

SWAT FIREARMS: ARE YOU TRAINING OR PLAYING?

Firearms training:
The process by which an officer acquires, improves and maintains the skills necessary to win a lethal threat encounter with assigned duty weapons.

Playing: Engaging in enjoyable activities.

By Bret Pagnucco



For today's officer, the ideal training program combines training and playing, as the expectation for modern training is that it must be as entertaining as it is informative. The difficulty lies in creating a program that maintains a proper balance between training and playing. Training that is not structured or supervised often turns into play, as play is more fun and less demanding than actual training.

In relation to firearms training, it must first be recognized that firing the majority of qualification courses is *not* training. Qualification courses have little or no value in preparing officers for a lethal threat encounter; they are a legal requirement. In my opinion, firearms instructors and rangemasters should post the below message in their office and on the range: *When you need to prepare for the day that you will have to shoot someone at a known distance, in a predetermined amount of time, using a specific number of rounds while standing out in the open without facing any chance of injury and having no fear of striking bystanders, practice the qualification.*

Practice for the qualification course of fire is only necessary when the qualification is imminent, and should be necessary only as a refresher on the structure and timings of the course of fire. Many agencies and officers believe that any SWAT qualification course is the Mount Everest of weapon ability, and upon firing a perfect score they have reached the summit of their abilities and need not concern themselves with any further preparation for a lethal threat encounter. Does anyone believe that mastering a Tai Bo workout video is good preparation for a five-round mixed martial arts match with an opponent of previously demonstrated ability and experience?

The essential difference between training and playing is the result. Proper training is goal-oriented and



end product-driven; play is simply having fun and enjoying the moment with no other goals or measurement of success required.

Examine your SWAT team's firearms training as well as your personal training time. Did your last session at the range have clear objectives and performance goals? Did it take into consideration a specific component of the overall firearms training program, or did you just go to the range and play?

Individual training is rarely structured and often has no pre-established goals. When an individual officer or group visits the range, they will often practice a qualification or fire at close range to the target in an attempt to produce a "good target" or "nice group." They are often casually attired in t-shirts without body armor and are unencumbered by their standard gear. There is little or no pressure internally or externally to push past the current



level of ability. This is play; the primary focus is feeling good about their abilities and enjoying the range time. Timed courses of fire or skills that are difficult and produce poor targets are avoided to prevent the opportunity of embarrassment over an “ugly target” or “poor grouping.” This is particularly true of tactical operators who are on the range and being observed by officers outside SWAT.

This phenomenon is prevalent in many agencies and tactical teams. Range training is often poorly structured and does not follow an established training program. Most accredited tactical teams have an established training matrix that addresses the multiple disciplines associated with SWAT-related duties. This is an established list of required training that must be completed annually to ensure the team is current in every discipline such as HRT, explosive entry, barricade resolution, less-lethal, dynamic breaching and first aid, among others.

Firearms proficiency requires multiple interrelated disciplines and should also be subject to a training matrix that ensures officers are current in all aspects of duty weapon use. Firing the required annual qualifications for each weapon in a tactical operator’s inventory should be a one-attempt completion that allows for maximum training time. If you are not prepared for the qualification on the first attempt, you are obviously unprepared for a SWAT



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Each firearms training session should begin with a stress drill competition fired by officers in full deployment kit. This determines both individual and unit readiness for a lethal threat engagement. The drill should incorporate many of the skills to be addressed that day within the firearms training matrix. On completion of the stress drill, the training matrix should be utilized to address training goals for the day. Skills such as weapon transition, multiple target engagement, shooting on the move, support side fire, disabled drills and gas mask firing should be trained, and the training recorded as completed by the training officer. On completion of the training, a repeat of the stress drill should be conducted and results compared. Only the initial test score counts toward any competition.

Operators will naturally become aware of the process and will adjust their individual training to accommodate the requirements of the matrix. Play time will decrease and training will increase with the necessity to demonstrate full competence in all firearm-related skills, not simply those associated with a known annual qualification course of fire.

A gunfight is a competition; the combatant who attains the first solid hit usually prevails and wins the battle. Therefore, safe and healthy competition is encouraged within the team and unit during all aspects of the training. Turning target systems or shot timers make it a simple process to accurately assess individual ability and ranking for the course of fire. Keeping track of individual scoring during courses of fire allows for determining each stage winner and an overall champion. These competitions are the “play” in your training program, and when

properly developed they will dramatically raise firearms proficiency throughout the team. Individual results can be posted much in the same manner as golf course leagues, and a set of trophy plaques presented and posted annually generates pride and interest in weapon proficiency. Ancillary awards can recognize individuals as “most improved” or “fastest miss” to further promote the fun aspect of the program.

Just as firearm competitors utilize standard drills to determine their ranking within their discipline, standard drills can be incorporated into the training matrix that will allow the individual officer to determine his level of competence and monitor improvement, just as some officers track their workouts to gauge progress in the gym.

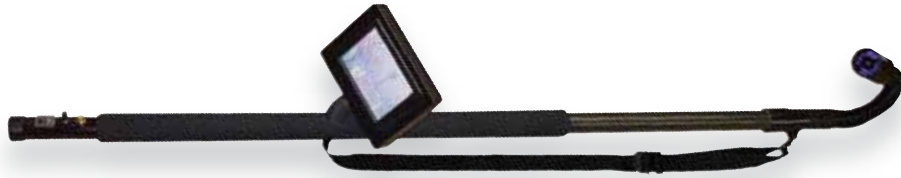
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Granted, the initial establishment of the training matrix for your unit and administration of the competition process will require some effort for those responsible for firearms training. Excellent training programs do not just happen; someone has to step up and provide the leadership to establish and

maintain the training program’s operation and relevance. Hopefully that someone is you. //



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