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The D.R.A.W. School program focuses on balance and mechanics.

PHOTOS: FENIX LAW ENFORCEMENT TRAINING SYSTEMS

In most states, the firearms training standards for law enforcement officers are geared toward helping officers qualify with their firearms on an annual or semi-annual basis. Many departments though, have a hard time getting their officers to surpass the basics of shooting taught in the academy. "Criminals are getting smarter, faster, and more deadly than ever before. Our training must give our officers the advantage on the street today," says Sgt. James "Mike" Smith, president of the North Carolina Law Enforcement Training Officers Association and a trainer with the Monroe (NC) Police Department.

Jason Speller, chief firearms instructor with Charlotte-based Fenix Law Enforcement Training, strongly agrees. "We cannot continue to make our minimums our maximums. We are seeing how state-mandated training minimums are handicapping officers, especially when it comes to being able to quickly perform the basic skills necessary to win in high-stress scenarios."

To help officers gain more advanced firearms skills Speller and the team at Fenix Training developed the Law Enforcement D.R.A.W. School Firearms Training program. D.R.A.W. is an acronym that stands for drawing, reloading, and aiming of weapons.

"When we started working on D.R.A.W. School, we knew we wanted to push the training envelope, and this would require setting tradition aside and thinking well outside the box," says Speller.

★ ★ ★ BODY MECHANICS

SPELLER TURNED TO AN UNLIKELY SOURCE FOR INPUT—elite athletic trainers and doctors. He teamed up with Dr. Aaron Ernst, who worked directly with the U.S. Olympic judo team and was instrumental in helping Kayla Harrison win a gold medal in 2012. "When we started our research for D.R.A.W. School, the first thing we did was focus on the human body, not the gun," Ernst says.

Ernst's approach became the foundation of the D.R.A.W. School program. The first part of the DRAW School curriculum focuses on the mental and physical processes that create balance and rapid movement. "One of the most interesting things we learned was that there is absolutely no such thing as 'muscle memory.' The brain initiates and controls movement, and how fast the impulse travels from the brain to the muscles will dictate the speed and accuracy of that movement," says Speller. "In the first D.R.A.W. School training module we teach officers how the brain precisely controls

Firearms Training

Fenix Law Enforcement Training Systems' new D.R.A.W. School program uses scientific analysis developed for enhancing athletic performance to help officers improve their shooting skills. DAVID GRIFFITH

movement and physical balance. Once they understand these two important factors we then focus on how the body works mechanically."

Ernst says there are a lot of current firearms training techniques that actually slow down an officer's speed. "Anytime you are working against the natural parameters of how the brain functions sequentially or how the body is designed to move mechanically, an officer's performance and speed will suffer tremendously," he explains.

Speller says the D.R.A.W. team spent months looking at every physical function of using a firearm, from drawing to shooting. Any techniques that did not use proper body mechanics were discarded and new ones were developed, he explains.

That meant D.R.A.W. was challenging conventional wisdom and traditional training methodologies. "This was not popular when we first started," Speller says. "But we quickly realized that the traditional fundamentals being taught to officers for decades actually inhibited an officer's performance." For instance, Fenix Training says the process in which the brain fires signals to the muscles in a high-stress situation will always cause the officer to begin moving or getting into his or her shooting stance before reaching for the firearm. "Based on the traditional fundamentals of marksmanship, teaching grip before stance actually slows the officer down. If we train officers in a manner that is not in line with the brain's natural sequences, we are robbing the officer's ability to react in the fastest way possible," says Speller. "What we've found is proper stance must be taught and mastered before anything else."

Another adjustment Speller says the D.R.A.W. School program made was replacing the fundamental of "grip" with "draw sequence." Many officers and instructors told the Fenix Training team they were never taught a specific method for drawing their firearms from a duty holster. Yet, according to Speller, many officers struggle with the draw.



The instructor training course is an intense program that includes academic study, practical exercises, live-fire training, and online training for each segment of D.R.A.W. School.

With a Level III duty holster, there are several things that must take place simultaneously in a fraction of a second for a quick, smooth draw, Speller explains. "Gripping the firearm is just one part of the draw process. If we don't train officers on the entire draw sequence, we are really hurting their performance at a very crucial point. If the overall draw sequence isn't right, nothing else will be either."



