

Bill Blackwood
Law Enforcement Management Institute of Texas

Physical Fitness for Part Time SWAT Teams

**A Leadership White Paper
Submitted in Partial Fulfillment
Required for Graduation from the
Leadership Command College**

**By
Robert Lister**

**Bay City Police Department
Bay City, Texas
August 2016**

ABSTRACT

Implementing a minimum physical fitness standard for part time SWAT teams will help improve officers' overall health and help improve the safety of the officers and the civilians. According to Tate (1999), research has shown "that individuals who maintain physical fitness standards have displayed the discipline and mental toughness to maintain a strenuous regimen are apt to be more focused on achieving tactical goals under adverse conditions" (p. 4). Currently, most part time SWAT teams are not required to maintain minimum physical fitness standards, and the officer maintains his own physical fitness. The purpose of this research is to discuss the importance of implementing a minimum physical fitness standard to improve the officers' overall health and safety. Requiring officers to maintain a physical fitness standard will help improve the officers' health. Oldham (2001) stated "Every year more officer's die from heart attacks or diseases related to the degradation of the body than all those who die from violent attacks and traffic accidents combined" (p. 74). A recommendation was made to have all part-time SWAT teams implement a minimum physical fitness standard.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
Abstract	
Introduction.....	1
Position	2
Counter Position.....	6
Recommendation.	9
References	11

INTRODUCTION

In 1966, an incident occurred on the University of Texas campus, where Charles Joseph Whitman climbed the University of Texas clock tower, and in less than 90 minutes, he killed 15 and wounded over 30 people. When this incident occurred, agencies did not have plans or equipment in place to handle a situation of this magnitude. The tactical assault on the gunman in Austin required the officers to negotiate a number of obstacles and demonstrate a variety of physical skills to safely reach their objective (MacLeod, 2007). Due to this atrocity, departments across the nation began forming special response teams who were trained and equipped to handle dangerous incidents.

Currently, most law enforcement agencies have or have access to a specialized weapons and tactics (SWAT) team. SWAT teams have been utilized in many different facets, such as hostage rescue, barricaded subject, high risk warrant service, and high risk search warrants (Hawkins, 1999). Almost every major law enforcement agency has a full-time SWAT team that trains daily; however, part time SWAT teams are only able to train once or twice a month. Most small to mid-size agencies either have a SWAT team or combine with another department to have a joint SWAT team. These are the part time teams that do not have the funding or the manpower to train more than once a month.

When SWAT teams were being formed back in 1966, agencies began a selection process that included a physical fitness evaluation (Cascio & McSweeney, 1996). Forty-five years later, small and mid-sized departments are still having issues with physical fitness requirements for their SWAT teams. Over the years, many tests have been

studied to determine an appropriate physical fitness test for police officers. Full-time SWAT teams will experience less of a problem implementing a mandatory physical fitness program than a part time team (Kolman, 1982). Most full-time teams are allowed team physical fitness training while on shift, while part-time teams are unable to allow on-duty time for physical fitness training. For part time teams, this should not be an excuse not to exercise, and they should still maintain acceptable standards set forth by the department on their own time. The implementation of minimum physical fitness standards should be required for part-time SWAT teams. If physical fitness standards were required, it would improve officer safety as well as the safety for the citizens. Having fitness standards would also decrease officer injuries and improve the SWAT team morale. Being physically fit will ultimately improve officers' health.

Some of the issues concerning implementing physical fitness standards for small to mid-sized departments would be losing personnel who are unable to meet the required standards. Another issue would be having manpower shortages, where there would not be enough physically fit officers who would meet the minimum standards. The last issue of fitness standards would be the department financial cost of losing team members who do not meet the minimum standards.

POSITION

For years, there have been issues with officers not being physically fit. Implementing a minimum physical fitness standard for part-time SWAT teams will improve physical fitness and help improve officer safety and morale for the team. Implementing this standard will decrease officer injury and improve officers' health.

