

Par-simonious Practice

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To me, at least, part of the challenge and fun of Cowboy Action Shooting is developing the skills to shoot better and move up in the competitive ranks. According to *Wikipedia* online, a game consists of a goal that players try to reach, and a set of rules that determines what a player can or cannot do. Sounds about right so far. Further definition suggests that if a player cannot, according to the rules, do anything to interfere with another player, then the conflict is considered to be a competition. Competitiveness is an innate biological trait that coexists with survival traits, according to *Wikipedia*. Therefore, it seems natural for most of us cow-folk to be competitive.

Having established that we do play a competitive game, and therefore want to do better, how do we go about the task of improving? As most of us are busy, it would be nice to have efficient practice leading to real improvement. We discussed recently (*The Cowboy Chronicle, date*) the use of split times to learn *where* to gain speed and efficiency in shooting. Once you have decided *where* you want to improve, practicing with an electric timer using the *par time* feature can help you to achieve that goal. Thus, *par-simonious* practice is frugal practice in that it saves you time and even bullets.

What is a “par time” and how do you use it to practice? Well, the word *par* is Latin for “equal,” and in competition, it means to be *equal to the standard or normal performance*. Par time practice means, simply, making your practice *equal to some standard of performance*. You can set the standard of performance at whatever you wish to achieve. If you have a goal of, say 1 second for the first shot on the draw, you can set the timer to beep again at 1 second. Most good quality electronic timers have the ability to set a par time manually, and that is the key to this kind of practice. The timer can be set to beep first at a randomly determined time after pushing the starting button, and the par time can be set to beep again at whatever interval you choose. If you are practicing alone, use of the random start allows you to get in position before the starting beep. The beauty of par time practice is that you can achieve significant improvement with just dry fire, in the comfort and convenience of your own home. Just make sure your guns are empty (check often to verify) and use snap-caps whenever required to prevent damage to the gun.

In order to use par time practice effectively, you need to know two things: 1) what is the function you want to improve on, and 2) what is the new time you want to do it in. Let’s say you want to improve the time of your first shot out of the holster with a handgun. Studying your split times, you may have learned that it takes you 2.5 seconds or more to respond to the starting buzzer by drawing first handgun and getting a good hit. You have identified the first part of your goal; faster times at the draw. Now what time do you want to achieve? Again, for the sake of discussion, let’s say your split time was 2.5 seconds and you would be satisfied by improving that time to 1.5 seconds. The way par time practice works is to set the par time feature so it beeps again after the starting

beep, and you simply draw and “click,” pointing at some imaginary (and safe) target in your living room, hoping to hear the click of the hammer fall before the par time beep. To do this, you push the starting button and get into your normal (not gamer) starting position; hands wherever you might normally expect them to be in a match (i.e. not touching any guns). When the buzzer goes off, draw and pull the trigger one time, expecting to hear the click of the dry fired gun before the second (par time) buzzer goes off. If the gun goes “click” before the second buzzer, you have beat the par time that you set. If the buzzer goes off before the gun goes “click,” then you have more work to do.

Ok, Bunkies, that’s the mechanics of par time practice. How it is helpful? How does this form of practice really help one improve? Many people, if not most people, who want to shoot faster just try to, well, shoot faster. Just trying to go faster doesn’t allow for any analytical input to figure out what movements are efficient and what aren’t. Furthermore, and I propose that this is the most important factor that par practice can help overcome, just trying to go faster doesn’t necessarily train the most important part of your body, your brain. Just trying to go faster is often associated with a frantic mental state. Unless you can get your mind under control, the desire to go faster can produce anxiety and uncertainty. Anxiety does little to permit smooth action.

With par time practice, however, you can teach your brain that you have all the time in the world. Here’s how you do it. Remember our goal of getting the first shot out of the holster in 1.5 seconds? Set the par time for, say 3.5 seconds, draw and dry fire until you’re bored with beating the clock. It may take ten replicates or fifty, but do it until you’re smooth and find yourself standing around waiting for the beep. If you’re really getting bored, you can experiment a little with how you grab the gun, present it, find the front sight, etc. This is the opportunity for analysis and developing the so-called muscle memory that obviates mental input.

Once this is working for you, decrease the split time to, say 2.5 seconds. Nothing much will likely change, except that you may find yourself waiting for the beep a little less. You will still hear the soft click of the hammer fall long before the timer beeps. O.K. so do this to boredom then set the timer down to 2.0 seconds and keep going. Finally, set the time for your goal of 1.5 seconds and I’m willing to bet you will still hear the hammer click before the beep.

