

Hierarchical Training, Standards, and Self-Evaluation

By Chris Fry (12/6/2012)

Shoot, stab, strike, grapple, impact, illuminate, parry, tourniquet, challenge, diffuse, run or lift. The combat arts for a well-rounded practitioner, C.C.W. holder, officer, or operator comprise numerous disciplines and sub-disciplines. How does the citizen, law enforcement officer, or average military serviceman maintain proficiency in each discipline while living an everyday life filled with family, jobs, obligations, and limited resources? Is proficiency in each discipline required and desired, or does the cliché "Jack of all trades, master of none" apply?

I believe that "Multidisciplinary Proficiency" is necessary when considering the current environment in which we live and operate. In this article, I will outline essential core disciplines—the development of a training hierarchy and a review of performance standards and self-evaluation aid in developing this hierarchy. I base this analysis on my experience, studies, and continued attempts to improve my understanding and application of these disciplines through training and pressure testing. It is not an "expert" opinion but rather a seasoned student's experience. I hope this article might answer some individuals' questions about scheduling and how to prioritize their training to attain and maintain proficiency accurately.

The Problem

Except for elite military units and specific special response law enforcement teams, we citizens, patrolmen, and infantrymen will rarely have the luxury of knowing what type of combative encounter we may face. If I had known I would be in a gunfight, I could have planned accordingly or avoided the situation altogether. Herein lies the crux: having the skill sets necessary to deal with various situations. Having a black belt or possessing a C.C.W. does not prepare me for what I may encounter. One must have variable force options and skill sets to deal with dynamic, changing, combative environments. "Specializing" in today's world could spell disaster.

Essential Solutions

Proficiency in five core disciplines and their sub-disciplines should be acquired and maintained at a bare minimum. For me, these disciplines include:

1) Managing Unknown Contacts (MUC) – MUC encompasses verbal and physical challenge, diffusion, and avoidance skills. In my experience, it is one of the least taught but most utilized and important disciplines. I've spent more time talking to known and unknown contacts in my environment than fighting them. MUC is the most relevant skill in our defense profile; daily, this skill set may be used more frequently than any other in our lifetime as we age.

2) General Physical Preparedness (G.P.P.) – This, to me, is an essential combat skill set. Possessing the ability to run away from a potential encounter (or endure a prolonged encounter) should be our foremost tactical consideration. Without a base level of G.P.P., your ability to utilize the skill sets outlined below, except for firearms (which can be argued depending upon the range of the encounter), will be severely limited. Some could say that G.P.P. should be #1 simply because it leads to better health.

3) Practical Unarmed Combative Skills (P.U.C.) – I believe the ability to defend oneself unarmed should precede weapon/tool skills. Without unarmed defensive and offensive skills and the ability to counter sudden spontaneous attacks, whatever tools we possess could be quickly nullified. P.U.C. skills have been the easiest for me to seek out, train in, and attain. P.U.C. training also tends to be much more affordable than other disciplines

Essential P.U.C. Sub-disciplines include:

- Grappling/Ground Defense
- In-Fight-Weapon-Access
- Defense Against Armed Assailants

4) Edged/Improvised Weapons Skills (E.I.W.) - Edged/Improvised Weapons are prevalent, accessible, and can be carried in more places than a firearm. For me, they have provided a potential lethal force option to carry in non-permissive environments (N.P.E.). E.W.I. is in core disciplines due to the affordability of quality edged weapons, ease of concealment/everyday carry, and the relatively short amount of time it takes to acquire basic defensive and offensive proficiency

5) Firearms (C.C.W.) – Firearms come last in my hierarchy simply because there are non-permissive environments I cannot and do not carry in. Most of my work is in an N.P.E. I am limited to other options (see above). For you, it may be different, and firearms may be higher on your list with more training time dedicated to this discipline

The above is an example of my personal training hierarchy. This hierarchy may be different for you.

