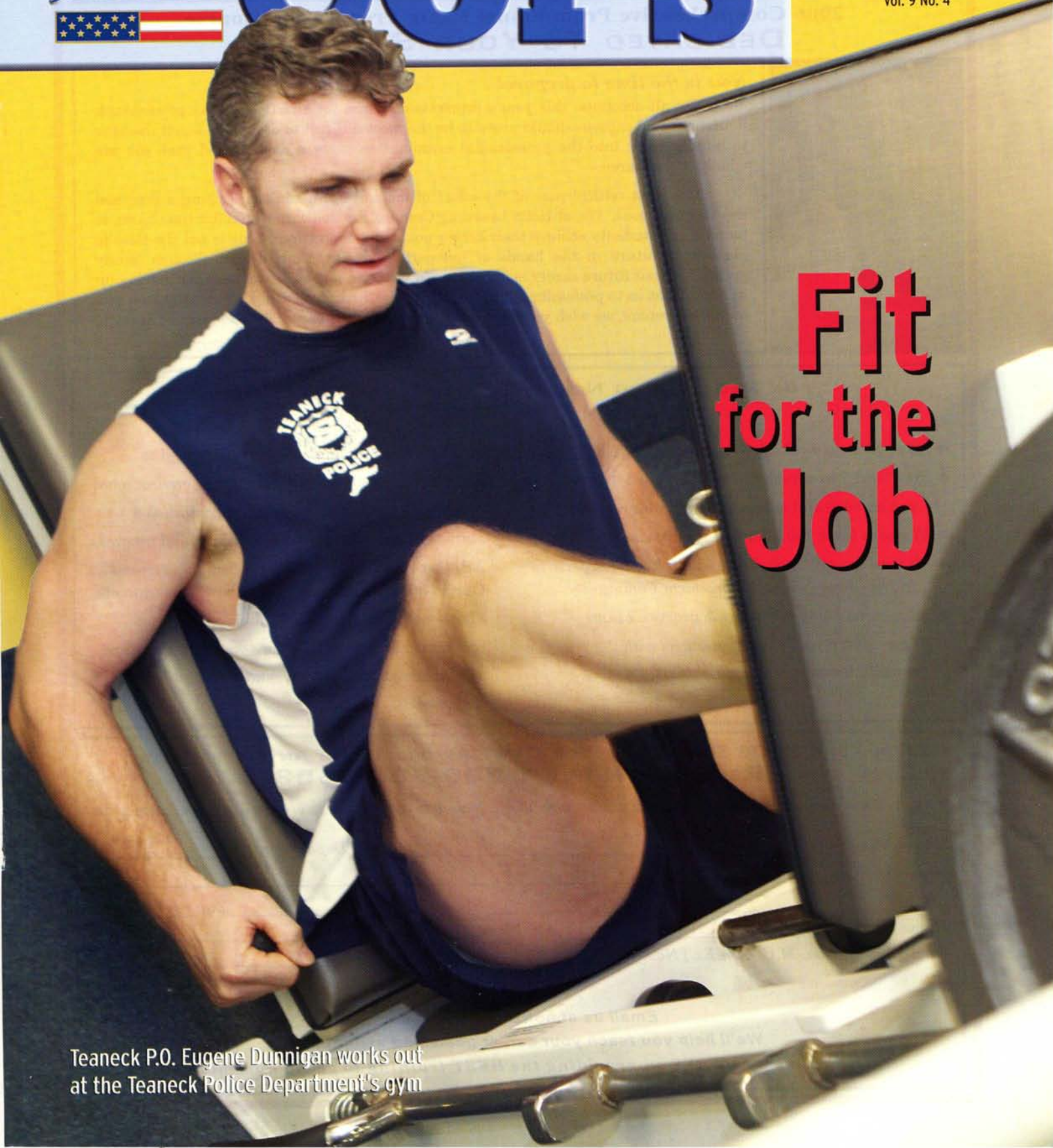


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Fit for the Job

Teaneck P.O. Eugene Dunnigan works out at the Teaneck Police Department's gym

Fitness tests: a critical look

■ BY MATT BRZYCKI

Whenever the topic of fitness testing for law-enforcement personnel comes up, it's sure to spark plenty of heated emotions and discussions. Usually, the discussions revolve around three things: (1) the components of the tests; (2) the standards for successfully completing the tests; and (3) whether or not the tests should be mandatory.

