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Applied Fitness: CrossFit Defense

Athletes and affiliate owners explain why Tony Blauer's brand of self-defense is an important part of the CrossFit lifestyle. Rick Randolph reports.

By Rick Randolph

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CrossFit Founder and CEO Greg Glassman said, "The greatest adaptation to CrossFit occurs between the ears." It's not new skills or PRs that necessarily make us able to do more work, but instead a new understanding of how we approach the workouts emotionally and psychologically.

Tony Blauer says the same thing about violence. It's not necessarily the skill or technique you use to defend yourself that saves you; it's just the fact that you were mentally prepared to do something.

"Everyone needs to have a plan," Blauer said. "When there is no plan, you are lost."

Being lost is that moment when you emotionally, psychologically and physically freeze and fail to act. In a violent ambush, it won't matter how elite your fitness is if you are unwilling or unable to respond. Blauer helps his students build a map to get there through fear management and by understanding the dynamics of a violent encounter.

"There is that moment (in an ambush) when you think, 'I am going to die.' Then there is that moment when you think, 'I can't believe this is happening' Then you think, 'Where is the cavalry?' Then you think, 'I need to do something,'" Blauer said. "How fast you get there is based on your map. Your plan is your map."

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CrossFit Defense: Functional Movement in a Fight

Blauer is the founder and CEO of Blauer Tactical Systems and the SPEAR System. He travels the world teaching cops, military personnel and citizens how to protect themselves against violence using a series of natural, functional movements based on the way the body was meant to protect itself—the way the body was meant to move. Sound sort of familiar?

“CrossFit is the study of human movement. The SPEAR System is the study of human movement as it relates to violence, fear and aggression.”

—Tony Blauer

“CrossFit is the study of human movement,” Blauer points out. “The SPEAR System is the study of human movement as it relates to violence, fear and aggression.”

In addition to his usual classrooms full of martial artists, soldiers and law enforcement officers, Blauer has added a new client to his list: CrossFitters. In August, CrossFit added [CrossFit Defense](#) to its list of specialty courses. CrossFit Defense is based on Blauer’s SPEAR System.

In CrossFit Defense, athletes forge links between the CrossFit fitness program and the body’s primal instincts for self-defense. Participants learn how CrossFit principles such as core-to-extremity movement translate to combat, and they learn how to use CrossFit movements and equipment to prepare to defend themselves. A push-up is a cousin to a palm strike, and a box jump is from the same family of movement as a knee strike, so CrossFit athletes know many of the movements in some way, and many others are already hard-wired into the body. The skills and drills Blauer teaches will add variety to workouts and prepare people to defend themselves in any situation.

CrossFit teaches us that “the needs of Olympic athletes and our grandparents differ by degree not kind.” CrossFit Defense is similar in that the mindset and awareness



Blauer believes elite fitness alone doesn't guarantee safety. Even CrossFit Games athletes such as Blair Morrison can benefit from knowing how to defend themselves.

methodologies of a SWAT officer and a stay-at-home mom differ by degree not kind. Both need fear-management skills appropriate to their arena. Both need to have a built-in understanding of what they’re fighting for—their directive. Both need to understand that the body already knows a lot about protecting itself and is going to do certain things in a dangerous situation, trained or not.

“CrossFit predisposes you to self-defense,” Blauer explained. “Everything that CrossFit does—aside from the actual self-defense techniques, the knees, the palm strikes—that is the foundation of self-defense.”



David Wallach

Blauer defends against a tackle. He believes having a planned response to aggression is one of the keys to staying safe.

CrossFit Defense is real-world self-defense. Like CrossFit, it is scalable according to need and skill.

Application in the Box

Jeremy Kinnick is a four-time CrossFit Games competitor. This year he placed 31st. He is also the owner of CrossFit Kinnick in Upland, Calif. Kinnick first met Blauer at a seminar Blauer was teaching that was connected to a strongman workshop. The athlete got hooked on Blauer's methods, so he attended a summer combatives camp and became a certified coach. He went to every course he could. Now, he coaches alongside Blauer at many of his CrossFit events.

"For me, it is empowering," Kinnick said of his self-defense training. "I'm not some fighter or a cop. I am just a normal guy, so this is good for confidence."

Kinnick is one of the fittest men in the world, but that's not enough, according to Blauer.

"Elite fitness doesn't guarantee personal safety," Blauer said.