Proficiency or Empowerment

How do we acquire and then maintain proficiency in the outlined disciplines? I guess the bigger question is – what do you consider proficient? What standards do you hold yourself to? Is your training done to succeed and overcome the strictest of tests and standards, or slide by because you don't enjoy training that particular skill as much as another? Do you focus on empowering your training by feeling good about what you have done during a class or training session, or is your focus on challenging yourself and attempting to overcome previously set goals, sometimes failing?

These questions may seem redundant, but they should also make you step back from your current training regimen and consider where you're at, how you determine which discipline gets the most attention, and training time. Developing a training hierarchy is a highly individual process. Setting goals and following performance standards go hand in hand with creating a personal training hierarchy.

To quote veteran Law Enforcement Officer, M.M.A. Fighter and trainer Paul Sharp: ***"Skills degrade under pressure. Train to the highest possible standard; put yourself under pressure constantly and consistently. The rest will work itself out as part of the evolutionary process."***

Performance Standards and Self-Evaluation

There is no second place in a fight. Establishing performance standards for a specific discipline should not be a random process or left to our "instructor" to determine if we are good enough. Your instructor won't be there to help you during a combative encounter. Each discipline in our hierarchy should follow some self-evaluation process. A base level of proficiency needs to be demonstrable before shelving that skill set to focus more on another or seek training in a new discipline outside our core. The practitioner may train each core skill set/discipline under fixed-variable conditions and move into more complex multi-task/multi-variant combative simulations or conditions.

Determining performance standards for each discipline has the potential to be highly controversial. What I choose to be a basic standard may be far and away different than what you determine. For this purpose, the standards I provide below are "generic." You can use them or lose them. What is important is that you adhere to some self-evaluation consistently or risk stagnation and skill loss, which is unacceptable. These generic standards won't evaluate your ability to make applicable use of force decisions. There is no "good enough"; there is always room for improvement.

MUC Standards: Managing Unknown Contact skills, like all others, need to be trained into a conditioned response. Simply yelling at a paper 2D target is not enough. I should train and practice vs. a live, moving, speaking opponent. But, before jumping into a scenario against a live opponent, key challenge phrases need to be ingrained and quickly issued without conscious thought. Once achievable on command while multi-tasking (moving and accessing a tool simultaneously), you have met the first standard and can proceed to scenario work.

G.P.P. Standards: This is a highly individualized area, but there are some specific standards we can strive to achieve, which will help us determine how much emphasis we need to place on this discipline. One beneficial standard I have found is Ross Enamait's (RossTraining) burpee test.

When done in high repetitions, a burpee combines bodyweight exercises that tax your strength, endurance, and anaerobic capacity. Ross's standard is 100 burpees in 10 minutes for an average person/athlete and 5-7 min. for elite athletes. Because the burpee is a multi-body part exercise that works the upper body, lower body, and cardiovascular system and requires no special equipment, the burpee excels as a personal training modality and evaluation tool.

Other G.P.P. standards include any of the numerous LEO/MIL Personal Fitness Tests since each unit/agency usually has its own. An excellent resource to follow is Ace Any PFT from Stew Smith. Once one achieves a base PFT score, conduct 3-5 times/week to maintain this level, and the focus can move to other core disciplines/sub-disciplines or a new discipline.

P.U.C. Standards: Proficiency in practical unarmed combatives can be lifelong. While some have achieved a black belt in one style or system in 1.5 years, others have been studying a martial system for twenty and still have not attained this rank. Rank and meeting standards are different. In my experience, formal ranking in martial arts is highly subjective, and simply achieving a black belt or instructor credentials does not mean fighting is known and mastered.

P.U.C. standards should follow a more objective path. Specific categories of unarmed defense should be determined, trained, and then pressure tested. If the pressure test is successfully navigated repeatedly from variable opponents within the context of criminal assault, then proficiency has been demonstrated. Rehearsing a pre-arranged set of movements against a pre-arranged set of attacks is neither demonstrable of skill under pressure nor presented realistically. For P.U.C., a core set of skill sets and sub-sets must be verifiable:

1) Effective Default defense against spontaneous/ambush attack- Trained solo and with partners and then pressure tested via moderate to full force attack scenarios vs. single and multiple aggressors.