TEST COMPONENTS

Most fitness tests for law-enforcement personnel are based on fitness tests for military personnel. The fitness tests for our country's regular military (soldiers, sailors, airmen and marines) involve two calisthenic-type exercises (push-ups or pull-ups/chin-ups and sit-ups/curl-ups/crunches) and a run/walk of 1.5 - 3.0 miles. (Interestingly, the only branch of our military that does pull-ups/chin-ups as part of their fitness test is the Marine Corps; all others



Matt Brzycki

do push-ups.)

Some additional notes: As part of their fitness test, the Air Force also measures waist circumference to estimate a percentage of body fat. The Coast Guard also includes a sit-and-reach test to assess flexibility. Finally, the Navy has an optional swim test and their run/walk can be conducted on a treadmill.

The fitness tests for our country's special-operations personnel (Army Airborne, Rangers and Green Berets; Navy SEALs; Air Force Pararescue Jumpers; and Marine Recon) are more rigorous.

In addition to the components used to test the regular military, fitness tests for "special ops" can also include swimming a specified distance, hiking a specified distance with a weighted backpack and negotiating an obstacle course. The exact components of the fitness tests depend on the branch of service and their operational requirements. Besides being more demanding, the fitness tests

for special ops often require the service members to wear at least some elements of their tactical gear.

Two more points about the fitness tests for our military personnel: If a service member is medically unable to perform the running portion of the test, some branches allow an alternative test (usually a bike, walk or swim test). Additionally, the fitness tests in all branches have different standards for age and gender. (The Marine Corps has a different test component altogether: Men do pull-ups/chin-ups and women do a "flexed-arm hang.") The Air Force and Navy also have different standards for the run/walk component of fitness tests that are conducted at altitudes of 5,000 feet or higher (the altitude at which there's a noticeable decrease in aerobic capacity).

As noted earlier, most fitness tests for law-enforcement personnel have been adopted from the military with regular police officers being administered tests

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similar to the regular military and rapid-response personnel (SWAT, SRT, ERT and so on) being administered tests similar to the military special ops. With literally thousands of police departments across the country and no national standards, it's no surprise that a wide variety of fitness tests are administered to law-enforcement personnel. Be that as it may, the majority of fitness tests for law-enforcement personnel involve calisthenic-type exercises and a run. 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. (Alternate testing is allowed in place of the run; officers have a choice of a bike test plus a 40-yard dash or a swim test.)

Other components of fitness tests that are sometimes used by the law-enforcement community are weight-room exercises such as a leg press, bench press (with a barbell, dumbbells or some type of machine) and lat pulldown. These measure muscular strength/endurance, depending on whether the officer performed a one-repetition maximum or repetitions to fatigue with a designated weight (often bodyweight or a percentage of it). Also used to assess "physical abilities" are a vertical jump (power), standing broad jump (power), rope climb (strength and coordination), shuttle run (speed and agility) and, sometimes, an obstacle course (strength, speed, agility, coordination and balance) as well as tests of blood pressure, body composition, body-mass index (BMI), grip strength and flexibility (usually a sit-and-reach test). Finally, some departments incorporate a shooting element into the test where officers must fire their assigned weapons at targets after their muscles have been fatigued and their heart rates have been elevated in earlier portions of the test.

So what are appropriate components of a fitness test for law-enforcement personnel? Well, a fitness test must be representative of the job requirements of a police officer. In other words, the test must measure the ability to perform specific jobs that are most likely to occur in the line of duty. Let's revisit several specific components that are often used in fitness tests and see whether or not they're related to your job as a police officer.