STRESS INOCULATION

THERE ARE A LOT OF SIMILARITIES between the negative, involuntary physiological affects experienced by elite athletes and officers in high-stress situations. Increased heart and respiratory rate, loss of fine motor function, auditory exclusion, restricted sight, and other physical responses to stress can impair an officer's performance. "For many years, athletic trainers have been teaching athletes how to identify and push past these involuntary responses and maintain focus on their objectives. Accordingly, the D.R.A.W. School curriculum and practical exercises are designed to inoculate officers against much of the mental and physical stress they will initially experience during high-stress situations.

Speller says this is extremely important when it comes to aiming. In high-stress situations, it is rare that officers actually acquire their sights before firing their guns. "The brain has an amazing ability to control fine movement in a high-stress situation," explains Speller, "but only if we train for it. We train officers to align their sights on every repetition in a very specific, conscientious manner. As we increase the speed of each segment of training, the process of aligning their sights slowly becomes less of a conscious function and

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more of a subconscious function."

Speller explains it this way: "When officers anticipate recoil, they are not aware they flinched as the bullet was traveling through the bore. That is because in the instant the gun fires, the subconscious mind is afraid of the gun firing and tries to counter the recoil by flinching and pushing the muzzle down. It happens so fast the officer doesn't consciously know he or she did it. All the officer sees is a low impact on the target."

Students who have attended the D.R.A.W. School say the results can be impressive. "When we went to the range for live-fire training after the first D.R.A.W. School class, the results were instantly apparent. Not only were officers quicker out of the holster, their first shot was right on target, and their follow-up shots were faster and much more accurate," says Lt. Jason Graham, training coordinator with the Wake Forest (NC) Police Department.



RECOIL MANAGEMENT

THE INCREASED LEVEL of accuracy experienced by the Wake Forest PD students is a result of another aspect of the Fenix Training team's research, say Ernst. "In a word, it's all about ergonomics. It is one thing to grip a firearm; it is something entirely different to interface with it based on what it does when it's fired," he explains.

The Fenix Training team used several technologies to analyze how recoil energy traveled from the firearm and through the body of the shooter. They discovered the energy always seeks the path of least resistance, and they found two ways to manage recoil.

Their first method is to teach students to manipulate joint angles in the wrist, elbows, and back, so that the recoil energy is given a predictable and controllable path to travel. "When the officer knows how and where recoil energy is going to travel, managing it becomes much easier," explains Speller.

The second method focuses on using the stored energy in a semi-auto pistol's recoil spring to the officer's advantage. When a pistol is fired, the recoil energy moves the slide to the back of the gun, compressing the recoil spring. As the spring moves the slide forward, energy is immediately transferred back to the front of the firearm. This process happens in a fraction of a second, making it extremely difficult for muscles to react to the opposing forces in a controlled manner, Speller says. "When we control recoil energy with the angles in the wrist and elbows, the stored energy in the recoil spring will bring the firearm right back down on target for us, which means the officer doesn't have to fight the firearm back on target for each shot."

The next thing the officer has to focus on is trigger control. "We cannot underscore the importance of trigger control enough," says Speller. "We speed things up by slowing them down when it comes to trigger control."

Speed is also addressed in the program's weapon drawing training. It takes an average of 1.5 seconds for an officer to get his or her firearm out of the holster and on target from the point of recognition. "That 1.5 seconds in a high-stress situation is an eternity. Every officer we spoke to who had been involved in a shooting said that if they could've had a few extra tenths of a second, they would have gladly taken it," says Speller.

Fenix Training claims D.R.A.W. School can help officers cut their draw time from a Level III holster almost in half. "Officers in our first D.R.A.W. School class reduced their draw speed to under

MAKING DRY FIRE SAFE AND REALISTIC

Dry-fire sessions can be a highly beneficial form of firearms training; it also has its drawbacks. "Dry-fire training can build unnecessary steps into a performance sequence; we call these training scars," explains Jason Speller, chief firearms instructor with Fenix Law Enforcement Training.

Speller defines training scars as functions an officer has to perform in a training environment that would not otherwise be duplicated in a real-world situation. "We wanted D.R.A.W. School to have zero training scars. This meant that every function of the firearm had to be precisely duplicated, while ensuring the firearm was completely safe," he says.

According to Speller, achieving this goal was no small feat. "There wasn't a single product on the market that could do what we needed, so we ended up designing a new training tool altogether."

The Fenix Training team created a two-piece training and safety tool called BarrelBlok, which inserts into the firearm. The first part of the BarrelBlok slides into the barrel through the open ejection port and fits into the chamber. When installed, the chamber is completely blocked and a round cannot be chambered. The other end protrudes from the muzzle. This provides a positive visual indication that the firearm is safe and the tip also acts as a holster clearance indicator when drawing. This teaches officers the correct draw height so they don't under or over draw from the holster.