Now obviously this may take more than one session, but it is a good idea to start every practice session with a slower time than your goal. With continuing practice, the boredom with slow times will come sooner, and you can probably get down to your goal time sooner. The good news is that as your comfort with faster times increases, so does your confidence.

First shot at the draw is, of course, just one example of what can be improved. Reholstering and drawing the second handgun, reholstering second handgun and picking up the rifle, setting the rifle down, action open and empty and picking up your shotgun are all transition events that can be practiced this way. Finally, you can even set a goal of total stage time you would be happy with and go to work. For discussion, let’s say it is a

SAD (Stand And Deliver) stage with little movement between guns, and you think that a good time might be 25 seconds. Well, Pard, just set the par time and go to work. As with what we discussed above, set it for something like 30 seconds at first, then work your way down. Of course, readers of Tex's editorials realize that SAD stages are old hat, so you can stage guns all over the house, if you want to, and par time practice will help you develop the skills and mental calmness to deal with it.

Does it really work? Figure 1 shows the best time (SAD stage, 10 handgun, 10 rifle, and 4 shotgun) for a shooter before practicing transition drills with par time practice and after practicing with par time for several months.

It was stated that this might be called "Parsimonious" practice because it saves time and doesn't cost powder or lead. Actually, you can GAIN time, maybe enough to walk up to the stage and collect a ribbon or two. Good luck and good shootin'

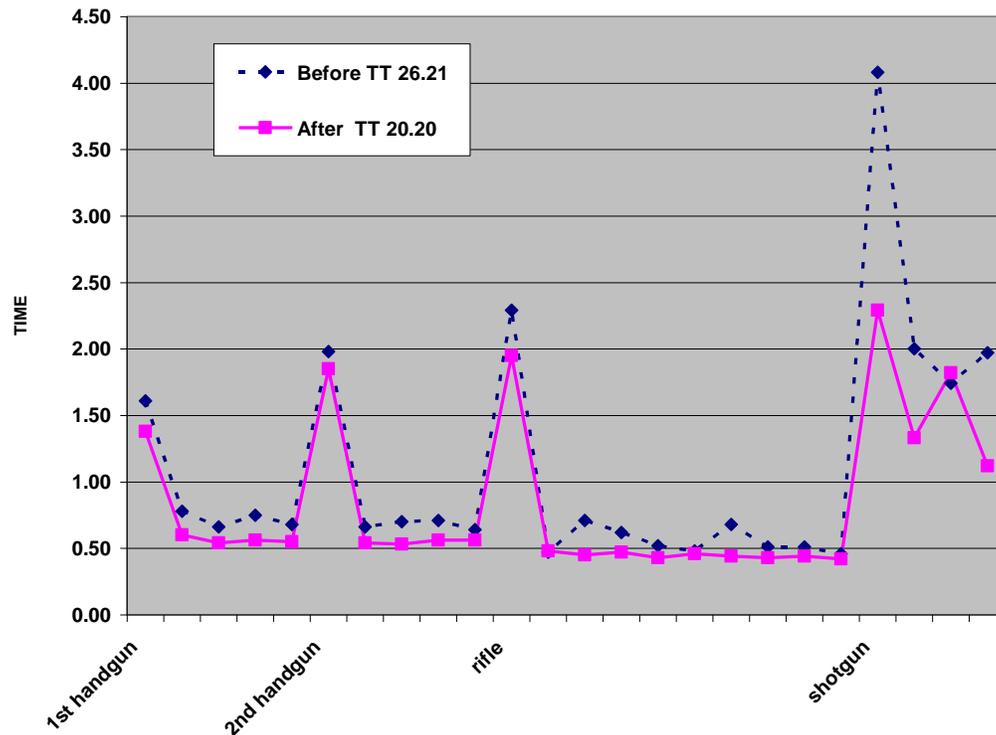


Figure one. Split times from live fire practice (SAD stage, 10 handgun, 10 rifle, 4 shotgun, in a simple sweep). The dotted line represents best time (26.21 seconds) before par time practice, and the solid line represents best time (20.20 seconds) after working on technique with par time practice. Note that not only did the transition times improve, but so did the split times. This shooter's goal was to improve his shotgun times, both at the pickup and subsequent shots.