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Fight Training Fitness

An Interview with Tony Blauer

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Tony Blauer is the founder of Blauer Tactical Systems, a consulting firm that has developed innovative personal defense and combative skills based on physiological responses to danger. Blauer Tactical Systems has consulted for many U.S. military and law enforcement groups and offers training for law enforcement, military, self-defense instructors, and civilians interested in research-based self-defense.

As one of the original advocates of reality-based self-defense, Mr. Blauer has pioneered research and training methodologies that have influenced and inspired martial art and combative systems around the world. He is the creator of the S.P.E.A.R. System™ (Spontaneous Protection Enabling Accelerated Response), a medically and scientifically reviewed system that utilizes the body's natural physiological response to surprise attacks in extreme close-quarter confrontations. Training scenarios are designed to effectively simulate real encounters. Students learn performance psychology and fear management as well as combatives and personal defense readiness.

An avid CrossFitter, Tony Blauer taught Combatives/ Personal Defense Readiness at CrossFit's Training Seminar this past July. I spoke with him in late December about self-defense and physical fitness.

Given that most fights only last three to five minutes, why is physical fitness important in a fight?

Real fights actually last only ten to fifteen seconds. A fight that lasts three to five minutes isn't a fight; that's more like a round in a UFC match. Real street confrontations are over in ten or fifteen seconds, and that's important to know because if you don't really understand how to analyze the confrontation, you can't prepare for it as effectively. Someone who thinks the fight is going to last for five minutes will train using some sort of sport training where they pace themselves for five minutes, clinch, rest, and so on. Real confrontations are sudden and violent. A person training with a sport mindset can be overwhelmed by that sudden extremely violent close-quarter fight. Understanding exactly what goes on, from timeline to psychodynamics, from the

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pre-contact phase to the moment of collision helps you define and design a training program.

What do you think is more important in self-defense, the physical or the mental?

Definitely the mental. There's an article on my website called "The Zen of Chu Fen Do." The most important lines in it are, *"There are more people who defend themselves every day with no training than there ever will be people who are attacked and successfully defend themselves with martial arts. Through sheer will and indignation, people fight back rapists and attackers more so than black belts who get attacked. There are people who just reflexively do things and then they're out of the situation because they weren't the compliant, complacent subject or victim."* So if I had a choice between having a strong mind and a weak body or a strong body and a weak mind, if it's one or the other, I need the mindset to fight back. The human elbow, head, teeth, fingers, knee, shin, voice…we don't need to build them—we just need to use them. That's mindset. The mind navigates the body; the proverbial mental trigger in making a decision is part of your psychological infrastructure. In the martial world, many people get stuck in "best style" or "secret technique" traps. I think if more people saw how real fights transpire, it would change how they train.

There's an expression I heard several years ago that I really like: "You can't fake endurance." You can fake a lot of things, like knowledge or experience; we can offer fake theoretical answers. But when push comes to shove, you can't fake endurance. This is one of the paradoxes of true self-defense versus strength and conditioning. Someone could boast that they can do thirty pull-ups, you can stick a bar in front of their face and say, "Do it," and then that person pulls three or ten or thirty, but it's measurable. Real fighting is different. Everyone has theoretical ideas, but the reality is that you can't practice real fighting; at best, you can simulate it. I was cage-side at the first UFC and wrote "Although the athletes are really fighting, it's not the same as a real fight." Amazingly, almost 15 years later, some people still don't understand that. It's a real source of conflict and confusion in the community. Just because an athlete is in awesome physical shape and can spar for ten rounds doesn't mean they can survive a violent attack in the street. It's imperative that the reader understands that by street fight I mean credible confrontation. That's one that you cannot avoid and in which your opponent is a predator.

