Fitness and the Police Officer
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ABSTRACT

Law enforcement is a dangerous profession that can quickly turn deadly for the unprepared. According to the FBI – Law Enforcement Officer Killed and Assaulted (LEOKA) report, 54,469 officers were assaulted in 2010. Over a quarter of these officers sustained injuries as a result of being assaulted (FBI, 2010). In over 30% of these assaults, officers were responding to some type of disturbance (e.g. domestic dispute, fight in progress) (FBI, 2010). Approximately 62% of these assaults occurred to officers patrolling in single-car units (FBI, 2010). As of September 2012, eighty-one officers had lost their lives in the line of duty (ODMP.org, 2012). These statistics provide constant reminders that the need to be prepared in every way possible is an absolute necessity. One aspect of preparedness often overlooked is physical fitness, but oversight can mean the difference between life and death.
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Consider the following scenario. While working the night shift on mostly deserted streets, a call for service comes out. It is the usual industrial park business alarm. Arriving on scene, someone is spotted crawling through a window on the side of the building. The rush of adrenaline has you exiting the squad in record time, while relaying to dispatch and fellow officers your position and a description of the subject. The chase is on when the subject notices your presence. It appears that you are keeping up, but this guy is younger and not packing on an extra 30 pounds of equipment or weight. The good news, after chasing the suspect over a fence, you catch him. The bad news, he doesn’t just lie down and give up. Despite your commanding presence, superior training, and lawful authority; this guy is not going down without a fight. Back up is supposed to be close behind, as the struggle ensues for what seems like an eternity. You are about to get that all important first handcuff on, when you feel a hand slide between your arm and waist, directly next to your firearm. This foot pursuit turned into a fight, possibly a fight for your life. There is a sigh of relief when back up approaches. The officer begins yelling encouragement and starts climbing the fence. After several minutes of fighting with the aggressive suspect, you need your back up officer. You are tiring and the suspect has made advances to your weapon. The back up officer is struggling and unable to overcome the obstacle. The realization hits that you are on your own.

Think for a moment how this back up officer would feel if they were forced to watch their partner in a life and death struggle. Worse, knowing that their inability to maneuver the obstacle was to blame. Regardless of the outcome, guilt, anger and shame are feelings to be considered. Will fellow officers lose confidence? Engaging a suspect in a physical confrontation during your career is almost an absolute certainty. Will you succeed? Physical fitness is a critical factor in determining success especially since it was determined that over time the body’s ability to perform physically diminishes.

The Baltimore Longitudinal Study of Aging found a decline in aerobic fitness levels after age 40 (Ades & Toth, 2005). This decline is independent of muscle mass and physical activity levels. The bad news - aerobic fitness declines with age no matter what you do. The good news, those who start with higher aerobic capacity and maintain such active habits throughout life, maintains a greater fitness level at all points in the aging spectrum (Ades & Toth, 2005).
Now consider the academy recruit who is required to participate in a physical fitness program. All law enforcement academies require the passing of a physical fitness test in order to graduate. Problems with fitness arise once officers graduate the academy. Few police agencies mandate the maintenance of academy physical fitness standards post-academy.

**Importance of Fitness**

The term physical fitness is difficult to define due to the variety of approaches to fitness. Peter J. Maud, PhD, provided a “universal definition of physical fitness” as “the ability to carry out daily tasks with alertness and vigor, without undue fatigue, and with enough reserve to meet emergencies or to enjoy leisure time pursuits” (2006). Fitness professionals report the general benefits of remaining physically fit, as well as the hazards from failing to do so. After hearing the same information countless times, people tend to ignore it, even if it is something critically important. The benefits of regular physical activity: weight control, prevention or controlling health concerns and disease, improved mood, boost energy, promote better sleep, improved sex life (Mayo Clinic, 2011).

The benefits of physical activity are far reaching. However, maintaining good health is more important as we age. The American Heart Association (2012) estimates that for each hour of regular exercise, two hours of additional life expectancy are gained. Moreover, this is true even if one does not participate in physical activity until middle age.

**Law Enforcement Training and Standards**

Police agencies from all 50 states have instituted training standards for police recruits. All police academies require a standard of physical fitness prior to graduation. A portion of academy curriculum is devoted to physical training. The issue of defining physical fitness standards for career officers has been debated for many years. Fortunately, a group of fitness professionals have assisted with this task. One of the most prominent is Dr. Thomas Collingwood.

Collingwood is an exercise physiologist who has worked with hundreds of law enforcement agencies worldwide, designing fitness programs. Collingwood’s validation studies have assisted in defining job-related fitness standards for numerous agencies. These standards were not adjusted by age or gender. This has been found to be in compliance with Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, the Civil Rights Act of 1991, and the Americans With Disabilities Act of 1991 (FitForce, 2011).

**Developing a Fitness Program**

Anyone wanting to begin a fitness regimen should contact their health care provider, prior to beginning any type of fitness program. For anyone beginning a fitness program, a current fitness level assessment is necessary. This will provide a fitness baseline that can identify areas in need of particular focus. A trainer can use the assessment to construct an exercise prescription to achieve goals as quickly and safely as possible.

Exercising for good health and fitness needs to be approached like a retirement plan. One of the benefits of successfully achieving retirement is the prospect of collecting the retirement pension you have paid into for years. This plan was built by a steady and consistent contribution. The same should be considered for physical fitness. A little effort consistently applied over time will result in substantial personal benefits.
Conclusion
Physical fitness has many benefits, including: weight control, improved mood, increased energy, better sleep, improved sex life, and an amount of control or prevention of disease. The flipside is a lack of physical fitness. A lifestyle that does not include regular physical activity has been shown to contribute to obesity, depression, heart disease and diabetes. Police recruits are required to perform at a certain level of physical fitness prior to academy graduation. Post-academy, many officers fail to maintain these same fitness standards. Individual consequences are not limited solely to the individual officer. Fellow officers and communities are impacted.

A study conducted by the National Institute of Justice (NIJ) found that in over 7500 researched arrest situations, some type of force was used approximately 20% of the time in making the arrest (1999). This directly supports opinions held by those in law enforcement, that physical fitness is a necessity for the successful execution of their duties. Our co-workers expect that we will be able to assist them when needed. The public also has expectations of the police. And lastly, loved ones expect their officers to come home at shifts end. The reasons for staying physically fit are many, but the choice to do so is yours.

About the Author
Commander Scott Sheets is a 24-year veteran police officer with the Village of Park Forest. As the patrol shift supervisor he has been exposed to investigations, special operations, and community policing. Cmdr. Sheets holds instructor certifications for patrol rifle, handgun, defensive tactics, and physical fitness. As a Certified Personal Trainer for the past nine years, Cmdr. Sheets became his department’s fitness coordinator and in his free time, he competes regionally and nationally in triathlons.

References