THE PREPARED CITIZEN

MASTERING HANDGUN COMPETITION PREPARATION

FOR IDPA AND PRACTICAL MATCHES

THE CARRY GUY®

ARE YOU READY?™

The Carry Guy Complete Manual: Preparing for Handgun Competitions (IDPA and Similar Disciplines)

Safety First

Always keep the firearm pointed in a safe direction. Keep your finger off the trigger and outside the trigger guard until your sights are on the target and you have decided to shoot. Treat every firearm as loaded. Be sure of your target and what is beyond it. This material summarizes standard descriptions of IDPA stage procedures, equipment, and preparation practices from the IDPA rulebook, NRA Shooting Sports Journal, and published competition guides. It is not a substitute for the current official rulebook, match director instructions, or in-person professional training. Always follow the specific match's rules and Safety Officer commands. No ammunition is permitted in safe areas.

Who This Is For

New competitors preparing for their first IDPA or similar practical handgun match. Experienced shooters seeking a structured checklist for stage planning, gear readiness, and training. Anyone who wants to improve competitiveness through preparation rather than equipment alone.

What Competition Preparation Involves

Preparation includes understanding division rules, selecting compliant equipment, practicing relevant skills (draw from concealment, movement, reloads, target transitions), conducting effective stage walk-throughs, verifying the firearm and ammunition, and managing logistics on match day. IDPA emphasizes defensive scenarios with concealment garments, cover, and tactical priority (near-to-far engagement in many stages). Similar disciplines (USPSA Production, Steel Challenge) share core skills but differ in rules and scoring.

When to Prepare

Ongoing dry-fire and live-fire practice between matches. Stage planning during the official walk-through immediately before shooting each stage. Final equipment checks the day before and morning of the match. Mental rehearsal of stages after the walk-through.

Where Preparation Occurs

Home (dry fire with unloaded firearm). Range (live-fire drills). Match site (walk-throughs and safe-area handling). No live ammunition or loaded magazines in designated safe areas per IDPA rules.

How: Complete Instruction

Equipment Readiness

- Handgun: Must meet the division requirements (e.g., SSP, CCP, Carry Optics). Reliable function is primary.

- Holster: Belt-mounted, covers the trigger guard, strong-side or permitted appendix position (verify with match). Concealment garment required in IDPA.
- Magazines and pouches: Minimum three magazines recommended; at least two belt-mounted pouches.
- Belt: Rigid, through belt loops (IDPA prohibits certain “race” belts).
- Concealment garment: Vest, jacket, or long shirt covering firearm and magazines.
- Eye and ear protection: Required.
- Ammunition: Bring more than the match requires (commonly 200+ rounds for a club match). Use factory ammunition that meets power factor if required by the division. Many competitors use standard 9mm factory loads (115–124 grain) that cycle reliably.

Verify all gear functions with the exact concealment garment and belt that will be used. Practice drawing from the holster under the garment.

Stage Walk-Throughs (IDPA Rules)

Per IDPA rulebook (Section 3.3):

- A group walk-through is conducted by the Safety Officer (SO). The SO indicates vision barriers, points of cover, fault lines, and special conditions.
- Shooters may view each target from every shooting position (including kneeling or prone).
- Individual walk-throughs (walking the path of fire or assuming positions for planning) are not permitted beyond the group walk-through.
- Air gunning (rehearsing firing motions with hand or finger) is prohibited within stage boundaries.

During the allowed walk-through:

1. Listen to the SO briefing and note target locations, cover, and scoring.
2. Identify optimal target sequence (tactical priority where required).
3. Plan reload locations (preferably while moving).
4. Note footwork, entry/exit points for cover, and fault lines.
5. Mentally rehearse the stage after the walk-through ends.

Documented guidance emphasizes using the walk-through to build a mental map rather than relying on improvisation.

Training to Prepare

- Dry fire: Draw from concealment, magazine changes (including tactical/retention reloads required in IDPA), movement while keeping the muzzle safe, target transitions. Use a confirmed-empty firearm.
- Live fire: Accuracy drills at typical stage distances (often 7–15 yards), multiple-target transitions, shooting from cover, reload-and-move sequences.
- Specific drills referenced in competition literature: Near-to-far target engagement, square drills for movement and transitions, timed draws to a defined aiming point.
- Malfunction clearing and slide-lock reloads.

Practice with the exact gear (holster, pouches, concealment garment) that will be used in competition. Documented sources note that consistent practice of these skills improves stage times more than equipment changes for most club-level competitors.

Firearm Preparation

- Clean and lubricate according to manufacturer recommendations.
- Verify reliable function with the intended ammunition.
- Confirm sights or optic are zeroed.
- Check magazine function and spring tension.
- In the safe area: Unload and bag/unbag the firearm only; no ammunition handling.

Ammunition

Use ammunition that meets the division's power factor if applicable and cycles reliably in the firearm. Factory loads are common. Bring extra rounds for reshoots or malfunctions. Do not mix ammunition types during a match without verifying function.

Match Day Process

- Arrive early. Attend any new-shooter briefing.
- Check in and confirm division and equipment.
- Follow SO commands exactly: "Load and Make Ready," "Are You Ready?," "If You Are Finished, Unload and Show Clear," etc.
- After each stage, clear the firearm as directed and holster.
- Paste targets when requested to keep the match moving.

Common Errors

- Inadequate stage planning during the walk-through.
- Standing still to reload instead of reloading on the move.
- Failing to practice draws under the concealment garment.
- Insufficient ammunition or magazines.
- Handling ammunition in the safe area.
- Violating the 180-degree rule or muzzle direction.

Special Considerations

Division rules, equipment restrictions, and scoring differ between IDPA, USPSA, and other practical disciplines. Always consult the current official rulebook for the specific organization. Local clubs may have additional procedures. Differing viewpoints exist on the balance between pure speed training and scenario-based practice; both appear in documented competitor preparation. Professional instruction and repeated match experience are required to develop consistent competitive performance.

Conclusion

Preparation for IDPA and similar handgun competitions centers on understanding the rules, practicing relevant skills with match gear, using the official walk-through to plan each stage, verifying firearm and ammunition function, and following Safety Officer commands. Consistent application of these steps improves scores more reliably than equipment changes alone.

For hands-on training go to www.thecarryguy.com.

Sources

IDPA Rulebook (walk-through procedures, safe areas, reloads); NRA Shooting Sports Journal articles on stage speed and competition preparation; published first-match guides and competitor training materials describing equipment lists, dry-fire drills, and ammunition practices. Differing viewpoints exist on optimal training emphasis (pure speed vs. scenario fidelity); both approaches appear in documented practice.