

ESTABLISHING A PHYSICAL FITNESS ASSESSMENT AND TRAINING PROGRAM IN A LARGE METROPOLITAN LAW ENFORCEMENT ORGANIZATION

GETTING OFF THE GROUND

Fitness and Wellness Director for the Jacksonville Sheriff's Organization (JSO) is a newly created position. Having been appointed to the role, I would be establishing everything from scratch. In the months leading up to my start date, I spent a great deal of time trying to formulate a plan.

Change is sometimes hard, often unwelcome, and for at least the immediate future, I knew I would be a one-man show tasked with enhancing the health and wellness of 3,400 police officers, corrections personnel, and civilian employees. Nearly a decade ago, I served in a similar capacity with the United States Army Physical Fitness School, where our best efforts were often met with "that's now how we've always done it."

For at least the first two to three years, I would be one person in a sea of employees; there was no realistic way to give individual attention to them all. A mentor of mine from the US Army once asked "if I told you to eat an elephant, how would you do it?" Understanding that "cannot" is seldom an option, I responded: "one bite at a time I guess." It certainly would not happen overnight, so my first task here was expectation management. Trying to personally train each individual was out of the question.

It was essential to lay a basic foundation and develop systems and resources that ultimately would lead to a culture of motivation and activity. First, it was necessary to perform something similar to a Command Climate Survey in the US Army. This early analysis would identify what needed attention first. In the corporate world, this initiative is known as a SWOT (strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats) analysis. What were the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats to this project's success?

STRENGTHS

My office is located at the Law Enforcement Academy and the chief in charge of the academy was in the next office. On the other side of him was the training sergeant, and across the hall was the training lieutenant. Three of the most influential members of JSO were steps away, which was definitely a strength.

Another strength was that unlike many law enforcement organizations, JSO already has a fitness test. The question remains whether the intent of a "good" test is to evaluate fitness or performance (2,3). Virtually all law enforcement academies have a fitness assessment of some kind, but beyond graduation,

individuals are often on their own. Whether it is the Police Benevolent Association of New York or the Fraternal Order of Police, there is some understandable push-back on the part of unions to protect members from anything that might constitute a threat to employment. For example, a new test could threaten the employment of the 50-year old sergeant who has spent years behind a desk or in a car. The Physical Assessment Test (PAT) did not strike me as particularly strenuous, but the fact that we had it meant the union, at least to some degree, recognized the value of fitness and performance.

WEAKNESSES

My first perceived weakness was that my office was located at the academy. While the movers and shakers of the academy were influential, my role was intended to impact all of JSO. JSO headquarters was over 10 miles away and there were six substations scattered around a metropolis of over 900,000 people. Initially, few people outside of human resources knew I was on board; but as word spread, I did not want to be seen as the "academy fitness guy." It was possible that my location would give that impression.

Another weakness was the fitness center. The academy is located on a college campus, and much of the footprint is owned by the school. This adds another layer of bureaucracy when it comes to funding and procurement. The fitness center dedicated to our organization was not the worst I had ever seen, but much of the equipment was rather dated. Moreover, the majority consisted of selectorized resistance machines with little functionality. This was not by itself a roadblock, but it was a weak link, and it did not help that our location was nearly an hour's commute from some of the substations around the city.

Lastly, I had to be humble enough to admit that my lack of familiarity with the day-to-day job requirements of law enforcement personnel was a weakness. I have been a Certified Strength and Conditioning Specialist® (CSCS®) for 25 years and a Tactical Strength and Conditioning Facilitator® (TSAC-F®) for as long as the certification has existed. I have decades of military service, but have never carried a badge. This was certainly surmountable. My background as an athlete was in hockey and baseball, but obviously as a strength and conditioning coach, I have developed expertise in training athletes from other sports. As with any position, one should always be learning.

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OPPORTUNITIES

The most helpful opportunity was that in a time when some law enforcement organizations were losing funding, this position had just been created and had a lot of visibility among the senior leaders of the JSO. They wanted to see the program make a difference. This would prove helpful when I began submitting purchase orders for functional equipment like weight vests, medicine balls, etc.

