SELF-DEFENSE AIRSOFT TRAINING

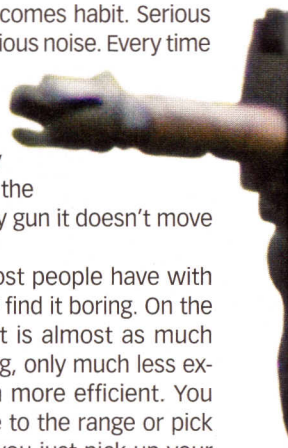
BY DUANE THOMAS
PHOTOS BY ED LEAVITT

There has already been a huge increase in the price of factory centerfire ammunition. For handloaders, normally that wouldn't be a problem because, aside from carry ammo, those who roll their own rarely fire factory ammo anyway. Unfortunately, another bi-product is that primers have become nearly impossible to find. That is a problem. However, this may all be a blessing in disguise. Out of sheer necessity, many shooters are turning to another method of practice that doesn't involve expending live ammunition: airsoft.

Let's define "airsoft." Airsofts are replicas of real firearms and are designed to operate as much as possible like the parent guns. Airsoft systems are already in use by various military and police agencies throughout the world in support of force-on-force training. They're also seeing more usage among a certain group of competition shooters. It's fairly well known among serious shooters that the World Speed Shooting Championship (the Steel Challenge) has been won several times by Japanese shooters who never get to fire real guns in their own country. Rather, they train with airsoft and come to the U.S. a few weeks prior to a match. Then they smoke everyone.

Shooters observing this phenomenon eventually learned that there are significant advantages to doing most of your shooting with airsofts. For one thing, while there is gun movement during firing, there's not really a distinctive amount of muzzle rise and no appreciable noise. Thus, the shooter doesn't develop a flinch. Even for experienced shooters, it's very hard not to develop at least some flinch if you do all your practice with live ammo. Subconsciously, our mind is concerned that the gun will strike the face.

Another factor that degrades training is noise produced by a live firearm. Pull the trigger on a realistic, defense-type handgun and it's like a firecracker going off a few feet in front of one's face. It's hard not to flinch at least slightly. What we do the most eventually becomes habit. Serious gun movement, serious noise. Every time we pull the trigger ingrains a flinch.



The classic remedy for this is to dry fire. When you pull the trigger on an empty gun it doesn't move or make noise.

The problem most people have with dry fire is that they find it boring. On the other hand, airsoft is almost as much fun as the real thing, only much less expensive and much more efficient. You don't have to drive to the range or pick up brass. Instead you just pick up your airsoft and shoot,

Another great aspect to airsoft training deals with a shooter's trained ability to reaquire sights quickly after a round has been fired. It's actually much easier to track the sights in recoil. This readily transitions to the ability to watch the sights of live-firing guns. For those who practice like this before going to the range, they

typically find that not only has their speed improved, so has their accuracy.

There are two basic types of gas-operated airsoft mechanisms: the Gas Non-Blowback (GNB) and the Gas Blowback (GBB). There are also spring-operated airsoft colloquially called "springers" and electric airsofts as well, both of which are outside the scope of this article. Typically, a GNB runs off a CO_2 cylinder that's installed inside the gun. In operation, nothing on a GNB moves externally but the trigger and hammer (the gun doesn't have a reciprocating slide, a removable magazine or a functional slide stop).

GBBs are an entirely more sophisticated breed. From a manual of operations standpoint the GBB works just like a real auto pistol. The slide must be racked (or, alternately, the slide stop thumbed down if starting from slidelock) to chamber the first pellet. When you pull the trigger, the slide cycles. When the gun is empty, the slide locks to the rear. The magazine is removable and snaps into the mag well just like the real thing. The magazine release is functional and must be depressed to remove the magazine. The slide stop works to lock open the gun when empty and can be manually operated to lock back the slide.

GBBs are most often seen in pistols (gas rifles are very rare) and tend to have a much lighter trigger pull than GNBs.

On an airsoft, you don't have to partially disassemble the gun to install a CO_2 cartridge. The magazine is usually the gas reservoir. Rather than loading a fresh CO_2 cartridge, the magazine can be recharged with gas.

