

# A “Sweeping” Trigger Technique

*by Scott E. Mayer*

When it comes to shooting a handgun accurately, we’ve been drilled to slowly squeeze the trigger. I’ve even had some instructors say that the precise instant the gun goes off should be a surprise. Now change the game so that speed is a major component of a good score, such as in IPSC or IDPA, and that slowly squeezing technique goes out the window. Unfortunately, a lot of accuracy can go out the window with it, too, so I typically use a fast trigger pull for the large and close in targets, and slow down for the long range shots.



With the "sweeping" trigger technique, the finger is lifted off of the trigger between shots, and is "swept" back to fire the shot.

Now, I’m a relatively accurate handgun shooter, and I’m a relatively fast handgun shooter, and I do a decent job of combining the two to the point that I’ve even won a few local IDPA matches. But the abilities of the top shooters still elude me, so I’ve made a conscious effort recently to study what they’re doing differently from me.

Over the past few years I’ve the indescribable privilege to shoot with some of the world’s most talented shooters at the PASA Park shooting facility during Intermedia “Roundtable” events. The Roundtable has a different group of industry leaders at PASA Park each day to shoot for fun, share story ideas, and try new products. The shooters I’ve shot with there include World Champion Speed Shooter, Angus Hobdell who shoots for CZ-USA. There’s also USPSA Four-Gun Champion Todd Jarrett who shoots for Para-Ordnance, and 15-time USPSA National Champion Rob Leatham, who shoots for Springfield, Inc.



According to Todd Jarrett, once you master the trigger sweep technique, you can pick up any gun and be proficient with it regardless of its trigger pull.

During a recent conversation with Hobdell about trigger technique, he explained that he came from a Bullseye competition type of background where he was taught to increase pressure on the trigger until the gun goes off. With that method, if the sights are relatively aligned on the point of aim, he scores a hit. From Bullseye competition, he taught himself speed shooting and found that in contrast to Bullseye where the gun “goes off by surprise,” in IPSC you essentially tell the gun when to go off. Every time he points the gun and wants it to go off, it goes off. He called his trigger technique a “surprise, compressed break,” tantamount to slapping the trigger, but without lifting his finger from the trigger.



World Champion Speed Shooter Angus Hobdell uses the trigger "reset" technique in which the trigger is released only enough to reset the action between shots

Hobdell also advocates the “reset” method in which he releases the trigger just enough to reset the trigger mechanism for the next shot. That technique is not as simple as it sounds, as Hobdell pointed out to me you can experience “trigger freeze” with it, which is when you pull with too little force and lose your cadence. But from the years he’s been shooting, he’s developed an intuition for how to manipulate a trigger so that he “feels”

(literally and subconsciously) when the trigger is reset and ready to be pulled again. His reason for using the reset was that if, for example, you had a gun with a four-pound trigger pull, it takes 4.01 pounds pull to fire the gun. If you pull the trigger with any more than 4.01 pounds pull, that additional pull shows up as flinch, or “snatch” as Brits like Hobdell call it, that can throw the shot for a lower score.



Rob Leatham, USPSA National Champion many times over, uses the trigger sweep to an extent that he slaps the inside front of the trigger guard between shots. He says it's one of the keys to his long range accuracy.

Jarrett and Leatham use a “sweeping” trigger finger motion—literally lifting their finger fully off the trigger between shots. As Leatham explained to me after quickly downing five steel plates, “Everyone slaps the trigger at close range, but it’s the best way to do the long range shooting, too.” That got my attention, especially since I had been using the “reset” technique. Unlike Hobdell who sees the reset from the flinch-reducing perspective, I believed that I was saving time between shots by minimizing trigger movement, and using that time saving to align the sights sooner. That the reset technique seemed to reduce gun movement during the actual trigger pull was another compelling reason for me to have been using it.

Instead of reset, Leatham drilled me by making sure my trigger finger contacted the inside of the front of the trigger guard between shots. It occurred to me as I was knocking down steel plates that this trigger sweeping technique he was showing me was essentially how I pull a shotgun trigger on multiple moving targets. As I pulled and fired, pulled and fired, the finger movement reminded me of the old steam engines chuffing away at the county fair in that the pull is more like staging the trigger. With staging, you take up all of the trigger movement, get a flash sight picture and then nudge the trigger that last little bit to fire the gun. That said, when someone like Leatham uses the trigger sweep, it’s pretty much one fluid motion.



When Todd Jarrett is sweeping through his trigger pull, he keeps his arms fully extended to minimize recovery from arm flex.

