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Q&A With Tony Blauer

Loren Christensen talks to self-defense expert Tony Blauer about the warrior spirit, what drives him and more.

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All images: Courtesy of Blauer Tactical Systems

Tony Blauer is an expert on combatives and self-defense, and he's been a part of the CrossFit community for years. Loren Christensen talks to the creator of the SPEAR System to find out more about what makes him tick and what defines a true warrior.

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Blauer says a warrior is defined by his or her willingness to face adversity and do what's right.

How do you define a warrior?

That's such a hard one to answer. Warrior-like action can manifest itself in so many ways, in so many places: the courage to face battle, the courage to face fear, the courage to face reality... I suppose at the core, a warrior is defined by his or her willingness to face adversity and do what's right. One of my favorite quotes is from Emerson and pretty much sums it up: "What goes on around you compares little with what goes on inside you." In other words, the true mark of a warrior is often defined by their personal virtues. That's the philosophical answer. Combatively, or more specifically "athletically" speaking, I see warrior essence demonstrated in contact sports like boxing, football and so on ... However, many of these athletes haven't balanced that skill and responsibility with some of the more "Renaissance" virtues that once made the warrior a coveted class.

Why are warriors needed?

Obviously, there are many ways to answer this. Perspective will influence an answer, and I don't know if I should focus on the philosophical or the tactical ... the actual combat realm, but I feel that sheer ability and toughness are only two components of a totality. At the meta level, I think the warrior class creates balance in society. And not to get too esoteric—there's a DNA aspect to this as well ... some of

us are hunters, others are farmers, artists, doctors and so on ... I surmise there's the room to have a little warrior in every calling. But as this is a warrior interview, let me say this: there were always warriors, from caveman times to right now, so for me, it's not so much "why are they needed" but rather "when weren't they needed?"

Who influenced you as a warrior?

So many people have influenced me over so many years and continue to influence me. I've become friends with many people who are professional warriors and risk their lives every time they go to work. Even though I've met them through my courses, I'm like Angelo Dundee and they Ali or Leonard: they're fighting in the arena and I'm outside the ropes. These men inspire me to stay razor sharp and continually innovate new drills to address their concerns. Having said that, of course it started somewhere. For me, my first warrior heroes were television warriors. As a youngster it was Bruce Lee as Kato that transfixed me. Bob Conrad in *The Wild Wild West* was super cool. Sylvester Stallone as Rocky and Sugar Ray Leonard during the Roberto Duran/Tommy Hearn's years. All these men shaped or formed some idea of what toughness meant or exhibited something in the way they handled violence and adversity.

While I realize three of these guys were TV/movie people, if you study their stories, you come to realize that what made them successful were some of the virtues and elements of conviction, tenacity and will that are requisites for any warrior. Of course, Conrad was a darn good boxer as well as martial artist. Bruce Lee, well, he was years ahead of his time, and Stallone trained very hard and was actually a decent fighter. Leonard pulled off tactics and strategies in the ring with unreal competition that most fighters can only fantasize about. I remember for years in the '80s getting up in the early a.m. to go running and coming home and watching a Sugar Ray fight every day, studying his ring generalship, footwork, combos and then creating drills around them for my students. Incredibly, over the years I met and developed relationships with each man—save Bruce, who had passed away when I was just 13, but I ended up being good friends with his son, Brandon—and was able to share my experience and really connect with these people who inspired and drove me. Of course, over the years I've studied the Samurai mind, a great deal of Patton and other leaders who've shaped our world.

When I was 13 ... I told my mother that I wouldn't really need school because I was going to develop my own martial-art system.

Why do you do it week after week, year after year?

I don't know. It's what I do. Twenty-four-seven I have dreams of drills. I'm constantly tearing apart courses and training principles and searching for a deeper reality. Sometimes I have no idea where ideas come from When I was 13, my mother asked me what I was going to study when I was older, and I told her that I wouldn't really need school because I was going to develop my own martial-art system and be like Bruce Lee. She smiled, patted me on the shoulder and said, "OK, sweetie, we'll talk about this when you're a bit older." That was 30 years ago. I know she's proud of me, but I don't think she quite knows what I do!

Only another warrior can really stop a warrior.

Why are warriors a different breed?

A real warrior just is. It's like the DNA thing I mentioned earlier. So a real warrior, at the tactical level, finds himself gravitating toward the training, the analysis and the what if? Emotionally, warriors are different because they can focus on the bigger picture ... like determining what is the right thing to do for another person or for their society (based on their beliefs, of course). This kind of comes back to my answer for why are warriors needed I really think the warrior class is more a part of a huge human ecosystem that keeps us all in check, so to speak. I don't think there ever was a time when there weren't warriors, nor do I think there will be a time when the warrior will be extinct After all, only another warrior can really stop a warrior When the proverbial duel is over, metaphorically speaking, a warrior still stands.

