I made the mental leap to “Hey, let’s just see what happens if I put the gun out there and shoot as fast as possible. Don’t worry about the speed; the speed will be whatever I can achieve when I’m shooting “balls to the wall.” Just sit back, watch the sights, and take care of everything else EXCEPT shooting fast. That part can happen on its own.” When I did that, I found that not only did my speed improve immensely, so did my accuracy. I found that I really do have all the time in the world to track the sights, to fire accurately, to transition the gun between targets between shots, even when firing it as fast as I can. Because THE TIME INTERVAL IT TAKES TO DO EVERYTHING ELSE IS LESS THAN THE TIME IT TAKES TO PULL THE TRIGGER AGAIN. You literally feel like you’re waiting on the gun between shots. That to me is how I know I’m shooting really well: the sense that I am always waiting on the gun.

The either/or attitude toward speed OR accuracy, for most people, is a very real choice they have to make. However in a perfect world we would like to have both – and one of the first and most important steps toward achieving that is to dump the either/or attitude. To fire with the maximum rate of speed with accuracy, we need to be operating at a speed beyond which our conscious minds cannot keep up. The conscious mind can only do one thing at a time, and it operates in a very linear, A-to-B-to-C-to-D fashion. There’s no way it can execute the physical skills needed, and monitor all the visual and tactile inputs necessary, to fire a handgun with speed and accuracy. It simply doesn’t work that fast, or multi-task well enough. This is the basic problem with shooting slowly and accurately, then thinking that’s going to transition over to shooting fast and accurately.

The subconscious mind, by contrast, can multi-task, it can do many different things at once. The subconscious mind needs to become accustomed to operating at the necessary speed, the conscious mind needs to understand it can indeed get out of the way and things will not fall apart, in fact they will work out much better. This trust between the conscious and subconscious minds, the conscious understanding that the subconscious mind is capable of shooting accurately even when the gun is firing faster than the conscious mind can control the shooting, is not going to occur unless the conscious mind KNOWS though successful repetition after successful repetition, that it works, at that speed. Shoot accurately slowly, then try to transition that over to firing much faster and not only is the subconscious mind not able to function at that speed because it’s never built the capability through repetition, but shooting fast always seems something “other”, something very different than what we do normally, and therefore frightening. This is the very antithesis of the relaxed trust that leads to good performance at speed.

Group A shooters tend to get stuck in “when I’m slow I’m accurate, when I shoot fast it all falls apart” mode. Group B shooters, by contrast, who start out fast (then, granted they do indeed work to bring their accuracy up to the level of their speed), tend to progress into “accuracy with speed” mode much more easily – because they’re used to operating at that speed. If I could go back in a time machine, I would become a Group B shooter right off the bat. I wouldn’t have wasted years of my shooting career beating my head against the “I’ll become accurate then fast” wall, and would be much further along The Path.