



# American Gun

## ASSOCIATION REPORT

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### In This Issue

#### PAGE 1

AIRSOFT

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#### PAGE 2

TOP 6 PROBLEMS WITH  
AIRSOFT TRAINING

---

#### PAGE 8

PROHIBITED  
TECHNIQUES

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# AIRSOFT

## AKA Dry Fire on Steroids

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*There is a lot of debate on the topic of using airsoft for firearms training. Most of the critics are simply professional fault-finders who focus on a few shortcomings that they've seen with recreational airsoft and think that it applies to all airsoft training.*

Other critics are people who are fortunate enough to have a job or the financial resources to allow them to shoot tens of thousands of rounds of live ammo per year, but these critics are normally won over quite quickly when they realize that airsoft is an enhanced version of dry fire rather than a substitute for live fire. In fact, I've been in my local airsoft

supply store when a state law enforcement agency was picking up a case of spare Glock airsoft mags to go along with their case of Glock airsoft trainers.

So, I'm going to address this head on and tell you the top 6 problems people have with using airsoft for training and why they don't apply to you. Then I'm going to show you airsoft training in a whole new light and introduce you to some GREAT at-home training that you can start doing with airsoft.

I've got to start off with a safety warning. Treat airsoft trainers like real guns loaded with live ammo. The main reason to do this is to develop and maintain good firearms discipline. The second reason is that airsoft bullets have enough kinetic energy to break skin, go through your cheek into your mouth, and completely destroy an eye. This means always wearing safety eyewear when shooting and not pointing them at anything you don't want to destroy.



# TOP 6 PROBLEMS WITH AIRSOFT TRAINING

1. **THEY'RE CHEAP PLASTIC TOYS.** There are two broad categories of airsoft. Toys, and Training Pistols. You'll find the toys in discount stores and some sporting goods stores. They're usually clear plastic, lightweight, fragile, inexpensive, and inaccurate.

The training pistols, sometimes called Professional Training Pistols or PTPs. PTPs are the same size and weight as their real counterpart...to the degree that good PTPs will fit in the same leather or kydex holsters as your real firearms. The controls are the same. They break down the same way. They don't have hoses coming out of them or any funky attachments sticking out.

The magazines hold both a small propane gas cylinder and plastic 6mm bbs. The propane gas cylinders propel the bb's and throw the slide back to provide recoil. The trainer rifles have accessory rails that you can put your real optics on for training. Since most of the rifles have a 300-600 round per minute "full-auto" option, they use electricity from a lithium battery instead of gas to propel the bullet.

These training airsoft firearms look so real that if you brandished one in public, you

should fully expect to get shot.

The solution to this “problem” is to get high quality, metal airsoft trainer replicas of one or more of the firearms you own.

2. **LACK OF RECOIL.** High end airsoft guns DO have recoil, but it does not compare to a real firearm. There is no doubt that this is an accurate criticism...but it's also a GREAT benefit. One of the most common problems with handgun shooters is anticipating recoil. Basically, the brain decides that it knows how much the muzzle is going to rise after each shot and tries to compensate by pushing the muzzle down that much as you're shooting. The problem is that the timing seldom works right and the end result is low, inaccurate groups.

When you do dry fire training with airsoft, you don't have very much recoil and you train the brain to keep pointing the sights at your target all the way through your shot and reacquire them quickly after each

shot. Since there's so little recoil to push the muzzle off target, you know immediately that any deviation in aim is because of something you're doing and you have the opportunity to quickly correct the problem.

This is especially helpful with new shooters or when teaching experienced shooters new techniques. By taking the feeling, sound, and shock wave of live rounds out of the equation, it allows the shooter to focus on their technique and not on the shock, euphoric feeling, or muscle fatigue that you get from firing live ammunition.

One of the problems that the lack of recoil DOES cause is that it messes with the cadence and rhythm that speed shooters have when practicing multiple shots in rapid succession. This IS valid, but doesn't really apply to very many shooters. Most shooters would benefit greatly from thousands of repetitions of smoothly clearing their cover garment, acquiring a solid, consistent grip, presenting their firearm, QUICKLY acquiring



their sights and smoothly squeezing off the first shot. And, even competition shooters can and do use airsoft to practice everything up to double taps.

