Diagnosing Shooter Problems and Coaching

A good firearms instructor must also be a good coach. It is not sufficient to simply impart information from the front of the classroom or the range. If one is to actually be effective in assisting the student in turning theory into correct action, the instructor must be able to deal one-on-one with the student. This is especially critical when the student is having difficulty with the skill being taught. What seems clear and obvious to the instructor is not always so in the mind of the student. The frustration causing the instructor to throw their hands into the air and walk away in disgust must be avoided. A good coach never forgets the awkwardness they experienced when they first learned a skill. One way that helps is for the instructor to take classes themselves in techniques they are not yet proficient. A right handed instructor should learn to perform all skills with their left hand. The left handed instructor should attempt proficiency with their right hand. This is not only a useful and essential teaching skill but serves as a reminder when they note their own self conscious awkwardness. The good coach, whose desire is to see the student succeed, needs to recognize the effects of stress being felt by the student and take steps to alleviate it.

Effective Coaching also requires:

1. Thorough understanding and application of marksmanship fundamentals (Sec. 4)

2. The ability to recognize and correct deficiencies and problems.
   - The ability to read the student’s trigger finger, hands, eyes, body clues and weapon.
     - Stand where you can actually see each of the above, yet be careful to remain behind the muzzle of all the weapons on the firing line.
     - Observe them during dry fire as well as live fire.
     - Observe them closely during “ball and dummy” exercises (Sec. 2 – Pg. 28)
     - Shooting one-handed sometimes exposes problems not otherwise revealed during two-handed shooting
     - Many times eliminating recoil, by having the student fire a 22 cal. pistol reveals a problem.
   - The ability to “read” the student’s target (Examples: Pgs. 2 – 5 Resources section)
     - This is not an exact science. Use it to supplement your observation of the student’s body clues.
     - Sometimes one problem can mask a second problem. For example: Improper sight alignment (front sight held too high) can conceal and compensate improper trigger control. Shooting from different positions and shooting from cover introduce too many variables to accurately use reading the target in reliably analyzing the student.

3. The ability to make positive corrective comments

4. The ability to maintain a positive constructive attitude
Diagnosing Shooter Problems and Coaching

5. The ability to listen to the student – have them analyze themselves. What are they seeing, what are they feeling? Have them repeat back to you what they are attempting to do. Maybe they are doing exactly what they thought you told them to do!

6. The ability to make use of different teaching/learning techniques:
   - **Auditory** – be as clear and descriptive as possible. Include illustrations, anecdotes, and humorous stories to approach your point from several different angles. Many times it’s the second or third illustration where they suddenly say “why didn’t you say so!”
   - **Visual** – Use demonstrations, handouts, and visual aids. Video taping the student and having them watch themselves often leads to self-revelation. After receiving specific instructions as to what to watch for, having the student play the role of the coach with another student, can sometimes accomplish the same result.
   - **Kinesthetic** – Hands on trigger drills (Pgs. 6 – 8 in this Section)

Instructors must always remember that we are not attempting to just impart enough skills for the student to pass a qualification course but rather assisting them to develop the skills necessary to win the deadly force encounter.

DEALING WITH SPECIFIC PROBLEMS: Common sense advice;

1. Persistent mismanagement of the trigger
   - Lots of Dry Practice
   - Ball and Dummy exercises. Instructor or other student does the loading of the magazines. Sometimes may choose to load only one or two live rounds amongst many dummy rounds and point out the quality of the one round fired after they tired of jerking the trigger.
   - Consider eliminating recoil by using .22 cal. pistol and then graduated movement to heavier calibers
   - Consider videotaping student so they can observe themselves.