SWAT team members have an ethical obligation to other team members and citizens to maintain a healthy fitness level (Sanow, 2008). Team members need to be able to assist other members, which might mean running, pushing, lifting, and carrying. Sanow (2008) indicated that it would be like showing up at a gunfight without a gun or not showing up at all since unhealthy team members really cannot help. According to Sanow (2008), many fitness standards have already passed court challenges.

Many agencies have implemented the Cooper physical fitness test, which consists of a 1.5 mile run under 16 minutes; this is an aerobic test. The 1.5 mile run will help predict how one can handle 2 minutes of higher exertion. Sanow (2008) stated, "This predicts how well you can survive just 2 minutes of higher levels of exertion" (p. 6). More of the test consists of 30 pushups with no time limit and 30 sit-ups in 60 seconds. This test will check upper body strength. Having upper body strength will help in carrying an injured officer. Another part of the test is to run 300 meters in under 70 seconds and a standing jump of 15 inches higher than the standing reach, which helps determine leg strength. Having leg strength will help in clearing a 6-foot wall. This physical fitness qualification relates to real tasks that SWAT officers could endure on a call (Swon, 2001).

According to department policy, the Bay City Police Department follows the guidelines and standards set by the National Tactical Police Officer Association (NTOA, 2008). The guidelines and standards require an applicant to voluntarily apply and understand that a position on the team could increase the risk of injury. After applying, the applicant would interview with the team commander, team leaders, and department command staff. If an applicant passes the interview, he/she must pass the new Cooper

age and gender physical fitness test with a minimum score of 70. The test consists of 35 push-ups and 33 sit-ups in one minute, a 300 meter run, a 40-yard dash, and a minimum of two pull-ups; this is done while wearing all operational equipment used during SWAT runs. If the applicants are able to meet the minimum score of 70, they become a part of the team. The Bay City Police Department SWAT policy requires all team members to take the new Cooper age and gender physical fitness test quarterly and must still pass with a score of 70.

Tate (1999) stated that “Using the experiences of the past, coupled with future needs, an argument can be made that fatigue, stress, and physical fitness are more important than ever before” (p. 4). For many part-time teams, physical fitness is left up to the individual. This causes a problem for the team, as each member will vary in physical fitness. Even though part-time SWAT teams are not all physically fit, they still need to “emulate worst case scenarios, including harsh physical conditions, evaluate their performance under the effects of fatigue and duress and realize the effect on their work product” (Tate, 1999, p. 4). Commanders and team leaders can use this information to determine the teams’ capabilities, shortcomings, and where improvement is needed to avoid future problems.

In addition to officer safety, being physically fit also improves officers’ performance. Well-conditioned officers look and feel better but are less affected by fatigue and will perform at a higher rate than one who is not physically fit (Kolman, 1982). According to Tate (1999), being physically fit can have a direct influence on fatigue resistance, along with providing a foundation for performance enhancement in

the field. A difficult tactical approach on a stronghold will always require strength and endurance.

Also, a physically fit person is more likely to keep their pulse rate in an optimal range under exertion than an unfit person. A high pulse rate can affect motor skills significantly during an operation. It has been proven that “Individuals with a long term physical fitness habit and have displayed the discipline and mental toughness to maintain a strenuous regimen are apt to be more focused on achieving tactical goals under adverse conditions” (Tate, 1999, p. 4). Physically fit officers are also more able to make solid decisions under duress. Siddle (1998) found that raised heart rates have a direct effect on the performance of motor skills. An optimum heart rate can be achieved where skill performance is enhanced, but too high of a rate can be an impairment (Tate, 2001).

Physical health is also another reason why there should be physical fitness standards for part-time SWAT teams. Most officers, when they graduate the police academy are in the best physical shape, and shortly after beginning their law enforcement career, stress on the job, shift work, and other issues take a toll on officer’s health (Oldham, 2001). The long hours and shift work cause officers to have poor eating habits and no time for exercise.