While you can't accurately practice double taps, you can practice follow-through by reacquiring your sights after each shot. In addition, what I do is set up two targets, 20 feet away from me and about 10 feet apart from each other. The practice that I get transitioning from target to target carries over very well to live fire...and this is something that my local ranges won't let me do outside of competitions.

One last note on the topic of recoil. .22 caliber barrels & uppers have gotten quite popular in recent years for 1911s, Glocks, AR-15s, and other firearms. I own a couple and LOVE them. As you can imagine, when you shoot your normal firearm with .22 rounds, you don't get nearly as much recoil or muzzle rise. The .22 inserts still provide a valuable training aid and help shooters put thousands more rounds downrange than they would otherwise. Is the recoil exactly the same? No. Can you still practice the fundamentals? Absolutely...just like you can with airsoft.

3. **EXCESSIVE MAGAZINE CAPACITY.** I really get a kick out of people who have this "problem" with airsoft training. It goes something like this, "You can't do serious

training with airsoft because they hold so many more rounds than a real firearm." Well, this "problem" requires a MOTO (master of the obvious) solution...when your training would benefit from realistic magazine capacities; don't load them up all the way. If you load 7 or 28 rounds in your real magazine, load 7 or 28 rounds in your airsoft magazine.

This isn't really an issue at all. If I'm training my draw stroke, I load the magazine all the way. If I'm training reloads, I only load 2-4 rounds in each magazine, whether I'm training with airsoft or live ammo. Even when training force on force...whether it's with airsoft, simunitions, or paintball, I load as few rounds as possible so that the interactions don't decay into a game.

4. **TRIGGER WORK.** The trigger pull and trigger reset on airsoft trainers are different than on real firearms, but they're also different between real firearms. Airsoft trainers still reward solid fundamentals. Press the trigger straight back and you'll get tighter groups than if you over grip, pull with your trigger finger, or jerk the trigger.

Eliminate over-travel and start your trigger press as soon as the trigger resets, and you'll shoot quicker and more accurately, regardless of the firearm. These fundamental truths apply to both airsoft and live fire. You won't be able to practice the EXACT squeeze or the EXACT reset that you have with your real firearm, but you will be



able to practice the fundamentals.

**5. MAGAZINE CHANGES.** With a real firearm, the magazine gets lighter as you shoot it and when your magazine is empty, it weighs a lot less than when it's full. This is very different with an airsoft pistol mag. Airsoft pistol magazines have a gas reservoir in them, as well as the bbs and are a big part of the weight of the gun. Since the bbs are only a fraction of a gram apiece, the magazines are almost as heavy when they're empty as when they're full. This wouldn't be a BIG problem, except that on almost all airsoft magazines, the feeder lips and the baseplate are both plastic and can break.

When you drop an empty airsoft pistol mag, you need to be a lot more careful than when you drop an empty real pistol mag... especially on concrete, tile, or other hard surfaces. Since the baseplate and the lips of the mags are plastic, they can and do break if they're dropped on hard surfaces.

There are three things that you can do to get over this shortcoming. The first is to position foam memory pad, a heavy blanket, a sleeping bag, or even remnant carpet strips wherever you plan on dropping your mags if you're training on a hard surface. The second option, if you don't have access to anything soft, is to do tactical reloads and retain your partial mags instead of



doing emergency reloads and dropping your mags. The third is to use a drop bag on your belt and practice pulling your mags from your mag well and putting them in the drop bag. (This is standard operating procedure for many deployed units) None of these are perfect solutions, but they are workable.

**6. PEOPLE WHO PLAY AIRSOFT.** Airsoft is a popular sport around the world. People who play it seriously dress up like military/SWAT (some are/ were military or SWAT) and run scenarios against other teams, much like you would with paintball, laser tag, or like what our armed forces does with the MILES system. Some people take it as a game and view it like an adult version of "cops and robbers"

and others use it as a serious form of force on force training. In fact, more and more law enforcement and military units are turning to airsoft as a training aid because of the extreme low cost of training.

