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The Case for Job-Specific Fitness Testing

By Matt Brzycki, Assistant Director of Campus Recreations, Fitness
Princeton University

The main purpose of fitness testing is to evaluate physical readiness. No organization conducts more fitness testing than the military. In general, fitness tests that are done by our nation's servicemen and women involve two callisthenic-type exercises (push-ups or pull-ups/chin-ups and sit-ups/curl-ups/crunches) and a run/walk of 1.5 to 3.0 miles.

Most of the fitness tests that are administered to police officers are patterned after the ones that are done in the military. Here in New Jersey, for example, the fitness test for incumbent state police officers consists of push-ups, sit-ups and a 1.5-mile run.

But changes in fitness tests for the military are afoot. And these changes offer valuable lessons for the law-enforcement community.

Perhaps the first branch of the military to re-think the way that it evaluates physical readiness was the Marine Corps. The Physical Fitness Test (PFT) is still used and, with one exception, has been the same since at least 1975 when I went through basic training at Parris Island. The PFT consists of "dead-hang" pull-ups (or a flexed-arm hang for women), abdominal crunches and a three-mile run. (Sit-ups were replaced with abdominal crunches in the late 1990s.)

In the past few years, however, the Corps has added a Combat Fitness Test (CFT) to its repertoire which is much more specific to its operational requirements. The CFT consists of a "movement to contact" (an 880-yard run), an "ammo lift" (raising and lowering a 30-pound ammunition can overhead as many times as possible in two minutes) and a "maneuver under fire" (a 300-yard shuttle run that involves combat-related tasks including crawls, buddy drags/carries and agility running). This is done while wearing a "battle dress uniform" consisting of tactical footwear and utilities (aka "boots and utes").

The latest branch of the military to change its thinking on this topic is the Army. Since 1980, the Army has used the Army Physical Fitness Test (APFT).

The APFT consists of push-ups, sit-ups and a two-mile run. This fitness test is scheduled to be replaced with the Army Physical Readiness Test (APRT). The APRT consists of a 60-yard shuttle run, "rowers" (a callisthenic-type exercise for the abdominals), a standing long jump, push-ups and 1.5 mile run.

Also on the agenda is the addition of the Army Combat Readiness Test (ACRT). The ACRT consists of a 400-meter run, hurdles, a high crawl, a "casualty drag," sprints and several other movements. This is done while wearing an "Army Combat Uniform" consisting of tactical footwear and utilities along with a ballistic helmet and weapon.

So although traditional fitness tests still remain in some capacity, the Marine Corps and Army have recognized the importance of job-specific fitness testing as a better means of evaluating physical readiness. And so should the law-enforcement community. Obviously, the operational requirements of the military are different than the operational requirements of the police. Nonetheless, the basic idea is the same.

The fact of the matter is that fitness tests for police officers must be representative of the job requirements of police officers. In other words, the tests must measure their ability to perform specific jobs that they're most likely to encounter in the line of duty. Suffice it to say, push-ups and sit-ups don't pass muster.

In developing and/or implementing a fitness test for police officers, consideration must be given to the specific operational requirements of the department as well as the physical characteristics of the local community (specifically, urban versus rural). Here are some elements of a job-specific fitness test for police officers along with justifications for inclusion.

Distance Run: It's safe to say that at some point in the performance of their jobs, police officers will have to run. For a fitness test, the distance should be somewhere between about 1.0 and 1.5 miles. Another option is to do two or three 880-yard or 800-meter runs

(which total 1.0 to 1.5 miles) with a recovery period of about three to four minutes between each effort. This will assess an officer's ability to recover sufficiently after an intense exertion and then perform another intense exertion.

Sprints: Any running that police officers do is more likely to be a short sprint rather than a long run. (But as noted, a fitness test should also include a long-distance effort.) There are a number of ways to incorporate sprinting into a fitness test. One way is to simply do one sprint of a given distance (such as 100 yards). Another is to do a series of sprints with a designated period of recovery between each sprint (such as six 40-yard sprints with one minute of recovery between each effort). A third way is to do some type of shuttle run that involves running back and forth multiple times around two or more cones that are spaced a certain distance apart. This will assess an officer's ability to change direction and resume running.

Fence Climb: When police officers have to run, the odds are that they won't encounter a clear path. During a foot pursuit, for example, it's quite conceivable that an officer might have to "hop" a chain-link or wooden fence.

Object Hurdle: Police officers might have to contend with other obstructions while running. For instance, an officer might have to jump over some type of object that's on the ground.

Low Crawl: Different objects may require different tactics. A police officer might have to crawl under, over or through an obstacle, for example.

Pull-up: Most callisthenic-type exercises aren't job specific. One exercise that's related to the job requirements of police officers is the pull-up. This exercise is similar to pulling the body up onto a ledge or fence. While on the subject, each pull-up should start from a "dead-hang" position and be performed without any swinging or "kipping."

Dip: Another callisthenic-type exercise that's closely related to the job requirements of police officers is the dip. This

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exercise is similar to pushing the body up onto a ledge or fence. Here again, swinging or “kipping” shouldn’t be permitted.

Stair Climb: In the performance of their job, police officers might have to run up one or more flights of stairs. Many buildings have elevators but they’re not always operational and not always the best option from a tactical standpoint. For the most part, running up six to eight flights of stairs (three to four floors) is adequate for a fitness test.

Carry/Drag: There’s a chance that police officers might have to carry/drag another individual out of harm’s way. Even though this may rarely happen, it’s still one of the most important tasks that an officer could ever perform. Ideally, the carry/drag should be done using a real person rather than an inanimate object (such as a dummy or heavy bag).

Obstacle Course: Many of the aforementioned elements of a job-specific fitness test can be fashioned into an obstacle course (or an “O-Course”). As an example, an officer could sprint 60 yards, do three dips, sprint 30 yards, low crawl 10 yards, sprint 20 yards, do three pull-ups, sprint 10 yards, hop a six-foot chain-link fence, sprint 20 yards, hurdle a series of four low-lying objects, sprint 30 yards, carry/drag another officer 10 yards and sprint 60 yards. The design of an O-Course can be done an infinite number of ways and without great expense. A local park that has some type of fitness trail can be used, employing those stations that are most related to the job requirements of police officers and ignoring those that are not.

Note: Police officers who are assigned to a bike patrol should perform some type of cycling as part of their fitness test; police officers who may be involved in water-borne operations should perform some type of swimming as part of their fitness test.

Most fitness tests are conducted in “PT gear” (T-shirt, shorts and running shoes). But in the performance of their job, police officers don’t wear PT gear. For job-specific fitness testing, police officers should don clothing that represents what they might wear while at work (including a duty vest). Depending on the specifics of the test, tactical clothing may be worn in lieu of a duty uniform.

Lastly, fitness tests must be able to distinguish between those who can meet acceptable standards and those who cannot. The tests shouldn’t have different standards for different officers. A police officer who performs the same job as another police officer should be held to the same standards without getting an allowance for age or gender. (Case in point: There aren’t different standards for age or gender in the fitness test for the New Jersey State Police.)

THE BOTTOM LINE

Fitness tests can be designed in many ways. But the best test for police officers is one in which the components are as specific to their job as possible.

Matt Brzycki is the Assistant Director of Campus Recreation, Fitness at Princeton University in Princeton, New Jersey. A former Marine Drill Instructor, he has authored, co-authored and edited 17 books on strength and fitness. The opinions expressed in this article are those of the author.