As officers age, they fall into a routine of family responsibilities, job related duties, injuries, and lack of sleep, which all lead to an officer becoming unfit (Oldham, 2001). When officers finally realize their health is deteriorating, it may be too late to correct the problem. Oldham (2001) stated “Every year more officers’ die from heart attacks or diseases related to the degradation of the body than all those who die from violent

attacks and traffic accidents combined” (p. 75). Due to these severe health problems, many officers are forced to retire early. By officers being more physically fit, departments will lower workman’s compensation claims and less sick time may be taken by officers because of health issues related to being unfit (Oldham, 2001). According to Oldham (2001) “Cardiovascular disease is without a doubt a killer and one that can be especially so in the high stress environment that a police officer occupies (p.76). Each day, over 600 people die from cardiovascular disease.

Having physically fit officers also increases morale on any SWAT team. All officers are not created equal, and they become disgruntled when they are unable to maintain their physical fitness and stamina as before (Green & Paidousis, 2002). Older officers and unfit officers have to train harder just to match the younger and physically fit officers. To motivate officers, the commanders and team leaders must come up with incentives and ways to make physical training fun and interesting for the team (Green & Paidousis, 2002). Team building exercises that require some type of physical activity is one of many ways to improve physical fitness and morale for the team at the same time. Knowing that most part-time teams can only train once a month due to manpower and financial reasons, the training session must include physical fitness training as a team. Team physical fitness is just another way to increase morale; maintaining physical fitness training while officers are off duty inspires others to continue their training (Green & Paidousis, 2002).

COUNTER POSITION

There are several concerns regarding the implementation of physical fitness standards for part-time SWAT teams. The first concern will be the loss of qualified

SWAT officers who were already team members. Before the Bay City Police department implemented physical fitness standards for the part-time SWAT team, the department only required a firearms qualification to become a member of the team (Bay City, 2011). The Bay City Police Department gave a time table of one year to meet the fitness standards set by the department. Once that time has been met, and the officer is still not able to pass the minimum physical standard, the officer could have the option to stay on the team but would not be allowed to make entry on SWAT runs and would be required to maintain perimeter security during those runs. The officer would be given one more opportunity to pass the physical fitness test four months after the previous test. If the officer should fail the physical fitness test a second time, the officer will be removed from the team (Bay City, 2011).

Even though the team will lose team members, it will decrease the chance of civil liability for the department. Every SWAT call-out involves the possibility of having to take a life, and every SWAT officer carries weapons that are more destructive than regular police officers (Snow, 1996). One study showed that physical fatigue causes poor decision making, and poor physical fitness leads to physical fatigue during high levels of stress (Snow, 1996). An officer in good physical health and fitness will make better decisions under high stress. If officers are not in good physical health and are not physically fit, their decision making during high levels of stress could leave departments dealing with civil liability. Civil liability is important and "One of the challenges is educating departments that the officers and community are at risk if the department has not addressed tactical fitness" (Wyllie, 2011, p.1). Officers have to

pass a fitness test to enter the field of law enforcement, and they should be expected to maintain that level of fitness throughout their career.

Another issue of implementing minimum physical fitness standard would be manpower shortages. Part-time SWAT teams have a smaller selection pool of members to choose from compared to full time teams, which can cause agencies to remove members due to poor fitness and unable to perform well under stress (Tate, 1999). Most departments that have a SWAT team require a higher firearms qualification than regular officers due to the increased possibility that deadly force could be used. SWAT teams may also require the applicant to be in good standing with the department and not on probation. Departments could require an officer to have a certain number of years with the department before they are able to apply for the team. With all of these requirements and adding a physical fitness standard, more applicants will be disqualified. If these issues prevail, one way to overcome this challenge would be for departments to develop a multi-jurisdictional SWAT team.

If a multi-jurisdictional SWAT team is formed, the agencies involved shall develop appropriate agreements, protocols and procedures for support relationships between and among neighboring teams for the handling of extraordinary incidents (NTOA, 2008). The agreements should cover many areas that include agencies involved, the chain of command, standard operating procedures, and which agency is responsible for investigating any criminal investigation involving SWAT members.

