

Find the Dot Faster!



Transitioning to red dot sights the easy way

By Dave Brown

"Knowledge is not skill. Knowledge plus ten thousand times is skill."

- Japanese violinist and composer Shinichi Suzuki

The wide adoption of red dot sights for law enforcement in Canada will be the single biggest advancement in defensive weapons since the invention of the cartridge in the 1800s. If your agency is not considering upgrading your pistol to red dot sights now, they will be soon. In the next five to ten years, nearly every agency in Canada will be so equipped.

The advantage to officers in high-stress situations will be immediately obvious. Red dot sights are both fast and accurate. Most important, they allow officers to keep both eyes open and focused on the threat and not on the front sight. Long battery life means one can leave them on constantly and simply swap batteries during yearly in-service training sessions.

We have come a long way with the technology. Red dots were not invented for use by military or special forces; they were created for competitive pistol and shotgun shooters who have been using them successfully since the early 1980s. In those days, battery life was measured in hours instead of years and we had to carry as many spare batteries in our range bags as we carried spare ammunition.

We also quickly found out that one doesn't simply bolt on a red dot or similar electronic sight on a pistol without learning how to use it. The skills are unique, and it not only takes practice, but it also the right kind of practice.

To paraphrase an old saying, one doesn't get to Carnegie Hall just by practice, practice, practice. One also needs directions on how to get there.

Your First Time with a Red Dot

Your first session with a red dot sight will be a mixture of emotions from, "Why didn't we do this years ago?" to "Where's the stupid dot?" and "Is this thing still on?" Once you learn to focus on the target and not on the front sight and with an understanding of the need for consistency in your wrist angle and grip, it will become second nature.

If you are continually hunting for your dot, you're doing it wrong. Simply firing rounds downrange and hoping for some kind of "muscle memory" to take hold will never correct the basic problem. Without proper instruction, some will struggle with red dots and even resign themselves into thinking, "red dots sights are not for me."

Red dots are for everyone. Constantly hunting for the dot is a sign that your wrists are not at a consistent angle. Get rid of the concept that constant repetitions reinforce muscle memory. Muscles don't have memories. Our brain has a memory. This is where the six basics - grip, stance, sight picture, trigger control, draw, reload - must be constantly practiced in order to imprint those skills into the unconscious part of the brain.

The secret to the dot always on target is consistency in all those basic movements. Your draw should be up and then out, and your reload should duplicate the same mechanical movements as your draw stroke. Any variations in draw, wrist angle, grip pressure or arm motions will simply result in chasing the dot just when you need it the most.

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Smooth on the Draw

Placing your sight on target begins long before you bring it to eye level. Understand that the three most important factors are consistency in your draw, consistency in your wrist angle and consistency in your grip pressure.

Now let's look at how that begins with a correct draw stroke. Once the grip is established and the holster released, the pistol should rise almost straight up until about throat level, then the arms are extended toward the target. This motion can be visioned as an upside 'L' shape.

This upside-down 'L' shape draw gets the sights close to your eyes as early as possible, and the amount of arm extension is then dependant on the distance to the threat. Sweeping in an arc from holster to eye level (sometimes called a "bowling draw") just slows you down because you don't see your sight until the last fraction of a second. The upside-down 'L' draw is an example of how the fastest line between two points is not always a straight line.

Now that we know the ideal motion in our draw stroke for most situations, we need to find our 'workbench' area. This is simple. Stand straight with your arms at your sides, bend both arms at the elbows slightly more than 90 degrees and picture an imaginary 'box' in the air that extends from the bottom of your elbows to about throat level.

This is your 'workbench.' Every draw, reload and rise from low or high ready should go through this workspace. I call it your workbench because precise work while standing is done from a higher level than sitting at a desk. Every time you practice your draw, you are also practicing the same mechanical motions that you use for reengaging from a reload or engaging from ready.

Finding the Dot

Now that we know consistency in our draw will contribute to getting your dot on target, let's look at how we can do that faster.

Start at the end and work backwards. Before we get the dot perfectly on the target, we need to know what perfect feels like. PROVE the pistol safe and empty, then point it at the target while establishing the red dot on target. Take your time. There is no need to rush this part.

Now when you have the dot lined up, examine your wrist angle. This is the locked wrist angle you need to aim for while practicing. Feel the grip. Are you gripping the pistol lightly with the strong hand and using the support hand to give that consistent pressure we need to prevent the dot from sliding from side to side as our speed goes up?

Consider that your wrist is a hinge and any variation in movement on that angle or variation in grip pressure is going to complicate your consistency in finding the dot. Wrist angle should stay locked from the moment you grip all the way through to the presentation on the target.

Notice we haven't even fired a shot. This is where having a space where you can safely dry-fire without ammunition is very important in our transition from iron sights to electronic sights. For safety, there should be no ammunition in the dry-fire area and no magazine in the pistol. It also helps to dry-fire with a partner who can provide feedback on your draw stroke and the movements of the sight as you pull the trigger.

Once you have established the end point, it's time for draw and dry-fire drills. The purpose of dry-fire is to imprint the basic mechanics into the unconscious part of the brain and to reinforce basic skills. Keep it simple and watch the movements of that dot as you press the trigger to the rear.

If your dot is consistently sliding up or down in the vertical axis, your wrist isn't properly locked. If the dot slides left or right in the horizontal axis, you need to work on grip pressure. Work on one skill at a time. If it's grip pressure, loosen your strong hand and squeeze more with the weak hand. Much like gripping a golf club, the pistol is controlled more with the support hand than the strong hand.

Stop Practicing Speed

When new to red dot sights, the biggest error is usually the dot not centered in the vertical axis. This is where shooters try to 'hunt' for the dot when the actual cause is inconsistency in the wrist angle.

Stop trying so hard. A jerky draw will translate into having to hunt for the dot. Don't try to work on multiple variables at the same time; work on one skill. Slow down your draw and strive for smoothness and consistency, not speed. Speed comes with practice. First you get smooth, then you get fast.

Once you break the draw down into the components of grip, break, snatch, lift and extend, then work on keeping your wrist angle the same for every draw, reload and extend from ready. Lock your wrists and reinforce that upside-down 'L' shaped motion in your arms.

**“Practice doesn’t make perfect. Only perfect practice makes perfect.
First you get smooth. Then you get fast.”**

Listen carefully to your instructor. They understand those brief moments of panic when you can’t see a dot, and they know how to correct that. To help reinforce the advantages of the both-eyes-open target focus, they will even apply tape across the front lens. It still works.

Looking for the dot is a conscious skill that relies upon your vision. Conscious skills don’t exist in high stress situations. Finding the dot consistently on target without thinking is how those skills get reinforced into the unconscious part of the brain that may some day save your life. Slow down; concentrate on smoothness and use constant repetition to imprint body mechanics into the subconscious.

It is not just coincidence that your high-speed driving instructor and your firearms trainer can often be heard uttering the same phrase, “Slow is smooth and smooth is fast.”

Remember that it’s not practice that makes perfect. It’s perfect practice that makes perfect.

Walk before you run. Two blocks up and four blocks over. That’s how one truly does get to Carnegie Hall.



The new RCMP Glock pistol in its first public showing, in service with the Yukon RCMP during a 2026 pistol competition with the Alaska State Troopers. Canada won.

Photo courtesy Alaska State Troopers