THREATS

I anticipated that I would get a lot of resistance from the rank and file, but found that to be far from true. Likewise, just as I observed in the US Army, when we literally rewrote the book on fitness training, I expected mid-level leaders—specifically the academy’s instructors—to resist being told how to train their people. This too was far from the truth. This perceived threat evaporated as I discovered the incredible professionalism of people who want to send the best officers out into the community.

The last threat, and I frankly viewed this as something of an opportunity as well, was the union. I had been told by several people that “you can do whatever you want with the recruits, but if you try to force regular officers to do anything, the union is going to fight you on it.” My first reaction was that just because there is a fight does not mean I am going to lose. As stated earlier, after 30 years in the US Army, there is no “cannot.” I made a mental note to invite the president of the union to lunch. You can accomplish a lot by building relationships, and I hoped we could find some commonality of purpose.

BUILDING THE PLAN

As mentioned, a big picture to-do list and an agenda, needed to be constructed outlining the steps to program success. I was brought in to create a program from scratch, and my single biggest priority was to develop systems that would assure the success of my replacement in five or six years. Naturally, this necessitated a well written standard operating procedure (SOP). Other agenda items included:

- Rewriting the physical fitness packet sent out to candidates
- Writing periodized workout plans for each category of class
- Creating an introductory presentation for arriving recruits
- Making a calendar of exercise classes/sessions at headquarters and substations
- Arranging to meet union president to discuss mutually beneficial collaboration
- Formulating a curriculum for JSO fitness leader certification
- Conducting inventory of fitness center and generating list of needed equipment
- Submitting purchase request for obtaining functional fitness equipment

- Obtaining 2019 Worker’s Compensation expenses from human resources
- Identifying the number of 2019 PAT failures

Much of this list may seem self-explanatory. For obvious reasons, it was important to get the historical data on previous expenditures for Worker’s Compensation. A strong program should help reduce lost hours due to injury, and measurable progress in lives and dollars saved would go a long way in getting approval to hire additional staff. On the wall in the lobby of the JSO were pictures of every officer who had died while “on the job” since the inception of the organization. In a 12-year period, from 1990 – 2002, there were five officer fatalities due to heart attack alone (1,4,5,6,7,8).

Since its inception of the Tactical Strength and Conditioning (TSAC) Program at the National Strength and Conditioning Association (NSCA), the field of tactical strength and conditioning has exploded to become one of the fastest growing segments of the fitness industry. Still, many of the available positions are with military special operations. This implies that the areas with the most potential for growth are law enforcement, conventional military, and firefighters. Understanding the growth in tactical strength and conditioning and the fact that the majority of law enforcement agencies do not have full time fitness and wellness staff, it seemed wise to publish a blueprint for those who find themselves in this role in the future.

DIFFERENT CATEGORIES OF TRAINEES

During my first few days on the job, I met with many of the leaders, observed a few defensive training classes at the academy, and took stock of the fitness center and the grounds outside. I continually sought to identify where change was needed and in what priority. One personal priority was to garner some early success in order to generate awareness and interest in what would become the JSO Fitness and Wellness Department.

Despite not wanting to be seen as the “academy fitness guy,” the recruits were the proverbial low-hanging fruit. The basic law enforcement (BLE) course taken by aspiring police officers is 24 weeks long. BLE recruits learn everything from the relatively simple (e.g., self-defense and physical fitness) to highly complicated and challenging (e.g., drawing their firearm and engaging a target while enduring having their Taser used against them).

What may surprise some is that law enforcement academies teach more than just law enforcement. Classes are also underway for corrections officers (CO) and community service officers (CSO), which are different roles entirely. CO supervise and manage inmates in jails, prisons, and other correctional facilities. Their time at the academy is roughly half the length of BLE. CSOs are the third group of trainees; they perform duties such as managing

the scene of an accident or doing roadside assistance when someone has broken down. They are not sworn law enforcement officers and do not carry a gun. The CSO course generally lasts nine weeks.

