

LAW ENFORCEMENT FITNESS: Survival of the Fittest

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Abstract

This paper was prepared in an effort to assist law enforcement personnel with fitness. The paper will focus on physical and emotional fitness. Today's law enforcement officers are expected to deal with increasingly difficult crimes, as well as, the addition of mandatory technology advancements in the field of criminology, while attempting to complete an extremely dangerous occupation. Accompanied with working secondary jobs due to low salary issues while attempting to provide for their families, officers could potentially place fitness on the backburner. This paper will provide officers who are on tight schedules with possible avenues of maintaining physical and emotional fitness. These avenues provided by examples of exercise techniques found in literature and some personally proven techniques of the author. The paper will provide ways of dealing with on the job stress. Ultimately, these examples will aid officers not only with physical and emotional well-being but will allow them to appear as professionals to the community they serve. This combination of physical and emotional fitness accompanied with the appearance of professionalism will hopefully make their jobs less difficult, safer and allow them to have a more productive career.

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Life-Saving Fitness

On September 14, 2016, at approximately 7:00 AM, Arkansas State Police Cpl. Trenton Behnke was patrolling rush hour traffic along U.S. Interstate 40 between Lonoke and North Little Rock, AR. Cpl. Behnke had just made a traffic stop on a vehicle and was positioned behind the traffic offender along the northbound shoulder of the congested interstate. While standing alongside the citizen's vehicle tending to police business, Behnke heard the crunching of metal and turned to see a vehicle coming at him. Next, he recalled being struck by the oncoming vehicle and flying approximately seventy feet in the air into a wooded section. The trooper gathered himself so that he could check on the occupants of the vehicle crash that had just occurred in his presence. Once he assessed the situation and checked on the potential injuries of the involved parties, he called for additional officers to work the crash. The trooper was transported to the hospital where he learned he had only suffered a slightly fractured tibia that would simply require physical therapy. Hospital doctors attributed the excellent physical condition as the primary source of prevention of further injury. While speaking with Cpl. Behnke, he attributed his lack of injury in the accident to his involvement in Crossfit. (This new fitness trend will be discussed later in this paper.) Behnke said, *"I feel that the tough regiment that Crossfit workouts put on my body prepared me for being hit by a vehicle."*

This is just one example of the dangers law enforcement officers face every day. Once the crash investigation was complete, officers were able to determine that a teenage drivers' attention was distracted due to texting and driving. Therefore, the driver did not see the slowing, congested traffic and struck a moving car, shoving the car into a moving pickup. That pickup

began to spin and strike the vehicle that Trooper Behnke was standing next to, striking him and catapulting him through the air. Obviously, other factors could have attributed to the results of this incident such as; a higher power, training and experience or just luck. But, after talking with Behnke, I learned that he has been an officer for over twenty years and still wears the same duty belt that he was issued in 1997 (same waist size). Accompanied with the fact that he was a college athlete that still exercises four to six times a week, we shouldn't rule out the importance of physical fitness in his incident. Luckily, Trooper Behnke did not suffer from any adverse emotional issues from the crash but a reasonable person could understand how a person could have. As we dig deeper into this paper, we will refer back to Trooper Behnkes experience, as well as, discuss ways to advocate and educate the reader about physical and emotional fitness in the lives of law enforcement officers.

Achieving Physical Fitness

It would be difficult to put a starting point on where, when and how physical fitness began. However, we have learned that physical fitness was paramount during pre-historic times when it was necessary to be in top physical condition to carry out the daily duties of hunting food for survival. If pre-historic humans weren't in good physical condition, then they couldn't survive. In relation to the law enforcement community, the standards are quite similar in the aspect that if an officer is in bad physical condition he or she may not survive an encounter with a criminal.

With that said, it is important to define fitness. In *Fit for Duty*, a book geared toward improving law enforcement officers' level of fitness, the authors define physical fitness as, “*the ability to*

perform physical activities, such as job tasks, with enough reserve for emergency situations and to enjoy recreational pursuits.” (Hoffman, Collingwood, 1995, p. 3). The physical fitness aspect of this paper will focus on three important components of physical fitness: flexibility, muscular strength and endurance, and cardiovascular endurance. These components discussed by providing quotes from books, as well as, my personal experiences and preferences.