But there are people who play airsoft who blur the line between reality and not-reality in their mind and talk like they've actually been in combat. Law enforcement door kickers who have been in live fire situations and combat veterans who have been there and done that hear these airsofters talk and get turned off by the entire method of training. This is a case where you should judge the training based on the facts and not on who else uses it.

In addition to the reasons I gave why these arguments don't apply to you, perhaps the simplest way to look at airsoft training is not to look at it as a substitution for live fire, but as a really fun and effective way to do dry fire drills, as well as some training drills that you just can't do with dry fire.

What's that mean? It means that neither dry fire or airsoft training shouldn't be viewed as a complete replacement for live training and that you should always follow up your dry fire and airsoft training with live fire. Some people suggest a 50/50 mix, while others suggest that you can make rapid improvements with 90% dry fire/airsoft and 10% live fire. In truth, don't get too hung up on the ratios.

Do as much dry fire and airsoft training as you can and you'll start seeing your live fire performance rapidly improving. Personally, I shoot 50-200 rounds of airsoft per day (integrated into my workout), dry fire a couple hundred rounds per week, and live fire a few hundred rounds per month on my own plus formal training and events.

Airsoft training is a case where perfect is the enemy of good. It could be easily argued that perfect training would be all live fire. Few elite forces would agree with you, but many competitive shooters make that argument. In any case, few people can afford the time and money required to do the repetitions necessary to lock in and maintain muscle memory with JUST live fire.

Keep in mind that the time you spend training with airsoft will ALWAYS be superior to the time that you wanted to spend training live fire but didn't actually do it because something got in the way.

One of the most famous anecdotes about using airsoft to train for live fire shooting comes from 2004 when Tatsuya Sakai won the US Steel Challenge. He couldn't legally train with a real firearm in Japan, so he trained with an airsoft gun for one year before the event. He came to the US one month in advance and trained with a real firearm to get his timing figured out and went on to win by beating some of the best names in shooting...guys who'd been training with 50,000-100,000 rounds of live ammo per year for several years.

I don't suggest that you only go out and shoot your real firearms once a year, but the time may come where that is more of a necessity than simply an option due to ammunition costs or restrictions on firearms. In the meantime, the benefits of cost, frequency of training, and the ability to train "prohibited" techniques makes it hard to beat airsoft training.

	Shooter A (live fire only)	Shooter B (airsoft and live fire)
1000 rounds of target 9mm	\$250 (low ball)	
100 rounds of target 9mm		\$30
NEW Airsoft Trainer Glock Pistol		\$150
4000 rounds of premium BBs		\$20
2 canisters of LP gas		\$10
Airsoft Propane Adaptor		\$20
Silicone Lubricant Spray		\$5
Total spent for 1000 rounds	\$250 with no rounds left to shoot	\$235 w/ 3100 rounds to shoot
Cost per round, when you only pay for ammo/airsoft gas	25 cents per round	6/10ths of a cent per round

Let's take a look at the cost to shoot airsoft. I'm only going to figure the cost of ammo. I'll

let you add in fuel, range fees, targets, and maintenance supplies. Let's compare 2 scenarios... one where someone buys 1000 rounds of ammo for their Glock and uses it at the range and another where the shooter buys an airsoft Glock AND shoots 100 rounds of live fire.

It's important to note here that the airsoft shooter in this example also shoots 100 rounds of live fire. Since the purpose of your airsoft training is to be able to perform better when you're doing live fire, it's vital that you practice occasionally with live fire. One of the biggest reasons for this is to convince your brain that your dry fire and airsoft training actually carries over to live fire so that when you find yourself under stress you'll not only have solid skills, you'll have already proven to yourself that you have solid skills.

But cost isn't the only benefit of airsoft training. When you use airsoft, your frequency of training will go up considerably. Think about it...all you have to do to shoot is throw a thick blanket or sleeping bag over a door, clip a target onto it with clothespins, make sure no animals or pets are around, put on your eye protection, and start shooting!

