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Masters of Combat

E.M. Burton talks self-defense with combatives experts
Jeff Gonzales and Tony Blauer.

By E.M. Burton

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All images: Courtesy of E.M. Burton/Tony Blauer

This summer I received a Smith & Wesson Model 340 .357 five-shooter as a birthday gift from CrossFit Inc. I'd never touched a gun before, so I decided to learn how to use it.

I contacted Trident Concepts of Austin, Texas, owned by a former SEAL by the name of Jeff Gonzales. With his first available Combative Pistol Level 1 scheduled for late spring, we decided on two days of personal sessions, and we brought Tony Blauer of CrossFit Defense and Blauer Tactical Systems.

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Before spending two days in the company of the weapons and combatives experts, I asked girlfriends of mine—neither CrossFitters nor trigger pullers—what they would want to ask a guy like Gonzales if they had the opportunity?

Their top three questions:

1. How do you avoid becoming a victim or target in the first place?
2. What three things do you need to know to have the best outcome when defending yourself?
3. What factors determine whether one would stay and fight or try to flee?

The answers are easy for Gonzales.

"You can't avoid becoming a victim. We all have the potential to be a victim of a violent crime," he says. You can choose, however, to be a complex target, an armed victim.

"Everything and everyone is vulnerable in some way. You can prepare for certain situations by knowing what you would do 'if,' and you can evade attention by being a less attractive target," he explains.

According to Gonzales, there are hard targets and there are soft targets.

"From the bad guy's point of view, the soft target is more appealing. Make yourself a hard target. Take precautions. Look like you're a hard target. Look like you're aware, prepared. Look like this: 'I could be your victim, but I'm not going to be your victim voluntarily.'"



***In a violent encounter, willingness to act is often more important than equipment and weaponry.
Having a plan in place is key to survival.***

In determining the best outcome, preparation, mindset and equipment are key, but it comes down to your willingness to act.

“Willingness to act can be understood by understanding the violent crime,” Gonzales explains. “Very rarely does a murder occur at the initial crime scene, which is to say, at the ATM, or in your car when someone says, ‘Get out,’ or in your doorway when they demand in. This is the essence of the warrior mentality.”

Gonzales says you need to say no. You need to be prepared by knowing that you will fight back first—no matter what the situation is.

“When a victim refuses to comply with ‘if you don’t get out of your car I’m going to kill you,’ they have a much better chance of survival. In fact, if you comply, your chances of survival are in the single digits,” says Gonzales.

Indeed, the TriCon motto translates to “come and get them,” a reference to the Spartan King Leonidas’ response when Xerxes, king of the Persians, demanded he lay down his weapons. Just say no.

As for fight or flight?

“This is a sheep’s question. You have to be prepared to fight regardless of what you might encounter. There’s a guy trying to get into your car: what do you do? Figure it out in advance. You have to be prepared for it,” Gonzales explains.

Taking it to another level, think of others.

“You have to be prepared to fight not only for yourself but to save someone else’s life; it’s a step up.”

Your success will be determined by the tools at your disposal and your training. In the news recently, there was a story of a person who literally beat a home invader off with a trophy. It seemed like poetic justice. Gonzales would want you to have a tool, “and if the guy breaks through your door, I would want you to shoot him.”

For you to use lethal force in defending yourself from an attacker acceptably under law, there are three things that must be satisfied.

“First, does the offender have opportunity? ... You’re by yourself, it’s late at night. Second, does he have the means to hurt you? ... There is a threat, he is a big person, he has indicated he means to hurt you. Third, is there intent? He has verbalized or otherwise indicated his intention

to hurt you? ... Just say no,” Gonzales says. “Determine the level of threat to decide how quickly you’ll react, but regardless, just say no. He’s trying to get into your car at a red light? Fuck the streetlight; run the red. A car accident is better than being raped—or worse. This comes down to mental preparedness.”

Being mentally prepared will help you react appropriately to a threat.