Preparing for credible self-defense is a journey. I like to use the driving-trip metaphor. You need a car, you need gasoline, and you need a map. The car is your body. Gasoline represents your energy, which could be your stamina or your endurance as well as your will or indignation, or a whole bunch of the emotional cocktails that allow us to get through these events. But you also need a map to get to your destination, and the map represents your strategy, your plan. And part of that would include preparation: how do I prepare for this fight? If you're missing one of the components (car, gas, map), then the outcome is uncertain. And quite often I see people teaching or training and they are missing a vital component that would better prepare them or their students for a real confrontation. That's the trap I alluded to earlier. Focus can't be cosmetic. It can't be about strength or time or rounds. It's about cumulative preparation beyond the ubiquitous mind/body/spirit

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formula. Here's a perfect example: There's a lot of talk about adrenalized training, or elevating the heart rate. This is important and very valid. But what a lot of people don't realize also is that there are two ways to rapidly elevate your heart rate. One is through intense physical activity, very much like the CrossFit model. The other way is a "fear spike" that dramatically increases your heart rate and can bring with it the same shortness of breath, loss of complex motor skill, etc. The problem is that this physiological change can occur while you're standing still. This knowledge represents a training nuance and the ability to break down training phases. You can sprint or do a fast, intense workout and have trouble threading a needle or reloading a weapon. That's important to do. However, that disorientation and distraction can also be produced by a fear stimulus, which is more significant because you can't stress-inoculate to that the same way you can using CrossFit-style physical challenges .

Getting back to the "you can't fake endurance" quote: If you have mindset and awareness, then working intelligently on your fitness is crucial. Also, in the immortal words of Vince Lombardi, "Fatigue makes cowards of us all." Your ability to be responsive, explosive, and so forth is going to be dynamically influenced by your level of fitness. This is especially true for police officers, soldiers, and firefighters. Remembering that real fights generally last about fifteen seconds, if I had to pick between knowing how and when to defend myself and being in good shape, which do you think I'm going to pick? Not to beat a dead horse, but the formula changes when the event changes. MMA fighters require a tremendous amount of fitness conditioning. A soldier may need to walk, hike, climb for hours or days to get into the twenty-second fight. A cop chases the bad guy four blocks, jumps a fence, and then fights for twenty seconds. Fitness can determine whether you even make it to the actual fight.

This gets back to preparation. The event should inspire the training regimen and it should be customized whenever possible. We can use CrossFit as an example: because there's so much variation in the training, your body doesn't get used to routine. It also focuses on functional movements—ones with the most carryover into real-life scenarios, A great example is a kipping pull-up as opposed to a strict pull-up. You're being chased, you jump up on to a car, from the car you to jump to a balcony and then pull yourself away from danger. The plyometrics from box jumps, the gymnastic movements, the more "violent" kipping movement replicates real life. The CrossFit formula creates functional fitness. That's what we do with our training. We reverse engineer fitness and fighting training regimens based on analysis of actual events.

So you're saying that CrossFit is similar to the type of self-defense training that you do because the body doesn't get used to certain things, because there's variation, and also that CrossFit movements are more effective because they cross over more to how you would want to use your body in real life?

Yes. We have several scenario-based isolation drills we use to help predict how attacks happen. We've got surveillance videos of real fights that are used to study real movement. We replicate real violence and evolve the intensity through a gradient process where we move from static to dynamic to alive to full speed with HIGH GEAR protective training equipment on both role-players.

Since you train for the worst-case scenario, how do you know that the end-user will not react with an excessive amount of force for the situation they find themselves in?

First, that's a misnomer to think that we train for a worst-case scenario. A lot of people will see the military shots and the HIGH GEAR force-on-force images on our website and think all we do is fight. We have a training model we've been using for over two decades called the 3 Ds, which stands for detect, defuse, and defend. We

teach people to avoid and de-escalate. All our courses begin with extensive phases on fear management research, verbal tactics, and awareness skills and drills. Also, learning how to deal with an emergency doesn't compartmentalize responses. If I said to you, "Here's how you put out a fire, this is a fire extinguisher, these are the causes of fire, these are the clues…" that's the detect, defuse, defend, model, right? So if you smelled something burning, would you immediately grab a fire extinguisher and start hosing down your house? Or would you ID the smell, go into the kitchen and say, "Oh, I burned my toast"? Having a last-resort tactic is useful only if you understand when you need to use it. Does that make sense? It's that process that creates balance.

We're always looking at the scenario. We have a simple formula: "The scenario dictates." Next, we teach "Force must parallel danger." That's a legal statement we make everybody write down at each course we teach. Going back to the burning kitchen analogy, we start each course by addressing the worst thing that can happen. We educate the participants that the most significant thing that can happen occurs at a physiological level and it's the fear spike, because that can disable or debilitate you. Our focus is the ambush model: a sudden, unexpected, real confrontation that would create an automatic fear spike. We teach you how to work through it; that's our startle/flinch conversion and ultimately, the goal is to get back in the fight fast.