When you're through shooting, simply throw away your target, run your vacuum to pick up the BBs, and you're done.

When it's that simple to shoot, you'll find yourself training 50-100 repetitions, 3-7 days a week. It's MUCH easier to build up muscle memory this way than to blast through 500-1000 rounds every month or so.



# Prohibited Techniques

**A**irsoft will also allow you to practice techniques that are prohibited at most ranges like shooting while moving, shooting from behind cover, drawing from a shoulder or ankle holster, and shooting from and around a vehicle.

So, in addition to almost every drill that you can do with your firearm and dry fire practice, I'm going to tell you about some of my favorite at-home drills that airsoft guns are particularly suited for.

1. **MOVEMENT/FINDING COVER/  
SHOOTING AROUND COVER/  
CONCEALMENT.** Gabe Suarez has trained shooters on force-on-force skills extensively with airsoft, paintball, and simunitions and one of the biggest factors that he's identified to increase your chances of surviving is to "get off the x" as soon as you realize "it's on." In other words, taking a stance, planting your feet solidly, drawing, aiming and firing isn't necessarily the best option, even though that's what how ranges

force you to train.

A better approach is that, instead of planting your feet, immediately start moving to cover or concealment as you're drawing your firearm. If you happen to be able to get a shot off before you reach cover, that's great. If not, get behind cover, get your firearm ready to go, and then decide whether to engage the target around your cover or retreat.

This is a drill that is PERFECT for airsoft.

[You can still put a hole in sheetrock, break windows and valuables, break skin, and rupture an eyeball, so you need to make sure that you're doing the drill in an appropriate area.]

As an example, if you've got your target set up at the end of a hall, you can stand at the other end of the hall and instead of simply standing, drawing, and shooting, you can get your body out of the hallway as you're drawing and lean back into the hall to engage the target.



You can also hit the deck behind a couch or bed and practice shooting around, over, and even under concealment. When I'm doing this drill, I'll usually wear knee pads so that I can hit the deck harder and faster than I normally would in repeated training.

2. **PUNCHING AND SHOOTING.** It's been said that the main reason for handguns is to serve as a backup to a long gun or as a tool to help you fight to your long gun.

Well, there's another level to that line of thinking, and here it is. If you are within 21 feet of someone when a violent encounter happens, they will be able to get to you and hit/stab you as fast or faster than you will be able to get off your first shot. That, combined with the fact that most violent encounters will happen at "smelling distance" and not at 21 feet, it's quite possible that you'll have to use your hands to fight to get to your firearm/knife/OC or other weapon. In fact, recent National Institute of Justice studies of 10 years of law enforcement and civilian self defense shootings show that the majority of them happen within 11 feet.

I practice "fighting to my gun" in a couple of ways. I've got one of those "Bob" punching dummies that is a life sized torso of a man on top of a heavy, water filled base. I'll set it up next to a man-sized torso paper target to simulate multiple targets and I'll stand in front of the Bob and the paper target and assume

that they have done something to start a violent encounter.

In this drill, I strike the Bob on the throat/neck/ eyes/ears and then move away from "Bob" so that he is between me and the paper target as I draw my firearm...essentially slicing the pie and setting up a scenario where the untouched attacker has to go around his injured partner to get to me.

Then, I engage the punching dummy with my firearm and then slide to the side until I can see the paper target and engage it as well. (The airsoft BBs DO bounce ricochet off of my punching dummy with a lot of speed and could hurt you or break things. There is also always a risk that the airsoft bb's will penetrate and permanently damage your punching bag/dummy. I usually have a t-shirt on my Bob and the airsoft rounds put holes in the shirt but my Bob is still 100% intact after taking thousands of rounds at close range.)

If your training environment permits and it won't cause alarm among neighbors, you can add in yelling commands, like, "Drop the weapon!"

3. **TRANSITIONING FROM PRIMARY TO SECONDARY WEAPONS.** This is a simple, but valuable drill if you ever carry both a longarm and sidearm...and another one that is hard for civilians to practice at ranges.

