



Fitness training for the tactical operator: Sorting through the options

By Brian L. Springer

The amount of fitness information available to the tactical operator is staggering. In the pre-Internet age, one could seek strength and conditioning advice from numerous workout books, muscle and fitness magazines and buddies at the gym. These days, the database on strength and endurance training continues to grow; an Internet search for “law enforcement fitness” or “SWAT fitness training” leads to links ranging from basic fitness advice to training programs using specialized equipment. Consistency is lacking, information remains contradictory and results often depend on the individual user.

Various approaches to fitness and training are touted in this and other journals, with fairly solid rationale given for each. While not espousing any single approach to fitness or training, the goal of this article is to provide an overview of the most common fitness training methods seen within the tactical community. What becomes clear is that given a solid foundation of general fitness, the operator can benefit from many of the training options available.

Traditional approach

The health-related components of fitness are the parameters assessed during many departmental fitness batteries, and still serve as the foundation for any fitness program. A basic primer on physical fitness, along with tips on getting fit, can be found at the Center for Disease Control’s “Physical Activity for Everyone” Web site¹. Development and maintenance of physical fitness can best be achieved through a regular exercise program that includes 30 to 60 minutes of moderate to vigorous physical activity (running, cycling, swimming) most days of the week. This is supplemented with resistance training (free weights, machines, body weight) two to three times a week. A diet based on the U.S. Department of Agriculture food pyramid² provides the necessary muscle fuel and building blocks.

Pros: The traditional approach has withstood the test of time. Dr. Kenneth Cooper first assigned a fitness-point system to various aerobic activities in the 1960s, and at the same time introduced his 1.5 mile and 12-minute fitness run assessments. The traditional approach is flexible enough to fit into most work schedules, allows for a tremendous variety in aerobic conditioning and is highly adaptable to variables such as age and injury.

Cons: Arguably, the role of the tactical operator requires a degree of training beyond that of the patrol officer or detective. The ability to run distance may not translate into the ability to chase down a fleeing suspect, and the ability to

A combination of traditional and functional training provide a solid fitness foundation and supplement (but do not replace) task-specific practice of essential skills such as officer rescue.



Functional Training



Task-specific Training

do push-ups may not translate into the explosive strength needed in a ground tussle.

Functional training

In some circles it is believed that basic fitness training is insufficient preparation for the tactical environment. Tactical operations and warfighting place extreme demands on the body, and a basic running and weight training regimen may not be a sufficient challenge. Functional training programs (for example, CrossFit) are designed to achieve peak fitness through a wide variety of relatively short, intense bouts of exercise. The movements are often based on Olympic-style weightlifting that emphasizes use of the entire body, and the workout routine changes on a daily basis to bring continuous challenge and to prevent boredom and repetitive injury. Some functional programs focus almost exclusively on a particular style of exercise (such as kettlebells).

Pros: Functional training helps develop the skill-related components of fitness: coordination, agility, power, balance, speed, accuracy and reaction time. A variety of available workouts helps prevent boredom and burnout. Functional training may be used alone or integrated into a basic fitness program.

Cons: While functional training has maintained a strong presence as an “alternative” method of training for over a decade, it has yet to withstand the test of time. There is not yet a sizeable study population that has kept up this type of high intensity training from decade to decade into old age. There are arguments that the extreme variability of training technique, while avoiding overuse injury, may leave participants more susceptible to acute injury. Anecdotally, the high intensity of functional training workouts may lead even highly fit individuals to the development of rhabdomyolysis, a potentially life-threatening condition resulting from extensive damage to muscle tissue.

Task-specific training

Task-specific training entails performance of specific operator tasks while in full gear, such as runs, low crawls, stair and fence climbs and buddy drags. Tactical long riflemen may be asked to run up to several hundred yards in gear, get into position and fire an aimed shot. This type of train-

What is physical fitness?