Training at your school must be eye-opening for those coming from other styles or who haven't trained at all.

Yes. The reframe was always enjoyable. My training center was eclectic and we offered a variety of programs, but I never let anybody study sport or advanced technique principles in any martial arts form we were teaching until they had done three months of self-defense training. Everyone who signs up in a school originally signed up for self-defense! I always laugh when people say they study martial arts for fitness, for culture, for community. No! You study for self-defense! Yes, there are byproducts and benefits aside from self-defense. But why not do aerobics, go for a bike ride, join a walking club? If you just wanted to get in shape, why would you join a club where one of the objectives was kicking someone in the face? I believe that someone who wants to train in fighting discipline, at their core, they want that ability to defend themselves.

Some people say that the more you train in self-defense, the more likely you are to find yourself in situations where you would need to protect yourself because you're thinking about it all the time.

I disagree with that. I think that the more you train, the harder a target you become. If you exude an aura of awareness and confidence, there is less of a chance that people will mess with you. Now if you're training because you want to fight or test yourself, then of course your subconscious radar is going to lead you into situations where you can exploit those skills or abilities. But if you're the proverbial Good Samaritan training for the right reasons, it won't. A good recommendation is to train at a club that has a moral, ethical foundation. Look at the people there and their understanding of the philosophy. For example, look at the people of CrossFit. One of the things I always talk about is how cool, how down-to-earth every CrossFit trainer is that I've ever met. I don't experience any attitude or ego in the coaches. Everyone is there to help. Now go to a general health club, how weird are the vibes when you walk around a gym? It's awful, right? You're always getting looks from guys who have weird clown clothing

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on. (Where do they get those pants, anyhow?) I'm not saying there's anything wrong with clown clothes, of course, but the point is you'll get all sorts of different personalities and egos and dynamics there, and that sort of thing attracts those types of people. There are parallels between the martial arts communities and fitness. When you look at CrossFitters, at people who genuinely do it because they get it, they get the idea of functional fitness. And with the exception of a few genetic specimens like Greg Amundson, you can't tell who's a CrossFitter by their body type.

How do you incorporate CrossFit into your training?

I've always done CrossFitesque training in my workouts, blending aerobic and anaerobic fighting drills. When I started reading about CrossFit, I thought, hey I've always done CrossFit, but without the variation. I'd never incorporated specific exercises that worked on my body head to toe from a strength and conditioning point of view. My approach was intuitively based on the SAID (specific adaptation to imposed demands) principle. We would work almost exclusively on the drills and skills needed for the fight. Incorporating the sprints, pull-ups, gymnastics, and core exercises has made me a more complete athlete. I'm stronger and healthier as a result. CrossFit training has added to my total strength and confidence. The Lombardi line about fatigue is something I look for in my opponent instead of worrying about whether perhaps it applies to me. I love the idea of variety. Yesterday I did a deadlift workout. Now, I've never done deadlifts in my life before CrossFit! I'd never done any Olympic lifting, and I wonder now, at age 46, how much stronger and faster I'd have been if I'd incorporated this stuff earlier. I'd never been exposed to this formula of cross

training in the right way or had its function explained. So I'd see weightlifting in the Olympics—weird-body-shaped guys in spandex doing cleans and jerks—and I'm thinking, "Okay, thank you, next! Where's the judo or the gymnastics?" But watching CrossFit trainer Nicole Carroll outlift guys twice her size made me think, "Oh my god, that's functional strength!" So what I've done is add these core skills on top of my regular workouts as best as I can.

I travel a lot—I'm on the road 180 days a year without equipment—and CrossFit is perfect. Recently I was teaching a course in Tennessee; after the day's training, I did a modified "Helen." I ran 400 meters around the building, jumped up to the first-floor balcony and did pull-ups from the second-floor balcony (which was awesome, because it was a completely different grip—almost all finger tips). I didn't have anything to swing so I did some handstand pushups and some shadow boxing and Tabata squats. When I'm in town at home, I do pretty pure CrossFit workouts because we have equipment in my office, and there's also a great facility at CrossFit Montreal.

You've been teaching real-world self defense since 1979. How has it changed in all those years?

