Watch That Front Sight!

By Duane Thomas

We’ve all heard the advice “Watch the front sight,” but I’m convinced that most people don’t understand — at the higher skills levels — why we watch the front sight. It’s because watching the front sight occupies the conscious mind, thus allowing the much more competent subconscious mind to run the shooting. Also, when we can see the position of the front sight within the rear notch for every shot, this frees our mind of an immense load.

If we do NOT see the position of the sights at the instant the gun fires, there’s always this little piece of our mind (whether we realize it or not) that, when we move on the next targets, is always still back on the targets we’ve already engaged, wondering if the hits are there or not. When you KNOW that every hit is there, because you read the sights at the moment the gun went off, you can just breeze through the stage with this wonderful feeling of mental joy and freedom.

Before I proceed, let me apologize if what I’m about to say seems like I’m bragging. It’s just that the only way I can think of to really explain what I mean is to give an example that starkly contrasts the difference in MY OWN shooting performance enabled by watching the front sight compared to not watching the front sight.

Okay, here’s my example. The first IDPA match I ever shot after getting my Stock Service Pistol Master rank had six stages. I didn’t realize — there or not. What have — that when your squadmates know you’ve just gotten the “M,” they’ll be watching you to see how well you can shoot. The first three stages I was really not shooting very well. Because I was trying to be fast, I wasn’t taking the time to pick up the front sight, I was just blasting away, dropping an immense number of points, and my times weren’t anything to write home about, either. Actually one of our better Expert-class shooters on my squad was pretty much keeping up with me.

I might have continued that level of performance throughout the entire match except that the fourth stage I shot required, at the first position, that you go to kneeling around a barrel and cut a tight no-shoot on the first target, which only had a partial down-0 circle available. I said to myself, Okay, this is obviously not a blast ‘em proposition or I’m going to hit that no-shoot. If I’m going to have a fast first shot, avoid the no-shoot and get all the points, I need to get on the front sight as I’m pressing the gun out to the target.

Now, this particular stage, if you hit everything you aimed at, was 11 rounds. You started out at the barrel, engaging four targets (that’s eight rounds), then shooting another target on the move across a fairly wide bay (that’s 10), then the final shot was again from kneeling around a barrel, on a round steel plate at moderately long distance (that’s 11). If I wanted to run a fast time, that meant I was going to come into the last position with only one round in the gun (you start with 11 in SSP), and I had to take down the plate with one shot. Again, this was a “focus on the front sight” proposition.

At the buzzer, I dropped down behind the barrel, acquired the front sight as I drew, fired two shots and knew I’d hit the down-0 circle with both, then, since that had worked out so well, just kept on using the front sight for the other three targets. Again, I knew I’d dropped no points there. Hustled my butt out across the range, blasted that one target on the move, as I dropped into cover at the final position acquired the front sight and dropped the steel with one shot.

To me this did not all seem particularly fast. I was surprised when, after Unload & Show Clear, suddenly every other person on the squad was standing around me, laughing, slapping me on the back, one guy said, “You’ve been holding out the Master on us till now!” A stage that most people were running in the mid-20s I’d just done in 10-something, I’d only dropped one point, on the target I shot on the move at almost a dead run — the only target on which I did not acquire the front sight, strangely enough. So by reading my sights while shooting, not only had my accuracy improved immensely, but by “taking the time” to pick up the front sight my speed improved, too.

Okay, that worked out so well, I decided to watch that little pointy thing on the end of the gun for the last two stages. By the end of the match, I was ahead of the Expert who had been pacing me for the first half of the match by 10 seconds — and it all happened on the last three stages.

The level of mental performance that watching the front sight enables makes this whole competition-shooting thing so easy; really it’s almost like cheating.