YOUR GUIDE TO SUCCESS IN IDPA COMPETITIVE SHOOTING

A BEGINNER'S GUIDE TO YOUR FIRST MATCH



FT-IDPA

THE INTERNATIONAL DEFENSIVE PISTOL ASSOCIATION

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YOUR GUIDE TO SUCCESS

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Safety first. Confidence follows. Enjoy the experience.

Welcome to IDPA

International Defensive Pistol Association

A new challenge. A welcoming community. A sport you can grow with.

Imagine a day at the range with a fresh challenge around every corner, fellow shooters cheering your progress, and a reason to keep learning long after your last shot.

Welcome to IDPA - the **International Defensive Pistol Association** - a competitive shooting sport that brings together safe firearm handling, accuracy, movement, and decision-making through simulated defensive scenarios.

Each match features a series of courses called **stages**. Every stage presents a different challenge, giving you an opportunity to test your skills, learn from others, and measure your improvement. Time and accuracy contribute to your score, while safety guides everything you do.

You do not have to be an expert to begin.

Perhaps you enjoy recreational shooting, have a concealed carry permit, or simply want to discover a new shooting sport. With safe handling skills, appropriate equipment, and the preparation required by your host club, you can take that first step into competition.

Tell the match organizer you are new. Ask questions. Attend the newcomer briefing. Your Safety Officers will explain the procedures and direct you through the range commands.

Your first match is the beginning.

Start with three goals: **finish safely, learn the process, and enjoy the experience.** Speed and competitive confidence develop with practice.

Along the way, you may find that the people are as rewarding as the sport - competitors who share advice, recognize improvement, and remember their own first match.

This guide will help you prepare, understand what to expect, and arrive ready to learn.

Welcome to the challenge. Welcome to the community. Welcome to IDPA.

What makes IDPA exciting

A sport you can grow with

Every stage brings a fresh challenge

A stage is one timed course of fire. You may see paper targets, steel, walls, barriers, and marked boundaries. Each stage has a briefing that explains what you must do. The number and layout of stages vary by match.

You share the day with a squad

Your squad is the group that moves through the match with you. You take turns shooting and help reset stages when directed. It is a chance to meet people, ask questions, and become part of the local shooting community.

There is a place for different equipment

Your division groups eligible equipment. Your classification reflects your demonstrated skill level. Match staff can help you select the right division and explain how to enter as a first-time competitor.

Watch your own progress

A smoother match, fewer mistakes, and growing confidence are meaningful wins. You can enjoy competition while building toward your own goals.

Find your first match

Turn your interest into a date on the calendar

Start with an affiliated club

Visit IDPA.com to find clubs and events. Look for a local match that welcomes first-time competitors, then contact the organizer before registering.

Introduce yourself

Say: I have never shot an IDPA match. What preparation or orientation do I need, and when should I arrive? Describe your experience honestly so the staff can help you prepare.

Confirm the essentials

Ask about registration, fees, membership requirements, arrival time, ammunition needs, and the new-shooter briefing. Confirm the exact range location and any accessibility needs.

Check your gear before spending

Ask the club to confirm your firearm, holster, belt, ammunition carriers, and concealment garment. Equipment requirements depend on your division. A quick conversation can save you an unnecessary purchase.

Pack for a great match day

Bring the gear and the comfort essentials

Your shooting equipment

Bring a division-eligible firearm, compliant holster, sturdy belt, and suitable ammunition carriers. Pack enough magazines or loading devices for the match, plus the ammunition quantity recommended by the organizer.

Protection and clothing

Bring eye and hearing protection. Wear secure shoes with good traction and clothing suited to the weather. Bring a concealment vest or other suitable garment when required, and confirm that it works with your equipment.

Make the day comfortable

Pack plenty of water, snacks or a small lunch, sunscreen, and a hat. A pull cart helps carry your equipment. A shade umbrella can make a long outdoor day more comfortable where the range permits it.

Before you leave

Confirm your registration and required documents. Check the forecast and range arrival rules. On hot days, plan extra water and take hydration seriously throughout the match.

Feel comfortable on match day

Know the people and the process

Required: new-shooter briefing

All shooters must attend the new-shooter briefing before shooting. The Safety Officer (SO) will explain the safety rules, range commands, safe areas, and match procedures so you can enjoy a safe, confident, and exciting first match.

Arrive early, introduce yourself as a first-time competitor, confirm your division, and find your squad. Before each stage, listen to the briefing, use the permitted walkthrough, and ask questions.



