Training — a Few Options for Firearms Instructors on a Tight Budget
By Darin R. Van Ryswyk

A few options I’ve used to help increase firearms training on a limited budget are dry drills and airsoft training. By developing “dry” training drills that are high in quality repetitions, officers are able to maintain (or improve) weapon handling proficiency that goes far beyond the simple draw-and-fire range drills, or worse yet — the dreaded “preparing-to-qualify” sessions that rarely prepare officers to win a deadly force encounter. Additionally, through dry drilling, we can train in places that we cannot typically shoot, like offices, kitchens, bedrooms, etc.

Dick Fairburn breaks gun fighting down into three functional areas: mechanics, marksmanship and mindset. Each of these can be practiced to a very high degree without the expense of ammunition. In fact, for officers who are challenged significantly by recoil anticipation, I’ve found that more dry drilling and shorter live-fire sessions help them become conditioned to no recoil (empty gun) vs. constant recoil (live-fire).

Here are a few dry drills I use to keep safe gun handling and deployment mechanics sharp:

- **Basic dry drills** — draw and step laterally, verbalize “POLICE, STOP!” to a paper target on the wall, then scan and reluctantly reholster.
- **Combat reload drills** (with dummy rounds) — empty pistol/magazine at slide lock with a 1-round (dummy) magazine in mag pouch. On command, reload.
- **Draw drills with flashlight** — draw pistol and light simultaneously, illuminate a printed target on the wall, go to sight picture, then scan and reluctantly reholster.
- **Transition to Taser** — with a spent or dummy Taser cartridge in the Taser, practice transitioning smoothly from pistol to Taser, consciously speaking to your “partner” that you are transitioning to Taser.
- **Room clearing and target identification** — label 5-8 targets with a letter, number or symbol (mix them up so they’re not sequential). Label a pack of cards to match each of the targets (I usually have 3 or more cards for each threat target). Starting in the hallway or another room, draw a card and move to the room to challenge or engage that “threat.” This drill requires you to remember the description of the threat. The targets can have photos of weapons or non-threat items (like a phone or can of pop). Clear the threshold effectively, verbalize to targets and communicate with other officers. This drill can be expanded or constricted as time, space and training needs allow.
Work each drill 10-20 times, until the movement is smooth and efficient. Run on shift for an hour or so, these drills won’t “cost” overtime pay or affect a training budget, but the return on the time invested is well worth it.

Be absolutely certain there is NO LIVE AMMUNITION anywhere in the training site when conducting dry drills. This is everyone’s responsibility. If someone leaves and re-enters the site for ANY REASON, they must be re-checked/searched for live ammunition/Taser cartridges/etc. There is no excuse for laziness when it comes to safety, whether on the street or in the training room.

Finally, many of these drills can be completed through the use of replica airsoft guns (CO2 or Green Gas), which typically cost $60-$150. Although the cost of acquiring a few airsoft guns on a non-existent budget can be problematic, the cost savings over live-fire is dramatic.

One note on training with airsoft: an airsoft BB can cause serious injury, so be certain to use appropriate safety equipment. For shooting paper or cardboard targets, use safety glasses; for force-on-force training scenarios, it’s essential to use a full face mask that protects the eyes, ears, nose and mouth.

If you have questions or want additional information on training ideas for a limited budget, feel free to send me an email.

Darin R. Van Ryswyk is a trainer with the Iowa State University Police Department, where he has served as a FTO, Firearms Instructor, Physical Conflict Resolution Instructor and Active Shooter Response Instructor, and currently manages the department training program. He is a member of the ISPA, NTOA, IALEFI, ILEETA and NRA. He can be reached via email at dvan@iastate.edu.