Spartan Firearms Training Group, LLC

Managing Transitions Between Handgun Platforms

By

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This article presents issues intermediate-level shooters face when transitioning from one handgun platform to another. It is important for these people to know and understand the characteristics of a handgun they are unaccustomed to using. This article defines the term "intermediate-level shooter," explains why transitioning to a different platform may be necessary, and highlights the characteristics of selected popular semi-automatic and revolver handguns. Drills used by *Spartan Firearms Training Group* instructors about gripping a handgun, aligning sights, acquiring a sight picture, and manipulating the trigger are discussed.

Intermediate-Level Shooters

Intermediate-level shooters are people with a good understanding of basic shooting skills, but have not yet progressed to an advanced or expert-level. They still need to develop or refine skills for accuracy, speed, consistency, and situational awareness.

Why Transition to a New Platform

Transitioning from one handgun platform to another can happen for various reasons, depending on the needs and preferences of the shooter. A review of best practices identified some of the common reasons for making the switch, including:

Improved Ergonomics. A shooter might switch to a handgun that feels more comfortable in their hand or offers better control.

Caliber Preference. The shooter may prefer a different caliber based on factors like stopping power, recoil management, or ammunition availability.

Upgraded Features. Shooters may switch to a platform that offers more modern or useful features that align with their specific needs.

Concealability. A shooter might transition to a more compact or subcompact platform for concealed carry.

Reliability and Performance. Some shooters switch to a different handgun for increased reliability or performance in specific conditions (e.g., extreme weather or high round counts).

Purpose-Specific Needs. Shooters often choose handguns based on their intended use. For example, a competitive shooter may transition to a platform with better performance for speed shooting or precision.

Recoil Management. Some handgun platforms manage recoil better than others. A shooter may switch to a platform with improved recoil control.

Weight and Size Considerations. Handguns come in various weights and sizes. Someone who finds their current firearm too heavy or light may opt for a different platform.

Personal Preference or Brand Loyalty. Sometimes, a shooter may simply prefer the feel, aesthetics, or reputation of one brand over another.

Training and Familiarity. If a shooter is in an organization (military, law enforcement) that issues a specific platform, they may transition to that platform to ensure

compatibility with their training or duty requirements.

Self-Defense Immediacy. A final reason to transition is that a person's primary self-defense firearm could run out of ammunition or have an irreparable malfunction. If another handgun was readily available the shooter could bring that gun into the fight.

FOUR COMMON HANDGUN PLATFORMS

There are two popular categories of handguns: semi-automatics and revolvers. Within the semi-automatic category there are three common platforms:

- single-action,
- double/single-action
- striker-fired.

The article begins with a discussion about the semi-automatic platforms followed by a discussion about revolvers.

Single-Action Platforms. The Springfield Armory 45 ACP 1911 Operator is a full-size single-action platform. A picture of the 1911 is shown below.

Springfield Armory 1911

The trigger on a single-action handgun only has one job to perform; that is, to drop the hammer after the shooter manually cocks the hammer. The gun will not function if the hammer is forward.

After the hammer is cocked, the hammer will drop when the trigger is pressed. The first trigger press on a 1911 style handgun is very light. The slide reciprocates and cocks the hammer after the first shot breaks making the gun ready for the subsequent shots, if needed.

After the first shot is discharged the hammer is cocked and ready to drop. The trigger needs to be prepped by removing the slack (the movement in the trigger before it drops the hammer). The trigger is pressed until it reaches a natural stopping point before breaking the shot. That stopping point is called the "trigger wall." Then, the trigger is pressed smoothly to the rear of the trigger guard to break the next shot. Remember, there is almost no slack in a single action trigger once the hammer is cocked.

As the shooter releases the trigger after the first shot, the trigger will reset at the "wall." The trigger reset is important for getting precise hits. Shooters will feel or hear a click as the trigger is slowly released. That is the sound and feel of the trigger resetting.

