



BALANCING High Operational Load While Sustaining Conditioning

BY SHANE IRVING

The drain on domestic tactical police units is as high as it ever has been, given the heightened threat environment of the past several years. Specialist law enforcement resources are under constant strain to maintain operational and organizational outcomes. The high operational tempo has a cumulative effect that disturbs many functions, including skill enhancement, personal development, work/life balance, and physical conditioning maintenance and improvement.

OPERATIONAL CAPACITY VERSUS CAPABILITY

Capacity refers to the specialist resources, manpower and operational tools required to complete a successful resolution. Capability is how the essential “human capacity” is utilized. For example, it may take 15 highly trained tactical response operators to safely execute a high-risk warrant. If those members have been engaged in other operational activities previously, or on call, then the overall unit capability is affected as a direct result of reduced capacity. In other words, if those 15 tactical response operators worked all night while dressed in heavy, load-bearing personal protective equipment (PPE), then fatigue may become an issue if they are not provided enough time to rest.^{1,2}

If the team is recalled to duty the next day, optimum performance can be affected if they are not adequately rested and recovered; therefore, the end state capability is effected by the diminished capacity. This balance of operational needs and maintaining optimum human output capacity is a constant juggling act for law enforcement officers. Research and recent literature has explored the effects of

fatigue and stress on law enforcement officers and the ability to make time-critical decisions.³

Research also shows that law enforcement officers are affected by stress.³ Other supporting evidence suggests physical performance is affected by altered sleep patterns and stress.⁴ The same applies to specialist tactical response officers; they should not be expected to be able to perform any physical conditioning program with any level of success, especially involving strength and power, while in a fatigued state. This then raises the question, what is the best way to manage and sustain physical conditioning performance in a highly stressed workforce that relies on physically performing at an optimal level every day of the year?

DISCUSSION

Recently, interagency discussions and observations have occurred in relation to human performance and how specialist law enforcement officers handle the continuous rigors of long reinforcement training cycles, particularly those including close quarter battle (CQB). The following situational example from personal observation provides some insight on the physical stress of training and CQB. The example focuses on the tangible performance of law enforcement officers during an intense, protracted period of complex skill development. The performance activities observed during this period of interest were tactical shooting and building clearance scenarios while wearing full PPE. It was noted that at the end of the training week, officers’ scores plateaued and in some instances decreased, despite them having more experience.

After several weeks of observation, an anecdotal performance bell curve was noticed. The directional staff stepped back from the program delivery and looked at not only the curriculum delivery and duration, but also the additional physical stressors of physical training (PT) conducted in the mornings on top of the already robust 10-hour days of CQB. After weeks of high intensity physical activity plus PT every morning, these officers were suffering from physical and cognitive fatigue.

Upon recognizing this, the directional staff immediately halted the PT in the mornings and reduced the length of physical activity. Further, they provided the officers more rest time at key breaks during the day. The staff also took the officers through mobility, foam rolling and sports massage sessions, and had them take beginning yoga classes and learn relaxation breathing techniques. A recognizable improvement in performance was observed.

Sometimes changing a schedule or roster or altering the focus can allow for recovery, stress reduction and a refreshing view for law enforcement officers. Dealing with immediate needs, and in some instances, giving officers time off to enhance recovery, is often forgone until paperwork is completed or physical training is undertaken, even in a fatigued state.

Most law enforcement officers want to physically train as often as they can, even at the risk of overtraining or inducing fatigue. A respected and credentialed tactical facilitator can have a strong influence on team leaders and decision-makers by closely monitoring law enforcement officers’ workload and performance

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indicators. Mobility and exercise therapy may assist in recovery and managing law enforcement officers' ability to return to a normal routine after being adequately rested.²

Some strategies to manage work-force fatigue and optimize physical performance include:

- **Managing the roster.** Do all of the officers need to be back on deck first thing the next morning after a strenuous night? Can a flexible work model be introduced to allow supervisors to grant officers time off to recover if needed?
- **Prioritizing immediate needs.** A reduced capacity through trying to achieve too much directly impacts capability. For instance, if the officer is overreached due to poor sleep patterns or protracted periods of high tempo physical work, their capability will be reduced.
- **Looking at the overall roster and upcoming team activity.** If there are periods of high complex skill development, formal training courses or planned operational activity, adjust the PT program to accommodate for heavy workloads. Additionally, plan on maintenance and sustainment rather than a period of focused physical improvement.

- **Mitigating organizational stressors.** Internal structure changes, policies and practices can have a large effect on officers.⁵ Mitigate these stressors by acting on whatever change is required quickly without lament. It is important to deal with the immediate situation efficiently so less time is given to workplace stress and more time is placed on improvement.

CONCLUSION

Research on workplace-induced law enforcement officer fatigue and the physical impacts of operational workload show that any ability to reduce workload and improve recovery will result in an improved and more balanced workforce.^{1,3} This precarious balance, while very difficult to achieve, must always be the focus of tactical facilitators. Every opportunity to enhance the ability for law enforcement officers to physically perform at their very best is crucial and should not be ignored.

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