There are five gases that can be used in airsofts depending on the make and model. What distinguishes them is their PSI-rating (pounds-per-square-inch).

1) The weakest gas available is 134A. This is used if the gun is entirely made of plastic such as an older Tokyo Marui.

2) Green Gas is basically propane with silicone added. This is the most common type of gas found in use with airsofts.

3) It is possible to use propane in any gun where Green Gas is appropriate, you just have to add the silicone.

4) Red Gas is more powerful than Green Gas and is reserved for use in fully supported, all-metal guns. Even then, it will wear the gun much faster than Green Gas or propane.

5) Even more powerful than Red Gas, CO_2 may only be used in guns specifically designed for it. In such guns, CO_2 is so powerful, using it will usually create abnormally high levels of wear and breakage.

For our purposes we're really only interested in Green Gas and propane. The primary reason for the use of silicone isn't to lubricate a gun. Silicone is actually a pretty poor lubricant. Rather, there are rubber seals within the magazine and inside the gun that must retain prevent leaks for the gun to work. The silicone keeps the parts wet and prevents them from cracking.

For lubricating the slide-to-frame contact, don't use a conventional, petroleum-based lubricant. Even if applied sparingly, as the action cycles it'll spread the

Photo courtesy of DoD

The HFC Airsoft at bottom is based on the Glock 17. Note that the HFC does not feature the actual Glock's trigger safety system.

lube throughout the gun and degrade its seals. Gun Butter is not petroleum based so it won't degrade the seals. Since there is no powder fouling, you won't have to clean out and replace the Gun Butter.

If you shoot a lot of airsoft, you're going to go through a lot of gas. Green Gas is not as widely available as we might like and it's also fairly expensive. After doing a quick search, the best price I could uncover for an 8-ounce canister of Green Gas was $13.99. By contrast, propane canisters practically litter the streets and they cost less than $3 each.

The problem with using propane is that it doesn't have silicone in it to lubricate the rubber seals. Thus you may purchase an adaptor that not only fits on one end into the threads of a readily-available propane canister and the other to an airsoft magazine's intake valve. It unscrews into two pieces, with a reservoir in between where two drops of silicone oil should be applied. When charging the magazine, the silicon gets blown into the mag along with the gas. Add silicone to the reservoir about every five to 10 mags.

Airsofts are available to mimic just about any actual firearm: 1911s, M9s, Glocks, AR15s, submachine guns. You name it. My carry/self-defense/match gun is a Glock 17, so this article will focus on the simulated Glock 17 airsofts. Manufacturers include Tokyo Marui, KSC/KWA, Marushin, KJW, WE and HFC.

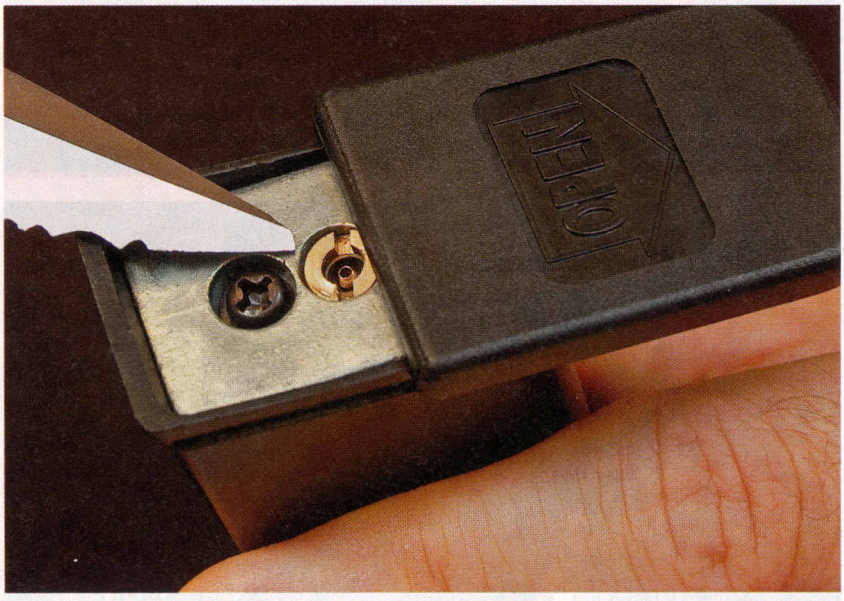
Airsofts made in Japan, like the Tokyo Marui, are constructed almost entirely of plastic, including the slides. In Japan, manufacturers are not allowed to make a "gun" with metal slides. The conventional wisdom with a TM is "Shoot it until it quits working, then upgrade to a metal slide." Spare parts are available, including metal slides and parts (This is perhaps a good place to mention that the metal used in metal-slide airsofts is actually aluminum). An airsoft pistol that simulates a Glock is considerably lighter than its real inspiration because that it is generally constructed of aluminum and plastic components.).

