

**ARE LAW ENFORCEMENT DEFENSIVE TACTICS BEING CHOKED  
OUT?**

**by**

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The Command College Futures Professional Article is a study of a particular emerging issue of relevance to law enforcement. Its purpose is not to predict the future; rather, to project a variety of possible scenarios useful for strategic planning in anticipation of the emerging landscape facing policing organizations.

This article was created using the futures forecasting process of Command College and its outcomes. Defining the future differs from analyzing the past, because it has not yet happened. In this article, methodologies have been used to discern useful alternatives to enhance the success of planners and leaders in their response to a range of possible future environments.

Managing the future means influencing it—creating, constraining and adapting to emerging trends and events in a way that optimizes the opportunities and minimizes the threats of relevance to the profession.

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## **ARE LAW ENFORCEMENT DEFENSIVE TACTICS BEING CHOKED OUT?**

Organized sporting events date back thousands of years and have offered countless hours of entertainment throughout the ages. Until recently, organized sports were not considered a safety concern for the future of law enforcement; however, this changed about twenty years ago with the emergence of Mixed Martial Arts (MMA) into the mainstream. The Ultimate Fighting Championship (UFC), a leading MMA promoter, proclaims itself as the “fastest growing sports organization in the world.” (UFC, n.d.). In a 2006 study conducted on the viewing of MMA presented in The Journal of Sports Media, (2009) author Nancy Cheever writes, “today, MMA has eclipsed boxing as the favored combat sport among young men.”

The study by Cheever reported that men said MMA is popular because of the different styles, that it is better than boxing and wrestling, and that it is the new sport for a new generation (Cheever, 2009). In the spring of 2007, Cheever developed and conducted a more comprehensive study that included 3,500 MMA fans worldwide in an on-line survey. Most (69%) of the MMA fans had never engaged in an organized fight, while 60% had been in a street fight. Interestingly, 54% reported having tried MMA on their own, and 38% reported they “sometimes” felt like fighting after viewing an MMA event (Cheever, 2009). This study reported that the popularity of the sport was shocking; arenas sell out in minutes, fights are held in countries around the world, and events are televised on major networks.

The popularity of the sport has caused MMA gyms to pop up nationwide, offering programs that teach others to become skilled fighters. In addition, some of the fans who view or attend the MMA events believe they possess fighting skills just from being avid fans. For

example, in July, 2011, a suspect arrested by the Redondo Beach CA Police Department told the officer that he was “an expert at mixed martial arts and kick boxing and was going to use his skills to beat [him up]” (Brian Long, Personal Communication, July 30, 2011). A subsequent investigation into the suspect revealed he had no formal training and chose to make these statements in an effort to intimidate the arresting officer.

Prior to 1990, MMA was almost unheard of; however, that has changed in the past two decades. As a result, law enforcement has experienced an increase in the level of martial arts skills and knowledge possessed by many individuals encountered in the line of duty. In 2000, the state of California adopted regulations that ultimately formed the foundation for MMA rules, but the sport was not legalized in California until 2005. (Mixed martial arts, n.d.). The growth of the sport is apparent by the number of MMA gyms currently in operation. A web search for MMA gyms in California shows 1272 MMA training facilities in the state (Findmmagyms, 2012) and a listing for each of the other forty-nine states as well as sites for other countries. Certainly, the gyms do not intend to enhance the proficiency of the criminal population; their presence, though, seems to have that unintended effect.

In February 2012, the Los Angeles County Sheriffs Department conducted a parole search on an individual and located a receipt for an MMA gym in Pasadena, CA. Through the investigation, it was learned the individual is on parole for robbery, and trains in MMA “two hours a day and four hours on Saturday.” The individual is 6’4” tall, 260 pounds, a documented gang member and has spent over ten years in prison. (Cory Silverman, Personal communication, February 21, 2012). A safety warning sent to law enforcement personnel regarding this incident closed with “Officers should use caution when contacting him.” In a 2006 incident, a transient in the Lennox area of Los Angeles County attempted to Suplex (an advanced professional wrestling

move that consists of picking up an opponent and driving them to the ground) a Deputy and then use a joint lock to resist being arrested. (Suplex, n.d.). The suspect in the case, despite being homeless, had previous training in ground fighting. In 2011, a Deputy in the Palmdale area of Los Angeles County became engaged in a prolonged fight with a trained MMA cage fighter that was attempting to avoid arrest. The fight ended up on the ground, and the deputy was saved by back-up that responded to the fight and were able to subdue the trained fighter. If back-up had not been immediately available, (which is often the case in Palmdale) this event could have ended tragically. (Mike Davis, Personal communication, February 22, 2012). One can easily envision situations where contact with others in enforcement situations could have similar issues.