Flexibility. Depending on who or what institution you ask will decide on the best way to achieve flexibility. Many athletic enthusiasts and coaches will start a workout with stretching. I have learned over many years of exercise that stretching a “cold muscle” is not possible. A person must warm the muscle up before stretching because the muscle fibers are more flexible at that point. Trying to stretch a “cold muscle” is counter-productive. Therefore, I recommend doing five to ten minutes of some type of body weight exercise to get the muscles warmed up before stretching. Some of the various types of body weight exercises are; pull-ups, pushups, sit-ups and dips. Also, simply walking or riding a stationary bike would be sufficient to warm up the muscles before moving on to stretching. In *Stretching*, the author states, *“There has been some controversy in recent years about stretching before you warm up. If you are going to stretch, will you get injured if you stretch without specifically warming up first? No- if you stretch comfortably and not strenuously. However, I suggest that you do several minutes of general movement (walking and swinging arms, etc.) to warm the muscles and related soft tissue before you stretch. This will get the blood moving.”*(Anderson, 2010, p. 14). Once the workout or exercise is complete, the officer should stretch again to avoid soreness and stiffness. Stretching is one way to achieve flexibility by lengthening the muscle and soft tissue. Due to the large number of stretches available, I would suggest the officer obtain a book like *Stretching*, which covers many stretching techniques or do online research to build a stretching regimen.

Once you have become familiar with ways to stretch and ultimately choose a stretching regimen, start at the head and work your way down to the feet to ensure all muscles stretched equally. The stretch needs to be slow and steady, not moving. This type of stretching referred to as *static stretching* in which a person holds a stretch with no movement. The officer should listen to his body and not stretch to the point of pain causing damage to the muscle and/or soft tissue. A form of static stretching that we will discuss next is Yoga.

What is Yoga? In *The Yoga Handbook*, the author states, “*Yoga is a scientific system that combines yoga postures, relaxation, breathing, and meditation techniques with psychological, moral, and ethical principles.*” (Finney, 2004, p. 15). This type of static stretching originated in India and has been around for many years. As you can see from the authors’ definition of yoga, stretching is not one of the primary objectives of the system. However, yoga enthusiasts have learned the postures, relaxation and breathing has an effect on a persons’ flexibility.

A fellow officer that was suffering from severe back issues introduced me to yoga after injuring his back, which caused him to take an extended sick leave from work. He found the only relief he could get was by lying on his back in the floor. After several days of lying in the floor, he decided to try yoga. Often, when yoga is mentioned, officers become skeptical or reluctant because of the unorthodox, “girlie” stigma that has been attached to the system. The injured officer was no different but was willing to try anything due to the severity of his injuries. While lying on his back in the living room floor, he saw an infomercial for DDP Yoga (<https://ddpyoga.com/>). DDP Yoga developed by WWE professional wrestler, Diamond Dallas Page to assist older athletes who had injuries after participating in high-impact sports. The fellow officer had been physically active all of his life, was an active body builder and a shield

operator for the Jonesboro Police Department's tactical unit. He purchased a DDP Yoga DVD and began doing the yoga exercises on his own. After a short time, he began noticing great results. Ultimately, he medically retired from law enforcement but credited yoga for his ability to regain flexibility, range of motion and a somewhat normal lifestyle. Now days, more and more health professionals are recognizing that police officers are prone to back problems because of, among other factors, the extreme weight and pressure that duty belts place on their waist, lower back and hips. *Fit for Duty* cites, "Americans have an 8-in-10 chance of experiencing back pain some time in their adult lives." (Hoffman, Collingwood, 1995, p. 6). In the event an officer is one that suffers from lower back issues, the previously mentioned systems are viable ways to increase their flexibility, decrease pain and possibly lengthening their career.