2. Fear of the weapon
   - Lots of Dry Practice
   - Double-up on ear protection to reduce noise from others shooting on the line: ear muffs over soft ear plugs.
   - Use of light recoil weapon such as .22 cal. with graduated move to heavier calibers.
Diagnosing Shooter Problems and Coaching

3. Improper sight alignment
   - Many times the student thinks they are aligning the sights correctly but are not. “Wiring the sights” can be an effective diagnostic and corrective tool especially if the student is consistently producing good groups that are either higher or lower than intended. Cut a piece of tape (electrical or masking tape work well) approximately 1 inch X 3/8 inch. Place it across the top of the student’s rear sight so that it forms a fine visible line from the perspective of the student when sighting the weapon. This allows the student to have a reference to clearly observe and make corrections when the front sight drifts above or below its desired plane. Remove the tape after the corrections have been made.

4. Small stature or weak fingers, hands, arms and shoulders
   - Change to a different stance. Consider the advantages and disadvantages of each stance in relationship to body configuration.
   - Adjust the stance. Smaller, weaker students must be more aggressive in their stance and use the support hand more aggressively to control recoil.
   - Within the parameters of individual department regulation, attempt to use a handgun more suited to the student’s physique. This does not necessarily mean using a smaller sized weapon of the same caliber as the reduction in the weight and mass of the gun causes more felt recoil and does the opposite of the intent.
   - If grip size is the problem, using a weapon configured for a single stack magazine may offer a solution. Some companies such as Robar offer grip reduction modifications.
   - Small hands usually contribute to improper finger placement on the trigger. Make small, incremental adjustment to the student’s grip to allow them to reach the trigger to allow them to control it smoothly. This generally means sacrificing the weapon being in line with the forearm. In short sacrificing the natural pointing of the weapon for the ability to manipulate the trigger.
   - Fatigue setting in before the training day is complete. Watch the students closely. Students suffering from fatigue not only aren’t concentrating enough to learn but can become a safety hazard. Monitor body language and conversation between the students and adjust training schedules accordingly.
Diagnosing Shooter Problems
and Coaching

5. ATTITUDE PROBLEMS

A student with an attitude problem many times creates a more difficult situation than those with physical or capability issues.

- **Resistant** students who state “I’m just not a gun person” or “but that’s not the way I’ve always done it” or “I already know how to do this stuff” will require all of the instructor’s salesmanship and people skills to motivate them to not be satisfied with where they are and move to a new level. Don’t give up too quickly. Take it on as a challenge. It sure is fun when you prove to them you were right all along.

- Rarely but occasionally the instructor encounters a **defiant, argumentative** student. They must be dealt with immediately, before their attitude spreads throughout the class. **There can be only one person in charge on the range!** That is the instructor. This becomes even more of a problem if the student is of a higher rank than the instructor. Establish the ground rules with your supervisor before this becomes an issue, to verify how much backing you will get. Sometimes they are just testing out the territory and the situation can be resolved by taking them aside to explain the ground rules. If that doesn’t work, the instructor’s supervisor should be called in to deal with the problem.

- Not too infrequently, the instructor will find that they must deal with “the class clown.” Humor can be a good thing. But the instructor must balance the humor with control. Do not allow it to be disruptive and don’t allow the humor to transition into horseplay on the range that can create a safety hazard. Remember you will be held accountable for what occurs on your range.

Using the Coach/Pupil method of instruction on the range can be an effective teaching tool from many perspectives.

- It allows more sets of eyes to be watching for safety issues.
- It allows students to see in others the same things they themselves have been doing (both the difficulties and the successes)
- It occupies all persons in a large class instead of having them stand around at the back of the range simply observing.

Instructors choosing to use this method must however give the coaches clear complete instructions pertaining to the responsibilities of their role. Their responsibilities must take into consideration their skill level and base of knowledge. For example, novice
students may merely be another set of eyes to watch for violations of the Four General Safety Rules (Sec. 1 – Pg. 3, 4) Instructions should include:

- Exactly where to stand. This must include admonishments regarding staying behind the muzzles of all weapons on the firing line.
- What are they supposed to be observing? Examples: “Watch the trigger finger on the press and reset.” Or “Make sure they are not looking down from the threat area during the reload.”
- If, when and how they are to make any corrections or suggestions. This should include verbal or “hands-on.”
- Specific instructions as to how to respond to any safety issues.
- If the skill being taught involves movement and it is applicable, the coach must know where he is expected to hang on to the pupil and what he is expected to do if equipment is dropped or if their pupil slips or stops suddenly.

