

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 widespread 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 isn't considering upgrading your pistol to red dot sights now, it will be soon. In the next five to 10 years, nearly every agency in Canada will be so equipped.

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

We have come a long way with the technology. Red dots weren't invented for military or special forces use; they were created for competitive pistol and shotgun shooters who have used 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 did spare ammunition.

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

To paraphrase an old saying, one doesn't get to Carnegie Hall just by practicing. One also needs direction on how to get there. You don't just stop random people on the street; you listen to someone who actually knows where to go.

Your First Time with a Red Dot

Your first session with a red dot sight will be a mixture of emotions ranging 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 rather than the front sight, and understand the need for consistency in your wrist angle and grip, it will become second nature.

If you are repeatedly 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 to thinking, "red dot 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 idea that constant repetition reinforces muscle memory. Muscles don't have memories, but our brain does. This is where the six basics (grip, stance, sight picture, trigger control, draw, reload) must be practiced in order to imprint those skills into the unconscious part of the brain.

The secret to keeping the dot 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 result in chasing the dot 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. The three most important factors are consistency in your draw, wrist angle and 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 to about throat level, then the arms are extended toward the target. This motion can be visualized as an upside-down 'L' shape.

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

Now we need to find our "workbench" area. 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 happens at a higher level than sitting at a desk. Every time you practice your draw, you are also practicing the same mechanical motions used to re-engage after a reload or to engage from ready.

Finding the Dot

Now that we know consistency in our draw will help you get 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 and establish the red dot on target. Take your time. There is no need to rush this step.

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

Think of your wrist as a hinge, and any variation in that angle or in grip pressure will 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 why having a space where you can safely dry-fire without ammunition matters during 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 sight's movement as you pull the trigger.

Once you have established the end point, it's time for draw and dry-fire drills. Dry-fire imprints the basic mechanics into the unconscious part of the brain and reinforces basic skills. Keep it simple and watch the dot's movement as you press the trigger to the rear.

If your dot is sliding up or down the vertical axis, your wrist isn't properly locked. If the dot slides left or right along 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 increase pressure with the weak hand. Much like gripping a golf club, the pistol is controlled more by the support hand than the strong hand.

Stop Practicing Speed

When new to red dot sights, the most common error is the dot not being centred on the vertical axis. This is where shooters try to "hunt" for the dot when the real cause is inconsistent wrist angle.

Stop trying so hard. A jerky draw will make you hunt for the dot. Don't try to work on multiple variables at once; focus 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, work on keeping your wrist angle the same for every draw, reload and extend from ready. Lock your wrists and reinforce the upside-down 'L'-shaped motion in your arms.

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 it. To 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 on your vision. Conscious skills don't exist in high-stress situations. Finding the dot consistently on target without thinking reinforces those skills in the unconscious part of the brain that may someday save your life. Slow down; concentrate on smoothness and use constant repetition to imprint body mechanics into the subconscious.

It's no coincidence that your high-speed driving instructor and your firearms trainer often say the same phrase: "Slow is smooth and smooth is fast."

Remember, it's not practice that makes perfect. It's perfect practice that makes perfect. 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