

Police Defensive Tactics

More than a Collection of Martial Arts Techniques

By Bob McKean
Police Officer and Defensive Tactics Instructor (Retired)

Many martial artists believe that police defensive tactics is nothing more than a collection of martial arts techniques that can be used by police officers to make arrests and for self-defense. It is far more complex than that.

Two standards must typically be met when developing and teaching a police defensive tactics course. One standard is driven by police administrative and the other by line officers.

Police administrators are responsible for providing the best possible training to their officers, as well as to protect the interest of the community they serve. When selecting a police defensive tactics program, police administrators generally consider the following:

1. Are the tactics to be taught defensible in civil and criminal court? Lawsuits are very costly.

2. Will the tactics be acceptable to the community, or will the general population be outraged at the tactics officers use? In one example, a citizen died while resisting arrest in which the officer had used a carotid restraint (a chokehold). It was later determined that the hold contributed to the citizen's death, but it was not the cause (the cause of death was drug-related). A vocal part of the community applied so much pressure that the police administration prohibited the use of the carotid restraint except as deadly force. Only after a number of officers were injured and it was again shown that the use of a carotid restraint was reasonable, did the police administration reverse its policy.

3. Will the tactics meet the agency's specific needs? Each region of the country has different needs. The type of crimes, weather, terrain, and so on, influences the type of defensive tactics taught. Police officers in Florida do not wear heavy winter jackets, whereas officers in Alaska wear heavy jackets most of the year. Can the police arts taught to short-sleeved uniformed officers in Florida be effectively performed by officers in Alaska wearing heavy jackets?

4. How much cost and time will be needed to properly train the officers? Believe it or not, most police training is dollar-driven. Too many police agencies try to reduce their operations costs, and training is usually the area they cut first.

The line officers, the ones who will be actually be using their skills on the street, have a completely different view of what a police defensive tactics program should include. The street cop wants the following:

1. Whatever techniques and skills are taught, they MUST work. If a technique does not work most of the time, and if it is not effective in a number of different situations, officers will not use it.

2. A technique must be simple. If it's too complicated (to many moves) the officer will not remember it and will not use it.

3. Can the techniques be remembered? The vast majority of police officers do not train daily, weekly, or even monthly. They do not use their defensive tactic skills everyday. Police defensive tactics are like martial arts training; it's a perishable skill. You must train regularly to maintain your skill level. Unfortunately, many officers only receive defensive tactics training only once or twice a year, and this training may be only 2 to 4 hours in length. Many smaller departments do not provide additional training to their officers other than what they receive in the basic police academy.

Police defensive tactics are actually broken down into two areas. Arrest and Control Tactics and Self-Defense Tactics. Both areas are completely different, but they sometimes run together, depending on the situation. Arrest and Control Tactics are the techniques and skills a police officer needs to safely and effectively taken a suspect into physical custody. This area includes verbal communications, basic handcuffing, simple takedowns, and control holds. The idea behind arrest and control techniques is to use minimal physical force to secure a person. Depending on what city a police officers works in, these basic Arrest and Control skills are used in anywhere from 75% to 98% of arrests. Also, between 2% and 25% of arrests involve either an attack on an officer or a suspect resisting arrest in some way.

Police Self-Defense Tactics can also be broken down into two different areas: the skills needed to deal with a person who is resisting arrest or trying to escape from being arrested and the actual fighting skills needed to defend against a person who is physically assaulting or attacking an officer. Some suspects will physically fight a police officer so they can avoid arrest. This resistance can be anything from simply pulling away from a control hold to striking the officer or even using a weapon. Most of the time, such resistance is overcome by applying more pain control with a physical hold, using chemical agents (pepper spray), the use of less-than-lethal weapons (the police baton, bean-bag rounds from a shotgun, or a TASER) and the "pig pile:" when police officers outnumber the suspect and overwhelm him with numbers and brute force.

In the past 5 years, police defensive tactics trainers realized that cops go to the ground with their resisting suspects 80% to 90% of the time but that ground fighting arts were not being taught. Many police administrators fear that officers will be injured during training. In the 1950s and 1960s, many police departments adopted wrestling

and judo programs. These programs were taught by wrestling and martial arts instructors and resulted in many injuries. The other training problem was that most officers did not like rolling around on the ground. This reluctance may be hard for jujutsu students to understand, but officers do not like to get their uniforms dirty or damaged, and departments do not like reimbursing officers for cleaning or replacing damaged uniforms.

Use-of-force training is now “reality based.” Training is based on research as to what officers actually face. Use-of-force reports and incidents are consistently reviewed to see what circumstances officers are faced with, as well as what techniques were used, what worked, and what did not.

Police defensive tactics programs no longer use the “stick principle:” if your stick did not fix the problem, you just get a bigger stick. Today’s police defensive tactics instructors are educated trainers who are working police officers. The days of the neighborhood martial arts instructor of boxing champion being the local police defensive instructor is over. If you are not a police officer or a person with a law enforcement background, you will have a hard time being accepted by most police officers. They tend to listen and respect one of their own, someone who walks in their shoes. Police administrators want their own in-house instructors. Use-of-force issues and department policies must be included in all defensive tactics training. Lesson plans must be written and kept on file. Student performance evaluations must be recorded and kept. All of these documents may be needed for future litigation.

I was a certified police defensive tactics instructor for over twenty-five years and I’ve been a martial artist for over thirty-five years. I kept my two worlds apart. I would recommend that all martial arts instructors keep those two areas completely separate. As a martial arts instructor, you can be liable for what you teach to others who use or misuse what you have taught. What you might think is a “cool” and effective art may be in fact a dangerous and out-of-policy technique that a police officer should not use. Don’t place yourself in a position where you become the focus of a police training issue. You might find yourself in court, hiring an attorney, and maybe even paying out a large sum of money in a civil settlement. If you have police officers as students in your martial arts class, make sure that they understand that what you teach in class may not be in line with their department’s use of force policy and training standards. Keep the two worlds apart and protect yourself.

This article was previously published in the Kiai Echo