It's changed dramatically. What I was teaching then was a kickboxing derivative, because that was my influence at the time. My philosophy was always about street defense. But I went from being heavily influenced by Bruce Lee, Bill Wallace, Joe Lewis, and the full contact kickboxing generation to my current path. Part of it was luck, part of it was research. We had started doing a lot of force-on-force drills in the early 80s and we had become quite creative and extremely realistic with our simulations. We put out the PANIC ATTACK video series that influenced most of the modern groups now doing scenario- and reality-based training. But it was in 1988, while doing an isolation drill, that our biggest discovery was made. The drill was a "sucker punch" isolation that included dialogue and natural movement pre-contact. And pretty quickly I noticed how effective the flinch was. I was looking at the video after training and thinking, "Man, I almost got hit there, but I flinched and I didn't get hit," and looking at all these other times when I was a nanosecond late on a block or slip and I did get hit. As a trained fighter, instructor, and athlete, it was a real enigma because it didn't make sense that I could be more effective when I didn't try to intercept the attack and just let my body do what it wanted to do naturally. That's counter-intuitive.

Of course, none of this makes sense until you focus on the most important factor and that is the physiological relationship to the surprise attack. I couldn't say this as clearly back then as I can say this now, but unconscious neuromuscular communication is way faster than conscious neuromuscular communication. Conscious neuromuscular communication is the conventional decision-making loop: I see the punch; that is my stimulus. I choose to slip, block or do some move; that is my response. But in an ambush, action is faster than reaction, and the action portion is the bad guy! And that's the part that most people don't get. It's a huge light-bulb moment if you do understand it. As soon as you say "Let's practice counter-ambush," it's no longer an ambush. That's why I said you can't practice real fighting. You've got to scientifically replicate things, because at the end of the day, you can't do Pink Panther stuff and have adults jumping out of closets and attacking each other—someone's going to go to the hospital.

Has the industry changed too?

The industry has evolved. The changes brought about by grappling and MMA have had a huge influence on how the community trains both fighting and conditioning. It's awesome to see John Hackleman injecting CrossFit into Chuck Liddell's training and to see B.J. Penn and many other fighters embracing it.

While my system has evolved, it's really the same philosophy as when I started teaching. I started teaching exclusively self-defense and essentially that's still what I do. The philosophy has always been the same: I wanted

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realistic stuff. And I continue to evolve. In fact, I will drop what I'm doing today for an improvement that is going to enhance the survivability of myself, my family, and my students tomorrow. Interestingly, I still receive e-mails from people asking what I think the best art for the street is and I always answer, "Art is for a museum." I love martial arts, but I can separate the sport and street toolboxes. I always tell people, "You're not your style when you're walking around."

How do you modify your programs for men and women? What are the differences?

A man walked into my office years ago and told me he traveled extensively and wanted his wife and daughter to learn more about self-defense since he was gone so often. I explained our approach to fear management, mindset, physiologically researched tactics, scenario-driven training, and so on. He was intrigued and then asked me if I also had a men's class since he should probably train too. I told him that what I had described was the class, that there was no gender separation. He was noticeably confused. I looked at him and said, "If what I teach will work for your wife and daughter, why wouldn't it also work for a full-grown man?" Our system is designed around human responses to fear and danger. You don't have to train in martial arts to have a startle/flinch response. The startle and flinch exist before you come to class. It is a physiological survival mechanism. We don't each people how to flinch; we teach them how to convert the flinch into effective response.

Tony Blauer & Randy Couture

What's the best way to learn more about your system?

We have Personal Defense Readiness coaches all over the world, as well as CrossFit one-day workshops. We have many articles online on my website and on the policeone.com site in the columnist section. If you're geographically restricted, video is the next best thing. Our bestselling video for ultimate self-defense is called Rape Safe. The title throws a lot of guys off because it sounds like it's just for women, but we've heard from self-defense instructors that it's the best amalgamation of all of our principles, and it's an awesome video. It takes some of the most potent information and goes from the psychological to the emotional to the scenario to the skills.

Yael Grauer has been training in martial arts (the good, the bad, and the ugly) since she was twelve years old. A Tucson resident, she currently trains in MMA in the garage of CrossFitter James Forbes. Yael received her Bachelor's degree from Shimer College in Illinois, and she is completing her teaching certification so she can make high school kids read Shakespeare. Her articles and interviews have been featured in a wide variety of publications, and some can be found on her website. She can be contacted at yael@dirttime.org.