Lastly, another less visible, but very important, group includes new hires whose class has not yet started. Just as with basic trainees in the military, it is a major drain on financial and human resources if a new recruit becomes injured because they lacked adequate fitness upon arrival. I met with the lieutenant in charge of recruiting who showed me the packet sent to applicants when they are first accepted. It made suggestions for exercises they could do (e.g., like sit-ups) and was written by one of the instructors who was a former US Marine and fitness enthusiast. The lieutenant was open to new ideas and allowed me to rewrite it. I created a new one with guidance on running shoe selection, nutrition, what to expect for physical training (PT) at the academy, and what I felt were minimum fitness standards they should aspire to before reporting. This would hopefully minimize or eliminate injuries while at the academy. You cannot have a plant without putting a seed in the ground; the incoming BLE class would be that seed.

FRAMEWORK

The training sergeant's role at a law enforcement academy is comparable to a sergeant major, or very senior non-commissioned officer in a US Army training environment. I was fortunate that our training sergeant and I were philosophically identical in almost every respect when it came to training recruits. This made for a harmonious working relationship, and he was a great source of information. Through this collaborative environment, it was revealed that the 24-week BLE curriculum included two weeks spent entirely at an offsite firing range. The nature of the firearms training not only takes up those entire two weeks but is extremely physically demanding. We agreed the best approach was to build a 22-week PT program for the training cycle.

The critical first step to any strength and conditioning program calls for a thorough needs analysis. In baseball, infielders need to explode laterally. An outside midfielder in soccer is the distance runner of his sport, whereas a sweeper primarily needs speed. A running back in football is an anaerobic athlete who needs agility, explosive power, and strong grip strength. Naturally, their respective workout plans will cover their needs, but what about law enforcement? What are the performance requirements of an officer patrolling their community? What are their movement patterns? Which energy systems are used? A police officer challenges a strength and conditioning coach's entire knowledge base.

Patrolmen may find themselves sitting behind the wheel of a squad car for hours and suddenly have to get out and sprint full speed for an unknown distance without the benefit of a warm-up.

They may find themselves transitioning from a calm discussion to a fight for their life without warning. Situations can arise where a water rescue is necessary or they may be on their knees rendering cardiopulmonary resuscitation (CPR) or first aid. They do all these and more with approximately 15 lb of equipment in the form of their body armor and duty belt. These present not only as extra load carriage, but a degree of strain on the lumbar spine when rotating the body to exit the squad car.

Following our needs analysis, the training sergeant and I agreed on the value of Brazilian jiu-jitsu (BJJ) as a critical skill. Much media attention has been paid to law enforcement officers firing their weapon in the line of duty. A percentage of these incidents occurred when the officer was suddenly faced with a physical confrontation by a perpetrator who may or may not have an advantage in size or strength. In some of these cases, advanced training in a non-lethal method may have delayed or negated the need to resort to deadly force. Those familiar with BJJ will tell you it is an exhaustive anaerobic and functional workout in itself. Thus, we chose to schedule BJJ training on Monday, Wednesday, and Friday, while slotting our more traditional physical training sessions on Tuesday and Thursday. The training sergeant was a black belt in BJJ and had a plan that would afford the recruits the opportunity to earn a blue belt by graduation.

This combination of training was constructed using 22 weeks as a framework with five "mini-mesocycles" of four weeks each. The intent was to lay a foundation in the first four weeks that addressed very general physical fitness and then transform into true athleticism, as we addressed strength, speed/agility/proprioception, and explosive power going forward. Progression was primarily linear and designed to have the recruits peak at graduation.

We arranged for "unload weeks" every fifth week, during which the recruits would perform exercises radically different from the previous four weeks. Unload weeks are not intended to be easy training periods. Unload weeks are designed to change up movement patterns and energy systems so that the body does not become so adept at a workout protocol that its benefits plateau.

Without my own staff, I had to learn to delegate or I would indeed end up as the "academy fitness guy." But how could I successfully delegate matters of strength and conditioning to mid-level leaders who are not strength and conditioning coaches? When interviewing for this position, I referenced the US Army's model of Physical Readiness Training and suggested creating a JSO version of the US Army's Master Fitness Training Course (MFTC). MFTC is an intensive course that develops lay leaders who go back to their units and deliver the PT philosophies they have been taught.

The academy instructors led their classes much like a military platoon sergeant. The problem is that like platoon sergeants,

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they already have a demanding job. Freeing them up for weeks at a time to qualify them for an additional duty was out of the question. Moreover, getting them all free at the same time proved extremely difficult.

