

**The Bill Blackwood
Law Enforcement Management Institute of Texas**

**Development of a Standardized Physical Fitness Test for SWAT
Officers**

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ABSTRACT

Developing a standardized physical fitness test for SWAT officers is relevant to contemporary law enforcement because there is currently no physical fitness standard in the State of Texas. Most SWAT teams have developed their own physical fitness standards, often with no validation process or proper research conducted to ensure that they have a good fitness program in place. The purpose of this research is to determine the feasibility for developing a standardized physical fitness test for SWAT officers. The method of inquiry used by the researcher included a review of articles and books, along with a survey distributed to various supervisors and SWAT commanders throughout the state. The researcher discovered that there is no consistent standard among SWAT teams and that most SWAT teams used a variation of the "Cooper Test." The researcher discovered that the variation in physical fitness standards resulted in some teams having a better overall conditioning program, with much higher standards, than others. A recommendation was made to have all Texas SWAT teams adopt the recommended "Cooper Test" with a minimum expected achievement of 90% on each of the test areas.

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INTRODUCTION

In the last four decades, law enforcement agencies nationwide have experienced a significant increase in violent incidents that have exhausted the available resources of traditional police departments. These incidents have included the University of Texas Tower shooting rampage in 1966 in Austin, Texas. Law enforcement has experienced mass murders in restaurants and schools, now referred to as active shooter incidents. There have also been violent confrontations with terrorist organizations and criminal street gangs (Snow, 1996, p. 1).

After the University of Texas shooting incident, police departments began to realize that there was a need for specialized units that would be trained and equipped to respond to, and safely handle, these dangerous situations. As a result of this realization, police administrators began the process of forming these specialized units, most commonly known as Special Weapons and Tactics teams (S.W.A.T.). Included in the formation of these teams was a selection process that included a physical fitness evaluation (Cascio, 1996, p. 8). These evaluations vary from agency to agency and often do not effectively evaluate the physical abilities that might be required of a SWAT officer during an emergency situation. According to Speed (2005), commanders need to ask themselves, "What physical capabilities do we want our operators to possess?"

The purpose of this study is to review the physical fitness standards for SWAT officers at a variety of police agencies and to develop a standardized physical fitness examination that will effectively evaluate the physical condition of a SWAT officer. This will aid in determining their suitability for assignment to a SWAT team. This standardized test will assist in the recruitment and retention of qualified SWAT officers

while providing these SWAT officers with a consistent standard that they will be required to meet. By providing these officers with a consistent standard, they will be better able to develop a personal physical fitness training program that will adequately prepare them to meet these standards on a consistent basis.

A variety of police agencies will be surveyed to ascertain the different physical fitness standards mandated of SWAT officers across the state. Several professional journals, articles and books will be referenced for the final proposed standardized physical fitness test. The goal of the final standardized test is to have a demanding physical fitness test that is task oriented and job related, and is able to withstand legal challenges. It will also aid in establishing minimum criteria for SWAT officers at every police agency, regardless of agency size.

It is anticipated that most of the police agencies surveyed will not have a standardized physical fitness that is task oriented and job related. Furthermore, it is expected that the current physical fitness tests at most of these agencies have been developed without any type of validation process and that there has been a significant amount of commander's preference in the finalization of physical fitness standards. This means that the team's commander has used some of their own personal preferences in determining what tasks to include in their respective physical fitness tests.

This research will provide police agencies with a sample standardized SWAT physical fitness test that, if adopted, will establish a consistent set of standards for current and prospective SWAT officers. It is hoped that this research will also educate

SWAT officers on the importance of validation processes in police (SWAT) physical fitness tests.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The issue of physical fitness among SWAT officers has been a focus of much attention since the first SWAT teams were formed. In the Texas tower incident, officers were faced with a tactical situation in an urban environment that they had never encountered. The safety of the public was at risk on a large scale and the local law enforcement community realized that they were ill-equipped and unprepared for such a scenario. 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). This tragedy led to the formation of SWAT teams and to the establishment of physical fitness guidelines for SWAT officers.