Instructors working the class should be closely monitoring the instruction between the coaches and the pupils to ensure correct information is being given by the coaches.

Instructors should point out things to the coach and allow them to take corrective measures with the pupil whenever possible.

\(^1\)The Robar Companies Inc.
Diagnosing Shooter Problems
and Coaching

Trigger Drills:

Poor Trigger control and improper sight alignment will be the most frequent and most obvious cause of poor shot placement. They can also be the most frustrating and challenging to correct. A system of Trigger Drills has been developed by Larry Mudgett of Los Angeles Police Department’s firearms training unit, along with Greg Morrison, firearms instructor and one time operations manager of Jeff Cooper’s American Pistol Institute in Arizona. These Hands-on drills can be effective in evaluating and correcting these common problems. For instructional purposes it in effect turns the handgun into a crew served weapon.

Basic Rules:

- This is ideally a step-by-step building block process but each trigger drill can be used to accomplish specific needs. Trigger drill #3 is the one which most commonly is used as a stand-alone drill.
- The best results occur at distances inside 15 yards
- The technique requires student/pupil interaction. Student should comment on dry fire squeezes. The coach only comments when they disagree.
- As the coach squeezes the trigger they must be careful of the placement of their thumb in regards to the movement of the weapon’s slide. The hazard varies with the type of pistol being fired.
- Both coach and pupil should be made aware that the exercise requires physical contact between the two of them.

Trigger Drill #1:

Objective: Assessing and teaching sight picture. This exercise isolates the fundamental elements.

Student:

- Holds the weapon keeping their trigger finger under the trigger guard.
- Is responsible for sighting the weapon

Coach:

- Stands on the student’s strong side and places their hand across the back of the student’s hand with their trigger finger on the trigger.
- Slowly presses the trigger when the student indicates the sights are aligned.
- Places the heel of their uprange hand on the student’s upper back to stabilize their body movement.

Critique the shot placement. Consider “wiring the sights” (Pg.3 of this Section) as needed.
Trigger Drill #2:

Objective: The student monitors and learns to recognize, using sight and feel, a properly squeezed trigger to “surprise break.”

Student:
- Stands on the coach’s support side.
- Places their index finger on the trigger but does not apply any pressure.
- Monitors correct trigger squeeze and reset.

Coach:
- Has the primary grip on the weapon – this is the only one of the four drills where this occurs
- Controls the sights
- Places their finger over the index finger of the student.
- Presses the trigger

This drill is similar to dual control flight instruction

Trigger Drill #3:

Objective: By adding responsibility of holding the weapon and sight alignment and still only monitoring the trigger squeeze, the student moves incrementally closer to full responsibility for their shots.

Student:
- Has the primary grip on the weapon.
- Sights the weapon.
- Places their trigger finger on the trigger but does not apply any pressure.

Coach:
- Places their hand across the back of the student’s dominant hand.
- Places their trigger finger over the student’s trigger finger.
- Presses the trigger to achieve a “surprise break.” This is also the best time for the instructor to demonstrate proper trigger reset.
- The uprange hand is on the shooter’s shoulder to assist in balance.
Trigger Drill #4:

Objective: Similar to trigger drill #3 except reverse the responsibilities. This monitors the progress of the student’s trigger finger.

Student:
- Has the primary control of the pistol.
- Controls the sights, and presses the trigger.

Coach:
- Stands on the student’s support side.
- Places their trigger finger between that of the student and the trigger.
- Monitors the student’s trigger press as well as the reset.
- Reverses the roles of Trigger Drill #2