Why is the "average" warrior willing to risk everything from embarrassment (I'm thinking of him screwing up) to injury to loss of life for the mission ("mission" defined as everything from chasing down a purse-snatcher to going into an Afghanistan cave)?

Most likely because of the calling, because warriors are goal oriented and because a true warrior is somewhat selfless. So the mission, the objective, the chance to verify the training is of tantamount importance to the lifestyle.



Blauer is constantly thinking of new drills and training principles.

How should a warrior's mindset be each time he trains?

That really depends on the phase of training he or she's at, but training should serve the ultimate objective. One of my favorite maxims is attributed to the Roman Legions: "Training should be like a bloodless battle so that battle is just like bloody training." Years ago, we coined a concept called "cerebral calisthenics"; in fact, *Martial Art Training* magazine ran a feature on it in the '90s. The premise is quite simple, and that is that all training should be three-dimensional; i.e., blend the emotional, psychological and physical arsenals. Anything you work on should connect to some sort of scenario so that, irrespective of the drill, there's an emotional and psychological rationale for the exercise. This way, the training triggers and creates connections between all three arsenals. As well, we remind warriors that to have theoretical confidence in training, it must be three-tiered, meaning, there must be physical conditioning, there must be skill development, and then lastly there must be strategic and tactical conditioning.

If you don't blend pain management and fear management into the training, you are not completely preparing yourself.

What should a warrior's mindset be as he moves into danger?

All our training is geared toward performance-enhancement protocols. I was once asked what the most important element of a fight was, and I smiled and said, "The result." To achieve this we start all our training attacking fear, since fear is the first opponent. One of our maxims is, "It's not the danger that makes us afraid; it's the fear of danger." In other words, to fully engage a threat with resolute focus, we need to understand what the risk is and train for the risk. This eliminates fear of the unknown. When we are in the tactical arena, in other words, the training is done and this is the fight. We strive to be totally focused on the task and the opponent.



Blauer integrates research about how fear affects performance into his training.

A huge part of our training encompasses over two decades of research into fear and how it affects performance, and we integrate these behavioral realities into our training always. Every single one of our drills blends emotional and psychological components so that "danger" is just another aspect of the training. In fact, even with our High Gear scenario equipment, we built it so that the dispersion properties of the gear allow for the transfer of energy on impact. This causes pain. Pain causes fear ... if you don't blend pain management and fear management into the training, you are not completely preparing yourself. We have another drill called "Emotional Climate Training," and this six-stage drill allows anyone to apply a researched formula to identify startle/flinch points, apply pain management and other conditioning aspects to almost any attack imaginable. What this does is help the warrior stay in the proverbial Zen moment and just focus on the threat. Again, my answers are never simple, as real danger evokes and inspires emotional and psychological reactions, so those systems that focus mostly on the physical don't really prepare for the totality of an assault.

What should a warrior's mindset be regarding the risk of getting hurt?

At the training level, we have a maxim: "Training must hurt at times but should never injure." Hurt heals; injuries are permanent at some level. Naturally, this mindset will carry itself over to real-world activities. At the same time, the realistic training attitude and effort creates a form of stress inoculation for the real world, provided the drills replicated the reality.



Blauer works with CrossFit athlete Jeremy Kinnick to demonstrate his warrior-athlete techniques.

What should a warrior's mindset be regarding the risk of getting killed?

This is just an extension of the mindset moving into danger and risk of getting hurt. Again, I come back to the psychology of fear and the need to manage it during intense stress and danger. Dan Millman once said, "If you face just one opponent and you doubt yourself, you're outnumbered." I love that because it sums up the simplicity of it all. In the heat of the moment, the warrior athlete must focus on the dynamic of the game, and any and every distraction potentially can derail the effort.

What should a warrior's mindset be regarding having to kill?

The scenario should always dictate the choices one makes in a confrontation. If the situation is credible, if the requisite level of force required to achieve "safety" requires it, then it should be approached simply as another tactic. I'm not trying to sound cavalier about it. Over the course of 20-plus years of teaching, I have seen graphically the results of choosing to fight back too late or not taking the threat seriously enough. Having had the honor and pleasure of

working with sport warriors like MMA fighters and boxers, as well working extensively with real-world warriors like soldiers and cops, I've seen my intuitions about the importance of mental preparation in conjunction with realistic training proven correct. In the real world, force must parallel danger.

*This interview was originally published in the book **Warriors**, available at LWCBooks.com.*



About the Author

Loren Christensen is Vietnam veteran, retired police officer and martial artist. He has written over 45 books and a host of magazine articles widely enjoyed by the "warrior community." Website: LorenChristensen.com.