

IMPROVISED SHOOTING TARGETS AND METHODS



■ By Michael Ware

Finally... Ammo is back and there have been so many new weapons sold with all new customers, that ranges are full. Who would have thought that the problem would now become having a place to shoot? None-the-less, there are lots of places with plenty of traffic through the shooting lanes. I'm enjoying seeing new folks come into the fold. One question we're getting often through our shop is "what do you shoot?" They aren't asking what weapon I prefer. Instead are trying to see what we use for targets and training.

We use all kinds of targets and all kinds of props for training and practice. I've come up with some really great ideas by morphing concepts others have brought to us. I've used targets all the way from steel and paper through reactive targets, both purchased and built in house. I've used barricades, the hood of a pickup, a rock, or fallen tree, as support for a rifle, all the way to seated position draws from a picnic table for my pistol. The fact is you can make just about anything work if you plan it out and keep safety in mind.

As far as this article goes, we're going to assume you either have a range with suitable targets and positional equipment or you have a little slice of heaven in the country where you can shoot safely. Either is fine, although I'll admit that if you're lugging around lots of steel targets and step barricades back and forth from the range, it gets old. Thus, more emphasis on light weight affairs...

I've seen it all at ranges, and my only complaint are items that can easily ricochet and send some hot fast stuff back at you and the trash left over by whatever you shoot. If you take out a manhole cover and place it firmly in the dirt facing straight at you, you're not going to like the results after a few rounds. We suspend our metal from belting or rubber so the fragments pop straight down to the earth and the target can move. This is important.

If you're into shooting paper, that's fine. It is certainly important for judgment and measuring. In most cases you can come up with some cheap target stands or build

them yourself. Then a few pieces of 1x2s, some staples, and paper targets you buy or can print off from an internet download will do the trick. Some even have things like dartboard targets or pool balls, so you and your boy can play a quick game of cricket or the likes to hone your accuracy. I've seen shooting competitions where the source can mail you a target as you use the honor system to shoot it and return it for scoring. The first one that comes to mind is smackthesmiley.com. A friend of mine, Jason Baney, started this up years ago and we held the first ever group shoot for it here in Iowa. The money raised from buying the targets is given to "American Snipers" organization so you can have a blast inexpensively and compete at your own leisure while benefitting a really great organization all at once. You simply send in your fee to buy targets, send about ten rounds down range for each target you buy,

and send in your results. It is challenging, you operate on honor, and don't have to travel all over the country to compete. The target is a blend of first round hits, choices, and group measurement. I highly recommend it.

I've seen those Osama Bin Laden targets, zombies, etc. and they really don't smoke my brisket, but there's room for all kinds, right? In last month's article I mentioned shooting steel and having some stout brackets to get your targets up to the right height and suspending them from material like rubber mud flaps or belting will keep them hanging. A single bullet strike on a chain or cable and your shooting is stopped since your target falls to the ground, so avoid those. Besides, belting is tough as nails and not only will stay up and running a long time but won't send any bits of bullet back your way. So they are strong AND safe.

When I was younger I'd fill water balloons



Construction of a step barricade.



Shooter utilizing a step barricade.

part way with water and the remaining 3/4s or so with air. I'd gather a small trash bag full of them, shimmy up along the river, set them loose on the water, and head upstream to lay out prone and pick them off. Granted, I never considered the balloon rubbish left behind at the time, but the newest water balloons are biodegradable and while I'd make sure it made muster with the DNR first, the prospect of trying to pick off a 4" balloon stuck in the sand along a river at 600 yards proved to help my marksmanship. I'm not saying this was the best idea in the world, but you're starting to see what I'm talking about. You can easily skip the river scenario. The only reason I used it, was because it cut the family farm in two and there was nobody around. Besides, if I missed and the target was carried off down the river, it was harder and harder to shoot as a result of increasing distance, so my incentive to place rounds on target was huge. It really helped me since I never had a shooting partner. You could duplicate that in a pasture with balloons of various sizes, or suspend them from tree limbs down in a gully, etc. Put your mind to it, continually think safety, and you'll come up with something unique and fun.

The first time I was introduced to bowling pins, I probably offended everyone around me. Not known for stifling my judgment, I remarked how silly this was going to be when a buddy yanked an old clothes basket full of worn bowling pins from his truck and headed down range. Let me tell you something. Bowling pins are stout; darned stout. We used pistols on them a good portion of the afternoon and with only a couple of exceptions most were in pretty darned good shape when we concluded. I was shocked to be honest. There wasn't much trash either. A few pieces of white plastic where the cases had ruptured were all the clean-up necessary.