Law enforcement duties result in gang members and gang associates being routinely encountered. In an interview with a police detective from southern California who is also a professional MMA fighter, it is well known that current members of a prevalent motorcycle gang are regularly training and displaying proficiency in Brazilian Jiu-jitsu. The activities that this well-known, documented, violent gang is regularly involved in include narcotics, weapons, and prostitution, which make their chances of encountering law enforcement very high. The fact that these gang members possess fighting skills superior to many police officers is a dangerous situation for law enforcement. (John Sibbald, Personal communication, March 5, 2012).

The Force Training Unit of the Los Angeles County Sheriff's Department has analyzed incidents involving their personnel where advanced MMA type tactics were used against Deputies. They used some of these incidents as the basis for their cutting-edge force training program, which was rolled out in 2002, incorporating aspects of the various martial arts styles. While some Police Departments, such as the Los Angeles County Sheriff's Department, the Redondo Beach Police Department and Sacramento Police Department have recognized this

trend and developed training to better prepare their personnel, others have not. It's time for law enforcement to address this problem.

### **Where we are today**

The global UFC fan base is estimated to be at roughly 65 million (UFC fanbase, n.d.). Fans are treated to fights that showcase highly skilled fighters demonstrating a variety of martial arts experience. The sport is considered by many to be very exciting, fast paced, violent, and unpredictable--all characteristics that appeal to the highly coveted 18-34 year old sports viewer demographic. Many law enforcement officers are avid mixed martial arts fans and have been drawn in by the various aspects of the sport; however, few have looked at how the popularity of MMA and UFC are related to behavioral changes occurring in our society, and how all of this relates to defensive tactics training for law enforcement.

In a recent interview by Joe Bouchard and Tracy Barnhart, who work in corrections and have written extensively on corrections issues, contraband, gangs, and violence, leading Brazilian Jiu-jitsu Instructor Shawn Chitwood was asked if martial arts schools spend enough time screening their clients to determine "who is there for the right reasons, and who is there to improve their street fighting abilities." Chitwood answered, "No, absolutely not." Chitwood continued that [for many gyms] money is the main motivation behind training students.

At a recent visit to an MMA studio, one of Chitwood's students reported to him that, three students were training "ground and pound" (a vicious form of striking a downed opponent), while wearing ankle monitoring bracelets (Bouchard, 2010). Chitwood was asked how long someone would have to train to give an arresting officer a problem. He said three months of

training would be a problem for the officer; anything longer would be a serious officer safety issue (Bouchard, 2010).

When asked about gang members training in MMA, the President and Chief Instructor of a local martial arts training center stated that over the years gang members have approached him wanting to be trained in MMA (Brian Rauchbach, Personal communication, March 2, 2012). Because they are not there for the right reasons, they are turned away, but he knows this isn't their only stop in the search for an MMA gym. Sooner or later the gang member will find a gym willing to train them, for the right amount of money. In one instance, a former gang member that had turned his life around was given a conditional opportunity to train, as long as there was no indication of gang or criminal activity, and became very proficient in MMA. (Brian Rauchbach, Personal communication, March 2, 2012). Unfortunately, after several years the former gang member returned to a life of crime, was no longer allowed to train at this MMA gym, and just recently landed back in jail for residential burglary. This former gang member, who is highly proficient in MMA and has returned to his criminal roots, is now back out in society where his next run-in with law enforcement is seemingly inevitable. Will this highly trained, dangerous and skilled, former gang member use his skills and knowledge against an outmatched patrol officer to avoid going back to prison?