Muscular Strength and Endurance. Numerous ways of strength training exist ranging from your average weight lifting regimen that many individuals experienced in high school sports. To intense workouts such as Crossfit that was previously discussed in Trooper Behnkes' scenario. Each individual should explore these exercise systems and figure out which best suits their life style.

A beginner weight lifting regimen that some people choose is "circuit training." Circuit training is simply working out their entire muscular system utilizing a combination of free weights, bar weights and cable machine systems in about sixty to ninety minutes. This type of training earned its name because the workout is in a "circuit" moving from one machine to the next.

Another way of completing a weight lifting regimen would be to focus on a certain segment of the human body each day. For instance, on Monday an athlete would exercise his arms. The individual would focus on strengthening all muscle groups of the arms on that day.

On Tuesday, the athlete would exercise his legs and so on and so forth until Friday arrived and he had completed an entire body workout.

I, myself adopted my own personal approach to strength training by combining the previously mentioned regimens with a “taste” of Crossfit mixed in. I attempted Crossfit workouts and found them very productive but many of the exercises aggravated my pre-existing injuries. Thankfully, my agency and normal job duties allowed me to go to a gym on my lunch break but a normal lunch break was only one hour in length. Normally not enough time to do traditional strength training and/or cardiovascular workouts. Therefore, I focused solely on one muscle group each day, completing five weight resistance exercise sets in the traditional circuit style. Each exercise set was with moderate weight and was conducted in repetitions of 15- 20. The key to my workout was the “rest time” in between sets. Normally, average “gym-goer” will rest for a few minutes in between sets. With my workouts, there is very little rest in between the sets and is where the Crossfit training comes into play. Instead of resting in between sets, I would complete my muscle resistance exercise and instantly drop to the floor and do a sixty-second “plank.” A “plank” is where an athlete’s body is parallel to the ground with only his forearms and toes touching the ground. Once the plank was completed, I would do the second set of 15- 20 repetitions and so on and so forth until all three sets were completed. At that point, I would move to the next exercise and repeat the same prescribed method until all five exercises were complete. Although I wasn’t actually resting in between sets, that’s still what I would call it and would change up the “rest” action with each exercise change. Ultimately, I found that I could complete in about forty-five minutes what it would normally take me to complete in sixty to ninety minutes. This workout compressed the exercises in a way that helped me achieve an aerobic and muscle endurance aspect, as well. This type of workout might be attractive to an

officer that is pressed for time but really wants to improve his physical fitness. In SWAT FITNESS, a book geared toward fitness for SWAT officers, the authors state, “*The main purpose of strength training is to reduce your risk of injury. If you increase the strength of your muscles, connective tissues, and bones to tolerate more stress, you will reduce the likelihood of incurring an injury.*” (Brzycki, Meyers, 2003, p. 69). Although the books geared toward SWAT, the main strength training purpose would be important for all officers. If officers are lacking in strength training, they might not survive a confrontation with a determined aggressor in an arrest situation or not be able to intervene in a situation to rescue a citizen the officers sworn to protect.

Cardiovascular Endurance. A third important point in physical fitness is cardiovascular endurance. This point can be achieved by various methods such as; walking, running, bicycling or rowing. In most instances, foot pursuits are short-lived and do not require the officer to run for an extended period. However, the officers’ endurance might come into question once they have captured the fleeing suspect. In the past, I have heard officers say, “I caught him but once I did, all I could do was lay on him.” That should serve as an alert to the officer that he might need to work on his or her endurance levels. In To Protect and Serve, a book focused on “fixing” America’s police, the author states that in empty-hand combat situations, he believes, “*the most critical ‘tool’ at the disposal of a police officer is his or her body- and the mind that goes with it.*”(Stamper, 2016, p. 117). With that said, this paper will move forward into the mental or emotional aspect of fitness.

Achieving Emotional Fitness

In the beginning, most officers are eager to start their noble journey as servant helpers, protectors, and enforcers of the law of the land. Along the way, officers will face difficult tasks that will inevitably change their lives forever. How they respond and cope with these events could determine the outcome of their careers and life at home.

