



# American Gun

## ASSOCIATION REPORT

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## Mental Rehearsal

Free and inexpensive firearms training techniques to dramatically improve your speed and accuracy

*Mental Rehearsal Secret weapon of Olympic Athletes, Special Operations warriors from around the globe, world class competitors, and YOU.*

The next set of skills that we're going to cover may be the most important of all. You can do them in your car at stoplights, in bed as you're going to sleep at night, or even as a way to stay awake during a meeting at work. It's mental rehearsal. When I say "mental rehearsal" I'm specifically talking about envisioning a situation where you are going to engage a target

with your firearm and going through it in your mind from start to finish. This may include backing up parts of the sequence like you would rewind a video, repeating sections, and even visualizing yourself in the 3rd person and going through the motion and imagining what you would look like if you had a camera filming you from various angles.

In case you have any doubts about the value of mental training, I want to tell you about four groups of Soviet Olympians who competed in the 1980 Winter Olympics.

**Group 1** spent 100% of their time doing physical training.

**Group 2** spent 75% of their time doing physical training and 25% doing mental training.

**Group 3** spent 50% of their time doing physical training and 50% doing mental training.

**Group 4** spent 25% of their time doing physical training and 75% doing mental training.

You can probably guess that group 4 did best by the simple fact that I'm including the story, but the amazing part is that group 3 did 2nd best and the group that did 100% physical training did WORST.

And then, shortly thereafter in 1983, a study was done at the University of North Carolina where basketball players improved

their freethrow shooting ability by 7% by simply visualizing themselves using perfect form and hitting every shot.

These weren't isolated incidents. Since then, Olympic athletes, professional athletes, special operations teams, and SWAT teams have used mental rehearsal in combination with physical training to dramatically improve their performance over physical training alone.

In fact, a dramatic example of an Olympic athlete successfully using mental imagery is US diver Laura Wilkinson. Before the 2000 Olympics, Laura broke her leg and couldn't dive for several weeks while her leg was healing. Instead, every day she'd climb up on the 10 meter board, shut her eyes, and go through her routine in her mind. When her cast came off and she started diving again for real, she was at almost the exact same place in her training and won a gold medal in Sydney.

Elite athletes use mental imagery because at the top levels of athletics, almost everyone is equal in their talent and physical abilities. The big difference is how strong they are mentally, how few mistakes they make, how they're able to deal with adversity during competition, and how quickly they're able to identify and capitalize on their opponents weaknesses and mistakes.

You can take advantage of these same benefits of mental imagery, but there are some

additional benefits that are particularly important for individuals training to use a firearm to defend themselves in a lethal force encounter. You'll quickly see other applications to martial arts training as well as almost any survival skill you can think of.

In an era of increasing regulation, mental training will always be legal...even in a Federal Building.

As far as operational security and privacy goes, mental imagery will never give you away to your friends and neighbors as a prepper.

Working through mistakes in mental training doesn't "cost" as much as mistakes do in real life.

It's free, fast, and you don't have to clean your firearm afterwards.

You never need to find a willing "victim" to play a violent attacker and do it exactly the way you want them to.

You're less likely to find obstacles to practicing a skill in your head than in real life. Bad weather doesn't matter, illness doesn't matter, traffic doesn't matter, and finances don't matter. The only obstacles for mental practice are internal.

Injuries don't happen when you do

mental training.

Recovery times are shorter with mental training.

It is easier to practice perfect technique for 25 physical repetitions than it is for 100 physical repetitions due to physical exhaustion. The remaining 75 repetitions that you do in your mind can be done to perfection because you have a clear image/memory of what the 25 perfect repetitions felt like.

You can do mental rehearsal while injured, sick, or separated from your firearm.

So, how do you do mental rehearsal? That's a million dollar question, and the answer can get as complicated and involved as you'd like, although I'm going to help you shortcut a lot of the learning process and tell you the techniques that will give you the biggest bang for the buck.

I'll give you some fundamentals that will help you quickly enjoy the major benefits of mental rehearsal. I say that because the topic of mental rehearsal gets incredibly involved once you move past the basic skills, and the marginal increase in effectiveness may mean the difference between silver and gold in Olympic level competition, most people will see incredible improvement by simply using the techniques that I'll share with you here.

