

DRY FIRE: WHERE PROGRESS HAPPENS

With modern training aids, this once looked down upon practice method will absolutely improve your shooting.

STORY AND PHOTOS BY ASH HESS

For some, dry fire is a dirty word. It is considered low value and fake. If this is you, I highly encourage you to take another look at it. It is where you fix most of the issues, particularly in movement, draws, manipulations and getting into position.

If you break it down, the only things you do not get in dry fire are recoil and target feedback. But you are still attaining your grip and stance, aligning the sights and pressing the trigger. If everything to that point has been slow, the quality of the hit will not change the outcome, regardless of the shooting context, be it operations, competition or hunting. Dry fire, though, needs to be well thought out, follow a plan, and be adapted to you individually. Many shooters will just go through the motions, call it dry fire, and at best improve slowly or at worst do many reps wrong.

I plan my dry fire routines based on the upcoming match, issues/notes from the last event, and the incorporation of new things like scopes, stocks, grips or other components. I prioritize the latest items because there are always differences between makes, models and even lots of the items you had before. I plan my routines based on



A shooter aims a rifle equipped with the Mantis Blackbeard system, which allows for scored dry fire practice to be conducted anywhere. While the product uses a drop-in bolt carrier group and magazine, all weapons used for dry fire practice should be triple checked for safety.

five- to 10-minute sessions per day. Depending on the purpose, I will either do them immediately after a workout or before dinner. I am blessed enough to be able to have a training set of my competition gear, so it is easy.

Before we get much further, if you are using live gear, your dry fire session needs to be conducted in a sterile environment that has no possibility of live rounds in the area and oriented in a direction such that if an accident does happen, it will be safe. Further, firearms need to be checked, rechecked and triple checked.

Once you have all that squared away, you can continue.

IDO MOST of my competitive shooting in the Quantified Performance Shoot Fast, Shoot Far series. (In full transparency, I am one of the founders.) These matches involve small movements onto a prop, then engaging multiple targets from 100 to 1,000 yards. For most of the stages, the time used to attain a solid firing position on the prop always sets the tone for the stage. That initial position also determines much of the outcome of the shots. Remember:



Author Ash Hess shoots a stage at the Quantified Performance match at The Sawmill Training Complex. (PAUL PAWELA)

properly aim, then fire the shot without disturbing the aim.

Quantified Performance starts most stages one pace away from the prop with the bolt locked open. For dry fire, I will decide on the prop and perform five or so reps of moving to the prop and dropping the bolt. This phase of the stage helps speed up both the movement to the prop and getting the rifle ready to fire. Mounting the rifle and achieving a solid position with proper eye relief is vital to speed. Having to break a solid position to drop the bolt will cause an episode of negative self-talk at the worst possible time, so I tie these things together.

Once I get those reps in, depending on their quality, I will set a time to have them accomplished that feels faster than the warmup reps. I will then set that par time on a shot timer and push reps until I meet the time. Unless that is the primary focus of the session, once I beat the clock for three or four runs, I will move on but keep the time burning. Without other tools and systems, I focus on the first shot only. This is because breaking the position to reset the charging handle is unrealistic.

I use this same methodology when it comes to pistols. You cannot get good hits until the pistol is out of the holster and presented. I will do warmup reps just on the draw. I will then move into draw to full presentation. From there, I work to the first shot with the shot timer. I do not work pistol and rifle in the same session unless I am working transitions.

Regardless of the focus, I warm up with one of these two techniques. This will set the opening to a stage performance on the right track. It also happens to be very applicable to what you would have to do in real-world use of either system.

THEN I START adding dry fire tools that are available on the market. The first is the Mantis Blackbeard. Blackbeard does several things very well. First, to use it, you must remove the live bolt carrier and magazine. From a safety perspective, this is particularly important. Next, it resets the trigger, allowing you to take multiple shots without having to cycle the bolt. It also uses movement to track and score the quality of your shot; that data is

saved and can be replayed. Lastly, it transmits a laser that can be used with their Laser Academy to check the quality of your aim.

Combined, it takes your dry fire to a new level just short of live fire. No, you do not get recoil, but you get a ton of data to analyze from your dry run. To date, I have 25,000 Mantis shots on various systems that are scored and can be played back.

I also use the Canebreak Consulting Scaled Target. This has scaled targets from 100 to 800 yards that I can apply the proper elevation hold on. By shooting the stages, I learn better techniques for the stage and how to maximize stability and efficiency.

Just like a workout session, a good warmup followed by focused reps in a specific format will result in gains. This effort in dry fire will then translate into your live fire, regardless of the circumstances. Recently, Dutch Moyer from The Sawmill Training Complex released a video on the importance of dry fire. Every high-level shooter I know will mention dry fire if someone asks how to improve. Unless you are beating these people, you are not too good for dry fire. As we used to say in the Army, “rehearsals, rehearsals, rehearsals.”

Vince Lombardi once said, “All of our games are won in practice.” This does not just apply to your favorite ball team; it applies to your shooting as well. I have quantifiable data on how important it is for me to dry fire. If you put some work in, you will see how much it helps you. ★

Editor’s note: Ash Hess is a highly seasoned combat veteran of 22 years with four combat deployments to Afghanistan and Iraq, totaling 52 months. His military training includes the US Army Master Marksman Trainer course, as well as rifle marksman instructor, urban combat leaders’, senior leaders’, army basic instructor, high-angle marksman and unit armor courses. He also wrote TC3-22.9, the Army’s marksmanship manual.