There have been many studies over the years at determining an appropriate level of physical fitness of police officers. The most notable and widely accepted validation study for police officer physical fitness was completed by the Cooper Institute in Dallas, Texas. Their study was extensive and surveyed numerous police agencies/officers before they developed a standardized physical fitness test designed to evaluate the physical conditioning of police officers. The test that they developed consists of the following tasks:

1 ½ mile run 300 meter sprint Sit-ups Push-ups Vertical Leap

The “Cooper Test,” as it is commonly called, has been used by many police departments as a gauge for the level of physical fitness of police officers (Cooper, 2002).

One of the problems associated with the “Cooper Test” is that it was developed for the average officer and entry level positions. This was emphasized in *The Management of Police Specialized Tactical Units*. The author states, “A review of the literature addressing physical fitness as a selection criterion indicates that the usual focus of attention has actually been directed toward entry-level selection, not toward selection for specialized assignments” (McCarthy, 2000, p. 48). While there have been isolated studies for limited groups and some individual agencies, there have been no wide spread studies conducted which would help establish appropriate physical fitness standards for SWAT officers.

According to Kolman (1982), “The physical demands of a SWAT team member are great.” As a veteran SWAT officer, this author is well aware of how physically challenging an average SWAT call can be. There are a number of tasks required on these calls which require a level of physical fitness that likely exceeds the minimum level required of entry-level police officers. In *SWAT Fitness*, the authors state that a “better fitness level = better performance under pressure.” The authors go on to make a great point that emphasizes the underlying point of this research study. They state, “SWAT officers are the backup. If we fail, who do we call?” (Brzycki, 2003, p. #87).

Physical fitness of SWAT officers is an area that has been discussed for many years but is often neglected by team leaders and individual SWAT officers. In

SWAT Battle Tactics, the author states, “You don’t need someone on your team who is physically unable to carry out the mission.” Police officers, and especially SWAT officers, should be in excellent physical condition, but most are not (Cascio, 1996, p. 8). There can be many reasons why some SWAT officers are not in excellent physical condition, but none of these reasons is acceptable. An unfit SWAT officer can do tremendous damage to the team, including lost lives (Snow, 1996, p. 5).

The literature indicates that there has been an emphasis placed on developing a physical fitness evaluation for police officers at the entry level. SWAT teams have adopted these standards, usually by Cooper, with little consideration given to the fact that SWAT officers should be above this standard. Furthermore, many teams are formed in small departments and excuses are given for why officers in those agencies cannot perform at a level equivalent to the performance of officers in larger agencies. The reality is that a SWAT officer should be able to meet a minimum standard, regardless of agency size. These standards need to be job related and legally defensible. There is a validation process that is necessary for a physical fitness test to be considered legally defensible. According to the Cooper Institute, a physical fitness test is only valid if it is job related and scientifically valid. In order for a test to be considered job related, it must have construct validity, which means that the fitness component (test) must be an underlying factor for performing a critical function of the job. The test also needs criterion validity, which means that the component must predict who can (or who cannot) perform the critical function (Cooper, 2002).

Scientific validity refers to the concept that the test is generally considered as valid in the field of exercise science. This concept can be simplified by describing it as having relevance to a specific area of law enforcement. The problem with accomplishing validation of a physical fitness test is that they are expensive to conduct (Cooper, 2002). These tests are normally validated by contracting with a private company to conduct the study. Since most SWAT teams are part time and do not have sufficient funds to conduct these studies, they are limited in their options. These agencies still need standards for their SWAT teams but they must decide the best course of action for determining their standards. They can do nothing and run the high risk of their tests being indefensible in court or they can adopt another agencies absolute standard. The best method would be to adopt the standards from the Cooper Institute, as those were prepared and validated for law enforcement, in general.

METHODOLOGY

The research question to be examined considers whether or not it is feasible and practical to have a standardized physical fitness test for all SWAT officers in the State of Texas. The researcher hypothesizes that most SWAT teams in the state utilize a physical fitness test that was developed with an emphasis on personal preference. This means that the test does not conform to any established standard that assures a consistent level of physical fitness for all SWAT officers, but rather to the type of test preferred by the team commander or team leader. The researcher further hypothesizes that some tests will set very low standards and expectations while the standards for

others may be too high and unrealistic or impractical, thereby discouraging prospective applicants for the SWAT team.