# LET'S START BY TALKING ABOUT SENSORY ENGAGEMENT

That's a fancy way of saying that, as you're doing mental rehearsal, you want to think about what all 5 senses would be experiencing if you were doing physical training. One of the main reasons that you do this is to provide what's known as an "anchor" to your training. When you've repeatedly imagined a situation and then experience it, the more the actual experience matches up to what you've rehearsed in your brain, the more familiar it will seem. Your brain will basically say, "I've been here before. I've done this. I know how it goes and how it ends... and I know it ends well for me."

## HERE ARE SOME EXAMPLES:

**WHAT DO YOU SMELL?** What does your firearm smell like before you shoot? How about after? When you're under stress, does your sweat smell different?

**WHAT DO YOU SEE?** How do your hands look wrapped around your firearm? As you're moving, does your sight picture bounce or stay smooth? What is in focus? Your front sight? How much space is on both sides of



your front sight? What visual cues tell you that you should fire? What is your point of aim? A number on a target? The center of mass? Can you see what's happening inside your firearm as you pull the trigger as if you're looking at it with X-Ray vision?

## **DO YOU HAVE A FULL FIELD OF VIEW, PARTIAL TUNNEL VISION, OR COMPLETE TUNNEL VISION?**

Does your muzzle rise straight up or does it cant to the side as it recoils? Does fire come out of the end of your muzzle? How quickly do you reacquire your sight picture after each shot? Do you see heat waves coming off of your barrel as you fire more and more rounds? If you've got a 1911, what does a stovepipe look like and what do you do immediately when you see one? How is your sight picture different when your slide locks back on an empty mag and what do you do immediately? Think about what your reloads look like. Think about what your malfunction drills look like.

**CAN YOU IMAGINE BEING A CAMERAMAN AND WATCHING YOURSELF FROM SOMEWHERE ELSE IN THE ROOM?** (1/3 of Olympians view themselves from both first person (as you normally see things) and third person (like a camera on the wall, watching you.)) Do you have an aggressive stance? Is your stance stable? When you move, are you moving efficiently? When you clear and draw your firearm, is there any wasted movement? Are you shuffling your feet instead of crossing them?

**WHAT DO YOU TASTE?** Is your mouth wet or dry? Is your throat tight or dilated? Do you taste burnt gunpowder after you shoot?

**WHAT DO YOU FEEL?** What is each joint of each finger touching? How is your weight balanced? What is your breathing like? Can you feel yourself breathing with your diaphragm and your stomach going in and out? Can you feel your heart beat? Where do you feel it on your body? Can you feel your breathing and pulse rate slowing slightly and your field of view widening as you do combat breathing? How does it feel to draw your weapon? How is it different depending on your holster, clothing, and position? If you've got a retention holster, how does it feel to disengage the retention? If the retention doesn't disengage immediately, what do you do? If your firearm has a safety, how do you disengage it? How does the trigger feel as

you bring up the slack? How about as the trigger breaks? How far back do you release the trigger before it resets? If the firearm doesn't go "bang," what do you do? If you're transitioning from one target to another, do you pivot at the shoulders, at the waist, or do you keep your entire upper body still and pivot using your legs?

**WHAT ARE YOU AND OR ANYONE ELSE SAYING?** What does your draw stroke sound like? If you have a safety, what does it sound like as it disengages? Can you "hear" anything as you pull the trigger? What does a good discharge sound like? What does the sound of your trigger resetting sound like? What does the sound of a malfunction sound like and what do you do immediately when you hear this? What does the sound of your slide locking back after shooting the last round of a magazine sound like and what do you do immediately? What does it sound like when you're firing pin drops on a bad primer and what do you do immediately?

How important are these drills? VERY important if you want to improve your firearms performance. Especially when you realize that your firearm is simply a tool and that your biggest weapon is your brain. The more you train your brain, the better it will be able to use the tools you have in your hands. These drills will help you improve your skills rapidly while saving you HUNDREDS of hours of range time and THOUSANDS of dollars in ammo and range fees.