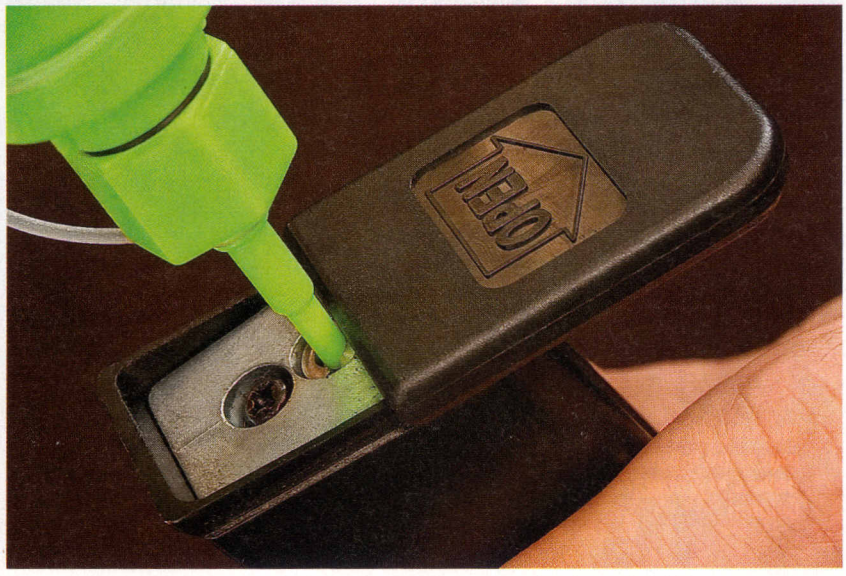
In the end, you want an airsoft gun with a metal slide. Period. On all three Glock-replica airsofts, the frame is plastic. Most

The most common propellant for airsofts is Green Gas. However, readily available and inexpensive propane may be used as long as the shooter adds silicone.

Adding silicone to propane, as allowed by this adaptor, turns it into "de facto" Green Gas (which is simply propane with silicone added) (top). The fill valve on the HFC magazine is contained under a sliding cover (center). Inserting the nozzle of the propane adaptor into the fill valve on the bottom of the magazine, then pressing for a few seconds fully charges the magazine (bottom).

Airsoft guns may not be lubricated with standard, petroleum-based products. Gun Butter, being non-petroleum based, is an excellent choice.





Airsoft pellets are available in a variety of colors and containers, including these "pellet grenades." A sliding lever in place of a Glock's serial-number plate blocks the trigger from moving when in its rearward position.

The HFC Glock 17 magazine holds 24 pellets in a staggered column.

airsoft guns have metal slides and frames and are therefore more durable.

