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A GRIPPING TALE

BY RICHARD NANCE | PHOTOS BY ALFREDO RICO



Your hands are the interface between you and your pistol. The grip you establish and maintain largely determines how fast and accurately you can shoot. When firing a single shot, just about any grip will do, but when the goal is to hit the target multiple times in rapid succession, grip becomes critical. The defensive handgunner must master the elements of a proper grip, including hand placement, gun alignment, wrist cant, grip pressure and arm extension.

When you pick up a pistol, grip as high along the backstrap as possible. The force of recoil will be directed opposite the muzzle, so the closer you grip to the bore line the better able your body will absorb recoil rather than allow recoil to cause the pistol's grip to rotate in your hands. In the case of the latter, your →

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A The thumb is flagged to create space for the other hand. The base of the thumb pushes forward and down while the pinky pulls in and up.



A When adding your other hand to the grip, use the bottom of the trigger guard as a physical reference point.



A Thumbs point toward the target, with the rear thumb applying downward pressure on the base of your other thumb. Hands exert 360-degree inward pressure.

← rate of fire will be slowed, and it will be more difficult to aim, since the front sight will flip up from view and probably not come down in the same spot.

There can be no gap between the web of your hand and the tang of the pistol. Even the slightest bit of daylight is unacceptable because it gives recoil an escape route, which will result in muzzle flip. The more the muzzle rises, the longer it will take it to settle and consequently to acquire the front sight for the next shot.

The thumb of your dominant hand should be flagged—as though you were trying to hitch a ride—to allow room for your other hand to join the grip. But before I address adding your second hand, let's make sure your pistol is properly aligned in your dominant hand.

For optimal recoil control, your pistol must align with your forearm. This places relatively large bones and muscles behind the gun, providing solid support. When the grip of your pistol is braced by your forearm, the slide reciprocates efficiently, as though it were in a vise.

To achieve proper alignment, your dominant hand should be extended relatively straight out, under your dominant eye. Your off or non-firing hand will be at more of an angle to reach the pistol. Gripping in this manner will not result in your arms forming an isosceles triangle. That's by design.

If the grip of the pistol is not properly supported, recoil forces can cause the whole pistol to move rearward. This could prevent the slide from cycling fully and subsequently not having enough energy to move fully back into battery. This problem is known as "limp wristing" and could result in a failure to feed or a failure to eject because of the decelerated slide movement.

When a pistol is too big, the tendency for a shooter is to rotate his or her hand inward to reach the trigger more easily with the index finger, forming a true isosceles triangle. →

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← This can also occur when the shooter doesn't have sufficient hand strength to press the trigger rearward. Rotating the hand enables the shooter to position the trigger deeper on the finger for more leverage.

The problem is, shifting the pistol in this manner aligns it with the base of your thumb, which is considerably smaller and weaker than your forearm. Even if this doesn't result in a malfunction induced by limp wristing, the base of your thumb is a sorry substitute for your forearm from a recoil management standpoint.

With the web of your dominant hand high along the backstrap and the pistol aligned with your forearm, it's time to add your other hand to the grip. But there's more to it than simply filling the gap on the grip left by your dominant hand. You'll want to lock your wrists to help mitigate recoil.

If your wrists aren't locked, recoil can cause them to flex rearward,

which is not conducive to properly managing recoil. Locking the wrists is not merely tensing them, but more importantly, canting them. I'll address the dominant wrist when we examine grip pressure, so let's focus on the other wrist first.

When you add your second hand to the grip, cant your wrist forward as much as possible without losing contact with the heel of your dominant hand. Canting your wrist will align your non-dominant thumb with your arm, as opposed to your thumb extending up.

When executed properly, your thumb will point toward the target, but beware. Just because your thumb points to the target doesn't mean your wrist is properly canted and therefore locked. In addition to the alignment of your thumb and arm, you'll know from the tension canting your wrist will create: If it's comfortable, you're probably not doing it right.

With your offside wrist locked,

let's look at how to lock the dominant wrist. Locking your dominant wrist occurs simply by applying proper grip pressure. Your dominant hand primarily exerts pressure on the grip of your pistol from front to back.