The new recruit, whether he has completed the police academy or not, become involved in first experiences, numerous unknowns, and sometimes even utter chaos. The rookie officer will have to react to these events having to trust on their training officers, supervisors and backup officers and what little training they have received in the short time they have been an officer. In the book, *Emotional Survival for Law Enforcement*, a book prepared as an emotional guide for officers and their families, the author tells about this “on the job training” by stating, “*The older officers have paid their dues and are in a position to assist the young officer in obtaining full citizen membership in the police culture.*”(Gilmartin, 2002, p.2) The author later states, “*From the predecessors, the next generation of officers learns how to handle the streets, but not necessarily how to handle their lives as officers.*”(Gilmartin, p.2-3) Based upon my experiences as a training officer, my job was to teach the new recruit how to do the job, not how to deal with the stress that goes along with the job. In the book, *Law Enforcement Management*, the author describes this event as “*Observations of Their Supervisors. In most departments, everyone starts out as a line police officer and often spends years in that position before they are promoted. During that time, they are constantly watching and evaluating the actions and performance of their supervisors in routine matters, as well as during critical police incidents. From those observations, they draw their own conclusions, and their collective experiences over the years*

help shape their supervisory personality for the future.”(Carpenter, Fulton, 2015, p. 8). It is important that as experienced officers we set a good example and be a positive role model for the new recruit and the authors affirm that by stating, “...*your people look to you for guidance, and as a source of power. They also will tend to emulate your attitudes, your demeanor, and even your appearance- good or bad!*” (p. 22). As mentioned, the rookie officer receives training on how to do the job but there is very little focus on emotional/stress guidance available to new officers in most agencies.

Trust and Officer Safety

If you want to see the definition of “uncomfortable” first hand, go with a group of officers to a meal and observe the mannerisms of the unlucky officer that is the last to enter the restaurant. That officer will exhibit signs of being uncomfortable because he had to sit with his back to the door. As the early arriving officers entered the restaurant, they filtered their way to the back wall or corner like ducks flying in v-formation to avoid the dreaded thought of having to sit with their backs to the door. To most humans, this behavior seems odd. However, to police officers, this is second nature. From the moment you become a police officer, officers are taught officer safety in every aspect of the job. While in the police academy, every course of study has a segment relating to the course that pertains to officer safety. Officers learn to position themselves in every location so they don’t “give up their back.” “Giving up your back” refers to never turning your back on anyone in the event on of the citizens you tend to help, intends to harm you. Instructors teach early in training that as an officer your main goals are to maintain peace, enforce laws and go home at the end of your shift. The “officer safety” mindset is necessary for the officer to survive in a world full of turmoil that we intend to fight and make tranquil. In this tumultuous world, exists a segment of the community that hates what we

represent and intend on doing harm to us. This segment of the community wants anarchy in this world so they can do as they please and do not care whom they harm along the way. In *Cop Under Fire*, Sheriff David Clark, Jr. tells a story of when he was being interviewed by a CNN reporter about the newly developed group referred to as Black Lives Matter. The Black Lives Matter movement believes that police officers are intentionally targeting black males. The reporter asked the Sheriff what he thought about the movements' message of "peace and coming together in the country" and what his message would be. Clarke responded, "*My message has been clear from day one, two years ago. This anticop sentiment from this hateful ideology called BLM has fueled this rage against the American police officer. I predicted this two years ago.*"(Clark, 2017, p. 104). Whether you believe Sheriff Clarke or BLM is irrelevant to the point I am making. The point I am making and is the title of Clarke's book, *Cop Under Fire*. Clarke continues by giving recent accounts where officers are targeted and killed. This is just one example of why the "officer safety" mindset is so important to officers. However important that mindset is, the trick is being able to manage that mindset so that it doesn't affect your home life and emotional fitness.