Leatham explained to me that basically all of the shooters of his caliber shoot about as fast and as accurately as each other, and it's the score on longer range targets that make the difference between a win and an also-ran. The trigger sweep technique is fast, and also gives him enough time to settle the sights and make good hits on the long shots. It reminded me of a quote I've seen attributed to Wyatt Earp, "Take your time in a hurry."

On the following day, Todd Jarrett was the featured speaker. He talked about trigger pull, too, specifically about the sweeping technique he had been using for the past 15 years that "allows the gun to settle between shots." Jarrett justified his trigger pull technique in terms of large and small muscle group motions employed to pull the trigger. I understood his large and small muscle groups to be flexor and extender muscle groups, and as he spoke, what he said made a lot of sense. If you're shooting using the trigger reset technique, you're using a combination of extender and flexor muscles in your trigger finger. The extender muscles are used to extend your finger as you release the trigger, while your flexor muscles are used to restrain your finger from fully releasing the trigger. Resetting, then, requires twice as much muscle to use, and they're opposing muscles at that. You may also have to think about the trigger and when it's reset instead of the sights, and that's taking some of the mental effort you could otherwise be using for something else.

As Jarrett continued with his large and small muscle group talk, I tried a simple little experiment of tapping my finger on the table as quickly as I could, and lifting my finger as little as possible between taps. Making those muscles reverse gears before reaching the end of their range of motion was much slower than I thought it would be. It really does take muscle effort to stop that upward movement of the finger as it just clears the tabletop. Next, I tried tapping my finger on the table while letting it fly upward without restraint, and it was noticeably faster. A light bulb came on in my head when I remembered that Ed McGivern, one of the fastest shooters who ever pulled a trigger, removed the front of the triggerguard on some of his revolvers. Where his triggerguards cut out so he could get his finger in during quick draw exhibitions, or was he letting his finger fly forward, too?



Jarrett explains his belief about how large and small muscle groups oppose each other to slow a shooter down when trying to pull the trigger quickly and accurately.

“You’re one of about five percent of the population who have short, thick fingers,” Jarrett said as he adjusted my grip. Normally, you want your wrist straight and your pistol right in line with your arm, but when I hold a gun like that, I can’t reach the trigger and have to adjust my hand around the gun a little more.

“And leave that support hand finger on the outside of the triggerguard hold to the folks in Hollywood,” Jarrett continued as he altered a familiar support hand position I had used for years to help control muzzle flip.

“And stand like this,” Jarrett said as he repositioned me from the modified Weaver stance I usually use to a more isosceles-type.

“Now when you draw, relax with your arms loose at your sides. When you see guys in that ‘gunfighters’ pose, they’re going to be slower because their muscles are all tightened up. When you see someone like Robbie or me ready to shoot, our arms are loose. It’s that large and small muscle group thing again.” Jarrett explained.

With my grip and stance so altered, we moved on to the trigger technique. “At ranges less than five yards, simply slapping the trigger is what most shooters do anyhow,” Jarrett said. Where had I heard that before...?

On the way home from the Roundtable, Jarrett and I ran into each other again at the St. Louis airport where we both had short layovers and used the time to talk about speed shooting. When quizzed about whether or not he was concerned that giving away his secrets might help unseat him, Jarrett just smiled and said the trigger was only a small part of his shooting ability. There are other things like the draw and shooting on the move that according to Jarrett, “will take someone 100,000 rounds to figure out.”



Jarrett checks to make sure the shooter's hand is properly gripping the gun and that his wrist is straight.

He believes the trigger sweep technique is best taught to shooters who compete with more than one gun and to law enforcement officers who might have to use a different gun because the technique works with all handguns, not just the Para LDAs and 1911s Jarrett uses. His advice was to start slow and close to learn the technique and gain time. He also said that there's no difference in split time at close range between trigger techniques. At long range, Jarrett sees the reset technique as being too slow because you have to think about it and that by using the trigger sweep, you have time to think about your sights instead of the trigger. On his stance, arm extension is very important to Jarrett because he's found that if he holds the gun too close, he loses time in recovering from arm flex.

All of these shooters agreed that a lighter trigger resulted in faster and better shooting, and that so long as the sight picture satisfied the need, to fire regardless of technique.

I've been experimenting with the trigger sweep for a few months now, which isn't enough for me to determine whether or not it works for me. Initially my times went down, but that's to be expected any time you try a new move, and that my times are back to pre-sweep levels suggests the technique probably has a future with me. That said, the success Angus has experienced with the reset technique can't be ignored and essentially what it may boil down to is to try the different methods until you find the one that works best for you.

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