

CrossFit's Right on Target

Newfound fitness helps a Practical Shooter move up in his sport

Dave Re



In September of 2007, I completed a major competitive goal. [The United States Practical Shooting Association](#) awarded me the highest classification they offer: Grand Master. Attaining GM status was a major milestone, but I knew that I was a long way from being able to consistently win against the best. Beyond a few local wins here and there, I'd never won a major match—and it gnawed at me. I was really no more than just a big fish in a small pond—and I literally mean a big fish. At 212 pounds, I was simply too slow to get off enough shots in a game that scored on quality and quantity. But I had hope that I could turn around that weakness in my game due to something I'd started a month earlier: CrossFit.

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Most people might not think that fitness would have anything to do with accurately aiming and firing a handgun, but then they probably don't know anything about the sport of Practical Shooting. Originally developed by Marine Lt. Colonel Jeff Cooper, a World War II and Korean War veteran considered to be one of the 20th century's foremost experts on the use and history of small arms, Practical Shooting started as a way to give shooters a venue on which to practice and develop self-defense skills. Today, it has evolved into the "X Game" of the shooting sports—a contest of speed, accuracy, and power.



With the clock running, we shoot full-power handguns at cardboard silhouette targets or falling steel plates 50-plus yards away. Scoring boils down to "points per second"—he who gets the most, wins. Matches are comprised of several stages, or "scenarios." We may shoot up to 36 stages over a 4- or 5-day match, although the typical local match will be a one-day, 8-hour match of four to six stages. A stage might involve from one to 32 shots fired from one or more positions, on targets that can appear, disappear, or move in various ways. The stage will usually involve drawing the gun from a holster, and can require reloading the gun one or more times. Missing a target, or shooting what is referred to as a "no shoot" target, incurs a scoring penalty. We never shoot the same stage twice, although we do have some benchmark stages (called "classifiers") that are used to assign classifications (sound familiar?). Some variants of the game involve shooting rifles and shotguns. (For more information, check <http://re-gun.blogspot.com/search/label/Video>).

Many competition shooters are law enforcement officers or military tactical operators, but most aren't. I manage a software development group for Sun Microsystems and am a semi-professional photographer on the side. I grew up fascinated with the gun collection of my grandfather, a competitive trap shooter in the 50s, 60s, and 70s, then found I had some natural talent while getting a Boy Scout shooting merit badge. I legally purchased a handgun at age 21, and went right down to my first USPSA match.

While I avoid discussing tactical issues, I think cops and soldiers will find that, when it comes to the mechanics of shooting and the physical challenges associated with operating a firearm at high speed in a stressful situation, our spheres of operation have quite a bit of overlap. Shooting is shooting. And whether you do it for sport or for life-and-death, I discovered that CrossFit can help you do it better.

The Need for Strength and Speed

Due to the way the 2007 match calendar worked out, my competition season was over for the year by mid-summer. While finishing my work on attaining my GM classification, I took a hard look at my game, as I do every year in the off-season, identifying weaknesses and solutions to them. One thing in particular stood out glaringly. I was extremely slow on my feet, a major disadvantage when you're playing a game of speed against guys 15 years younger than you are.



Most high-level competitors understand that the best way to get better is to find your weaknesses, and attack them until they become strengths. I got confirmation that my lack of physical speed was a major impediment to meeting my other major goals from other top shooters who had watched my shooting. "You're too slow and fat" was a predictable, recurring theme. At the time, I weighed in at 212 pounds and 22% body fat, and what physical activity I got through shooting was about the limit of what could be called "working out" for me.

Granted, you don't necessarily need to be Superman to do well in our sport. Many of my competitors will quickly point to examples of extremely successful shooters who've been obviously out of shape. If 10-time champion Rob Leatham, the most dominant practical shooter in history—who jokingly refers to himself as "a fat old guy"—can win without being in shape, why can't they? When it comes down to it, it's a shooting game, and being able to drive the pistol quickly and precisely is paramount. We have a saying that is all too true: you cannot miss fast enough to win. If you can't shoot, the rest has little bearing on the outcome. Leatham can SHOOT, and he wins in spite of his physical disadvantage.



But for those whose shooting is merely very good, and not at Leatham's level, being fit would certainly confer advantages. The need for foot speed is obvious, but there are other places that speed comes into play. Practical Shooters are often required to get into and out of awkward positions, shooting under low obstacles, or leaning hard around walls or barriers. Getting into these kinds of positions quickly requires speed, agility, coordination, accuracy and balance, and shooting from them requires strength for a solid shooting platform. Getting out of them and accelerating away adds the additional requirement of power. Shooting on the move quickly and accurately over uneven ground requires a similar physical skill set. Bottom line: General physical fitness can have a profound impact on the shooter's ability to apply shooting-specific skills.



Another big issue in training is recoil management, which often confuses the shooter. We shooters would like this to be a strength issue, and it is, but in a counterintuitive fashion. Recoil management in a proper shooting platform starts from the feet, and involves the shooter's whole stance and grip. Proper use of body mechanics allows the shooter to manage the gun's movements in the most efficient way possible. Where most folks get into trouble is in trying to dominate recoil through sheer muscular effort. This leads to a gross over-tensioning of the arms and shoulders, ruins trigger control and fluidity of movement in the whole body, and actually enhances the gun's ability to move the shooter under recoil.

On top of raw foot speed, set-up stability, and recoil management, good practical shooters must have numerous sport-specific shooting skills. I'm talking about things like trigger control and manipulation, drawing from a holster, reloading the gun at high speed, providing a solid base for the upper body while grounded in awkward positions, and maintaining a strong "triangle" that will support the pistol for an extended period of time without losing stability.