# OODA LOOPS

OODA Loop stands for Observe, Orient, Decide, Act, and the concept was formalized during the Vietnam War for fighter pilots. Between WWII and Vietnam, our Air Force became sloppy, relying more on the superiority of our jets than the skills of our pilots, and it cost us lives.

With the increasing speed of the jets in combat, the victor in air to air engagements was usually the pilot who could observe what was going on, filter it through their “orientation” or preconceived thoughts, decide on a course of action, and act the quickest.

Everyone in every confrontation goes through these four steps before taking action, whether it is a conscious process or

not. The trick is to try to do it enough quicker than your opponent that by the time they have decided what to do, you have already acted and are no longer where they expect you to be.

By doing mental rehearsal, you can train your brain to identify threats and opportunities quickly. You can also train your brain to know that the situation is survivable and that you will be victorious. By running through several options in mental rehearsal and pre deciding on the best course of action ahead of time, when the real situation comes, you won't have to waste time making decisions under stress... you'll just replay a script that you've already run in your mind.

The end result is that with proper mental rehearsal, you'll quickly go through your OODA loop and be taking action while other people are still standing flat footed with their mouths agape.



# Mental Rehearsal for Self Defense

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As we talked about earlier, many people reading this will be using mental rehearsal specifically to train for using a firearm for self defense. Obviously, shooting someone in self defense is not something that you can train at full speed or even half-speed. You CAN train for it with simunitions, lasers, airsoft, or paintball, but in order to do it effectively, you really need to train your brain for what is likely to happen in a firearms incident so that it won't surprise you when it happens.

One of the first things that is important to realize is that if you get shot with a firearm or are forced to shoot someone with a firearm, there is a 93-97% chance of surviving a gunshot wound. In TV and the movies, people die quickly and quietly after the first shot. The real world isn't so quick or clean.

When you're going through your mental rehearsal for self-defense scenarios, you need to keep this in mind. You might even want to run through scenarios in your head where you DO get shot/cut/hit and visualize yourself fighting through it and STILL eliminating the threat and being able to go home that night.



I go so far as to run through scenarios where I am out with my wife and sons and one of them gets shot. In these scenarios, instead of focusing on tending to them and eliminating their last line of defense (me), I run that 93-97% stat through my mind and immediately take out the threat and then tend to any injuries. It should go without saying, but I ALWAYS train successful outcomes.

Will this always work? No. One famous example of not being able to separate tragedy from performance was when US Olympic speed skater, Dan Jansen, fell in the 1988 Winter Olympics after his sister died. But an example of mental training paying off happened right before the 2003 Pan Am



Games when US Pentathlete Anita Allen lost her best friend in Iraq. She was devastated, but went on to win gold and qualify for the Olympics. Again, it may not ALWAYS work, but you hopefully won't need it to work more than once in your lifetime.

At a minimum, you want to make sure that as you're running through scenarios in your mind where you're eliminating lethal threats, you envision the possibility that it will require multiple strikes or shots to stop your attacker. If the time ever comes where you have to use lethal force, you don't want to be surprised and stall unnecessarily when your first strike/shot doesn't stop your attacker. If the first shot stops the threat, that's great, but there's a good chance that it won't.

## WHAT WILL YOU SAY?

One of the benefits of mental rehearsal is that you can dialog with an attacker and

have them say anything you want them to. You can also go through what you'll tell them:

“Drop your weapon NOW!” (instead of “Drop your gun NOW!”)

“Lay face down and look away from me!”

“Cross Your Legs”

“Arms Straight Out”

## WHAT IF THEY COMPLY?

A very difficult scenario for people who have only trained for lethal force encounters on a range or even doing force on force is what to do when your attacker actually listens to you. If you engage a home invader in your living room and you've got them laid out on the floor but your phone is in the kitchen and you're not sure if they're alone, what do you do?

Tase or pepper them to subdue them? Ask them to lay there like a nice home invader? Stomp on their ankle, wrist, or floating ribs? Strike them in the back of the head to subdue them? Cuff/plasticuff/zip tie them? If you decide to restrain them, what do you do first to insure that you don't end up in a wrestling match? Have THEM restrain themselves? The time to figure this out is during your mental rehearsal...not when your life depends on it.