Although managing the reset is important for making more than one precise shot, making rapid fire self-defense shots requires a trigger press technique that is called "rolling the trigger." Rolling the trigger means every time the trigger is pressed the trigger finger comes off the trigger and then presses it again, and again, and again until the threat is stopped or the gun runs empty.

It is important to remember that the trigger press weight changes after the hammer is cocked. It becomes "light," and if shooters are unaware of that they could have a negligent discharge after the hammer is cocked because they get a light press and the handgun discharges unexpectedly.

The Springfield Armory 1911 Operator has three safeties: a thumb safety (left and right side of the frame), a grip safety, and a hammer safety that is engaged when the hammer is half-cocked. Some 1911 style handguns have different controls.

There are three ways to disengage the safeties on a 1911: 1) use the thumb on the dominant-hand to disengage the safety; 2) make sure the dominant hand has a firm grip as high as possible up to and not above the tang (the uppermost curve on the grip) on the frame of the gun which will disengage the grip safety; and 3) fully cock the hammer manually to disengage the half-cocked safety position.

Double/Single Action Platforms. The Sig Sauer P226, Navy Model (chambered in 9 mm) is a double/single action semi-automatic handgun. A photo of the Sig Sauer P226 is shown below. Double/single action means the trigger has two tasks: 1) it cocks the hammer, and 2) it drops the hammer to break a shot. So, when a shooter presses the trigger for the first time the hammer will cock and drop on the same trigger press. Then the

slide reciprocates and cocks the hammer, thereby putting the handgun into single action for subsequent shots.

Sig Sauer P226

Shooters can put the Sig Sauer P226 into single action by manually cocking the hammer. When the hammer is manually cocked a lot of the slack in the trigger is removed, thereby creating a light trigger. In fact, the trigger weight could change as much as 10 pounds.

After the first shot breaks, the slide reciprocates and cocks the hammer into single-action. When the trigger is in single-action the trigger press is lighter. So, if a shooter makes the first heavy trigger press in double action, if not careful, the light trigger while in single action can be over-prepped to create a negligent discharge.

Another issue for shooters transitioning from a single-action handgun to a double/single action gun is learning how to de-cock the firearm. The hammer on a double/single action handgun should be de-cocked every time before returning the handgun to the holster. The Sig Sauer P226 has a de-cocker control button on the side of frame. Shooters must manually de-cock guns without a de-cocker by firmly gripping the hammer while pressing the trigger (some handguns will de-cock when the safety is engaged).

Striker-Fired Platforms. The Glock 19 is a striker-fired semi-automatic handgun chambered in 9 mm. A photo of the Glock 19 is found below. The Glock 19 has a stock trigger press weight of about 5.5 pounds. The slack in the trigger is taken out by pressing the trigger to its "wall." Once shooters confirm sight alignment and their sight picture, they press the trigger past the "wall" to break the shot. The stock trigger press weight is always the same with striker-fired handguns.

Glock 19, Gen 5

SIGHT ALIGNMENT, SIGHT PICTURE, AND FRONT SIGHT FOCUS

A significant issue that most shooters face, especially long-time shooters without formal training, is acquiring and maintaining a front-sight focus for making a precise shot.

After the sights are aligned and an acceptable sight picture is acquired, shooters must focus on the front sight—they don't look at the rear sights, they don't look at the target—they stare at the front sight; unless using a "red dot" optic whereby they focus on the target, not the front sight. A photo of a handgun with an attached red dot optic is shown below.

Handgun with Red Dot Optic

After the shot breaks, shooters must maintain a second sight picture to check their work by looking through the sights to ensure that there is no further danger. The number of sight pictures is always plus 1: see the first sight picture, stare at front sight, break the shot then see the second sight picture , look through the sights to ensure additional shots are not required. If a second shot is required, there will be three sight pictures—always plus 1.