Physical fitness is a state of physical vigor in one’s daily tasks, leisure pursuits and in emergency situations. It is composed of five health-related components:



Cardiorespiratory fitness is the ability to perform endurance tasks such as running, which is necessary in sustained pursuits or in prolonged physical conflict.



Body composition refers to the relative amounts of muscle, bone and fat in the body. Muscle and fat mass are reflective of one’s conditioning state, and will vary based on the relative amount of strength and endurance built into one’s fitness program. Endurance runners tend to have very little body fat, while a power lifter may have more fat but also more muscle bulk.



Absolute strength is a muscle’s ability to generate maximal force, necessary for tasks such as pushing, pulling and crawling. Exercises that reflect this include maximal bench presses, dead lifts and squats.



Dynamic strength is a muscle’s ability to generate repetitive force, necessary for sustained pushing, pulling, crawling or conflict. Exercises that replicate dynamic strength include push-ups and sit-ups.



Flexibility is being able to move a joint or joints through a full range of motion. This is necessary for an operator to be able to maintain muscular control through tasks that may place the body through tremendous variability of motion.

Photos courtesy of SWAT Roundup International.

ing physically and mentally prepares the tactical operator to perform essential tasks by actually doing them, often under time constraints. Task-specific scenarios are most often used for operational fitness testing of operators, but remain a highly specific and effective method of training.

Pros: Well-thought-out task-specific exercises bring a degree of realism and intensity to training not often found during traditional or even functional fitness. In uniform and faced with completion of a mission-specific objective, most operators will feel compelled to push themselves to their limits.

Cons: Task-specific training requires appropriate times, locations and equipment. Most officers will not have the ability to do much task-specific training at home or at a gym. Often, it is limited to sessions performed on training days.

Is there a “best” approach?

Arguing about the best form of activity is dubious, considering most law enforcement

personnel are not meeting appropriate levels of physical activity of any type. Most important is regularly engaging in some form of physical activity throughout one’s career, as well as lifetime. Some form of regular stretching should also be integrated into any program.

Finding time to train is often less challenging for the full-time SWAT officer, who may be given personal time to exercise, and may regularly participate in group physical training. Patrol officers or detectives who also work SWAT are challenged by the very nature of their jobs. Sitting in a cruiser or at a desk provides little opportunity for physical activity, and the officer must remain disciplined and find time to exercise. This may entail riding a stationary bicycle in one’s basement after a shift. While maybe not task-specific, it helps provide a foundation of cardiorespiratory fitness. Home workouts need not be boring, either. With access to a few free weights or resistance bands, the creative operator can devise an intensive and challenging circuit course or basic functional workout.

More intensive functional training requires a small outlay for equipment. Power lifting and gymnastic-based movements may require a spotter, and can lead to injury when performed improperly. These training regimens are best reserved for those who already have a solid foundation of physical fitness, and should only be performed under experienced supervision.

Task-specific fitness training should be integrated into a SWAT team’s training regimen. Team leaders and departmental fitness specialists should ensure operators have time to perform intensive physical tasks while in duty gear. Consideration should be given to adding a task-specific fitness battery to the team on a routine basis, along with the standard fitness assessment.

With a little bit of creativity and some time management, the tactical athlete can formulate an effective fitness training program. The emphasis should be on a combination of cardiorespiratory conditioning and absolute and dynamic strength. The fit operator can integrate functional training, and all teams should be provided the opportunity for task-specific training. With the choices available, the workout program need not stay fixed for a prolonged period of time. Variety provides new and ongoing challenges to prepare the body for the ever-changing demands of the tactical environment. ◀◀

About the Author



Dr. Springer is an Assistant Professor of Emergency Medicine and serves as a SWAT physician for the FBI. He completed fellowship training in sports medicine and is active in both the tactical medicine and sports medicine communities.

Endnotes

1. www.cdc.gov/nccdphp/dnpa/physical/everyone.htm
2. www.mypyramid.gov

References

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