In *Emotional Survival for Law Enforcement*, the author states that over time law enforcement officers begin to become cynical because of all of the negativity that surrounds them. The author states, "*Law enforcement personnel, like all other human beings, form their worldviews and predictions about life from the situations and events they see every day.*"(Gilmartin, 2002, p. 23). Also, "*This type of cynical outlook projects negativity into activities and social gatherings and can be extremely difficult on non-police friends and members of the officer's family. The officer can be viewed as negative, distrusting, hard, and unforgiving.*" (Gilmartin, p. 25). I, having been a police officer for over twenty years can attest

to these attributes because of incidents that have occurred in my life. Ask any officer that has been in law enforcement for an extended period of time and they will tell you that you constantly have to keep your guard up because you never know when you will run into someone that you've had to deal with in a law enforcement capacity. Gilmartin refers to this emotional state as a *"hypervigilance biological rollercoaster"* and states, *"This two-phase effect of hypervigilance on the life of a law enforcement officer can create challenges to maintaining a balanced personal life. If the challenges are not successfully met or the Hypervigilance Biological Rollercoaster is not understood, relationships fail, inappropriate behavior increases, and lives can be irreparably broken. Officers who do not understand the up-and-down nature of the rollercoaster only know that they feel more "normal" at work, more "alive" at work. They know that when they walk through the doors to their homes and personal lives, they can feel like zombies who don't talk and don't want to do anything- unfortunately, the families don't know why."*(Gilmartin, p. 48).

The author also refers to a phenomenon he calls "the magic chair."(Gilmartin p. 51) In "the magic chair," the officer comes home from work after being in this state of hypervigilance and resorts to sitting in "the magic chair" flipping through the channels on his or her television, computer or reading. In this state, the officer is avoiding conversation with any other human being in the residence. The officer enters into an almost vegetative state at the bottom of the hypervigilance rollercoaster. After reading this section, I recognized that this had occurred at my house. My wife usually refers to it as, *"How much football can one person watch? It's the same game every time."* and *"Let me guess, you've used up all your words?"* In no way am I disputing the authors' teachings but I think it would be safe to say that "the magic chair" would fit in the lives of bankers, lawyers, doctors, etc... However, this paper pertains to law enforcement officers and their emotional fitness. This brings to mind what a highly respected supervisor once

told me, *“Bringing a problem to me without a way to fix it is counterproductive.”* With that being said, the author does provide an anecdotal fix to a second phase caused by hypervigilance he refers to as the *“I usta syndrome.”* (Gilmartin p. 67). In the *“I usta syndrome,”* officers will discuss with one another hobbies and recreational activities they the used to do. I have heard this referred to before as *“being married to their jobs.”* The author states, *“The “I usta” syndrome is the generalized effect of the hypervigilance rollercoaster on the personal interests and nonpolice behaviors of the officer. All the activities that defined the complete man or woman before he or she became a police officer can be lost. If these other parts of life are lost, a new person emerges, many times a new person without the balancing strengths of multiple dimensions, activities, or roles in life to draw upon for perspective and understanding. Without this balance, the short-term day-to-day effects of the hypervigilance rollercoaster begin to turn into long-term, more damaging losses.”*(Gilmartin, p. 70).

In my opinion, the fix is simple but may be difficult to complete because it is much easier to sit down in *“the magic chair”* and will take the officer recognizing he has an emotional problem. Please be advised the intent of this report is not to keep an officer from sitting down in his favorite recliner, relaxing and watch his favorite football team. This book provides a theory into how easy it would be for an officer to detach from his life off-duty and how to recognize and avoid that from happening to him. Another remedy for the recovering *“rollercoaster officer”* cited by the author takes the reader back to the first section of this report... Physical Fitness. Gilmartin states that a way for the officer to recover would be with physical intervention and suggests, *“approximately thirty to forty minutes of aerobic activity, four to five times per week, appears to be adequate in increasing an officer’s off-duty activity levels.”* (Gilmartin, p. 125).

Numerous self-help or wellness books exist such as; *The Quest for Wellness*, a book that provides a practical and personal wellness plan for optimum health in your body, mind, emotions and spirit. The author, Mark Sherwood is a Naturopathic Doctor that is a twenty-four year retired veteran of the Tulsa Police Department. In this book, he provides wellness motivation that he has developed over the years for law enforcement professionals. In chapter two of his book, Dr. Sherwood defines wellness as being, “*Spiritually connected to God and to other people. It is focused on a relationship that involves a person’s inner-most being.*”(Sherwood, 2015, p. 25).

