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Agility training for law enforcement officers

By Nathan Dicks, MA, CSCS

The ability to react and initiate movement is vital to the safety of law enforcement officers (LEO) in many ways. Oftentimes, LEOs may be attacked by either an armed or an unarmed suspect within a short reactionary gap, or may need to escape the path of an oncoming vehicle, for example. Additionally, LEOs are likely to experience quick foot pursuits of suspects, lasting 70 seconds or less.³ Both types of actions require the need for agility, power and speed. Unfortunately, these needs may be compromised by inactivity and increasing loads of equipment

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carried. LEOs have been observed to carry between 17 to 25 pounds in body armor and duty belts, which are on average 8 percent to 12 percent of their bodyweight.^{1,4} With the increases in load, research has suggested that LEO performances in movement have decreased significantly.¹ A more recent

study suggests the heavier loads carried may have a direct, negative effect on sprinting ability.⁵

Including weighing the importance of agility, power and speed, most departments have a wide variety of resistance training statuses and anthropometric variables that need to be

considered before implementation of a program. Tactical facilitators need to consider that an LEO's rate of force development should be a priority in their training. Increasing the rate of activation of motor units will positively affect force development, allowing the LEO to accelerate to a higher speed more quickly. Baseline measures and training in the fundamentals of agility and resistance exercise should be emphasized to LEOs early in training but only if the officers are trained enough to warrant these protocols. Over time, and if progressed properly, strength exercises and performing explosive movements (such as heavy squatting and Olympic-style lifts) with officers may help to improve their rate of force development, or acceleration, and absolute speed.⁷ This article will explain some training techniques to assist officers in improving these necessary components to combat the additional weight of their duty gear.

AGILITY TRAINING

The ability to start, stop and change direction quickly, effectively and under control are some of the main goals of agility training. An agility program should be progressive in nature in terms of equipment used and difficulty level by adding tasks, whether physical or cognitive.

Prior to beginning any drills, for controlled training purposes, LEOs should be warmed up (dynamically), which can be done through a series of skips, lateral movements (e.g., lateral leap frogs and lateral toe touches), high knee crossovers, backpedaling or bounding.

LINE/LADDER DRILLS

Line/ladder drills can aid in increasing athleticism through mastery of footwork and body balance, and can be used in multitasking training. Agility ladders can be paired with a number of drills, such as in/out, high knees, lateral steps, hopscotch and icky

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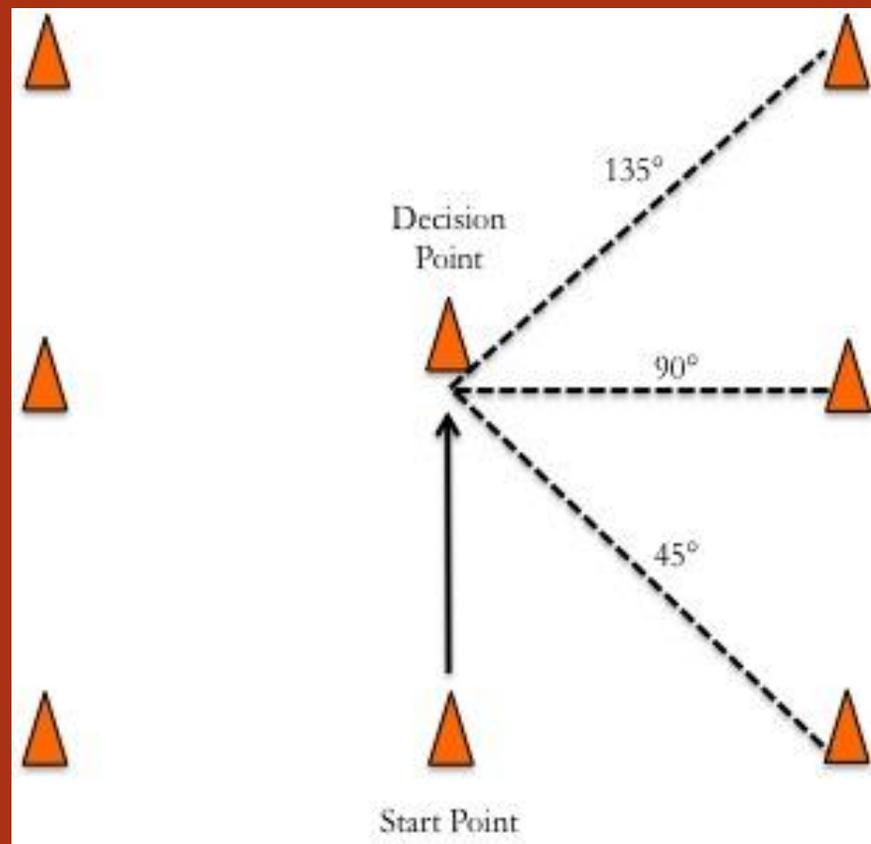
shuffles while being performed forward, backward, lateral, scissor progression to traveling line hops. The difficulty can be increased in the same direction of the drill by giving the LEO a series of numbers to repeat or require them to phonetically spell a word (e.g., “power”

= Papa, Oscar, Whiskey, Echo, Romeo) given at the beginning of the drill. Other techniques for law enforcement multitasking can be the use of their radio, catching a reactionary ball, or calling out an object's or person's location and/or direction.²

CONE DRILLS/REACTION

Focusing on the LEO's footwork, body balance, and the ability to accelerate and decelerate effectively is the purpose of cone drills. As preconditioning to the agility training, LEOs should master changing direction from a low athletic stance and the footwork required to change direction at a given decision point. From the decision point (Figure 1) LEOs should first work on the 135-degree directional changes in both directions (left and right). As LEOs begin to control movement and

Figure 1



are able to decelerate, change direction, and accelerate, they can progress to the 90-degree and then the 45-degree drills. To increase the difficulty of the cone drills, change directions (i.e., forward, lateral and backward), number each of the cones (both left and right) and use a number or cardinal direction to identify which cone they run to from the decision point.

In the field, LEOs make a number of decisions based on visual cues.⁸ It would be to their benefit to build decision-reaction ability during these drills based on visual stimuli versus audible stimuli.² Movement forward, laterally or backward is important for offensive and defensive maneuvers with law enforcement, which is the rationale for the specificity of the cone drill with the lateral or forward “J” or “L.”⁶

CONCLUSION

When conducting agility training with LEOs, it is important to progress them both physically and mentally to prepare them for an event they may encounter while on duty. Agility should be developed through proper training programs where LEOs can progress in skill, strength and power, and where modifications can be made by the tactical facilitators for optimal benefits. ■

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