According to Brady (2010), "the dangers of MMA to the American cop are similar to the dangers of any other combative sport; it's the marketing and popularity that drive this new subculture of toughs, nearly none of whom will ever make it to the big fighting leagues like the UFC." Brady, who is a life-long student of martial arts, a former U.S. Marine, and a Deputy Sheriff in Vermont, continues that an MMA fighter who does come in contact with law

enforcement will be “a better, faster striker, better wrestler, and better at defending himself from blows from the officer.” (p.3)

The concern of course is that even if they are not skilled enough to make it to the top of the sport will any of them become criminals and use their skills against law enforcement? Changes in behavior among society play an important role in the type of training that law enforcement personnel should receive to be as well prepared as possible. The minimum training that is provided to California law enforcement should include the following elements, many of which are specifically related to MMA:

- Grappling and ground defense (sprawl, mount, mount escape, guard, guard escape)
- Personal weapons (punch, palm heel, hammer fist, elbow, knee, kicks)
- Weapon Takeaway (gun and knife from front, rear, side)

### **History of Mandated Defensive Tactics Training in California**

The currently mandated defensive tactics training dates back to before the year 2000 when the Commission on Peace Officer Standards and Training (POST) included the exploration of incorporating perishable skills training into the continuing professional training (CPT) requirement (POST, 1998). At the conclusion of a year long study into the current CPT requirement, it was determined that law enforcement needed periodic re-training on skills deemed to be perishable, including defensive tactics (POST, 1998, p.3). Acknowledgement of defensive tactics as a perishable skill was a significant advancement in the level of training for California Law Enforcement. In a subsequent meeting, the Perishable Skills Ad Hoc Committee (POST, 2000) consisting of a diverse group of law enforcement personnel from across the state identified the minimum defensive tactics perishable skill elements as the following:

- Control techniques
- Verbal Skills
- Impact Weapons
- Less lethal
- Lethal
- Chemical
- Restraint Devices

In August of 2001, POST established a commission procedure (D-2) that mandated periodic defensive tactics training for law enforcement personnel as part of the Continuing Professional Training program. Coincidentally, this is right around the time period that the UFC was purchased by its current owners and the explosion of MMA into mainstream started. When the newly created perishable skill mandates were created, there would have been no way to predict the impact MMA would have on society and law enforcement ten to twenty years in the future.

Who would have thought twenty years ago that for the average person to get advanced fighting skills they wouldn't have to look outside of their neighborhood? A search for the number of MMA gyms in the United States was unsuccessful due to the rapid growth of the sport and expansion of the business. An article in Fight magazine offered this explanation, "there are so many MMA gyms opening up that in this day and age, if you live more than 45 minutes from a gym that teaches MMA, chances are you live in Montana" (Caplan, 2008). There has begun to be recognition of the potential danger of widespread MMA training for law enforcement and for society in general.

### **What do we do?**

The failure to make needed changes could be budget constraints, other training priorities, lack of support, or even a belief that no training other than what is currently specified by POST

is needed at all. Not recognizing the need to make changes could cause problems in the future. As MMA continues to grow in popularity and law enforcement has more force encounters with trained and skilled individuals, the risk of injury to officers increases greatly.

In much the same way the original minimums were created, a diverse panel that represents all areas of the state should be assembled, consisting of subject matter experts in the field of defensive tactics and force options. The panel would be able to analyze existing minimums and make recommendations on adjustments to the minimum types of skills without specifically identifying techniques (i.e.: ground fighting, personal weapons, etc.). Collectively, the panel could create a model lesson plan to incorporate all of the techniques the panel agrees would best prepare today's law enforcement. The model policy could then be provided to agencies on request that do not have the ability to develop cutting edge training on their own. Regular review is critical so new trends can be incorporated into current training protocols, and DT won't become outdated. If the adjustments are made on a regular basis (at minimum, biannually) they will be minor and not result in an unrecognizable lesson plan. Presently, no plan exists for periodic review of the mandated minimums for perishable skills training, and specific issues are discussed only when there is an impetus for change (B. Ziglar, Personal Communication, November 7, 2011). The development of this panel, establishment of a model lesson plan, and periodic review will better protect agencies, officers, and the profession of law enforcement in the future.

### **Conclusion**

Planning for the future is an essential component for the current generation of law enforcement managers. In the book *Futuring: The Exploration of the Future*, Cornish (2004)

states that it is especially important that we know about opportunities and risks that we should be ready for to improve upon the future (p.64). Law enforcement in general is full of risks and the work that is done to reduce these known risks increases our opportunities for success. As cultural norms change in society, attitudes toward police shift, and some people with ill intentions become highly skilled fighters (or at least think they are), our risks as law enforcement professionals increase. Fortunately, many opportunities also exist to minimize these risks. The law enforcement community is filled with highly skilled and experienced trainers who can work together to develop training models for use by any agency in the State or nation. California Peace Officer Standards and Training has instituted exceptional training standards for law enforcement officers. By recognizing where we are now, how we got here, and where we are going, steps can be taken to provide updated and high-quality defensive tactics training and preparation for California law enforcement.

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