“The problem is that people, reasonable people, second-guess the situation. They overthink it. They think, ‘That won’t really happen to me.’ You need to have mental lines in the sand. You need to work it through in advance so that when shit happens, you say to yourself, ‘When he does this? Plan A. When he does that? Plan B. When he does that? Plan C.’ You need to be prepared to execute, regardless,” says Gonzales.



***Surviving an attack is not about being tough or brave.
It's about having a plan.***



The mental toughness necessary to survive a difficult CrossFit workout could help you if you are ever attacked.

Professional soldiers establish the goal, mentally rehearse, create their strategy and tactics, and then execute.

“There is a process for everything we do,” Gonzales says. “Part of the mental rehearsal is in understanding your own strengths and weaknesses. You need to understand your weakness relative to the mission requirements. Again, this has to do with technique, mindset and equipment.”

Sometimes tools and training are moot.

“If you’re trained but you’re unarmed, without a gun you’re useless,” Gonzales explains. “Prepare to be safe without the firearm. But pick a default setting: fight. Expect the most hellish fight. This may be a difference of scale, but guys in Afghanistan react faster and more correctly because they expect the fight. In a civilian situation of threat, everything is a fight until you have the presence of mind to determine that you can leave, that you can back away.”

Combatives expert Tony Blauer would call this “the fear of indignation,” something I believe is commensurate with one’s level of self-esteem, which I would suggest can be increased through CrossFit workouts.

“You’re gonna do what to me? Really?” Mindset is thus enhanced by physical preparedness. It’s that familiar feeling of ‘I’m not going to quit until this is over’ that CrossFitters learn the hard way,” Gonzales says.

Personal defense, however, is not like hunting.

“Personal defense is almost always counter-ambush,” Blauer notes.

His focus is on an athletic point of domination, while Gonzales focuses on a strategic point of domination. But you’re never going to have a perfect point of domination. For Blauer, “Physical preparedness, training, doing the same thing over and over and over ... this repetition prepares you to protect yourself.”

He adds: "To shoot technically, there are a whole bunch of things you have to put together ... We can't be cavalier about this; it's like driving race cars. There's a lot of torque, and the margin for error at high speed is huge."

I got the fundamentals during my two-day class and was put through some stress drills on the second day, but repetitive training is critical, Blauer asserts, especially if we hope to defend ourselves and others against assailants.

Then there's the question of distance. In the classes, we practiced drills at all distances between three and 25 yards. The 25-yard distance is very difficult, as Gonzales emphasizes in his Level 2 course.

"If you're not accurate at greater distances, and you resist training from the 25-yard distance, how can you hope to be accurate in a real-life situation? ... How big is your house? Where is your child's room? Where would your child be if the bad guys got him or her? If you had to shoot an intruder to protect them, would it be at 25 yards? If not, then what is the distance of the shot that you'd have to take to protect your child in that moment?" he asks.



Do you have a plan for this situation?

Gonzales uses a golf analogy for me:

"When you have that perfect tee-off shot, the sound that the ball makes off the head of the club, the flight path straight down the fairway, the arc of the ball, all that you get, means that you executed all the small details flawlessly. How do you repeat that over and over so that every time you replicate it? That's the trick."

Gonzales has spent a lifetime training for anything and everything that can be anticipated in advance, and that means being ready for the unknown and unknowable too.

"Statistically, they say most gunfights happen within a distance of five yards. The problem with statistics is the sample group they've polled. Snipers wouldn't say that. The scenario dictates the distance."

Blauer agrees he would not have practiced the longer distances, as his training has focused on close-quarters fighting, but now he sees the necessity of doing so.

"Core skills are based on understanding gunfights," Gonzales asserts. "Some things we understand as knowns from decades of fighting. We reverse-engineer them by asking, 'What do we need to maintain a certain degree of efficiency across the board?'"

Gonzales wants his trainees to be lethal from zero to 300 meters, regardless of the weapon system: "Eight inches at any distance with any weapon."



About the Author

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