Although most shooters not using a red dot optic should master sight alignment, acquiring an acceptable sight picture, and maintaining a front sight focus, they should also learn to shoot rapidly using a technique called "point shooting." Point shooting or point of aim shooting describes a shooter's ability to shoot a target without using the gun's sights. The shooter quickly points the gun at the center mass of a target and shoots rapidly.

Point shooting is inappropriate for making precise shots.

Different Sights Create Different Hit Patterns

One of the principles for effective shooting is to "know your sights." After shooters align their sights, it is important to create a sight picture by overlaying the aligned sights on the target (if using a "red dot" optic the focus is on the target, not the sights. This also creates a "sight picture").

The sighting issue for transitioning to a different handgun platform is that different sights create different hit patterns. The president of the Spartan Firearms Training Group who is a skilled and accurate competition shooter arranged several of his handguns on a table at our range. He then shot each gun using the same sight picture. Each gun created a different hit pattern.

Because of his experience, he knew that some handgun platforms require the front sight post to be centered on the target, while other handguns need to have the target "sitting" on the front post like a lollipop. More importantly, if he has to transition to a handgun he usually doesn't carry, he now knows how to create a correct sight picture for each gun he tested.

If shooters aren't aware of how to create a sight picture with their aligned handgun sights, then their shot accuracy may be negatively affected (of course, what was just said is unimportant when using rapid self-defense point shooting that doesn't require sight alignment).

Revolvers

Some shooters prefer revolvers because the gun itself rarely malfunctions. One example of a popular revolver is the Smith & Wesson 357 Magnum. A photo of that revolver appears below.

There are issues with revolvers just as there are issues with semi-automatics. Four common issues are: sights, trigger press, round capacity, and grip.

Sights. There are two common sights on revolvers: a sloped front sight as seen in the first photo, below, and a notched rear sight as shown in the second photo, below. The apex of the front sight sits in the rear notch as shown in the second photo, below.

When aligning the sights on a revolver, the shooter may perceive that the barrel of the handgun is not level in relation to the target which can cause them to make unnecessary visual adjustments to the sight picture.

Smith & Wesson 357 Magnum

Some revolvers have rear sights that are in the shape of a "U," much like the rear sights on some semi-automatics, which makes it a bit easier to align the sights.

Revolver Sight Alignment

Trigger Press. Most revolvers use a double-action design, which means the trigger has two jobs: cock the hammer and drop the hammer. One style of revolver uses a single-action design, which means the trigger only has one job…to drop the hammer after the shooter manually cocks the hammer (these are the so-called "cowboy guns").The trigger press on a double-action revolver is heavy. Cocking the hammer reduces the weight of the press.

Round Capacity. Many semi-automatics use magazines that can hold 10-15-18 rounds (there are some that hold more, but these three capacities are most commonly used). Revolvers can hold 5-6 rounds. Reloading a revolver demands practice and also requires fine motor skills (which are some of the first

things to deteriorate in a self-defense situation).

Grip. It is not unusual to see shooters gripping a revolver using a technique commonly known as the "cup and saucer" grip. With that gripping technique, the support hand is under the grip handle which looks like the gun is sitting in a "saucer" as shown in the photo, below.

Cup and Saucer Revolver

We don't teach that technique. We teach our students to grip a revolver the same way they grip a semi-automatic as shown in the photo, below.

Two-Handed Revolver Grip

We teach the two-handed revolver grip to make the transition from a revolver to a semi-automatic or from semi-automatic to revolver as seamless as possible, which is critical under stress.

Recoil Management

Different handguns have different recoil effects.