The method of inquiry will include a review of books and articles that discuss SWAT team selection and physical fitness. The review will also include research of case law, relevant to physical fitness in law enforcement. A survey will be distributed to several SWAT team commanders around the state, as well as to participants of Modules I and II of the Bill Blackwood Law Enforcement Management Institute of Texas (LEMiT). The instrument that will be used to measure the researcher's findings regarding the subject of developing a standardized physical fitness test for SWAT officers will include a questionnaire requesting specific information on the structure of each team and details on the physical fitness test employed by those agencies.

The size of the survey will consist of 14 questions, distributed to 37 different supervisors/agencies. Again, the surveys will be sent to SWAT commanders and LEMiT participants. The response to the survey instrument resulted in 26 (or 70.2%) of the surveys being returned. Five of the surveys were returned blank, indicating that the agency had no SWAT team, so the surveys were discarded. The information obtained from the surveys will be analyzed to determine the differences in the physical fitness standards on these SWAT teams. The researcher hopes that this will guide the research toward establishing recommendations for SWAT commanders and in illustrating the necessity for a standardized physical fitness test suitable for any agency, regardless of size.

FINDINGS

There were 21 surveys returned that provided a significant amount of information helpful to this research study. The answers provided to the various questions elicited a wide variety of responses and confirmed the researcher's suspicions that there is no consistent physical fitness standard for SWAT officers. While some of the departments stated that they used the Cooper Test, there did not appear to be any consistent standard used from the norms established by the Cooper Institute. Many other teams used a variety of tasks with little or no explanation for how the test was created and what the justification for the test was. This included such tests as 10 pull-ups, 200 meter sprint and a 330 meter sprint in full gear. These tests could possibly be effective assessments for a team commander if there is an explanation of job-relatedness that is attached to the test. This validation process can be out-sourced or can be done in-house, but some type of validation needs to be done.

The first portion of the survey sought information on the basic demographics of the surveyed departments. Two of the 21 teams were full time teams. The remaining 19 reported that they were part time times, meaning their SWAT officers had other assignments throughout the police department and responded to SWAT calls on an emergency basis only. The average numbers of officers per team (exclusive of the two full time teams) was 16.5 officers. The respondents indicated that they all utilized some type of physical assessment but only nine of the respondents indicated that their assessments had been through any type of validation. In fact, most of these validations

were simply adoptions of the Cooper Test standards. Most felt that their tests were good assessments of the qualities required of a SWAT officer.

There was one unique response from an unidentified agency about the credibility of their physical assessment. This respondent replied to this question by stating, "I personally have been a member of SWAT for 12 years. I have hardly ever broken a sweat on a call-out. Other than being able to carry your personal gear, there is not a lot of physical strain on an operation." The researcher can only assume that this respondent is either in tremendous physical condition, or has not been involved in many call-outs in his 12 years. Interestingly, 15 of the respondents indicated that they would consider adopting a standardized physical fitness test, while five were unsure and only two indicated that they would not consider this option.

There was some version of the Cooper Test used by 12 of the respondents. The times required by these agencies for the mile and 1/2 run varied from 12 minutes and 15 seconds at one agency to 18 minutes at another. There was also a huge variance in pushups with a range of a minimum of 20 to a minimum of 50 (generally with no time limit). Setups also had a wide variance from 20 to 50 in one minute. Even though several of the respondents indicated that they used the Cooper Test, only one agency, Dallas Police Department SWAT, actually tested their SWAT officers on all five of the tasks recommended by the Cooper Institute.