Safety always comes first

Handle firearms only as authorized; no ammunition handling in safe areas. If unsure or not ready, tell the SO. If a firearm falls, do not catch or retrieve it; get the SO. If ordered to stop, stop immediately, keep your finger clear, and await instructions.

Build a strong foundation

Seven fundamentals of firearms marksmanship

Confidence begins with consistent fundamentals. Use this FT-IDPA reference as a starting point for guided instruction and continued practice.



Learn first. Build consistency. Let speed follow.

Ask a qualified instructor to review these fundamentals with you. At a match, follow the Safety Officer's commands and keep safety ahead of speed or score.

Your turn on the stage

One clear step at a time

Before the timer

When called, tell the Safety Officer you are new. Follow their commands and the stage briefing to prepare. If you are not ready to start, say so clearly.

From the signal to the finish

Begin on the start signal and follow the stage requirements at a pace you can manage safely. You are responsible for muzzle direction, finger discipline, and the applicable engagement and reload rules. Ask about anything unfamiliar before you start.

Finish under the Safety Officer’s direction

Your last shot is followed by an unloading and inspection process. Follow each command, keep the firearm pointed safely, and secure it only as directed. Wait for the range-clear announcement before anyone proceeds downrange.

Review and help reset

Listen as your targets are scored and raise a question promptly with the officials. After scoring is complete and staff direct you, help reset the stage. Be ready when your next turn comes.

IDPA Safety Officers' Range Commands

Know what you will hear - and what to do

STARTING THE STAGE

1. Range Is Hot

The SO begins your course of fire. Check that your eye and hearing protection is properly fitted. Everyone in the bay should do the same.

2. Load and Make Ready

Under the SO's supervision, prepare your firearm and magazines for the stage. A typical loaded start includes loading, chambering a round and carefully holstering. Follow the briefing; unloaded starts use "Make Ready."

3. Are You Ready?

Take the starting position specified in the stage briefing: stand straight with your hands at your sides (the required position may not always be hands at your sides). If you are ready, either say "Yes" or nod yes. If you are not ready, say "Not Ready."

4. Standby

Remain in the required starting position. The start signal follows within 1-4 seconds. Do not move before it unless the course requires movement.

5. The beep: start signal

The timer's beep is your cue to begin the course of fire. Follow the stage briefing and shoot at a pace you can manage safely. It is a signal, not a spoken command.

ENDING THE STAGE

1. If Finished, Unload and Show Clear

First, decide if you are finished. If not, complete the stage. If you are finished, keep the muzzle in a safe direction downrange, remove the magazine and open the action to remove any chambered round. Show the SO the empty chamber.

2. If Clear, Slide Forward

After the chamber has been inspected and found clear, close the slide only as directed. Revolvers use "Close Cylinder"; PCCs use the applicable chamber-flag and bolt command.

3. Pull the Trigger

For semiautomatic pistols only: on the SO's command, point the firearm in a safe direction and pull the trigger to verify it is clear. This is a separate command.

4. Holster

On command, carefully and slowly reholster your pistol. Keep your finger outside the trigger guard and watch for clothing or other obstructions.

5. Range is Clear

This ends the course of fire and allows scoring and resetting to begin. Wait for this command and staff direction before anyone moves downrange.

If you hear "Stop": Stop all movement immediately, keep your finger visibly outside the trigger guard, and await the SO's instructions.

Reference: 2026.2 IDPA Rulebook, Section 2.12. Follow the SO and stage briefing.

Ready for your first match

Take the next step with FT-IDPA

Understand your results

Your stage result combines elapsed time, target scoring, and any penalties. Lower totals are better. For your first match, focus on safe completion and understanding the process before worrying about placement.

Leave with a reason to come back

Think about what went well, what felt unfamiliar, and what you want to improve. Write down your questions and any equipment issues. Then choose your next match and keep the momentum going.

Questions or help getting started

Call or email a FT-IDPA Shooting Mentor for more information about getting started in competitive shooting.

Official rules and match information

Find clubs and events at IDPA.com. Current rules and equipment documents: idpa.com/idpa-match-rules/. This introduction complements the official rules and your host club's instructions. Rule reference: 2026.2 IDPA Rulebook, safety and range commands, Sections 2.10 and 2.12.

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READY TO GET STARTED? CLICK HERE

Your first-match notes

Match date / club / briefing time / questions for your Safety Officer

YOUR FIRST MATCH
IS JUST THE BEGINNING.

Learn safely. Build confidence. Find your community.

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A beginner-friendly guide by Mel Craig