What if you're a woman, you're out in public,

and your phone is in the bottom of your purse? Can you get to it, unlock it, and dial 911 without taking your focus off of your attacker? Would you be better attacking them first, and then calling 911?

In any violent confrontation, what is your strategy for staying aware of your surroundings while you have your attacker laid out?

## WHAT IF THEY COMPLY... PARTIALLY?

One set of scenarios that you need to run through in your mind is what you will do if your attacker listens to your command to drop their weapon but then nonchalantly approaches you. Should you shoot them? Should you pull out pepper spray or a Taser and engage them? Keep in mind that if your attacker has intent to kill you, they may bet on you not shooting an unarmed person and walk right up to you. In other words, just because they've dropped their visible weapon doesn't mean they still can't rush you and kill you with their hands or your gun.

You also need to keep in mind that your attacker could change their mind at any point...if they detect that you have a weakness, that they have an advantage, or if they see a "friend" coming.

## MENTAL REHEARSAL FOR COMBATING STRESS, TUNNEL VISION, & THE SHAKES



Chances are good that you will get an adrenaline dump during a violent encounter or immediately afterwards and possibly before the police arrive. This is a VERY vulnerable time and you must stay switched on. In fact, Muslim armies have taken a page from Sun Tzu's tactics and have allowed their enemies false victories since the 7th century. In short, they know that there is a psychological letdown after a violent encounter from the medicine cabinet of hormones and brain chemicals that are released when someone thinks they've escaped death and won.

It's not uncommon for fighters to have a hard time staying awake in this state and many armies have purposely caused this effect by sacrificing small forces against enemy forces simply to get

their enemy into this lulled state. Once their enemy's brains have started releasing their post-fight chemicals and hormones, the armies attack with their main force. It's smart and brutally effective as proven by a 1300+ year use of it.

If you find yourself in a lethal force encounter, regardless of whether your attacker listened to you or you had to subdue them in one way or another, you need to be aware of this and stay alert and aware so that you don't slip into the vulnerable post-fight state too soon.

When you're practicing mental rehearsal, carry the scenario out in your mind until law enforcement arrives, you're a safe distance away, additional attackers attack, or friendly backup arrives.

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## Mental Rehearsal Routine of a Career Operator



When I interviewed internationally known firearms instructor, Randy Watt, for this course, he described his mental rehearsal routine. To put things into perspective, until recently, Randy was the Assistant Chief of Police in Ogden Utah. He's an internationally sought after SWAT instructor. He's a Colonel in the 19th Special Forces Group with multiple combat tours. AND, he's one of the elite few who have the

critical combination of skill at arms and the ability to teach at a high enough level to be selected as an instructor at Gunsite.

Randy has decades of experience as a tactical operator and almost unlimited access to ammo and range time. Even so, Randy STILL uses dry fire and mental rehearsal. In fact, he considers them to be a vital component to his training.

Part of Randy's routine is the same, regardless of whether he is dry firing or on the live fire range. He'll start out with 5-10 minutes with his eyes closed, visualizing his body doing what it needs to do. The goal here is to bridge the gap between what the brain is focusing on doing and what the body is performing.

He goes further and breaks his presentation down into his component parts: Stance, grip, sight picture, sight alignment, breathing control, trigger press, follow through, and recovery.

This is similar to what Jeff Cooper, founder of Gunsite, taught when he told shooters that they could improve their shooting drastically by simply starting off their range time by doing 25 repetitions of getting a proper grip

on their firearm. Even if that's the only part of your presentation that you focus on, everything that follows will improve.

Then next thing that Randy does is create an image around a situation that he is shooting. In other words, in his mind he isn't shooting at a paper target. He has created a situation in his mind and the paper target has turned into a 3 dimensional person who has entered the room where Randy is. The goal of this is to put the emotional component of a violent force encounter into static training.

This step helps a person make the jump from "shooting" to "training."

