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Tactical Movement

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By Richard Nance

Proper footwork and sound body mechanics will keep you a step ahead of your adversary.
By Richard Nance

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Proper movement of the body depends entirely on the manner in which you carry yourself. The feet carry the body and the body directs the feet. --Miyamoto Musashi

Miyamoto Musashi is widely recognized as the greatest Samurai in Japan's history. By his estimation, more than 60 men died by his sword, which means he probably knew a thing or two about what it takes to prevail in lethal confrontations. The preceding quote from Musashi's classic treatise on strategy, Book of Five Rings, describes the importance of movement in combat.

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Whether armed with a sword or a firearm, proper footwork and sound body mechanics afford you several advantages. Not only does movement make it harder for your adversary to harm you, it creates opportunities to exploit your adversary's vulnerability. Due to the dynamic nature of combat, the participant who is more adept at shooting on the move will have a distinct advantage in a gunfight.

Any tactic you employ during a high-stress encounter needs to be simple and reliable. While walking is a relatively simple task for most of us, walking and shooting may be completely foreign. Proficiency in shooting on the move is dependent on several factors, including proper footwork.

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As a general rule, your feet should be pointed in the direction you're moving while your upper body turns in relation to the threat. The obvious exception would be when you're required to take a quick step or two laterally. In such a case, you would first take a large step with the leg closest to the direction of movement followed by a smaller step with your other leg.

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When moving forward, step in a heel-to-toe fashion and simply reverse this process when moving rearward. By walking in this manner, you minimize the chance of tripping and falling because your foot is always oriented in such a way as to "feel" the terrain for obstacles prior to committing your full body weight to the step.

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Ideally you want your feet pointed in the direction of travel while your body orients toward the threat.

For instance, if while moving rearward in the prescribed manner the ball of your foot hits an unexpected object, you might decide to stop, change course or proceed over the object. On the other hand, if your heel hit the object rather than the ball of your foot, there's a good chance you'll end up on your butt.

Since your mobility is significantly impaired while on the ground, that's the last place you want to be during a close-range gunfight. (To further reduce the odds of tripping during rearward movement, it's a good idea to glance over your shoulder to survey the terrain whenever possible.)

As mentioned, when moving laterally, step first with the leg that corresponds to the direction in which you're moving. This is the fastest way to move "off-line," and it affords you stability because your stance

remains relatively wide--providing a solid base. If you were to move your left foot first when moving to the right, your movement would be slower and you would be off balance because moving in this manner places your feet too close together.

If you turn to your non-gun side and move parallel to the threat while employing a two-handed shooting position, your body will tend to bind up at some point. Depending on the distance between you and the threat, shooting one-handed may be a viable option.

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As an alternative you could employ a "cross-step," stepping one foot in front of or behind the other when moving laterally. Crossing your feet is generally discouraged because it can compromise your balance or even cause you to trip over your own feet. And if you were struck by a bullet, bludgeon or even a fist while in this position, you would be more susceptible to being knocked to the ground.

Keep your knees bent, steps small and move at a reasonable pace. The goal is to remain on your feet during a fight. If you go down, you're in big trouble.

However, cross-stepping is sometimes required, particularly when you're walking in one direction and engaging a target that's behind you. In such a case, cross-stepping enables you to orient yourself to the threat while continuing to distance yourself from that threat.

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Once you've familiarized yourself with the footwork described above, it's time to incorporate the body mechanics that will comprise your shooting platform. This includes keeping your knees bent, taking small steps, moving at a reasonable pace and maintaining an aggressive posture. Combined, these factors enable you to move fluidly, maintain balance and deliver accurate fire.

Walking with your knees bent makes sense for a couple of reasons. First of all, by maintaining a slight bend in the knees, you can more easily negotiate rough or slippery terrain.

A simple diamond pattern setup with traffic cones is a great training aid. Practice moving around the cones in both directions while engaging the target.

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Second, keeping your knees bent enables you to control head movement better while walking. Head movement might be good for a boxer, but it's bad for a shooter because when your head moves, so does your sight alignment. Keeping your knees bent also helps cushion your step, thus minimizing the inherent bouncing of your gun's muzzle as you move.

Another common mistake when shooting on the move is to take large steps. While taking large steps, or even running, might be appropriate in certain instances, it makes hitting your target next to impossible. For this reason, it's best to move only as fast as you can accurately shoot. In other words, you might need to run or you might need to shoot, but it's not a good idea to do both at the same time--especially when you consider that you are accountable for every round you fire.

Regardless of which direction you're moving, you want to square your body to the threat and lean forward slightly. This not only helps you stay on balance, it serves as a psychological reminder to be aggressive. If someone poses an immediate deadly threat to you or another party, aggressiveness on your part is not only warranted but required. Maintaining an aggressive posture--with your abdominal muscles contracted and your upper body leaning into the threat--is important even when moving rearward.

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Shooting on the move should be learned in a natural progression. It should not be attempted by those who do not already have a thorough knowledge of firearms safety and a firm grasp of the fundamentals of marksmanship. Before attempting to shoot on the move, you should devote ample time to developing proper footwork and sound body mechanics.

A simple and effective drill to enhance your ability to shoot on the move is to position four traffic cones in a diamond formation, with a target placed approximately 10 yards from the rearmost cone. When shooting this course, you should have a "coach" walk behind you and help keep you from tripping over a cone--or your own feet. The coach can give commands to fire so that you're forced to shoot when you need to as opposed to when you want to.

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Starting near the rearmost cone, draw your handgun and begin walking around the outside of the cones counterclockwise, staying as close to them as possible. Remember to point your feet in the direction you're headed and allow your upper body to adjust to the threat. Engage the targets when instructed to do so by your coach. When you make it back to the starting line, perform the same drill in reverse.

If you run out of ammo, conduct a reload while moving. If your gun malfunctions, clear it in stride. You need to be able to handle both of these conditions without stopping because in a gunfight there's no chance to pause to reload or clear a jam.

During drills it's vital to conduct reloads or clear malfunctions without stopping. Why? Because you can't stop during a real gunfight.

Once you get the hang of shooting on the move, you can develop more sophisticated and challenging courses of fire that incorporate moving in a zig-zag pattern, shooting small steel targets, hostage targets and so forth. You can also make things a bit more interesting by putting yourself on the clock. This helps to develop the necessary balance of accuracy and speed needed for real-world proficiency.

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Another great way to practice shooting on the move is to supplement your live-fire training with force-on-force scenarios using airsoft guns. If you were under the impression that airsoft is "child's play," you might be surprised to learn that law enforcement agencies across the country utilize airsoft training to prepare their officers for the realities of the street.

Airsoft guns are relatively inexpensive, and training can be conducted almost anywhere. It's amazing how the stress of being hit by a plastic pellet motivates you to shoot on the move as opposed to standing in place.

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While there's no denying the importance of marksmanship in a gunfight, there are better ways to prepare than standing at the 15-yard line and seeing how small a group you can shoot. Shooting on the move can be a humbling experience, but don't beat yourself up too bad if your target is not as pretty as what you're used to.

Accept the fact that your groups will not be as tight as if you were shooting from a stationary position. No matter how adept you are at shooting on the move, it will always be more difficult to shoot while moving. But if your goal is to learn real-world skills that could save the day in a gunfight, you shouldn't be overly concerned with shooting a pretty target.

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