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Dark-Alley Defense

CrossFit Defense fuses fitness with effective self-defense, teaching physical and psychological strategies for surviving an attack or a tough workout. Hilary Achauer reports.

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Many years ago, before kids and CrossFit, I was an amateur boxer. I competed from about 2001 to 2004, and during that time one of the most frequent comments I got was, "Wow, I bet if someone tried to attack you on the street, you'd destroy them."

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Tony Blauer demonstrates a palm strike on CrossFit Games athlete Jeremy Kinnick.

"Yeah," I'd answer, "I totally would if I could first get my headgear, gloves and mouthpiece. They couldn't hit below the belt or behind the ears. I'd need the fight to stop every few minutes so I could sip some water and strategize with my trainer. And the whole thing would have to end after six minutes."

In other words, I have no idea how to defend myself.

Boxing is a sport. Other than the fact that I'm more comfortable than most women with the sensation of getting hit in the face, I knew even at the height of my boxing training I'd be fairly useless in a street fight. Boxing is not self-defense.

CrossFit is not self-defense, either. It certainly helps to be strong, fast and agile, but your 200-lb. snatch and flawless butterfly pull-ups are not necessarily going to help if you are taken by surprise in a dark alley.

That's where CrossFit Defense, taught by self-defense expert Tony Blauer, comes in. My boxing training had taught me how to throw a punch, and CrossFit had made me an athlete. It was time to learn how to defend myself.

Managing Fear

I made the drive from San Diego to Valley CrossFit to attend the day-long CrossFit Defense seminar on the first Saturday in November. Our group of about 20 attendees included firefighters, CrossFit coaches, five-time CrossFit Games athlete Becca Voigt, and a man who had never heard of CrossFit. He had come because he was familiar with Blauer's work and ended up getting a crash course in everything CrossFit over the course of the day.

At the beginning of the seminar, the participants shared why they were attending the class.

"I want to take my mental game to the next level," Voigt said.

A female paralegal said she frequently visited clients after hours and wanted to feel safer when she walked through dark parking garages.

Another woman, Christine Shen, had just started CrossFit a month ago.

"I'm a small person, and I want to learn how to protect myself," Shen said.

I chatted with Shen during one of the breaks, and she told me a specific incident had driven her to sign up for the course.

"A colleague of mine was in her apartment at night, and the property manager, who was high on drugs, let himself into her apartment," Shen told me.

"He was naked, and he got on top of her and tried to rape her. He was over 6 feet tall, and she is 5'1"!" Shen said. "She fought him off until he gave up and left, but she was black and blue from head to toe. I thought if she could defend herself, I could, too. I'm 5'1" also. A lot of it is psychological."

Shen told me that if she ever got into a similar situation, she wanted to know how to defend herself, even against someone twice her size.

After the introductions, Blauer started the seminar by talking about the psychological side of self-defense and any stressful situation, including CrossFit. Helping with the class that day were Marine veteran and LAPD officer Cliff Byerly and four-time CrossFit Games athlete Jeremy Kinnick.

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but you can manage your
fear better.”**

—Tony Blauer

“Most self-defense focuses on the physical,” Blauer said before explaining that it’s just as important to be prepared mentally.

“It’s all about fear,” he told us, whether the test is CrossFit or any athletic endeavor.

“On competition day, you can’t be a better athlete, but you can manage your fear better,” Blauer said.

“Every single victim of violence said afterward, ‘I knew something was wrong. I had a bad feeling.’ If you have a bad feeling, stop and address it. That includes a CrossFit WOD. The less stressed you are about surprises, the more focused you are on your task,” Blauer said.

Blauer has a background in wrestling, martial arts and boxing and has been working with law enforcement and the military for years. He’s a natural, engaging speaker with a quick wit and easy warmth. Over the years, Blauer developed a self-defense strategy called the S.P.E.A.R. (Spontaneous Protection Enabling Accelerated Response) System. It sounds intimidating and complex, but the basic idea of the S.P.E.A.R. System is to turn the body’s natural startle-and-flinch response into effective self-defense. It’s about using your body’s instinctive reactions to your benefit.



“Come at me, bro.”

After Blauer's introduction, Kinnick stood in front of the group and talked about how he came to be involved in Blauer's course.

The basic idea of the S.P.E.A.R. System is to turn the body's natural startle-and-flinch response into effective self-defense.

"I have no martial-arts training," Kinnick said. "I wanted to learn ways to protect myself and my family. I'm bringing these techniques to my athletes, trying to spread it around. You can apply these techniques to your life right away. I've also been using the techniques in my CrossFit classes, helping my athletes get ready to go."

Whether it's a fight or a tough WOD, managing fear is a key to success, and the best way to manage fear is to have a strategy.