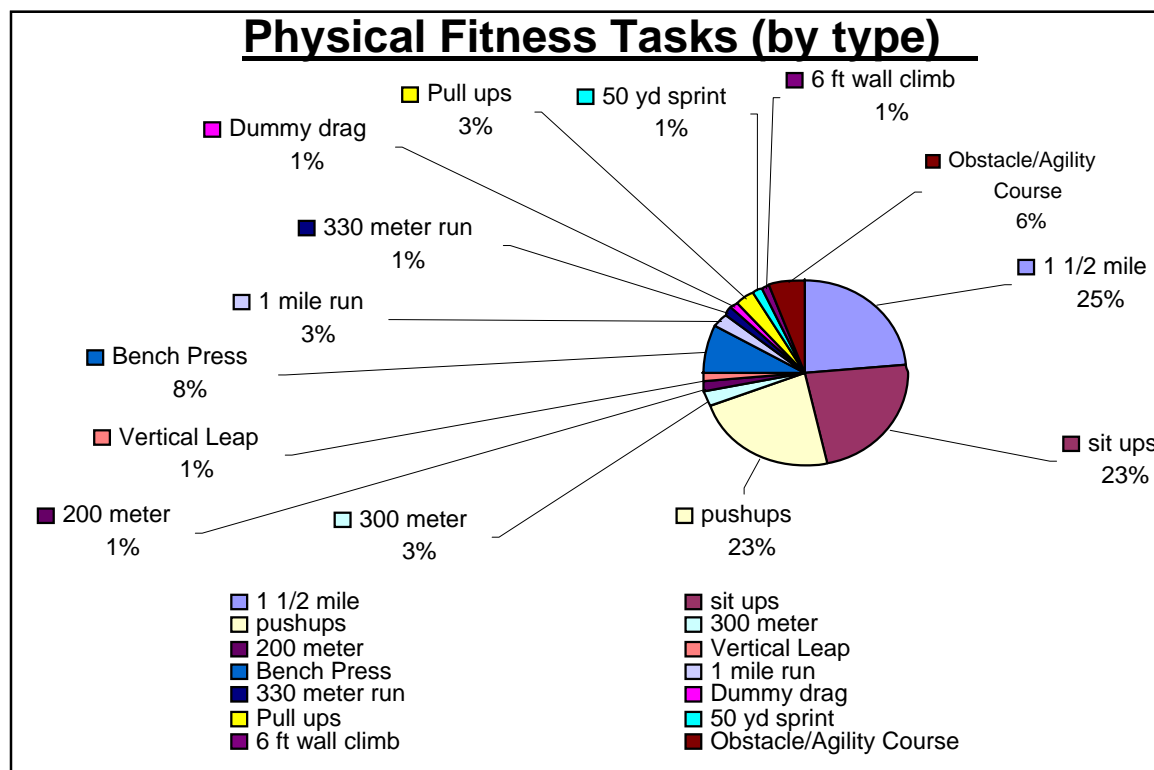


Figure 1. The above chart illustrates the breakdown in various tasks on the physical fitness tests reported by all of the respondents to the physical fitness survey. The percentages represent what percentage of agencies utilize that test for their physical assessment.

DISCUSSION/CONCLUSIONS

The researcher has been involved in law enforcement for 18 years, with the last 12 as a SWAT officer. In the last 12 years, the researcher has seen a tremendous amount of growth in the SWAT field. In the State of Texas, much of the credit for the professional growth of SWAT teams and officers needs to be given to the Texas Tactical Police Officers Association, commonly referred to as TTPOA. In 2004, the TTPOA Board of Directors established a SWAT Best Practices document to assist Texas SWAT teams with the development of policies and procedures to make their teams more organized and professional (TTPOA, 2004).

One of the TTPOA SWAT Best Practices was established policies for training, including physical fitness standards for SWAT officers. However, therein lies the problem. TTPOA's recommendation is just that, a recommendation. There is no further guidance given on what tests should be implemented and at what level. Furthermore, there is no mandate through TTPOA, or TCLEOSE (Texas Commission of Law Enforcement Officer Standards and Education), on the physical fitness standards of SWAT officers (TTPOA, 2004).

In conducting research for this project, the researcher learned that there were three primary explanations given for why there might be resistance to a standardized physical fitness test for SWAT officers. One of the reasons was that it is dangerous for TCLEOSE, or any other organization, to mandate certain areas of police services. This was interpreted as an unwillingness to give up a certain level of control over any level of the administration of a SWAT team. Essentially, there is a reluctance to be told what to do in the assessment of the physical condition of SWAT officers. Another reason given was that smaller agencies are not full-time SWAT teams and do not have the same amount of time to train as the full-time teams. Last, there is concern over finding money within agencies' already tight budgets to conduct validation tests.

In the State of Texas, many areas of law enforcement are necessarily highly regulated. All officers are required to qualify with their firearms at least once annually. There are levels of certification for peace officers from Basic to Master, each with certain mandated training hours required for certification. There is a proposal through TCLEOSE for additional training and certification for police instructors. K-9 officers are required to certify at least once annually in their particular fields. Each of these fields is

specialized areas of law enforcement which require a minimum level of proficiency. When it comes to physical fitness of SWAT officers, however, it seems as though the expectation of consistency and high levels of physical fitness have been left to the larger agencies.