Push-ups and sit-ups/curl-ups/crunches. Your ability to do these calisthenic-type exercises isn't related to the performance of your job. Pull-ups and dips are another story, however. These two calisthenic-type exercises have some job-specific applications such as pulling/pushing yourself onto a ledge or balcony.

Bench press, leg press and other weight-room exercises. Your ability to lift a maximum weight one time or a sub-maximum weight numerous times isn't related to the performance of your job. Plus, most of these exercises favor those who have specific body dimensions. In a bench press, for example, officers who have short arms and thick chests will do relatively well.

Body composition. Various methods are available to measure body composition but all of them have at least some drawbacks. For example, the accuracy of measurements from bioelectrical-impedance devices depends largely on the hydration status of the person being tested; the accuracy of measurements from skinfold calipers depends largely on the skill/experience of the person doing the testing.

Body-Mass Index (BMI). The BMI is simply a ratio of someone's height and weight. But it doesn't take into consideration whether the weight is fat or muscle. This can yield results that are enormously misleading, especially with athletic popula-

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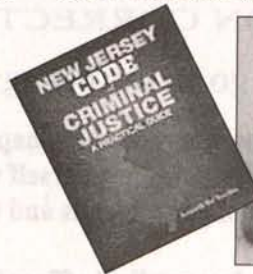
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FITNESS TESTS FROM PAGE 14

tions. Consider this: One study showed that based on BMI, the average soldier in the U. S. Special Forces was overweight.

Flexibility tests. Perhaps the most common way of assessing flexibility is the sit-and-reach test. However, the test favors individuals who have long arms and short legs. Besides, flexibility is joint-specific so several joints would have to be tested.

Blood pressure. An individual's blood pressure can vary considerably throughout the course of the day. To obtain a clear picture of blood pressure, multiple readings would have to be taken on multiple days.

Activities conducted in "PT gear" (T-shirt, shorts and running shoes). Let me be blunt: In the performance of their job, police officers don't wear PT gear.

TEST STANDARDS

A fitness test must distinguish between those who can meet the standards and those who cannot. Tests shouldn't have different standards for age or gender. Are there age differences in muscular strength and aerobic fitness? Yes. Are there gender differences in muscular strength and aerobic fitness? Yes. Do police officers have different requirements or get an "allowance" because of their age or gender when performing the same job as other police officers? No.

Law-enforcement personnel must be able to do the basic requirements of their job without getting an "allowance" for their age or gender. Suppose that you had to chase down a suspect. The suspect will not run any slower because of your age or gender. Suppose that you had to carry an injured officer. The injured officer will not get any lighter because of your age or gender. The bottom line: Law-enforcement personnel who have the same basic job requirements as other law-enforcement personnel should be held to the same standards in a fitness test. (In the New Jersey State Police, for example, there aren't different standards for age or gender.)

WHY TEST?

Should fitness tests be mandatory for law-enforcement personnel? Absolutely. This does two things. First of all, it helps to ensure your operational readiness. In preparing for a fitness test, you must engage in various forms of physical activity. Second, it helps you to improve your overall health and fitness. For instance, engaging in an exercise program on a regular basis will reduce your risk of obesity, diabetes and hypertension.

THE CHALLENGE AHEAD

The law-enforcement community shouldn't blindly embrace a fitness test solely because it's used by the military or another group. Rather, it must take a critical look at its policies for fitness testing. The test components should be as specific as possible to the job requirements and different standards shouldn't be used for different officers. Lastly, the tests should be mandatory for all law-enforcement personnel.

Matt Brzycki is the Coordinator of Recreational Fitness and Wellness at Princeton University in Princeton, New Jersey. A former Marine Drill Instructor, he has authored, co-authored or edited 14 books on strength and fitness, including SWAT Fitness (available at www.operationaltactics.org).

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