Randy does what good military, law enforcement, and other switched on people do and uses mental training in his daily life. As he's going up to his bank, he quickly games hold-up scenarios in his head so that he'll be able to react instantly if something happens. When he's with family and sees an unsavory character approaching, he games his response in his head. And when he approaches his home with his wife and puts his key in the door, he games potential threats that might be waiting for him on the other side.

He used these techniques as a member of SWAT, as a SWAT team leader, as a Special Forces door kicker, and as a Special Forces team leader. They worked and saved lives in those situations and it only makes sense to use them in everyday law enforcement and in off duty and civilian situations.

The more scenarios you game out in your head and the more often you do it, the

deeper your response groove will be and the easier it will be for your brain to quickly pick an effective response in a crisis situation.

At this point, you appreciate the value of mental rehearsal, understand the most important fundamentals, and simply need a blueprint to follow.

There are two major types of mental rehearsal that I do. Focused rehearsal and "current situation" rehearsal. I spend the most time doing focused rehearsal as I'm going to sleep at night, while waiting in line, or before shooting a stage for a competition. When I do focused rehearsal, I do several "repetitions" per session. I alternate between focusing on specific parts of my technique and the tactics of the situation. Sometimes it's all the same scenario, like before I shoot competitively, but I usually run several different scenarios in a row.

Current situation rehearsal is completely different and I do it throughout the day whenever I enter a new environment. It is focused more on tactics rather than technique. Here's an example. When I unlock my office and turn on the lights, I always game out what I would do if there was an attacker waiting. I take into account what I'm wearing, who's with me, what I'm carrying, and anything else unique to that day. The whole scenario takes from the time I remove my keys from my pocket until I turn the key in the lock—a couple of seconds at most—but it warms up my brain in case there actually is someone on the other side of the door.

## **SO, HERE ARE A FEW SPECIFIC MENTAL REHEARSAL ROUTINES THAT YOU CAN DO:**

1. In bed before going to sleep, spend time

going through the fundamentals of shooting—Stance, grip, sight picture, sight alignment, breathing control, trigger press, follow through, and recovery. Don't introduce a scenario at this time—just shoot targets. This should not cause your heart rate to increase or your breathing to change. Remember to involve all 5 senses and be as specific as possible with your mental pictures. Just like fundamentals should be the core of your live fire training, they should also be the core of your mental rehearsal. Run your drawstroke forwards & backwards in your mind, both as if you're looking out of your own eyes and as if you're watching yourself with a camera.

2. In bed before going to sleep, go through a few home invasion scenarios. How do you get out of bed? What do you grab first? If you have a lock/safe, what if it malfunctions? Can you tell if your firearm is in battery in the dark? Make sure you challenge and identify your home invaders as a legitimate threat...even during mental rehearsal. Sometimes you'll want to carry out the situation until police arrive. Sometimes you'll want to envision running into a relative. Other times, you'll want to envision finding everything's fine.

If you find your heart rate starts going faster while you're doing this, it means that your mental rehearsal has enough detail that your brain is responding as if the situation is real. This is good for realism, but bad for sleeping. You can either use this as an

opportunity to practice lowering your heart rate and blood pressure with combat breathing techniques, you can switch to mentally rehearsing fundamentals without scenarios, or you can stop running scenarios before going to sleep until you don't have as much of a response.

You'll find that the more you run through these scenarios in your mind, the more calm you become when you respond to "bumps in the night." Part of what you're doing is desensitizing your mind so that it doesn't overrelease adrenaline if you actually do need to perform in a violent force encounter. So if you're having a hard time getting to sleep after running scenarios, start running the scenarios during the day until you don't have a psychological response to them. At first, you might even be able to mentally rehearse exciting scenarios as a tool to wake yourself up in the morning or when you're getting sluggish throughout the day.

3. Any time you're waiting in line, run through one or two situation specific scenarios.
4. When you're at a stoplight, run through one or two situation specific scenarios, taking into account your clothing, your seatbelt, your vehicle, and the vehicles around you. As a hint, many times the best "solution" in these stoplight scenarios is to simply punch the gas, avoid confrontation, and escape.

Remember to always picture yourself walking away victorious. It's fine to imagine yourself getting shot, cut, or hit, but make sure that they don't affect your performance or the outcome.