In time, we concluded that the best way forward was to have two three-hour interactive briefings that focused on key concepts like:

1. Basic anatomy and human movement
2. What constitutes a dynamic warm-up
3. What a proper cool-down is and why it is necessary
4. Understanding functionality and occupational relevance
5. The SAID (specific adaptations to imposed demands) principle and its relation to exercise selection
6. Contraindications due to injury history
7. Basic nutrition
8. Optimal shoe selection

As with many strength and conditioning coaches, much of the terminology used in my programming is unique to me. For this reason, additional sessions were scheduled for the instructors to observe as I took a group of recruits through a workout. This intrigued several to inquire about having an in-house workout for the academy staff. The first baby steps to improving the organization's culture were beginning to take shape.

Given the limitations of our fitness center both in size and functionality, I made an early purchase request for a number of medicine balls, slam balls, slide boards, ankle bands, and other functional equipment. The size of the fitness center (3,600 sq ft) meant that it would be difficult to accommodate a full class of 40 – 50 recruits. Functional bodyweight exercises outside were another matter. The college in which the academy was located had a serviceable running track with a standard grass infield. This became the semi-official site for all things fitness.

GETTING THE BALL ROLLING

During my second week on the job, four officers failed the PAT. The training sergeant reached out to alert each individual's chain of command and made them aware of my role and the availability of remedial training. The existence of the union and the collective bargaining agreement meant that such training could not be mandated. I felt it was important to avoid having my role seen as that of a personal trainer. In time, I would have interns and assistants to help oversee remedial physical training, but in the near-term, I was the only one.

Only one individual communicated a desire for help. He was 46 years old and weighed 450 lb. A previous knee injury coupled with spending the vast majority of an 11+ hour shift for many years in a squad car had taken its toll. I encouraged him to get medically cleared by a physician before beginning a workout program and then met with him for our first session

We went for what was intended to be a two-mile walk at a moderately brisk (approximately 3.5 miles per hour [MPH]) pace. By the half-mile point, he was falling behind so we slowed our pace. This happened a few times before it was decided to turn back early. I recommend to young strength and conditioning coaches all the time that we as professionals should be willing to adjust on the fly when your subject's needs require it. There is a time and place to crack the whip, and the first workout is not it. Through the last quarter mile, he was doing less than three miles per hour and had developed a slight limp.

There are those who may question the efficacy of a simple walk as opposed to a more sophisticated workout protocol. I chose a walk for several reasons. In this individual's case, an initial walk gave us a chance to discuss his goals, the repercussions if he did not pass the PAT, and of course the even worse repercussions if he did not bring his weight down. I counseled that for the initial stage of his workout plan, I wanted to continue the walks. The US Army uses the euphemism "crawl, walk, run" when referencing the baby steps required on the way to proficiency in a task. I decided to err on the side of caution and slowly increased his work capacity in the first few months.

Specific to his professional career, this presented a problem. When a JSO officer fails the PAT, their collective bargaining agreement stipulates that they have 30 days to pass it. At the end of 30 days, if they still have not passed it, they lose the privilege of taking their squad car home and must commute in their own vehicle. They are then taken out of their current position for up to a year and given a relatively menial "light duty" position (e.g., answering the phone at the non-emergency call center). They also become ineligible for step-increases (i.e., pay raises) and overtime. At the end of 12 months, if they still have not passed the PAT, their employment is terminated.

Early in my career, I was told "if you rush the results, you will injure the athlete." I witnessed the validity of this firsthand while commanding young millennial trainees in the US Army. Transitioning from a sedentary lifestyle to a combat-ready soldier in 10 weeks of basic training led to several injuries. In this patrolman's case, I felt that pushing him to pass the PAT in 30 days should be secondary to the bigger picture of weight and body fat reduction. He was given a walking program with guidance about recovery and adaptations he could make if his knee became problematic. Within two weeks, he was asking to increase his volume; within three weeks, he had passed the PAT.