The other part of the BarrelBlok device resembles the shape of a cartridge and gets inserted into the top of the magazine. It "tricks" the gun's mechanical functions by replicating a magazine with live ammunition in it. The slide will not lock to the rear when fully actuated and it will not chamber the device itself. "When BarrelBlok is inserted, the firearm will maintain its full mechanical functionality just as it would when carried on duty. You simply cannot make the firearm any safer or more realistic than when using BarrelBlok," says Speller.

For more information on BarrelBlok go www.bloksafety.com.



BarrelBlok fits in the chamber of the user's pistol, blocking the chambering of a live round, but allowing it to be dry fired. In addition, a plastic rod protrudes from the barrel, giving students a visual indicator that the weapon is safe.

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one second from the point of recognition," says Lt. Jason Graham, training coordinator with the Wake Forest (NC) Police Department. "The speed at which the students were drawing from duty holsters by the end of the class was much faster than when they started."



A BLENDED LEARNING SYSTEM

FIREARMS SKILLS are perishable, regardless of the quality of the shooter's training. "If officers go three or four weeks in between training sessions with their firearms, they often lose more than they learned," explains Speller. "We wanted to develop a training system that allowed officers to stay constantly engaged in the firearms training process throughout the year. This meant that the practical exercises had to be developed on a dry-fire training platform."

The D.R.A.W. School uses a blended learning system, including five four-hour classroom sessions. These sessions cover mastering the proper bio-mechanical sequences for drawing and reloading, performing in an injured state with only one arm, mastering one-handed shootings, and shooting from various positions on the ground. Through a carefully designed series of practical exercises, officers quickly apply the techniques they are learning.

Classroom training is not enough, though, Speller says. That's why the D.R.A.W. School includes online training. Following each four-hour classroom session, officers must take five additional 15-minute training sessions. The online sessions require officers to work through each step of the classroom portion individually. Certain parts of the online training have "shoot-don't shoot" scenarios hidden throughout. "Departments asked us to build accountability into the online training system," says Speller. At the end of each online session officers have to take a short quiz in order to progress.



HOW THE PROGRAM WORKS

TO KEEP THE COST OF THE PROGRAM LOW, Fenix Training came up with an innovative delivery method for D.R.A.W. School. First, a department purchases the D.R.A.W. School program, which is priced on a sliding scale according to the agency's number of sworn officers. The cost for an average-sized department is about \$25 per officer for the first year. The department then sends its firearms instructors to a five-day D.R.A.W. School Instructor Training course to become certified instructors.

The instructor training course is an intense program that includes academic study, practical exercises, live-fire train-



Dry firing is an important part of the D.R.A.W. School program.



Students in the D.R.A.W. School are trained how to quickly draw their pistols. The program was derived from athletic training research.

ing, and online training for each segment of D.R.A.W. School. Instructor candidates must show proficiency in all areas to pass the course. Upon successful completion of the program, the instructors go back to their departments and implement D.R.A.W. School at their own pace. This means each department can customize the program to fit its needs.


Speller says the reasoning behind the delivery system is easily understood. "It ensures that state-certified firearms instructors are conducting the training." That's important because Speller hopes that in the near future D.R.A.W. School may be approved for in-service training requirements in many states. To make sure those hours are eligible for annual training requirements, in most states it has to be taught by state-certified law enforcement instructors. "



HIGHER LEARNING

D.R.A.W. SCHOOL has also caught the eye of the college community. North Carolina's largest community college, Central Piedmont in Charlotte, is the first accredited college in the country to add D.R.A.W. School to its course offerings for sworn law enforcement officers.

"We had the opportunity to learn about D.R.A.W. School and see it in action when it was being developed. We realized we could take law enforcement firearms training to a higher level by keeping officers constantly engaged, which we feel is extremely important for all of our officers," says Major Pat Brown, program coordinator for law enforcement in-service training for Central Piedmont.

She says the program has received excellent feedback from regional law enforcement instructors who went through the D.R.A.W. School course the college hosted. Immediately following that input, CPCC added all five modules of the D.R.A.W. School program to its spring and fall semesters. "Our world has changed tremendously in the last couple of years and the threats our officers face are not the same as they were 10 or 15 years ago. Our training has to rapidly evolve to keep officers in front of the curve," says Brown. "We are excited to offer D.R.A.W. School to our law enforcement community." 

For more information on D.R.A.W. School, call Chief Firearms Instructor Jason Speller of Fenix Law Enforcement Training at (704) 935-4433 or go to <http://DrawTraining.com>.