"Every fight is the WOD," Blauer said. "Every WOD inspires fear and requires a strategy. A bad guy is the whiteboard."

Outside 90, Fingers Splayed

In CrossFit, we constantly practice core-to-extremity movements. Blauer told us we can use those skills when practicing self-defense.

"So many of the movements you do in CrossFit are used in fighting," Blauer said. He brought Kinnick to the front of the room and shoved his hand in Kinnick's face.

"Kinnick is a med-ball. You grab his head and do Karen," he said, referring to the CrossFit WOD consisting of 150 wall-ball shots. "Do Karen like it's Rep 149, and turn him into a human Pez dispenser."

According to Blauer, many common CrossFit movements can be turned into self-defense tactics.

"You've done push-ups many times," Blauer said. If someone is moving toward you in an aggressive manner, "You can put your hands up and do a vertical push-up," Blauer explained.

The simple movement might just be enough to catch your attacker off guard, giving you a chance to escape.

"Stun and run is our objective," Blauer said.

Blauer then got the attendees up and introduced us to the concepts that form the foundation of the S.P.E.A.R System.

"Your arm is weaker with a fist," Blauer told us. To prove the point, Blauer had us divide into pairs and try to bend our partner's arms first with their hand in a fist, and then with their fingers splayed. The second position was markedly stronger.



Blauer demonstrate the Outside 90 concept. Note the position of his right arm and the angle at the elbow.

The other concept Blauer taught was that when the arm is outside 90 degrees (think arms up in front of your face, but with your forearms extended so the upper and lower arm form an angle greater than 90 degrees), it is much stronger.

Just as you could never learn Olympic lifting without touching a barbell, practicing these moves is essential to learning self-defense.

In our next exercise, we pulled our partner close using a bear hug. The defender experimented with keeping the attacker at bay with both positions: arms inside 90 degrees and outside 90 with fingers splayed. The second position worked even when the attacker considerably outweighed the defender.

Much like the CrossFit Level 1 Course, the CrossFit Defense Course is a mix of lectures and hands-on practice. In this case, “hands-on” is literal. You won’t get punched in the



Time to get up close and personal while drilling Blauer’s self-defense techniques.

face, and emphasis is always on safety, but you will be asked to practice escaping from bear hugs and headlocks, and you’ll even practice (gently) pushing someone’s face away with your palm. Just as you could never learn Olympic lifting without touching a barbell, practicing these moves is essential to learning self-defense.

One of the women I talked to said she had been to a self-defense course where they practiced only using focus mitts and dummies. She told me they weren’t really supposed to touch the other people.

While it might seem awkward to meet someone and then give them a bear hug a few minutes later, Blauer said getting comfortable with this feeling is as important as learning his techniques. In a sense, we were being inoculated against the shock of unexpected human contact. Spending a day experiencing what it feels like to have a stranger come in close contact helps lessen the surprise if it should ever happen on the street. As Blauer mentioned at the start of the course, mental preparation is equally as important as physical preparation—in any endeavor.

It’s a lot to think about, especially amidst the fear and confusion of a real attack. Fortunately, you don’t have to think. Arms outside 90 degrees with fingers splayed is the body’s natural flinch reaction.

To prove this point, Blauer showed a photo taken at a baseball game. The baseball bat had broken apart when the player hit the ball, and a large chunk of the bat went hurtling into the crowd. A photographer had captured the moment when most of the crowd realized a sharp piece of wood was headed for their faces. Every person, from senior citizens to young children, had their hands in front of their face, fingers splayed, arms outside 90 degrees.

“We all flinch the same way,” Blauer said, “and our hands come out to push away danger. We protect the command center, our head. You don’t need to practice. It’s in your physiology.”

What Blauer teaches is what to do after flinching, and how to use the body’s natural response to your advantage.

A Plan of Attack

Fear is part of our lives, whether we are ever attacked or not. We experience fear at work, in our relationships and, frequently, in CrossFit. Think Fran-on-the-whiteboard fear.

“You have to manage fear,” Blauer said. “If you can’t, you won’t have the neuromuscular skills to manage movement.”



"I need a volunteer for this next drill ..."

Blauer told us on the days we don't want to work out—when the WOD includes our most hated movement, when we feel tired or unmotivated—those are exactly the days we need to push through. While we might not make any great strides in our physical development on those days, we're learning important emotional lessons.

In a fight, the stakes are higher. You have to give everything you have, no matter how you feel. This is where it's essential to have a plan.

A fight or attack is like a WOD filled with your most hated movements.

"Nobody wants to get into a fight," Blauer said. However, CrossFit gives us practice pushing through fear and exhaustion.