Kinnick actually uses Blauer's fear-management techniques when coaching athletes in his gym. Kinnick threw a surprise Fran at his athletes early one morning, and his post on the whiteboard was met with gasps and obvious anxiety. He stopped and talked everyone through an abbreviated version of Blauer's Cycle of Behavior, a performance-enhancement model Blauer created to help people manage what scares them. On paper it looks like an electrical flow chart—in your head it looks like a plan.

"Tony says give your brain a plan and it relaxes," Kinnick said. He helped his athletes come up with a plan. Everyone PR'd.

David "Chef" Wallach is the owner and head coach at CrossFit Rubicon in Vienna, Va. He had trained in martial arts most of his life and had seen some of Blauer's videos floating around. Wallach finally got the chance to meet Blauer at a Level 1 seminar in Quantico, Va., in 2007, and he listened to Blauer talk about the body's natural reactions to danger.

"After listening to him talk, after all my training, it all made sense in about two minutes," Wallach said. "I have been an unapologetic groupie since then."

Wallach has hosted two coaching certifications for Blauer's Personal Defense Readiness (PDR) system and the annual two-day combatives camp this year.

There are predictable bad points in a WOD as well, and you need to be able to detect those before they happen and defuse them when they do.

And while he likes the skills, drills and tactical application of the system, he uses the mental aspects most when training CrossFit athletes. After Wallach attended one of

Blauer's certifications, he changed some of his CrossFit coaching strategies.

"I saw the way he taught movements," Wallach said. "I saw the similarities to CrossFit in scaling for speed and safety. It revolutionized how I was coaching."

Wallach said he started breaking movements down like Blauer, but he also changed his psychological approach to coaching.

"I ask myself, 'How does the athlete react in the heat of the moment?'" Wallach said. "There are similarities between close-quarters combat and a really tough WOD."

Blauer teaches Detect, Defuse and Defend as a methodology for approaching potentially dangerous situations. It's kind of a way to see and potentially avoid or head off danger. Wallach does that, too, with his athletes.

"You have to learn to detect and defuse during a WOD, too," he said.

There are predictable bad points in a WOD, and you need to be able to detect those before they happen and defuse them when they do.



David Wallach

Tony Blauer teaches the close-quarters combat stance. "Real fights happen in the space of a phone booth," Blauer says.



Sally Randolph

Tony Blauer and Blair Morrison square off at a recent seminar at Morrison's CrossFit Anywhere.

Blair Morrison is the owner of CrossFit Anywhere in Folsom, Calif. He's competed in the CrossFit Games, and finished fifth in 2011. He hosted a Blauer seminar in August at his box.

"It was a lot easier than I thought it would be," Morrison said of learning the techniques. "It's natural. Your body already knows how to do it. That is comforting right off the bat."

Morrison said he sees the relationship between self-defense and CrossFit WODs, in that in both situations contain a threat, be it a mugger or a set of rings.

"You need to have a plan and know where the threats are. You see those threats by rehearsing it in your head," Morrison said. "You won't dwell on those threats then. If you have a plan, you can dwell on the plan instead."

Part of Morrison's philosophy at CrossFit Anywhere is fitness outside the box and using your CrossFit training in different life tasks. He can see a similar philosophy in Blauer's methods.

"It's applied fitness," he said. "It's something that is relevant to humans. I just think it is easier for CrossFitters."

And while CrossFit claims to just forge elite fitness, those of us in the community know it really goes a step further: forging elite lives and making people better. CrossFit Defense is a part of that. Blauer said that many years ago he would tell anyone who would listen that he just wanted to make the world a safer place.

Wallach has heard Blauer say just that and said that he's inspired daily by the simple goal of making the world a safer place. He thinks it fits pretty well within a CrossFitting community.

"We like to say we are training to be better at life," Wallach said. "If that truly is our focus, we can't leave out the hugeness of the capacity to get home in one piece."

For more information about CrossFit Defense and other courses, visit the [CrossFit.com Specialty Courses](#) page.



About the Author

Rick Randolph is a CrossFit Level 1 and CrossFit Kids trainer. He trains at CrossFit Anywhere in Folsom, Calif., and he's also a Blauer Tactical Systems SPEAR law-enforcement and military coach, a Personal Defense Readiness coach and a member of Blauer's mobile Training Team. He is a full-time police officer and defensive-tactics trainer at his agency.