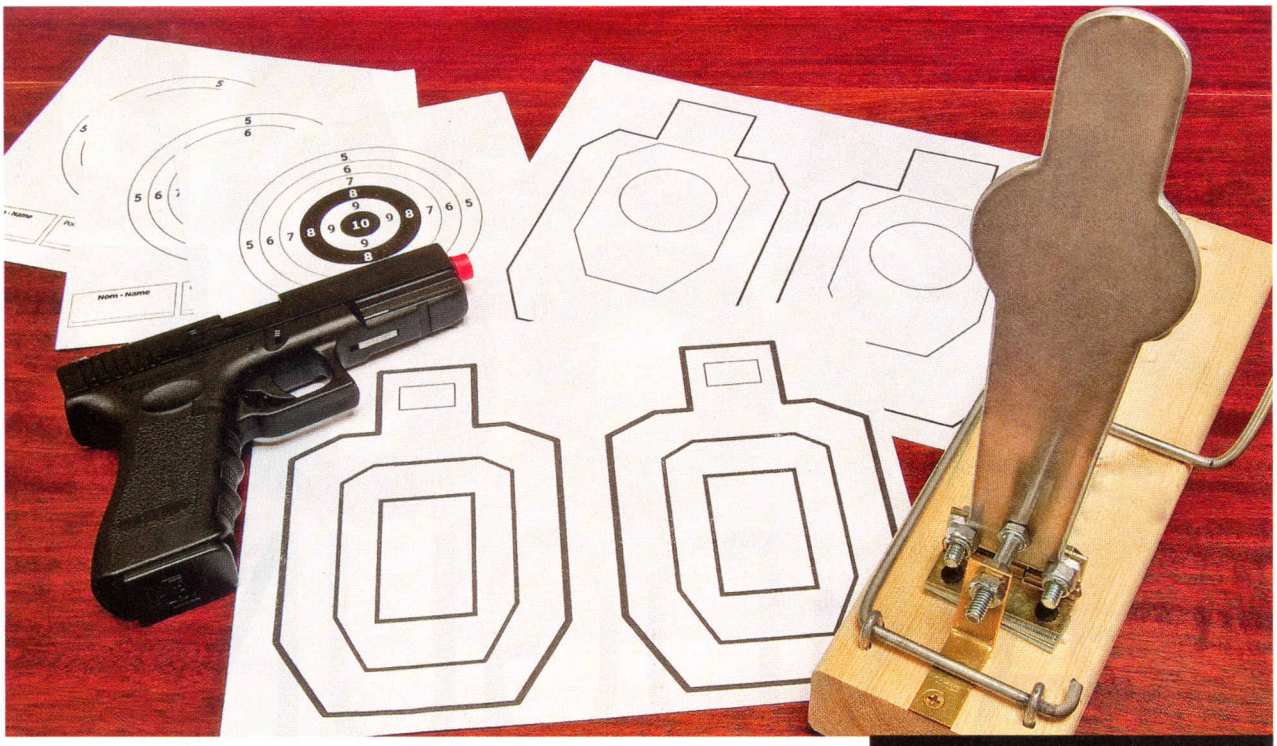
Velocities out of an airsoft pistol tend to run in the 275- to 350-fps range. Accuracy is decent considering the distance from the target. The method through which an airsoft gun stabilizes a pellet for accuracy is called "hop up," which means the pellet spins backward as it travels down the bore and continues to do so after it leaves the barrel. This performs a stabilizing function in a similar manner to a bullet that's spinning on its axis.

Most airsofts fire 6mm plastic pellets, though you'll also find a few firing larger 8mm pellets. Traditional metal BBs, being 4.5mm in diameter, will not fire out of any airsoft gun. Pellets come available in various colors—green, white, red, yellow, black, etc. The most commonly encountered colors seem to be green and white—though some serious shooters have a definite preference for black. Because airsoft pellets move slowly when compared to a faster flying bullet, it's actually possible to become distracted when shooting fast by the sight of a lightly-colored stream of pellets heading downrange. Black pellets, being less visible in flight, are less likely to cause this phenomenon, earning the nickname "stealth practice pellets."