Here is a chart showing data about recoil velocity for several different handguns found at: handgun recoil chart

Gun	Caliber	Recoil Velocity	Recoil Energy
S&W 1911	.45 ACP	10.4	4.6
Springfield Armory XDs	.45 ACP	18.7	7.5
S&W M&P45	.45 ACP	12.6	5.5
Glock G27	.40 S&W	15.2	5.9
S&W M&P40c	.40 S&W	12.9	5.0
S&W Model 19	.357 Mag	13.7	7.0
S&W Model 19	.357 Mag	13.1	6.1
S&W 640	.357 Mag	18.4	8.2
S&W 642	.38 Spl	18.3	5.6
Glock G17	9mm	10.4	3.5
Glock G17	9mm	11.8	4.6
Diamondback DB9	9mm	16.1	4.5
Ruger LCP	.380 ACP	14.1	2.6

Larger handguns have more weight and barrel length to absorb the energy released during firing, which helps lessen felt recoil. This makes them easier to control, especially for rapid follow-up shots. On the other hand, smaller handguns tend to have more felt recoil because of their lighter weight and shorter barrels.

Training Drills to Manage Transitions

Engaging in dry-fire practice to manage the transition to a new handgun platform is strongly recommended. The firearms safety rules should be reviewed before starting dry fire practice. There should not be any ammunition in the gun and none in the training area. Practice continues until an acceptable skill-level for manipulating the new handgun platform is acquired.

Dry-Fire Practice Drills

Remember, no ammunition in the gun and no ammunition in the training area. Do all of the drills, below, until becoming proficient. If proficiency is acquired for drill #1, then move to drill #2, and so on. The drills must be practiced correctly.

Drill #1: Drawing from a Holster. Attach an inside-the-waistband holster in a position where control of the handgun can be "purchased." If shooters can legally open carry a handgun, then they can train with an outside-the-waistband holster. Wear concealed carry clothing. Practice clearing clothing to give quick access the holstered gun.

After taking control of the handgun, shooters grip and draw the gun from the holster. It is very important to start the draw with a strong purchase on the grip with the web of their shooting hand up against the bottom of the tang on the frame.

Shooters will gain confidence in how the grip feels in their hands and ensures that they have a secure purchase on the gun as the gun is pressed down into the holster before drawing.

Drill #2: Drawing and Presenting the Gun. We teach a five-step drawing sequence developed by the Gunsite Academy at

https://www.gunsite.com/. The steps are:

Step 1 secure a strong purchase on the grip; step 2 draw the gun from the holster; step 3 drop the elbow down to position the handgun in a horizontal orientation toward the target and disengage the safety if there is one; step 4 bring the support hand to the gun; and step 5 press the firearm toward the target along a horizontal trajectory.

It is very important to practice the draw so you can do it quickly. Start by drawing and presenting the handgun slowly and gradually increase your speed. Slow is smooth, and smooth becomes fast

After drawing the gun from the holster, press the handgun toward the target while aligning the sights, acquiring a sight picture, and pressing the trigger (remember, no ammunition in the gun or in the training room).

The gun must be presented along a horizontal plane toward the target—no "fishing" or "bowling" movements. If there is a thumb safety on the handgun, the safety should be disengaged at draw step #3 before pressing the handgun toward the target. The safety needs to be re-engaged or the hammer de-cocked on a double/single action gun before re-holstering. It is very important to practice disengaging, re-engaging, or de-cocking the safety.

Drill #3: Mastering the Trigger Press. As shooters become proficient with drill #2, they can practice the trigger press and trigger re-set with an unloaded gun.

Mastering the trigger press is the key difference between different handgun platforms. The trigger is prepped by taking out the slack up to the trigger wall as the gun is pressed toward the target along a horizontal plane. Then, the trigger is pressed very close to when the gun reaches its full apex while maintaining sight alignment and a front sight focus.

After the simulated shot breaks, the trigger is firmly pressed against the back of the trigger guard. The slide is then manually racked while maintaining rearward pressure on the trigger. The trigger is released slowly to feel or hear the re-set point. Stay on the sights, especially the front sight to acquire and maintain a second sight picture.

Live-Fire Drills

Shooters need to go to a live-fire gun range to practice live-fire exercises with their different handgun platform. If it is an indoor range, they may not be able to draw from a holster as described in dry fire drill #2 (although some ranges will let people do that if they take a class at the range on how to draw safely; for example, the Guntry Club in Owings Mills, Maryland, (https://www.guntry.com/) offers classes on how to draw from a holster.

