

GAIN THE TACTICAL ADVANTAGE: POLICE SPECIFIC WEIGHT TRAINING

I remember 20 years ago training at a gym in Chicago owned by a Chicago police officer. There was a large poster on the wall that showed a prisoner from the IL Department of Corrections working out with heavy weights. The words under the picture read “Every day you don’t train, someone else does.” I can recall several police officers training at the gym regularly in an effort to stay fit for their job. They would periodically walk by the poster and stare at the heavily muscled prisoner, then walk by the mirror and compare their muscular development with the bad guy in the poster. Although I knew little at that time about the fitness needs of law enforcement, it was obvious from the way they trained that their goal was to get as big and muscular as possible.

Being big and muscular might add an intimidation factor, but it will do little to improve an officer’s ability to perform job related tasks or prepare for critical street confrontations and tactical situations. This is especially true for undersized male officers and women officers. The amount of muscle size a person can develop is largely determined by genetics and gender anyway. Typical bodybuilding weight training routines are good for increasing muscle mass and physical appearance, but negatively impact an offer’s strength to weight ratio. In simple terms, bodybuilding training causes specific changes to occur inside the exercised muscles. These changes cause a large increase in muscle size with only a marginal increase in muscle strength. So, if an officer gains 20 lbs of muscle mass yet doesn’t gain an adequate amount of strength to move the 20 lbs of newly acquired body mass, the officer’s ability to accelerate, jump, and quickly change body positions is compromised. This will directly affect the time it takes to gain distance from an attacker or get out of the line of fire and take cover. Time and distance, sometimes as little as hundredths of a second or a few inches, could mean the difference between life and death.

There is a saying among professional strength and conditioning coaches “train movement patterns not muscle groups.” This refers to training the body in such a way as to improve strength along with functional movement skills. For a law enforcement officer, this type of training is done by performing weight-resisted movements through ranges of motion and speeds similar to the ones performed during tactical situations. I have heard the statement “distance and movement are life.” If this statement is true, and I believe it to be, then it can be deduced that speed and movement skills are essential to performing well in tactical situations. A well designed, police specific, weight training program will allow an officer to develop these qualities, hence, improving movement skills and speed.

Here are two questions you can ask yourself to see if an exercise should be included in the fitness routine: Why am I performing the exercise? How will this exercise help my performance? Answers to these fundamental questions, or lack of an answer, can help an officer to assess whether the exercise routine needs to be adjusted or changed to be more law enforcement specific.

The following list of weight training exercises are excellent for improving all around movement skills, strength and speed. Some of these exercises can be added to an existing weight-training workout or performed on a separate day.

Exercise	Why perform the exercise?	How will it improve performance?	Sets/Reps	Rest time between sets
Power Cleans	Trains the body to recruit a maximal # of muscle fibers of the hip and legs in the minimal amount of time. Improves speed strength and acceleration.	Decreases the time it takes to close short distances or create distance, improving the ability to get to cover and get out of the line of fire.	3-4 sets of 3-4 reps	2-3 minutes
Dumbbell Split Squat Jumps	Develops lower body power and the ability to rapidly change body positions.	Improves the ability to quickly reposition from a kneeling or low squat position without compromising body mechanics, which can affect the ability to stay on target	3 sets of 5 reps	2 minutes
Overhead Squat	Develops core strength, shoulder stability, lower body strength and flexibility.	Trains the body to stay upright and on target in low squat positions with a heavier firearm. Develops flexibility and strength to move in and out of ranges of motion often encountered in law enforcement tactical situations.	3-4 sets of 5 reps	2 minutes
Dumbbell Lunge Drops	Develops lower body power and improves lower body flexibility.	Enhances the ability to rapidly change from a low kneeling position to a standing position. Develops the ability to safely and quickly decelerate after rapid acceleration.	2-3 sets of 3-4 reps	2 minutes

Dumbbell Lunge Forward to Backward	Develops lower body strength and lower body flexibility.	Improves flexibility and strength to move in and out of ranges of motion often encountered in law enforcement tactical situations.	3 sets of 5 reps	2 minutes
Dumbbell Walking Lunge Backward	Develops lower body strength, lower body flexibility.	Improves strength and flexibility to move in a low backward motion without compromising body mechanics, which can affect the ability to stay on target.	3 sets of 5 reps	2 minutes
Dumbbell Side Lunge	Develops lower body strength, lower body flexibility.	Improves strength and flexibility to move in a low sideway motion without compromising body mechanics, which can affect the ability to stay on target.	3 sets of 5 reps	2 minutes

These are just a few of the basic weight training exercises that will improve tactical performance. This is certainly not an exhaustive list, but these seven exercises are a good starting point for most officers to work from.

The human body adapts in highly specific ways in response to the type of physical fitness training imposed upon it. The important concept for all law enforcement officers to remember is this: “You get what you train for.” Specific exercise programming = specific exercise results = specific impact on job related performance. If you are going to spend time training, why not perform exercises and follow routines that will have a positive impact on police performance?

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