2) Demonstration of Speed and Power for a limited number of "Hard Skills" – These skills may include chin-jab, elbow strikes, axe hand, knee strikes, kicks, jab/cross, etc. (Specific skills up to the trainee and or trainee's coach/instructor to determine). Skill demonstration can be performed on focus pads/shields, then pressure tested via force-on-force drilling against padded assailants, and finally through moderate to full contact sparring wherein only specific techniques, thus demonstrating the ability to apply a skill on demand and during varying circumstances.

3) Standing Grapple/Clinch- the same hard skills trained at range from your opponent may be difficult to apply while clinched or standing grapple. Clinch skills are introduced, and they demonstrate proficiency via the ability to move in and out of and maintain control while in this range at will during moderate to full-force sparring. This range may also include defense against and application of grabs and holds.

4) Counter Take Down- negating an opponent's ability to tackle, throw, or pull to the ground. They have met a base standard when one can consistently deny these attempts during live, dynamic drilling and moderate to full-force sparring against opponents knowledgeable and trained in these assaults.

*In-Fight-Weapons-Access, Defense against Armed Assailants, and Ground Grappling are sub-disciplines, separate entities requiring specific time and focus. They fall under P.U.C. because they are a natural extension of practical unarmed combat and beyond the scope of this single article.

5) Edged/Improvised Weapons Standards (E.I.W.) - E.I.W. standards begin with demonstrating an ability to access a specific tool (In-Fight-Weapon-Access). This skill must be repeatable under dynamic aggression and moderate to full-force drilling, scenarios, and sparring. Demonstration of edged weapon hard skills such as movement off lines of attack, basic angles of attack, thrusts, slashes, strikes, and combinations of the above, both solo and under the pressure of attack

6) Firearm Standards (C.C.W.) - Similar to E.I.W., accessing the concealed (or stored) carry firearm solo and then under pressure of attack is fundamental and may supersede even marksmanship. Basic marksmanship standards can be utilized, such as two rounds into a 2-inch circle from 3, 5, and 7 yards with and without time pressure (timed drill). Combative marksmanship standards include two rounds in a 3x5 index card from variable distances under time pressure from in and out of the concealed holster, varied ready and body positions. Dynamic movement standards from in and out of the holster engage an 8-9 inch center of the visible mass target under time pressure while moving off the line of attack in varied directions. Note: I advise demonstrating proficiency for all of the above via square range drills before engagement in live force-on-force scenarios and drills. Some excellent resources I have found helpful in developing my standards include J. Michael Plaxco's book "Shooting from Within" and Pat Rogers's MEU-SOC Pistol Qualification Course (Page 2).

If your standards vary from mine, that's okay. What's important is that you are holding yourself to some performance standard and training the skills you need to work on based upon self-evaluation of those standards.

True Multidisciplinary Proficiency

Rarely are all or even multiple core disciplines trained in the same class or during the same workout. If we may have to traverse a force continuum ranging from verbal challenge to unarmed contact and perhaps even lethal force via the use of a firearm, why do we train them all separately? Secondly, can't we cover a broader range of skill sets in one workout, thus managing time and resources and accomplishing more if we batched several disciplines together? Most importantly, is having the ability to transition from one discipline to another under pressure more important than any single discipline individually?

It's good if these questions cause you to step back from your current training hierarchy. True multidisciplinary proficiency demonstrates that you possess a standard knowledge of each core discipline and can seamlessly transition between each during a combative encounter. Some excellent multidisciplinary or more commonly referenced "integrated" training programs are available, such as those offered by SouthNarc, Progressive F.O.R.C.E. Concepts, and InSights Training Center. Another excellent resource is the Integrated Defense Systems Club in Tennessee's Shadowboxing with Weapons audio CD and DVD, which guides you through an actual "multidisciplinary" training session.

Whatever you choose, first take a hard, honest look at what you are currently doing and why. Haphazardly jumping around from class to class or from skill set to skill set without reason or method is a sign of poor planning and preparation. A combative encounter may be completely random; our training and practice should not. Fill the holes in your personal defense profile before an actual threat discovers and exploits one of them.