If shooters cannot draw from a holster at a gun range, they can simulate having the gun out of the holster and ready to present toward the target at draw stroke #3 (as shown in the photo, below) and ready to press the gun toward the target.

From a simulated starting position as shown in the photo, below, take control of the handgun with the shooting hand and disengage the thumb safety if the gun has one, then apply strong grip pressure with the support hand, and begin pressing the gun toward the target.

Simulated Holster Draw

Just before the gun arrives at its apex while moving forward along a horizontal plane, shooters press through the trigger wall to break the shot. They keep their finger on the trigger and slowly release it until hearing or feeling the re-set click.

At that point, they acquire a second sight picture to be ready for a second shot. If a second shot is needed, shooters must acquire a third sight picture before returning the gun to the holster.

After each shot, shooters must acquire a subsequent sight picture in case more than one shot is required. The rule we teach our customers is one shot requires two

sight pictures; two shots require three sight pictures; and so on.

Conclusion

In this article, readers learned the definition of the term "intermediate-level shooter," why transitioning to a different handgun platform may be necessary, and read about issues affecting a transition from one handgun platform to another.

Readers learned that each handgun platform presents issues for shooters trying to learn to manipulate their new gun including gripping the gun properly, aligning sights, acquiring a sight picture, pressing the trigger, and managing recoil.

In some cases, shooters may benefit from personalized, 1-on-1 firearms training with an experienced instructor to manipulate their "new" handgun safely and effectively.

Although the article focused primarily on transition issues related to grip, sight alignment, sight picture, and trigger press it is very important to ensure that "clean" skills are practiced correctly. Incorrectly practicing the skill-sets described in this article can create training scars that interfere with effective self-defense using a handgun.

A Final Word: Training the Way You Fight

If a handgun is for self-defense, you must know how that gun shoots. A person with a carry permit for self-defense must be able to take the first shot with impunity and certainty. Any hesitation, or thought delay about how the gun will function, could cost you dearly. Train the way you fight.

About the Author

Francis (Frank) Duffy is a veteran of the 6th and 5th U.S. Army Special Forces Groups (the Green Berets), a graduate of the Army Ranger School, and a Green Beret combat diver. He is also a certified executive protection specialist.

He is a certified instructor for the NRA (rifle and handgun instructor), Maryland State Police, and the United States Concealed Carry Association (USCCA).

He is also a member of the Board of Directors for Maryland Shall Issue, an all-volunteer, non-partisan organization dedicated to the preservation and advancement of gun owners' rights in Maryland.

He is the co-founder and vice president of the Spartan Firearms Training Group, LLC. He can be contacted at 443-472-0216 or at frank@spartanftg.com.

Individuals who want to schedule a private, 1-on-1 firearms training session should contact Frank using the information, above.

About the Spartan Firearms Training Group

The Spartan Firearms Training Group, LLC, ((www.spartanftg.com) is a Special Forces Veteran-Owned business formed in 2015 to provide Maryland citizens with opportunities to enjoy their Second Amendment rights legally and safely. At the end of March, 2024, we entered into our 10th year of business and we have trained thousands of Maryland residents in a variety of ways:

- Concealed carry training
- Handgun Qualification License (HQL) training
- Emergency Casualty Care training
- Long distance precision shooting training
- Home Defense training
- Private, 1-on-1 firearms training
- Concierge Handgun Selection Service
- Private group training

Our training calendar is found at SFTG Training Calendar.

Questions about scheduling training should be directed to Paul Duffy. He can be contacted at 410-707-2992 or at Paul@spartanftg.com.

YOU WILL FALL TO THE LEVEL OF YOUR TRAINING; NOT RISE TO THE LEVEL OF YOUR EXPECTATIONS WHEN FACING A LIFE-THREATENING EVENT. TRAIN THE WAY YOU FIGHT!