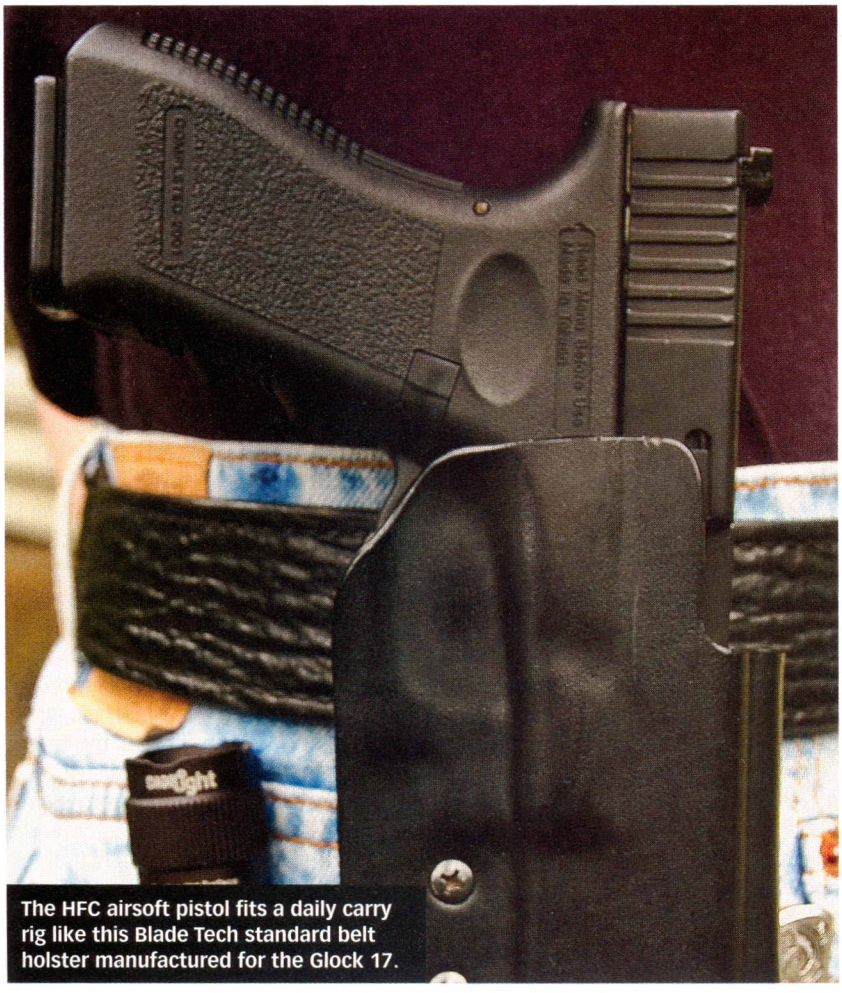
While it may be tempting to cheap out and pay the least amount for pellets, this temptation should be avoided. Top quality pellets are actually polished smooth while the seam of a cheap pellet can interfere with accuracy and cause failures to feed.

There is a school of thought among active airsofter shooters that says you should never reuse pellets. Once they've gone through the gun once, throw them away. The idea is that once the pellet has fed through the action and gone down the bore, its surface is scuffed and it's no longer smooth. If the pellet is severely deformed, it can fail to feed. In practice, I have found a used pellet can be shot again just as long as there are no deformations created when hitting something hard. Having said that, the pellets are fairly fragile.

The price for an airsoft pistol, depending



Running paper targets on a copy machine will give a shooter many airsoft training targets for little money. An aluminum mini-popper is an excellent reactive Airsoft target.



The HFC airsoft pistol fits a daily carry rig like this Blade Tech standard belt holster manufactured for the Glock 17.

on make and model, can range from $50 at the low end up to $400 at the high. A good airsoft pistol can be found in the $75 to $165 range. Magazines typically go for $25 to $30 apiece and my advice is to buy lots of magazines. Begin practice sessions with four to six fully charged magazines one can have a lot of meaningful practice without having to stop to gas up.

For the sort of training a self-defense-oriented handgunner does, it's important that the airsoft fits into a carry holster and be aware of the fact that if an airsoft pistol is used a lot, something will eventually break. The most common parts to break include the plastic feed ramp, plastic magazine feed lips and a floating valve inside the gun's gas cylinder. As with a real gun, know how to strip the gun and replace commonly worn parts.

After integrating an airsoft into my training regimen, even after the current feeding frenzy dies down and primers become available, the amount of live ammunition I expend is going to stay at a considerably lower level than before. Serious shooters are realizing the advantages of training with airsoft equipment and you might seriously consider doing likewise.