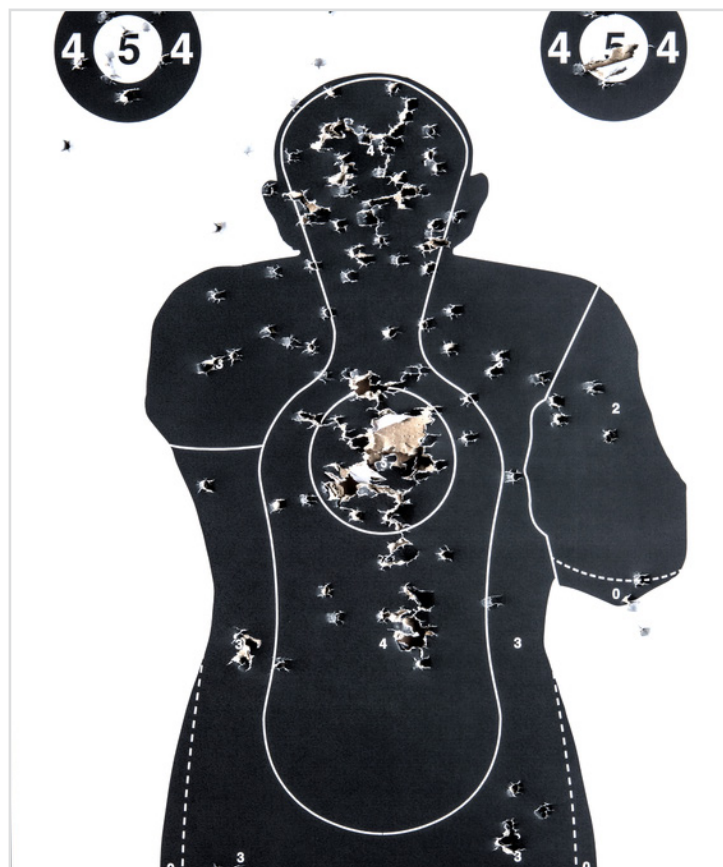
Put simply, the way I do this drill is to put 5-10 rounds in my airsoft M4 and go through drills. When my mag goes empty, I

drop and retain it with my left hand and go for my sidearm and continue engaging the target. Anyone who has done this can tell you that this is easy to mess up on. Does your long gun even have a sling? Where does your long gun end up if you simply drop it? What do you need to do to make sure that you don't get caught up in your sling when drawing your secondary weapon? These are all problems that get flushed out with airsoft training.

My transition consists of pulling my M4 down and across my body with my left hand as I clear my holster with my right hand. Once I've cleared my long gun with my handgun, I bring up my left hand to assume a 2 handed grip.

4. **TRANSITIONING FROM TARGET TO TARGET.** If your local range prohibits shooting across lanes, you'll love being able to do this one. It's simple...set up 2 or more targets and engage them, one after another. I sometimes do this one with friends in my garage. I go out of the garage, they set up multiple targets, and I go into the garage and identify and engage them. To add to the difficulty, sometimes I'll enter the garage in the dark with my flashlight on strobe mode so that I have to maintain cover, identify targets, acquire my sights, and engage with the added disorientation of the strobe.

You can also do this with a headlamp strobe. These flash slower than a tactical flashlight strobe and, depending on the



speed of your strobe, you might be able to do a drill where you identify and engage a target every time the strobe lights up. This version of the drill is simply fun.

5. **WHILE WE'RE ON THE TOPIC OF SHOOTING** while in the garage, airsoft gives you a good opportunity to practice drawing while in the drivers' seat of YOUR vehicle, practicing taking cover behind your engine block, and shooting around, over, and under your car. Remember, you can break out windows, blind yourself or others, damage paint, and break valuables in your garage, so only do this if you are willing to take those risks.

I do this drill several times of year, but the most important and most awkward time is

in the fall when I change from summer clothes to winter clothes.

When I started doing these drills around my car... the car that I paid for and didn't want to damage unnecessarily...I became VERY aware of the fact that it's possible to have a perfect sight picture of a target over the top of a car or other cover and still hit the hood of the car with your round. It sounds obvious, but since your barrel is lower than your sights, you need to raise your muzzle up over cover enough so that you don't shoot your cover instead of your target.

