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Back to school for some firearm fundamentals

Alternative training ideas take a cue from high performance athletes

Routine can be a double-edged sword. When we initially learn how to do something that is or will become intrinsic to our job duties, we practice that skill and perfect it until it becomes second nature. But what would it take to be persuaded to throw out what you know (or maybe fine-tune it) to try something new? What if that “something new” was how you shoot? As an officer, that could be a pretty significant recalibration. New ideas in firearms training can potentially improve draw time or accuracy. If the evidence for an alternative training looks good, it could be time for a re-boot.

Last summer the *LET* team observed a demo of a new firearms training system at the Milwaukee County Sheriff’s Office Training Academy in Franklin, Wisconsin called D.R.A.W. School Firearms Training. D.R.A.W. School is an offering of Fenix Law Enforcement Training Systems LLC out of Charlotte, N.C. Here’s a snapshot of the program.

Back to basics

Jason Speller, chief firearms instructor with Fenix, travels the county, state and country to watch how officers train with their firearm. In the course of his initial travels, one thing Speller noticed was that the officers all shot *differently*. In each case either the shooter’s technique varied, or maybe his or her stance varied from officer to officer. For example, while some shooting instructors still teach the Weaver stance (a shooting technique for handguns that was developed by LA County Deputy Sheriff Jack Weaver in the late 1950) Speller says it’s no longer valid in the context of modern policing. New scenarios and equipment—specifically body armor—call for updated technique. Now officers need to think about how he or she will get the gun out of the holster and reload.

D.R.A.W. stands for: Drawing, Reloading and Aiming of Weapons. The program for law enforcement and military is designed around how the body naturally functions, not necessarily a specific technique. Some objectives: Focus on natural body functions, use proper ergonomics, meet department budget challenges and think outside the box. The training claims it can increase officers’ speed, accuracy and safety for every function when using a firearm—particularly in high-stress situations.

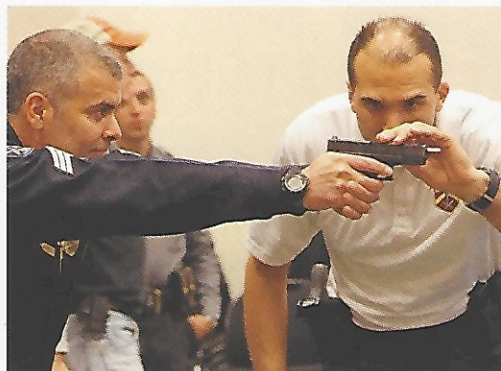
The training, which consists of classroom time and online sessions, covers shooting with either hand, individually; shooting with a flashlight and shooting from the ground, among other skills. Force-on-force scenarios are also practiced. The company also developed

a safety product called BarrelBlok in November. The inexpensive device is designed to prevent firearms from chambering a round and serves as a visual indicator to instructors and users that the firearm is safe. Speller says it is important officers train with their firearm, not a training prop.

The science

D.R.A.W. trainers worked two years with firearms instructors, U.S. Olympic team doctors and athletic trainers to examine natural body mechanics, ergonomics and brain function. Next, they spent more than six months looking at every movement a shooter makes while shooting and reloading. They considered, too, the unintentional consequences of certain stance or reloading movements. The goal, of course, was to help officers increase speed, accuracy, metal focus and safety. To achieve this goal, D.R.A.W. focuses on biomechanic techniques taught to elite athletes. Athletes—whether skiers or gymnasts—commonly assume a “Z” pattern for better balance where weight is distributed forward on the balls of the feet. This is known as a “forward aggressive stance.” According to USA Olympic Judo Team doctor and Maximized Living Chiropractor Dr. Aaron Ernst, correct body positioning transforms energy into immediate movement. Ernst was instrumental in helping to develop D.R.A.W. training. The same holds true for high-stress situations. The D.R.A.W. website states, “Based on the similarities between the physiological effects experienced during high performance athletics and lethal encounters, [we] developed new training methods to greatly improve an officer’s performance when it matters most.”

Each function of drawing, aiming, shooting and reloading a firearm is carefully examined. Physical balance and stability, mental balance and focus, brain function, the use of rapid movement, and



In every function and process trainers ask, “What is the fastest, most stable way to perform the function in a way that is natural for the body?”



Photos courtesy of Christa Turski

D.R.A.W. School training pulls from knowledge gained by U.S. Olympic team doctors and athletic trainers who examine natural body mechanics, ergonomics and brain function in stressful situations.

recoil energy are just a few of the areas that are closely studied. The method focuses mostly on proper physical and mental balance when firing from any position.

Trainers weigh in

Lt. Jason Graham oversees his agency's training division in Wake Forest, North Carolina, a city with a population of roughly 40,000. Wake Forest has about 70 employed officers. Part of Graham's job is to keep an eye out for new training opportunities every year that could benefit officers. There are no national requirements as far as this type of training is concerned, and the onus is on individuals states to decide how they want to mandate what types of programs to use.

Graham says, "The problem with firearms is it comes down to expense, time, availability—and sometimes it's about the officers' understanding of weapons in general—that makes different people succeed or struggle with the use of the firearm. Many agencies can only offer one or two trips a year to the firing range due to expenses, or availability of personnel that can oversee it. Trying to stay consistent with what we're teaching, and making sure everyone's getting quality instruction, is tough. We're blessed... to have our own firing range and in-house instructors." Even so, Graham admits it can still be a challenge to get to the range.

After observing a D.R.A.W. presentation, Graham's agency is considering picking it up this year or next. He says it is a unique take on firearms training, and perhaps

even more importantly, it offers a degree of consistency. Officers can complete classroom as well as online training segments where they practice stance, draw and reload. Online training can be accessed via an agency's subnet URL. Each classroom segment is one hour academic study and three hours of practical exercises.

"From my experience... people go through firearms programs and they may not go through the same program ever again. The fact that you can go through this program over and over until you master the techniques is extremely beneficial to the officer," says Graham.

Sgt. J.M. (Mike) Smith of Monroe, North Carolina has been with Monroe PD for seven years and has been in law enforcement for 27 years. He was introduced to the program at Central Piedmont Community College in North Carolina where he attended Module 1 of the course, and also requested the D.R.A.W. training be presented to the NC Law Enforcement Training Officers Association.

His initial impression? "The short classroom trainings, coupled with the online sessions, make it easy for officers to take," says Smith. His officers have not yet completed the training; however, he says he is very much interested in the "science" that explain why such techniques work.

In regards to the emphasis on body mechanics, Graham says, "Sometimes there are things we know but we don't know *why* we know it... If it works for athletes, it can work for anybody." ■

Profile: JASON SPELLER



Fenix specializes in law enforcement firearms training. Jason Speller is a 23-year public safety veteran and the Chief Firearms Instructor for Fenix. He is the creator of both D.R.A.W. School and BarrelBlok™. He trains officers, departments and agencies in pistol and carbine courses held throughout the mid-Atlantic region. For more information visit FenixTraining.com