COMMAND APPROVAL

A typical year at the academy sees approximately four BLE classes of 40 recruits each, four CO classes of a similar size, and three CSO classes. It took three weeks of diligence to create the programs for these and get them submitted to the chief, lieutenant, and training

sergeant for approval. Once approved, they were sent for printing and binding, and were disseminated to the instructors.

The next step was to construct a train-the-trainer curriculum, so that instructors would have the tools to properly oversee the training of their classes. A PowerPoint presentation would not be enough; they needed to become intimately familiar with contraindications, proper mechanics, proper terminology, and common mistakes to watch for.

The class workouts were approved in a few days as well as the curriculum for the instructors. It was decided that the path of least resistance for upgrading the JSO's fitness culture was to train every recruit to their genetic potential and counsel them on the pitfalls awaiting them if they failed to maintain an active lifestyle. The Fitness and Wellness Program would continue to be a resource for them throughout their career. Over several years, the percentage of healthy and high performing individuals would increase until it was the new normal.

MOVING BEYOND THE ACADEMY

One month after becoming the Fitness and Wellness Director for the JSO, much of the aforementioned low-hanging fruit was complete. A comprehensive 22-week workout was ready and waiting for the incoming BLE, CO, and CSO classes. A newcomer brief for incoming recruits was also complete. At the request of the recruiting personnel, I put together a packet of information regarding fitness and nutrition that they could send to new hires preparing for the academy. The briefing was meant to at least familiarize the academy staff with the basic science and exercises in the workouts, so that after seeing it done a few times, they could train their own classes. It was time to begin addressing the rest of the organization.

As one might expect, an organization the size of the JSO (3,400 personnel) is a complicated undertaking. The city is broken up into six zones just for the patrolmen. That does not include the headquarters staff, Special Weapons and Tactics (SWAT), narcotics, vice, internal affairs, investigations, property crimes, motorcycles, aviation, K9, homicide, and a host of other departments. Further, the civilian employees also have needs, albeit more in line with general health and fitness. In totality, the employees were male or female, aged 18 – 65, healthy and unhealthy, and from every conceivable background.

My first step was to visit with each leader and discover their needs, concerns, and limitations. Some specialties, like the bomb squad, were additional duties above and beyond their full time position. Some worked normal business hours, but the proverbial front-line troops, the patrolmen, worked 12-hr shifts with five days on and five days off. On their days “off” they often take on overtime responsibilities for additional pay.

What some might call a “precinct,” JSO refers to as a “substation.” Not every substation has fitness equipment or exercise facilities. The headquarters had a gymnasium and 2,000 sq ft weight room, plus a small aerobics room. One substation had a small fitness facility as well, but the others did not. We needed to determine an ideal location for officers to exercise. At 840 sq miles, Jacksonville is the largest city in the contiguous 48 states in terms of landmass. The academy is in the northwest part of the city, so expecting officers on the south side to commute at least 40 min each way as well as workout was unrealistic. Somehow the opportunity needed to be brought to them. JSO headquarters is in the heart of downtown Jacksonville, and centrally located for most substations. Holding workout and exercise sessions there was as convenient of a location as we could find.

In the needs analysis mentioned earlier, it was determined that common performance impediment for patrolmen include tight hamstrings and lower back trouble associated with sitting for a long time. Having weekly or even daily yoga classes at the headquarters was one means of addressing this. Civilian workers at the headquarters also requested a walking program. Few personnel aspired to “get ripped” or pursue extremely advanced levels of fitness.

When meeting with the chief of patrolmen, the individual in charge of the largest segment of JSO, there was a discussion about “not trying to turn every officer into a SWAT team member.” Many older officers have served for 20 years or more and understood very well the physical requirements of law enforcement. They were concerned about being asked to train at extreme levels unnecessarily. Rather than being perceived as forcing square pegs into round holes, I sought their input regarding what they felt they needed and what they would like to see made available. These conversations led to a good education for all involved and dramatically increased buy-in.

Between recruits leaving the law enforcement academy in the best shape of their lives and officers starting to see a good strength and conditioning program as a resource and not a burden or threat to their career, the culture and attitude of the organization turned in the right direction. Within three weeks of his first workout, the 450-lb gentleman mentioned earlier passed the PAT and the newest BLE class was seeing improvements in their mile time by 42 – 120 s after just five weeks of training.

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