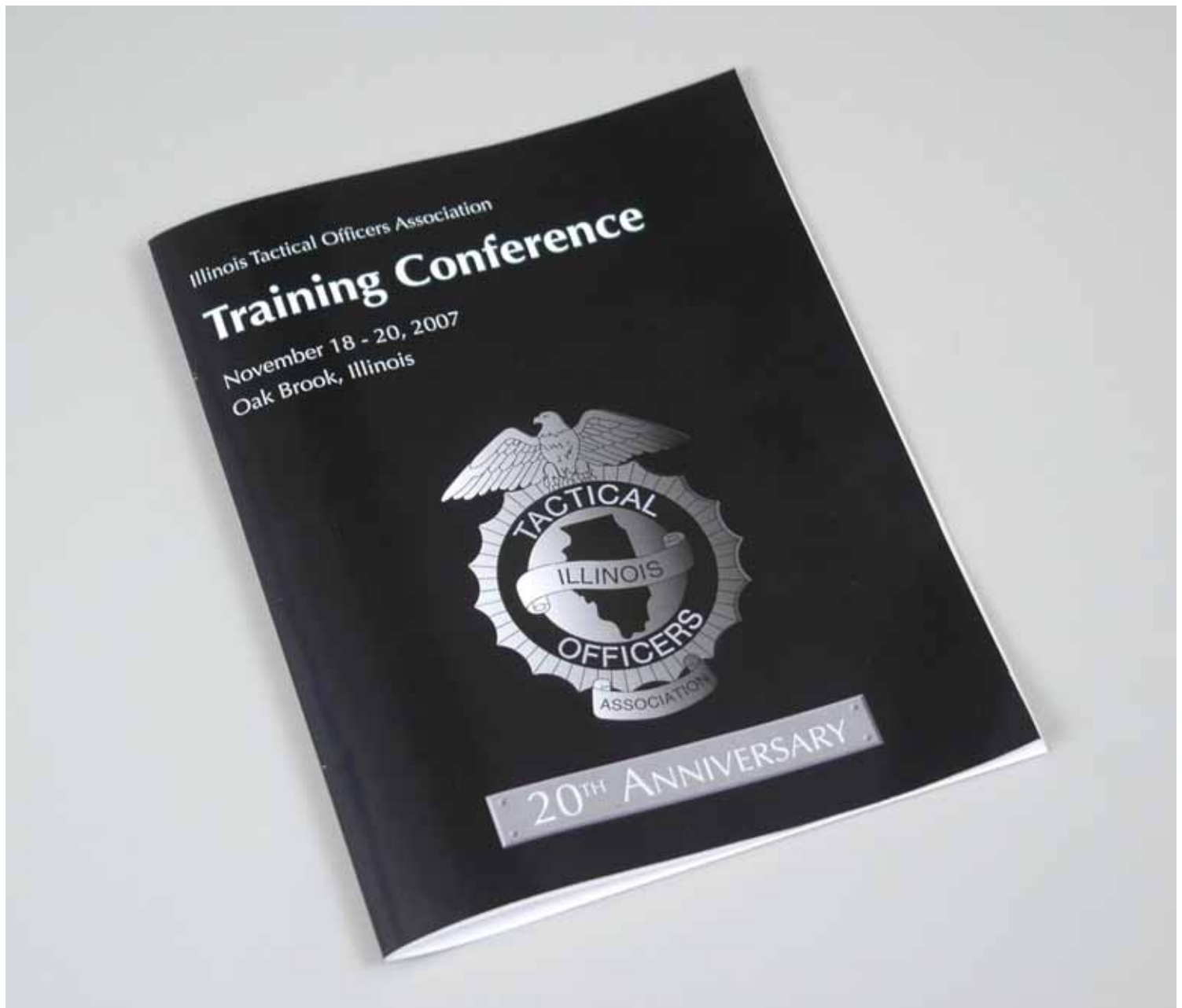


ITOA News



The Journal of the Illinois Tactical Officers Association

20th Annual Training Conference



Tactical Fitness

By TJ Cooper

During my time as a training officer, physical training coordinator member, and tactical unit operator, I have collected numerous standards for team and agency applicants. While some are better than others, they are all standards developed for hire, retention and/or qualification. Often overlooked, however, is the question, “How are we preparing for these qualifications?” Many times the qualifying agency sets the standard but does not put any program in place to develop the subject for it. This must be addressed. Because we do not know an operator’s training standards, it is very difficult to prevent injury. The most common problems are over-training and under-training. I believe a standard conditioning program should involve every team member under group conditions. The program should also be scalable and functional.

This article, the first in a series, will discuss the methods used, problems observed, and the options available to achieve the goal. As a member of our agency tactical unit for over 15 years, I can speak to the athletic prowess of our unit. We regularly compete in events and, as individuals, constantly work to improve skills.

When joining a team, fitness is the “known unknown.” It is the true oxymoron. In our case, applicants are asked to try out for the team, given a list of events, and a test date. The applicants arrive and, based upon the tryout scores, a recruit is selected. Therein lies the problem. I often wonder what the applicant did to prepare. Did the applicant change his training style to prepare for this event? What is his current style, and does it serve our long-term needs? Are there any medical concerns we need to? How do we know if the applicant will withstand the rigors of this assignment? Obviously, this unknown can hurt or help.