Finally, a day on the practical shooting range involves several short, intense bursts of activity, interspersed with longish periods of helping to prepare the stages in between shooters, including bending over to lift steel targets. Obviously, all of that is done in whatever weather Mother Nature decides to bless us with that day – heat, cold, wind, rain, or snow. Being on your feet, remaining upright in the weather, exacts a surprising toll on the body and destroys your mechanics. It becomes hard to stay focused later in the day, as the body simply runs out of energy. You begin to feel sluggish. Your shooting performance can suffer horribly.

I know. It was happening to me.



CrossFit Meshes Well with the Anaerobic Demands

Serendipity led me to CrossFit Central in Austin, Texas, in August 2007, a month before I was honored as a Grand Master. The changes were almost immediate.

In a CrossFit story that will resemble the successes that so many other people have had, I dropped 30 pounds and got down to 10% body fat in a few months, improved my eating dramatically, and just flat-out felt better. I have a "before/during/after" picture on my blog – as you can see, a big change, but nothing unexpected for those experienced in how CrossFit can change your life.

At the 2008 U.S. Nationals, although I finished 14 places worse in '08 (39th) vs '07 (25th) mainly due to a very poor first day in pouring rain, I placed quite well in several other major matches (two 5ths, 7th, 10th, 11th) and won a total of three stages at two of them—my first major match stage wins! My wins at locals became more consistent, too.

What happened? The stamina, strength, flexibility, power, speed, coordination, agility, and balance that I got from CrossFit were put to use immediately. Sprint speed is the most obvious outward benefit of CrossFit for the practical shooter— I'm noticeably faster on foot, though I'm still learning how to incorporate and use that newfound ability. And I've found there are many more subtle benefits. CrossFit's effect on my shooting accuracy has been dramatic. It certainly provides a solid foundation upon which to place one's shooting skills.

In executing the sport specific skills, it greatly benefits the shooter to have strong anaerobic metabolic pathways, as a shooter's aerobic pathway never comes into play during the course of shooting a given stage. After reading the October 2002 CrossFit Journal article entitled "What is Fitness?", it's easy to almost believe that CrossFit was formulated specifically with the sport of Practical Shooting in mind.

It may not seem intuitively obvious that CrossFit will directly enhance the shooter's ability to execute these fine motor skills under pressure. Certainly, doing CrossFit alone will not suddenly supply you with a sub-one-second reload on demand, or magically give you enhanced trigger control to execute tight shots on long range targets. Executing complex fine motor skills

subconsciously under pressure results from many, many repetitions of those skills in practice. Consider this, though: The vast majority of the stages we shoot are over in less than 30 seconds. They may involve sprinting short distances, sometimes 30-50 yards, throughout the stage. So the more that the physical demands of the stage tax your fitness abilities, the less precise your fine motor abilities become.

It's quite common to see shooters out of breath after a short physical exertion during a stage— even those who engage in lots of “long slow distance” fitness activities and appear to be quite fit. We execute stages solely utilizing the anaerobic metabolic pathways, and weakness here leaves you breathing hard mid-stage, with a high heart rate. This is not an optimal condition under which to attempt fast, accurate fine motor execution.

The conclusion, given these circumstances, is quite clear: Improve the shooter's anaerobic capacity, and you enhance the shooter's ability to execute complex skills under pressure during a very physical performance.

Another point where CrossFit comes in handy is an increase in general stamina, which greatly improves the shooter's ability to simply stay upright throughout the day and conserves your available energy. I see a lot of shooters “dropping out” in the heat; the CrossFit practice of working out in open garage-like settings conditions the shooter to the weather. When combined with proper nutrition and hydration (a good rule of thumb is to drink until you reach one-urination-per-hour pace; and grazing on Zone balanced snacks all day long has helped me maintain energy levels without bloating), it has the effect of inoculating them to the stresses of heat, humidity, and intense sun. I have only found one downside in this regard: a lower body fat percentage equates to less onboard insulation for cold environments, requiring warmer dress!

In addition to CrossFit workouts, I do find some benefit in adding exercise elements specifically targeted at my sport. The class I participate in at CrossFit Central meets three times per week. On the days in between, I engage in CrossFit-style workouts, supplemented with work on the agility ladder, medicine ball exercise, short interval sprinting, and other activities that resemble the specific physical challenges of the sport. The agility ladder further enhances balance, coordination, agility, accuracy,

and foot speed. For practical shooting, using a medicine ball for rotation work improves the shooter's ability to quickly and accurately move the gun between targets. This includes various rotational throws against a wall and seated “core” work like Russian Twists. The shooter will also benefit from various sprint drills, like suicides, that require rapid acceleration and deceleration, and include changes of direction and/or stopping accurately in specific locations. I will sometimes do sprint drills with a light dumbbell acting as a surrogate for my handgun, setting up in a shooting platform on each end of the sprint.

I also use CrossFit-style exercises in my shooting practices to emphasize performing under physical pressure. A simple shooting drill becomes quite a bit more difficult when you do 10 or so burpees immediately before the drill!

I've been involved with Practical Shooting almost half my life at this point. Technically, I ought to be past my prime. Instead, with my ever-better CrossFit fitness, I'm looking forward to my greatest achievements ever in the 2009 season.

Find more information on Practical Shooting at the [USPSA website](#), and search for “practical shooting” or “USPSA” on YouTube .

All images courtesy of [Peter Tsai Photography](#)



Dave Re began his shooting career in 1993, and has a total of 10 years experience with competitive shooting sports. In late August, 2007, he started training at CrossFit Central in Austin, Texas, and has used CrossFit as his primary fitness program since that time. About the same time, Dave hung up his shingle and began teaching practical shooting to motivated students in the U.S. (DR Performance, Performance Shooting instruction and coaching; dave@drperformanceshooting.com . He has been happily married for 12 years, and is owned by three miniature dachshunds and a horse.