In a fight, the stakes are higher. You have to give everything you have, no matter how you feel. This is where it's essential to have a plan.

Kinnick teaches the early-morning class at his box, and he has a habit of leaving the whiteboard empty until after the warm-up so his athletes never know what to expect. One day he went up to the board and started writing, "21, 15, 9." Before he could write "thrusters and pull-ups," his athletes started freaking out, panicking about the prospect of doing Fran.

Realizing his class was giving in to fear, Kinnick brought them together in front of the whiteboard. He spent time talking to all of them about making a plan. If the idea of 21 thrusters was too much, he told them to think of it as 3 sets of 7. He worked with each athlete to come up with a plan that fit his or her abilities.

"We saw incredible PRs," Kinnick said. "A number of people took their Fran time from 8 minutes to 4 and a half minutes. If you have a plan, the brain relaxes."

Blauer put it another way: "It's the difference between not being at your destination and being lost."

Putting It all Together

After discussing the mental aspects of self-defense, we got up from our seats again and moved on to the physical side of things.

There's no weight class in self-defense. Just like Shen's colleague, you might find yourself fighting off a person twice your size. Luckily, it only takes a little force to generate a lot of pain. To illustrate this point, Blauer had us take our partner's elbow and strike it to our own temple. Even fairly gentle taps hurt like hell.

"Women can defend themselves," Blauer said. "You don't have to be big and strong. An elbow can cut you up."

Now with our partners holding medicine balls, we practiced throwing elbow strikes and then moved on to knee strikes. Again, CrossFit experience came in handy.

"If you've done knees-to-elbows or box jumps, you can do this," Blauer said.

At this point, we had a number of easy yet effective defensive positions and moves in our arsenals: arms outside 90 and fingers splayed to escape close-contact clinches, and palm, elbow and knee strikes. We had learned how each of these movements flowed from our body's instinctive flinch response—and how to use that to our advantage.

Because it was a CrossFit course, it was time to turn all the training into a WOD.

Up until this point I had been paired up with women, but for the final drill I partnered with a bearded man taller and bigger than me.



Fingers splayed, arms outside 90 degrees at the elbow: your body's natural position of defense.

Blauer explained the workout. We would stand close to a pole and throw a medicine ball at the pole so it bounced back toward our face. After deflecting the ball with our open palms, it would fall on top of a box, which was set up to be about waist high. Then we were to strike the ball with our elbow, give it a knee strike, then turn around, where our partner was waiting to grab us in a bear hug, then a headlock. Our job was to escape and sprint a few yards to the end of the room. Then we would switch roles and keep repeating that for three minutes.

It wasn't equivalent to defending myself from a surprise, dark-alley attack, but that three-minute WOD gave me a taste of the anything-goes nature of self-defense.

The women I had worked with before were not only smaller than me, but they were also reluctant to put any force into the role-playing. My partner for the WOD had no such reservations.

Blauer counted down, 3, 2, 1 ... go! and I slammed the medicine ball into the pole, gave it a sharp elbow strike, then slammed it with my knee. I turned around and was immediately engulfed in a strong bear hug. I barely had a chance to fling my arms to the proper Outside 90 position and was so taken aback by the firm headlock that followed that I found myself trapped, my arms hanging uselessly at my side. I somehow managed to squirm away and ran to the end of the room, my heart pounding.

"Oh, it's on," I thought grimly.

The next few minutes passed in a blur. Byerly yelled out corrections every time I made an error—which was often—but occasionally I got it right and made a rapid escape. I tried to be as formidable in the bad-guy role as my partner, and when time was called we were both panting and sweating.

It wasn't equivalent to defending myself from a surprise, dark-alley attack, but that three-minute WOD gave me a taste of the anything-goes nature of self-defense. I saw how quickly everything happened, even when I was expecting every move. Early on in the course, Blauer had said that practicing self-defense builds up a psychological defense, like a metaphorical callus. Each drill or workout or practice session toughens the psyche for the challenges to come.

Fighting That Works

After it was all over, I asked Voigt what she thought of the course.

"The gym has tried to have me do jiu-jitsu, but it didn't feel like a position I would be in. It felt like the bedroom," Voigt said with a laugh. "I really liked the WOD at the end because the more tired I got, I had no time to think."

"The whole course was really well put together. I'm really happy I did it. It's one of the better courses to go to. I don't have a fighting background, and so this is just more tools in my toolbox."

Ken Cervera, an experienced martial artist who now trains at CrossFit Eagle Rock, said the CrossFit Defense course threw his martial-arts training out the window.

"It's simple, quick and efficient," Cervera said. "This is functional fighting, fighting that works. I really think this is the next step of CrossFit. It's the future."



About the Author

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