The last counter position is the cost of losing a SWAT member because of implementing a minimum physical fitness standard. When a SWAT member is accepted on a team, the cost to train and equip the member is expensive. The training

for a SWAT member is extensive, from a basic SWAT school to specialized training. If a physical fitness standard is set and the applicant does not pass, the department will not have to spend money on equipment and training for those applicants. For the members who are already on the team, they will be given a timetable to meet the minimum requirements. If a team member fails to meet the requirements, they will be removed from the team. The training the officer received could still be utilized on patrol if needed, and the equipment can be given to the next member who makes the team.

RECOMMENDATION

Part-time SWAT teams in the state of Texas should implement a minimum physical fitness standard. By SWAT officers meeting the minimum requirements, officers will improve their overall health. With improved health, officers will be less likely to have heart attacks or health issues from being overweight (Oldham, 2001). With physically fit officers, departments will lower workman's compensation claims and sick time from health issues related to being unfit (Oldham, 2001).

Requiring SWAT members to be physically fit will increase officer safety and the safety of civilians. Increased officer safety is always a must for police departments. Physically fit officers will be better able to assist their officers during high stress situations. A high pulse rate can affect motor skills significantly during an operation. Tate (1999) stated that "Individuals with a long term physical fitness habit and have displayed the discipline and mental toughness to maintain a strenuous regimen are apt to be more focused on achieving tactical goals under adverse conditions" (p. 4). Being physically fit will also improve the safety of civilians, by making better tactical decisions under high stress situations. By improving physical fitness, morale on a SWAT team

will also improve. Conducting physical fitness training as team will build teamwork, fitness, and overall morale.

Even if part-time SWAT teams lose officers by not meeting the minimum standards, it can decrease civil liabilities. A high pulse rate can affect motor skills significantly during an operation. By removing officers who are not physically fit, it will lower the chance of failure during the mission and the chance of civil liabilities. If departments do not have enough officers who meet the minimum physical requirements, the development of a multi-jurisdictional SWAT team would be appropriate.

REFERENCES

- Bay City Police Department. (2011). Special response team manual. Bay City, TX: Author.
- Cascio, P., & McSweeney, J. (1996). *SWAT battle tactics: How to organize, train, and equip a swat team for law enforcement or self-defense*. Boulder, CO: Paladin Press.
- Green, D., & Paidousis, G. (2002, March). Ten ways to keep a team together. *Law & Order*, 50(3), 85-89.
- Hawkins, J. (1999, March). Violent confrontations are escalating. *Law & Order*, 47(3), 53-55.
- Kolman, J. (1982). *A guide to the development of special weapons and tactics teams*. Springfield, IL: Charles C Thomas.
- MacLeod, M. (2007, October 20). *Lost innocence*. Retrieved from http://www.crimelibrary.com/notorious_murders/mass/whitman/tower_6.html
- National Tactical Officers Association. (2008, September). SWAT standards for law enforcement agencies. Retrieved from <https://ntoa.org/massemail/swatstandards.pdf>
- Oldham, S. (2001, June). Physical fitness training for police officers. *Law & Order*, 49(6), 75.
- Sanow, E. (2008, March). Fitness: An ethical obligation. *Law & Order*, 56(3), 6.
- Siddle, B. (1998, December). *Pressure points and control tactics*. Millstadt, IL: PPCT Management Systems.

Snow, R. (1996). *SWAT teams: Explosive face-offs with america's deadliest criminals*.

New York: Plenum Press.

Swon, A. (2001, March). SWAT team entrance testing. *Law & Order*, 49(3), 101.

Tate, H. (1999, September). Fatigue, stress and phsycial fitness. *Law & Order*, 47(9), 72-76.

Tate, H. (2001, March). Stress during SWAT training. *Law & Order*, 49(3), 77-81.

Wyllie, D. (2011, October 27). Implementing a 'tactical fitness' program. Retrieved from <http://www.policeone.com/health-fitness/articles/4558219-Implementing-a-tactical-fitness-program/>