While on the subject of God, we should point out where law enforcement is mentioned in the *Holy Bible*. In the book of Romans, chapter 13, verse 4 it reads, “*For government is God’s servant to you for good. But if you do wrong, be afraid, because it does not carry the sword for no reason. For government is God’s servant, an avenger that brings wrath on the one who does wrong.*” Many officers believe they are working as servants of God and this scripture backs up their claims. According to *Pew Research Center*, a research group focused on religion and public life, “*70.6% of Americans are Christians.*” Therefore, it would be reasonable to assume that a majority of American police officers are Christians or have Christian morals and beliefs.

When it comes to dealing with stress, it is important to believe in a higher power no matter what form you believe in. I, myself believe in God and his son Jesus Christ. The faith I have that he will give me the strength to pull through any problems I face and the ability to deal with the problems as they arise has helped me through some tough issues in my life. God has provided a great resource to the agency that I work in the form of Chaplains. These “*religious sheepdogs*” are full-time Pastors that are sworn reserve officers and respond in a minutes notice to help us with the difficult chores of police work such as death notifications. The Chaplains in

our department are there for our officers, as well, in times of grief and heartache. The “*religious sheepdog*” reference comes from the teachings and writings of Lt. Col. Dave Grossman. In these teachings, Grossman discusses the reasoning behind combat, killing and having a warrior mindset. In an article written by Lt. Col. Grossman, *On Sheep, Wolves and Sheepdogs*, he quotes a retired Vietnam Veteran Colonel as referring to the general public as sheep. The “sheep” are normal, peaceful, productive citizens who are hunted by the “wolves.” The “wolves” are the criminals of the world that do evil things. Then there are “*sheepdogs*” that stand guard over the flock and keep the wolves at bay. Police officers are “*sheepdogs*” and we have “*religious sheepdogs*” that stand among us.

In *Wokini*, a book that focuses on a Native American view on nature and an individual's personal journey to happiness, the author states the secret to achieving happiness is, “*If you think happy thoughts, you will be happy because you convince your mind that you feel good. To be happy, meditate quietly three times a day. Relax so you communicate with your subconscious mind.*”(Mills, 1990, p. 57).

This would be similar to an earlier mentioned stretching technique of Yoga, which we discussed during the physical fitness aspect of this paper. If you review the definition of Yoga you will see that it consists of, “*relaxation, breathing, and meditation techniques with psychological benefits.*”(Finney, 2004, p. 15). Yoga is a non-religious system that originated in India and has proven to “*bring health to the body, increased vitality and calmness to the mind, and a greater sense of peace and harmony.*”(p. 16).

Conclusion and Future Study

In conclusion, I have provided information that supports the importance of physical and mental fitness in the lives of law enforcement officers. In *Cop Under Fire*, Sheriff Clarke states, “*Today, we are more professional, more educated, and better trained than in any time in our history.*” (p. 236). With that said, there still lacks state mandated requirements for the physical fitness of officers. Therefore, the incorporation of physical fitness into an officers’ life is up to him or her. In my opinion, boredom is a big killer among officers. Therefore, don’t get stuck in a normal workout. You need to change your workout occasionally so to prevent boredom. This will also keep your body adapting to the physical change you are making. Thusly, you will see changes in your physique if you have reached an apex and aren’t seeing any more gains. In the book, *Social Intelligence Skills for Law Enforcement Supervisors/Managers*, the author states, “*When you appear strong and confident, people will believe that you are strong and confident.*” (Sampson, 2006, p. 12). Due to the fact law enforcement officers are under such extreme scrutiny, we should strive for an excellent first impression. As far as emotional fitness is concerned, we all have stress, problems, and worries but we must find a way to overcome those issues. It is a fact, that suicide is one of the main reasons for death among law enforcement officers. As we continue to keep watch over the sheep, be sure to keep an eye on your fellow sheepdogs.

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