Consider the following. Applicant A is now a full team member and has been in good condition for many years. He suffers an injury and must now re-invent himself and climb back up to team standards. Applicant B is also a full member, but has begun to “break down.” The miles of running are ruining his knees; his shoulders cannot bear the load; his back is shot. The question in each case is, “Can they return to status?” As I see it, this is a matter of balance. Generally, maintenance and balance are not in the mindsets of tactical operators. We are fringe athletes, working hard to be prepared for the task at hand. And that task, by and large, is unknown.

Let’s consider some of the major physical fitness models.

Workouts generally break down into two categories: running and lifting. To be sure, both groups of athletes do both, but in nearly every case our tactical athletes either run (joggers) or push weights (bodybuilding), favoring one over the other. Additionally, they never really reach deeply into the area of training they do not favor. Joggers, for example, have increased cardiovascular skills and good endurance. But their stamina and strength are weak. I have seen many athletes that can run 5-10 miles in outstanding time but cannot do 10 pull-ups or 40 pushups. Conversely, I have



Photo courtesy of TJ Cooper



friends that can bench press 350, but cannot run 1-3 miles. We do what we like to do, not what we need to do. This is acceptable for civilians, but not for operators and often leads to injuries that cost the team time, money, and operations.

The answer seems obvious; yet why are these injuries still occurring? My experience suggests that the problem is best solved by training and education. In my interactions with teams across the country, I have noticed that most teams do not have true group physical training from qualified fitness instructors. The team works out without direction. Specific training sequences must be developed for athletic performance. Otherwise, we will continue to do what we like. If this is grounded in good previous knowledge, then the cycle will continue. Good or bad, we continue to train as we have trained.

There must be a clear understanding of the benefits of proper fitness. As stated earlier, most of us are joggers or bodybuilders. We should be neither. Training options should consider age, job task analysis, and fitness scales. We need to understand the weaknesses identified by each of these factors and, as operators, reduce or eliminate them. This is how we arrive at the standards we need for optimal performance. An operator's fitness program should enhance the operator's ability to perform under unknown and prolonged circumstances. The best program will also be scaleable to allow for injury and recovery, as well as improvement using the same skill sets.

What do operators need?

Operators need a universally scaleable fitness program that addresses the need to function in any condition. The program should fix injuries, reduce chronic problems, and remove favoritism in the workout load and results. Law

enforcement, like the Military, has had to use important lessons drawn from war towards recruit development. Both groups have had to look for institutional and group adaptable programs.

The goal of training is improved fitness. Physical training must be measured against other physical training programs by testing performance against the testing standards of the program it replaced. If this is not done, the standards are not really challenged. This is a problem with standards-based programs vs. job task analysis. SWAT operators are required to perform tasks that defy categorization. As a result, neither performance standard would apply.

Constantly varied programming, built from functional exercises executed at high intensity is the key to building a physiological advantage. Within every workout, a performance point should be identified and used to provide future training data points. Distilling every workout to a single value turns physical training into sport. Sports are more fun, and make the effort more pleasurable.

Distilling load, range of motion, power, work, line of action, flexibility, and speed, relative to a single value (usually time) has conferred other, less-expected benefits as well. One surprising result of the public performance ranking for each workout has been increased motivation and accelerated improvement of those less physically capable by temperament, training, or natural limitation. Ranking seems to do more for bottom performers than top performers.

A reliance on functional movements, including many presumed too complex or technical for mass application, can return skill to physical training. Over the past 60 years, traditional physical training has been cleansed of nearly all skill elements that pertain to coordination, accuracy, agility, and balance. The costs here are enormous and extend to losses in speed and power, as well as producing an athlete less capable of dealing with variances and vagaries of opponents, movement, and terrain. The use of functional movements also reduces the chronic overuse injuries that plague traditional physical training participants, particularly injuries to the back and knees,

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shin splints, and “sick days.”

Finally, the intensity of a workout should be designed with the objective of maximizing adaptation. For a program to be effective, there should be a reduction in physical training time with greatly improved payout. Markers for such an effort would be:

- Efficacy
- Time required
- Safety
- Fun
- Motivation
- Testing/metrics
- Psychological demands
- Battlefield/street engagement

Looking at varied functions of a call-up, we can identify some tasks that occur with frequency, but the intensity of these areas does not qualify as a workload. This concept is important because developing a job task analysis is not key in developing training. It only defines what could occur. We need to classify our tasks as largely unknown and develop a way to introduce the best fitness methods from the best fitness programs.

Looking back on most typical call-outs, we see components of aerobic and anaerobic needs. We don't know if the marksman or the breacher or the entry team will have the harder task. We have no idea what job will be in front of us on any day, but being prepared is critical. All operators need to be able to “run, jump, and throw softballs” faster, harder, and further than our counterparts. We do not know what skill will be called for; we simply know we must be prepared.

Enforcing ability in each area is the key. By eliminating specialization (i.e., stressing jogging over bodybuilding or vice-versa), we reduce injury potential, increase strength and aerobic capacity, and restrict early team exits due to overload—all of which we need.

Proper conditioning will save us money; it will reduce retraining; and it will maintain team integrity.

So what must a workout program do? Simply put, it must produce power, maintain aerobic ability, and enhance recovery and repeat performance—and it must be able to do the above on demand.

Up next: How to integrate physical training into your team. 🌀

About the author

TJ Cooper is a Team Leader for Jacksonville Sheriff's Office SWAT. He joined the team in 1990 and still serves in the city urban core and as a High Liability instructor for the Regional Academy. He is the Lead Fitness Instructor at the Criminal Justice Training Center in northeast Florida. Questions are welcome at tj@ccijax.com.

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