SWAT operations often require multi-jurisdictional responses. This means that a particular operation may exceed the resources of one department and other departments may be called in to assist. A larger SWAT team may call upon several smaller SWAT teams for support. In these cases, all responding SWAT officers should be able to perform the minimum tasks required, many of which are often physically demanding. The excuses of having a small pool of candidates, no money or lack of training time for physical fitness should not factor in to any tactical plan. This scenario is best illustrated in the response to the initial assault on the Branch Davidian compound in Waco, Texas in 1994. Federal SWAT officers requested, and received, assistance from SWAT teams all over Central Texas (Ramsland, 2007). Many of those teams had to work closely on a variety of tasks. Regardless of the agency's size, or the team's status as full or part time, the ability to perform tasks should always remain constant.

When this research project was initiated, the plan was to evaluate agency standards and then develop a standardized physical fitness test to better evaluate SWAT officers. The initial intent was to eliminate the variations of the Cooper Test and develop a more tactically oriented physical assessment that would be more job related. The two main problems that were encountered with that approach is that not all SWAT teams have similar facilities and not all SWAT teams require all of the same specialized

skills, such as swimming or rappelling. An adjustment in the approach to the problem was necessary.

As mentioned previously, the purpose of the research is to establish consistency of SWAT officer physical fitness statewide, regardless of agency size. After in-depth analysis of the topic, the researcher concludes that there is no need to “re-invent the wheel.” It is evident that the wheel is working just fine, but that some agencies need to be introduced, or re-introduced to the “wheel.” This “wheel” is the “Cooper Test.” The Cooper Institute has already invested the time and money to conduct a proper validation study. Their standards are available to law enforcement through their web site, along with detailed scoring charts. By conducting their study, the Cooper Institute has eliminated the often cost-prohibitive process of physical fitness test validation. Any SWAT team, regardless of size, can use this study and adopt it formally into department standard operating procedures (SOP's).

The most appropriate level of fitness for SWAT officers on the Cooper charts is at the 90% level, which is categorized as “Excellent.” Most SWAT teams require their officers to score 90% or better on firearms qualification. This is a high level of achievement, usually higher than most officers within the department. If this score was achieved in an academic setting, it would give the officer a grade of “A.” Why should commanders expect any less of their SWAT officers on a physical fitness test?

At the 90% level, each SWAT officer would be in the “excellent” category by achieving the following minimum scores on all five areas proposed by the Cooper Institute:

<u>1 ½ M Run</u>	<u>Pushups</u>	<u>Sit-ups</u>	<u>300 Meter</u>	<u>Vertical Leap</u>
11:38 (min:sec)	38	42	:48 sec	23 inches

The adoption of these standards at the 90% level evaluates all relevant areas of physical fitness of concern to SWAT commanders. The validation study has been done so the cost factor is eliminated. There is consistency in the physical fitness of SWAT officers statewide. The individual components of the test accurately measure the physical characteristics desired of a SWAT officer, including aerobic capacity, anaerobic power and upper body strength. This test can be done by any SWAT team with access to a school track and provides officers with consistent fitness goals by which they can structure their personal exercise programs. If the test is administered at least semi-annually, SWAT officers will be more inclined to maintain their personal fitness programs so that they are prepared for the next assessment.

Nothing in this proposal should be interpreted as limiting the controls of team commanders. These commanders should be able to create other physical assessment tests, at their discretion, to further evaluate their officers. This could include running an obstacle course, pull-ups, wall climb, etc...However, these should be done in addition to the appropriate adoption of the "Cooper Test." While some commanders may balk at this proposal, it should be embraced for the greater good of the overall SWAT community. Every agency in the state will benefit from a tactical community that is in better overall physical condition.

SWAT officers take a great deal of pride in their chosen specialty. In Texas, the TTPOA has played an integral part in bringing the tactical community together and making it more professional and efficient. In *SWAT Fitness*, a direct correlation is made

between fitness and performance in tactical situations. Decision-making should be based on a responsible evaluation of the task at hand and not a knee-jerk reaction made out of desperation as a result of fatigue (Brzycki, 2003). This fatigue can be minimized, and performance during SWAT operations drastically improved, if our SWAT officers are in excellent physical condition. The adoption of the aforementioned "Cooper Test" standards, and consistent adherence to the 90% as a minimum score, will aid in accomplishing that goal.

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