

Commentary

# DEFENSIVE TACTICS: THE NECESSITY OF ONGOING TRAINING

By Cyndi Williams



**T**he entertainment technology field has made staggering advances over the past decade. Gaming systems, simulators, tablets and cell phones are all devices that offer users violent and combative scenarios to tackle from the safety of a comfortable chair. In fact, these electronic games, for many, present the only violence that a teen or young adult encounters in his or her life. Defensive tactics instructors report seeing an increasing number of academy students who have never been punched nor thrown a punch. With the exception of those with prior military experience, many of these individuals

have not encountered many challenging physical situations. They may have played sports in school, but fistfights were not a part of their daily lives. These students entering the police

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academy often have a higher form of education with presumed critical thinking skills — life skills are another matter altogether.

Teaching practical survival skills to someone with very little life experience can prove to be a challenge. Traditionally, law enforcement agencies have taught officers how to respond to an attack defensively rather than offensively. However, an offensive approach to a perceived assault decreases an officer's chance of getting injured. For that percentage of police officers whose memory banks lack solutions for dealing with life-threatening situations, their ability

to quickly decipher between offensive and defensive solutions is as critical as knowing which techniques to use and to what extent. Veteran officers have gained this knowledge through years of experience and refresher training.

There is a belief among police academy graduates that the defensive tactics skills learned in the academy are sufficient to keep them safe throughout their law enforcement careers. As a physical skills practitioner and a defensive tactics instructor, I can attest that such a belief is an illusion based upon the fact that the student/officer “passed” the training class. Most people can be taught a skill well enough to pass an assessment, but few can maintain proficiency without continual or advanced training. Skills are perishable, particularly those skills police officers depend on for their survival. Training and practical experience are stepping stones towards achieving proficiency, a foundation that every officer should have prior to finding themselves in an active situation with a suspect.

Frequently, a short time after “passing” the academy’s defensive tactics skills assessment, officers forget much of what they have learned in the academy setting. Most agencies provide some refresher training on defensive tactics, but the amount of training time varies from agency to agency and from state

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to state. Agencies may have policies mandating defensive tactics training, but not necessarily outlining how many hours should be spent on the skills and what level of proficiency should be achieved. In Florida, for instance, state guidelines do not mandate an agency provide any defensive tactics training to its officers.

Although important for their own safety, a good number of officers (both experienced and inexperienced alike) do not seek additional physical skills training outside their agency. They leave it up to chance that they will remember a defensive tactics skill critical to defending themselves from a surprise attack, although they may have not trained enough in that skill to use it effectively, let alone under stress. Those officers who dislike training in defensive tactics argue that they can resort to a tool on their utility belt if necessary. What those officers fail to recognize is that their tools may not be of help to them if, like defensive tactics, they haven’t trained in using them for perhaps a year or more. Therefore, I recommend officers seek training outside of their agency to learn offensive skills and add to their memory bank of defensive skills. I have found the more physical skills training the officer has, the safer and more confident the officer becomes, thereby increasing the chances for a winning encounter.

So how does today’s inexperienced officer with minimal, underdeveloped defensive tactics training overcome a real situation during an encounter? Assuming the utility belt is out of play and the encounter is to be handled defensively, part of the answer lies in physical skills training inside and outside of work, such as at a martial arts gym. An officer’s skillset diminishes without ongoing training and exponentially plummets when adding stress. To combat this, I advocate that agencies

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mandate at least bi-annual defensive tactics training. Due to agency cost/time restrictions, I also encourage officers to seek outside physical skills training.

This concern is not new and is shared among many of my fellow defensive tactics instructors. I recently attended an instructor level class where Sgt. Boyd Williams, a senior physical skills and ground combatives instructor, stated, “Instructors need to realize that when an officer lacks physical skills experience or has minimal training, they do not have a solid foundation to grasp the additional defensive tactics skills provided. If instructors present to them simple techniques that the officer trains repeatedly, it’s easier for the officer to retain and repeat those skills under stress.”

Some agencies choose to limit exposure to physical skills training to minimize the risk of injury, while some officers do so because of the lack of interest or confidence. So how can agencies minimize the risk of injury while providing a training environment that not only teaches the officers survival skills, but also makes training enjoyable

for them? Through my experience as a previous training unit supervisor and as a private instructor, student feedback and practical application have indicated that training sessions beginning with repetition of techniques and ending with force-on-force scenario-based applications are the most enjoyable, thus increasing the effectiveness and retention of training.

The repetitive practice of techniques builds the officer's confidence, which is subsequently reinforced when the officer successfully applies the techniques during scenario-based training that result in a winning situation for the officer. It is important for instructors to recognize that if an officer makes a mistake during the application of a technique, the mistake should immediately be corrected and the officer put through another scenario that results in correct application of the physical skills techniques. The scenario should conclude with a positive outcome.

Injuries will always be possible during active training methods, including scenario-based training. An agency can take a proactive approach to minimizing officer injury by providing a wellness program to its officers and ensuring physical skills instructors have some knowledge in health and wellness

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so as to incorporate a wellness routine prior the application of techniques.

Ultimately, regardless of generational culture, experience or lack thereof, officers are responsible for their commitment level during agency defensive tactics training and for their personal commitment to seeking outside physical skills training. The newer generation of rookies may not understand the concept of personal responsibility through self-preparedness. It is imperative for agency leaders to foster a culture of continual and effective learning, especially in high-liability topics such as physical skills training. ■

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#### ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Sgt. Cyndi Williams works for a police department in central Florida, where she has spent 10 out of her 14 years in law enforcement. In her career, she has been a SWAT member at two agencies, totaling 10 years of SWAT service. She is a certified personal trainer and sports nutritionist through the International Fitness Association. She is a LouKa Tactical instructor where she specializes in ground combatives. Sgt. Williams holds a bachelor's degree in criminal justice and is currently working on her master's degree.