6. **STRESS DRILLS.** Airsoft is also a great way to practice shooting when your fine motor skills aren't working right. While you can't completely replicate the stress response without stress, you can do some things to get used to manipulating your firearm when your hands and fingers don't respond as well as you'd like.

The first drill that I do is to shoot during or after exercising. My normal workout is an interval workout where I go hard for 20 seconds and then take a 10 second break. During that 10 second break, I practice drawing my firearm and engaging targets. Sometimes I do it after a run, sometimes during/after doing a heavy bag or Bob workout. In any case, I wait until either my heart rate is elevated, I'm shaky from an endorphin dump, or my hands don't work right from a post workout "pump."

This is also a good chance to practice techniques to lower your heart rate quickly...namely combat breathing. Simply put, combat breathing is taking in a deep breath over a 4 count, holding it for a 4 count, and then breathing out through pursed lips for a 4 count. When you're breathing in, you want to focus on pushing your diaphragm down (stomach out) instead of pushing your chest up. This can quickly lower your pulse 10-20 beats per minute.

The second stress drill that I do is putting my hands in snow or ice water until they don't function right and then do airsoft drills. It feels like my fingers are sausages and like I'm wearing mittens, but this drill has helped me get rid of a lot of "fancy" gun handling techniques in favor of simple ones that are more likely to work under stress.

The third stress drill that I do is a completely different kind of stress, but still helps for training. It's going through drills using a shot timer. You can buy dedicated timers, or, if you have an iPhone, IPSC has a Shot Timer app that you can download for \$10 and customize for however loud your particular airsoft gun is. When you go to the range, you can change the settings for live fire and you're good to go. Shot timers will record how long it takes you to get off your first shot and how long it takes between shots, providing measurable feedback on whether or not your skills are improving or not.

One of the drills I do with my shot timer

is drawing from concealment while moving to cover. I hit the start button and a random countdown timer starts that takes from 2-3.5 seconds. When it goes off, I start moving towards cover and drawing/engaging my target or targets.

A second drill that I do is called “El Presidente.” In one of its most basic forms, it starts with the shooter looking away from a group of shoot and no-shoot targets. When the buzzer goes off, you turn around and engage all the shoot targets with one round to the center of mass and then one round to the central nervous system while not shooting the no-shoot targets.

And, a third drill that I do is to put 3-5 rounds in a mag and have a spare mag handy. I start the timer, draw and engage. When the slide locks back, I immediately reload, reacquire my sights, and re-engage my target. In this drill, I pay attention to my time to my first shot, but the focus is on the time between the last shot of my first mag and the first shot of my second mag. Basically, I’m trying to speed up the loop of identifying that my mag is empty, dropping the empty mag (or retaining it) loading a full mag, racking the slide (if necessary) and re-engaging my target.

You’re on Camera! One of the biggest reasons to train with an instructor isn’t so that they can teach you some incredible new “sexy” technique that will change your shooting overnight...it’s so that they can

identify and help you fix basic fundamental problems with your shooting.

At some point, you’re probably going to know HOW to shoot with solid fundamentals better than you’ll actually be able to shoot with good fundamentals. When you find yourself in this situation, pull out your video camera, digital camera with video, or webcam and start recording your airsoft training.

Doing this will allow you to quickly see if you are shooting with an aggressive stance like a fighter or if you’re weight is on your heels; whether you’re squeezing or slapping the trigger, whether you’re reacquiring your sights as quickly as you should be, if you’ve got overtravel between shots, whether or not you’re anticipating recoil, and where you’ve got wasted movement on your presentation, malfunction drills, and reloads.

If you have the ability to play back your recording at 1/2 speed or 2x speed, you’ll pick up even more inefficiencies that you can improve.

As I mentioned before, don’t be afraid to train at 1/2 speed...even with airsoft. It will allow you to imprint quality muscle memory and speed is one of the few components of your firearms handling that will increase when you’re under stress.