I've shot kites with a shotgun, playing cards with a rifle, and hedge balls with my handguns. I've even shot down a little 2 foot remote control drone at a machine gun shoot out in Colorado. Don't get me started

on remote control drones, as there are few locally I might just engage if they buzz around my personal range much, but that's a topic for another article. I love the use of Tannerite as well. If you haven't picked up some of it by now, you're cheating yourself out of some fun. Granted, you'll find some folks who don't dig it and some ranges that disallow it. You can buy this stuff in small coffee cup jars, mix it up, and with a good bullet strike at a high velocity it'll detonate. It isn't powerful stuff, but it does make some noise, provide some smoke,

and there is no doubt whether you hit your target or not. I really don't recommend the jars of Tannerite for public range use. Too much boom and people respond poorly to that. Once or so a year out in the pasture is fine by me, but be cognizant of the noise an always be a good neighbor. You'd appreciate the same. Personally, I skip the big stuff and buy the small 'paster' packets. They aren't much bigger than a packet of sugar you find at your local cafe, and you can paste them onto something hard like a steel target. They do occasionally work on paper targets backers if you staple them just right, but with a hard surface backing them they do a nice little pop when struck. I would consider it akin to a large fire cracker. I use them at various distances for rifles and pistols both. As I mentioned prior, there isn't much clean-up and they are a lot of fun.

As far as positions go, you can really do some fun stuff. I can't emphasize safety enough. Part of shooting from other positions for me falls into two distinct categories. One, I prefer to practice in different scenarios so I am better able to do what needs to be done when hunting or

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Shooting News



my 'perfect' conditions I enjoy at the range don't exist. So I find it helpful to shoot weak handed from time to time, leaned against a tree, or across an object. Unfortunately the wind blows around here, so that tree will sway from time to time, especially if I don't find myself amongst some 65ft oaks. So I've used swaying platforms, to car trailers, to a horse to simulate movement. A word to the wise; choose your horse wisely!

We tend to use a lot of step barricades in our training. They can be a great tool and I've hated them as much as I've liked them at the moment I was using them. I have to admit that they do force me out of my comfort zone and as such I shoot better overall and I'm becoming better-rounded in my shooting as a result. To expand on why I didn't like them at the moment goes back to the whole 'comfort zone' thing. When you've got all the time in the world to get your stance and hold just right on a warm wind-free day at the range, you can post up a pretty fair performance. Now try posting up the same performance under time constraints, in cold weather, and from improvised shooting positions. Your results differ. To some this sounds like a waste of time. The reality is, if you really want to become a marksman, this type of practice and training is the only way to truly improve. Take a look at the step barricade and picture the use of an AR15. Some of the slots are very low and horizontal, not vertical. Imagine poking your barrel through the slots. You're instantly forced to turn your weapon at an angle or on its side just to see through the slot with your sights or optic. The bottom of the barricade is another example. The AR15 has a tall profile with a long magazine protruding from the bottom. The only way to get your rifle through the barricade slot is to lay that weapon on its side. Since the ejection port is on the right, you're left with a single option for how you'll utilize the weapon. The challenge and overcoming it with efficiency force you into being more versatile and proficient with the weapon.

If you think about it, alternate methods of training should be considered and employed for most all of us. Again, think about that lazy day at the range when you had all the time in the world to get into a rigid isosceles stance, lay a great grip on your weapon, acquire your sight picture onto a well-defined target and send some pills down range with your trusty 1911. Now imagine you've just been awoken at 3AM, there's some knucklehead in your house, your night vision is poor at best, your heart rate rises to 135 beats per minutes, your adrenaline is pumping, and you've got some decisions to make as the attacker enters your bedroom. Can you

wield that trusty 1911, that we all know requires a firm grip or it may not cycle correctly, as you twist around from a half seated position in bed, assess a threat, make a decision, and possibly fire your weapon? That's a darned tough question to answer. I can assure you that in situations like that, we're inherently wise to remove as many of the variables as possible. The lousy scenario you're thrust into when a rapist is all over you isn't the time to wish for better weapon manipulation skills. However, you can put yourself in a much better position by having practiced and become intimately familiar with your defense weapon. That puts you in a much better position.

I realize we got really serious there, but frankly firearms are a serious business. I even have to stop from time to time and reflect differently. I had a young lady that came into our shop with her dad that was looking for a home defense weapon. I'm pretty handy with helping manage my customer's concerns and I could sense she was simply rigid and uncomfortable. I remember asking her straight out if she was uncomfortable with our subject. In a nutshell, she was freaked out by all the weapons in the shop. "Doesn't it bother you that there are five guns laying on that bench right now that are pointed at you?" she remarked. I told her they had been cleared and double checked by another armorer and each had a safety flag in the chamber. While they were actually lying on the bench, they were made safe and thoroughly checked, and were simply waiting for repair. At the time I thought she was a bit paranoid. In reflection, I can see why she was uncomfortable and that response was probably an appropriate one given her unfamiliarity with weapons and their use. She has since purchased a weapon, taken our pistol course and passed with superb performance, taken the course a second time because she enjoyed it, attained her permit to carry, and routinely carries a defense pistol. We all have to step back and see things for what they are, apply some reason and good judgment, and then follow through. Lots of range time, improvised targets, fun and challenging shooting engagements are all positive impacts on our knowledge and result in better performance and loads of confidence.

There's no end to nifty and fun targets you can come up with and how you can implement their use. Just default to your basic safety rules, and don't be afraid to ask questions from a reliable and qualified source. I can't promise you Annie Oakley status, but how do you think she acquired her skill? Think about it. 🦋

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