Many equate this to squeezing a pair of pliers. While this is a reasonable analogy, it's not entirely accurate. You should also drive the heel of your hand upward and forward while pulling your pinky inward and upward. This essentially locks your wrist.

Your off hand applies more side-to-side pressure, often compared to squeezing a ball. With both hands doing what they are supposed to, your hands completely envelop the grip of your pistol, applying 360-degree inward pressure.

But how much pressure should you apply? One traditional response is, "Grip your pistol as if you were giving a firm handshake." But for best recoil control, I believe it requires more →

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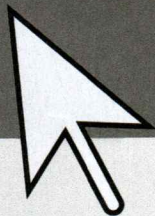
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← pressure than what most would consider a firm handshake.

Then there's the "Grip it as hard as you can" crowd. The idea is if you're gripping as tightly as possible, you are better able to mitigate recoil. Advocates of this technique believe that by gripping with maximum pressure, you eliminate the possibility of sympathetic hand movement while pressing the trigger.

While that may be true, gripping as tightly as possible will result in fatigue and even trembling of the hands, which could be detrimental to accuracy. A good compromise is to grip tightly but not so tightly that you strain and shake. Think of your grip as more than a firm handshake but less than a death grip.

But don't assume grip is only about your hands. Interestingly, the degree to which you extend your arms is also a factor.

Years ago, in police shooting courses, I was taught to extend my arms fully when shooting. The idea being if your arms are locked out, that's much more repeatable than if they were extended to a lesser degree. But locking your arms outward means the force of recoil is directed back to your shoulders. This causes your arms—

and your pistol—to rise, because the shoulders serve as a hinge.

A better option is to keep a slight bend in your elbows. This tends to be more comfortable than locking your arms out, and more importantly, when your elbows are bent, the forces of recoil direct the gun more horizontally, with less muzzle flip. That's because when your elbows are allowed to bend, it can bleed off some of the recoil forces, instead of directing all the recoil to the shoulders, resulting in unnecessary muzzle rise.

Another problem with having your arms locked out at full extension is you can't exert enough side-to-side pressure on the grip. Although you can still apply good front-to-back pressure with your arms at full extension, that's not sufficient. For maximum recoil control, you need 360-degree inward pressure on the grip of the pistol.

Conversely, with the gun closer to your chest, you can squeeze powerfully from side to side but only minimally from front to back. The solution is to split the difference.

Ideally, when you draw your pistol and orient the muzzle to the target, your non-firing hand should be staged at your lower chest. As you begin to



▲ A gap between the gun and the hand increases muzzle flip. Get your hand as high on the gun as possible.

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BECOME PART OF THE LEGEND

drive the pistol to the target, that hand slides under the pistol, with the base of your index finger contacting the bottom of the trigger guard. From there, the fingers of your off hand wrap around the fingers of your dominant hand.

The second knuckles of your off hand should be aligned with the second knuckles of your dominant hand to best lock your hands in place. As your arms extend, your off hand wrist cants forward as your grip tightens.

Just be mindful not to cant the wrist too far forward. If you cant your wrist to such a degree you lose contact between the heels of your hands, you're missing out on the friction this contact creates, which is as important to recoil management as the leverage achieved by canting your wrist. To complete your grip, the thumb of your dominant hand applies downward pressure to the base of your other thumb to help mitigate recoil.

When your arms are extended as you prepare to fire, the arms should be in a position where you can comfortably exert pressure all around the grip of the pistol. Experiment by applying pressure to the grip as you extend and retract your arms. You'll find a sweet spot where you can generate considerable front-to-back and side-to-side pressure. That's where you want to be.

You may find that your non-dominant arm is slightly higher than your dominant arm because your non-dominant wrist is canted. Some will lift their elbows slightly to help tighten the grip closer to the bore line. Others find it more comfortable to allow the elbows to drop.

While there are bound to be nuances to one's grip based on hand size, physicality and even personal preference, there's a reason the best shooters in the world adhere to these basic concepts. They work. A proper grip results in faster and more accurate rounds on target. That's the goal whether you're competing for a title or competing for your life.



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