

## **The Law of Exercise Specificity: Is your workout *really* going to help you in the field?**

By Guest P-1 Columnist James DiNaso  
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Ignorance is no defense for violating the law. Unfortunately, when it comes to police-specific fitness training, most law enforcement officers are repeat offenders.

The law of exercise specificity refers to the similarity between a training activity and the actual task(s) one is training for. Many officers understand the importance of being physically fit for duty and have developed regular exercise habits. Those who regularly participate in a fitness routine should be commended for their commitment and dedication to this effort.

However, despite their good intentions, many officers are performing various exercises and following physical fitness routines that will have little or no impact on their job related performance.

For example, the ability to jog five miles a day is a good way to develop an officer's *aerobic* fitness level but will do little to improve the *anaerobic* fitness level. You may ask, "Why is this important?"

Almost all law enforcement-specific tasks involve the

greatest contribution from the anaerobic energy system, *not* the aerobic energy system. High intensity, short duration activities such as getting out of the cruiser and sprinting after an offender or fighting with a noncompliant person are anaerobic not aerobic activities.

Developing the anaerobic energy system is going to directly affect an officer's ability to continue, without getting winded, during a chase or fight. This could mean the difference between going home at the end of the shift, going to the hospital, or worse, not going home ever again.

Other types of exercises can actually have a negative affect on an officer's performance. Typical bodybuilding weight training routines are good for increasing muscle mass and physical appearance, but they negatively impact an officer'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 and 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.

Undersized officers who desire to gain body mass need to understand that there are ways to increase muscle mass and gain strength without compromising the ability to move quickly.

Gender differences must also be taken into consideration when selecting exercises and designing police fitness routines. Aside from the obvious anatomical differences between males and females, there are specific physiological and structural differences that need to be addressed through training to optimize performance. Each gender has certain advantages and disadvantages due to these differences.

For example, females tend to have a greater capacity to perform endurance activities, a higher pain threshold, and greater flexibility than males. Males tend to have a greater capacity for strength, can move out of certain body positions more efficiently, and are less susceptible to certain injuries than females.

Understanding these differences can help officers physically train to overcome, to the extent possible, these disadvantages. This can help optimize performance and minimize the potential for injury to the officer.

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?

Here are two questions you can ask yourself to see if an exercise should be included in the fitness routine:

**1. Why am I performing the exercise?**

**2. How will this exercise help my performance?**

Answers to these fundamental questions, or lack thereof, can help an officer to assess whether the exercise routine needs to be adjusted or changed to be more law enforcement specific.

One of the questions I am often asked is: “What about training for health and not just performance?” The short answer is an easy one. Train for both but do not train exclusively for health and neglect performance. I will address more specifically how to train for health and performance in future columns.

In conclusion, the law of specificity is important to

consider when training to improve police performance fitness. The training activity should develop the physical qualities that will enhance an officer's performance.

The human body does this by adapting in a highly specific way to exercises and fitness routines imposed on it. Certain exercises and routines can have little or no affect, a negative affect, or a positive affect on performance. A well-designed police fitness-training program, which takes into consideration the physiological and structural differences between genders, can help overcome certain performance disadvantages unique to each of the sexes.

Training for health is important but should not be done at the exclusion of training to improve job related performance.

### **About the author**

James Di Naso is co-owner and Police Performance Director of [Police Kinesiology Company](#) and an instructor for North East Multi Regional Training (NEMRT), a regional police-training academy in Illinois.

James is a member of both the American Society for Law Enforcement Training (ASLET) and the International Law Enforcement Educators and Trainers Association (ILEETA) and has presented at both organizations annual conferences. He has

trained hundreds of federal, state, county and city law enforcement officers over the past three years.

Prior to focusing his efforts on training law enforcement officers, James worked for fifteen years as a sports performance coach training athletes at every level including professional athletes from the NFL and MLB. James holds a Masters Degree in Exercise Science from Eastern Illinois University and professional certifications from the National Strength and Conditioning Association, and United States Weightlifting Federation.