

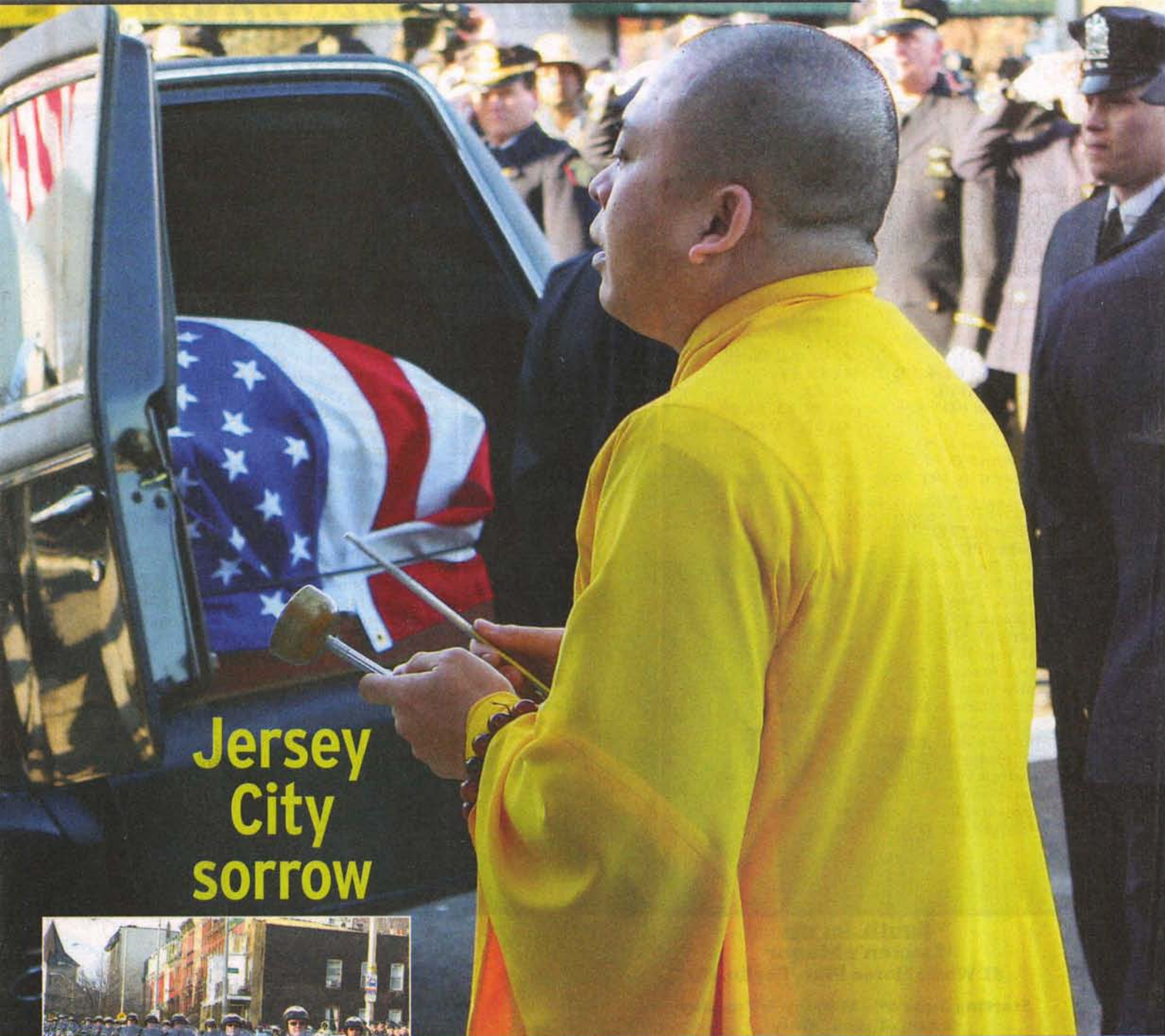
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Jersey City sorrow



A Buddhist monk offered prayers at the funeral of Jersey City Police Officer Robert Nguyen who died with his partner, Officer Shawn Carson on Christmas night. Thousands paid their respects as the funeral procession for Carson (inset photo) wound through the streets of the city. **PAGE 10**

Preparing for fitness tests

BY MATT BRZYCKI

You have to take a fitness test in a few months. The way that you prepare will largely determine how you perform on the test.

A fundamental rule in exercise physiology is that "training is specific." This means that in order for you to improve your performance in an activity, your training must be specific to the activity. Unfortunately, the meaning of specific is often misunderstood. The word "specific" means "exact" not "similar" or "just like." In other words, the best way to prepare for a specific activity is to do the exact activity. While this tactic is very simple, it's not always implemented.



Matt Brzycki

CONSIDERATIONS

In preparing for a fitness test, you must consider several variables. In particular, you must take into account the exercises/activities in the test, the sequence of those exercises/activities, the equipment requirement for the test, the environmental conditions in which you must take the test and the frequency of the testing. Let's take a closer look at each of these variables along with examples of how to prepare.

EXERCISES/ACTIVITIES

The specific exercises/activities that are in a fitness test must be taken into consideration. If the test involves pull-ups and sit-ups, don't prepare by doing the lat pulldown and abdominal machines. Remember, training is specific. Yes, a lat pulldown is similar to a pull-up and an abdominal machine is similar to a sit-up. But the best way to improve your ability to do pull-ups and sit-ups is to do pull-ups and sit-ups.

Similarly, if a test involves a run, don't prepare by using an elliptical machine, a stationary bicycle or a stairclimbing machine. You can certainly use that equipment as low-impact activities to improve your aerobic fitness but the best way to prepare for a run is to run. And in case you're wondering, running indoors on a treadmill isn't the same as running outdoors on a road.

Some fitness tests include weight-room exercises with a barbell, dumbbells

or a machine. In those tests, you may be required to do one repetition with as much weight as possible (known as a one-repetition maximum or 1-RM); 10 repetitions with as much weight as possible (known as a 10-repetition maximum or a 10-RM); or as many repetitions as possible with your bodyweight or a percentage of it.

For example, a test might involve a 1-RM on a bench press with a barbell. If this is the case, at least some of your training should focus on performing 1-RM sets of a bench press with a barbell. Or, a test might involve a 10-RM on a bench press with dumbbells. Here, at least some of your training should focus on performing 10-repetition sets of a bench press with dumbbells. Or, a test might involve as many repetitions as possible with 150% of your bodyweight on a leg press. In this instance, at least some of your training should focus on performing as many repetitions as possible with 150% of your bodyweight on a leg press (ideally the same leg press that's used in the test). You get the idea.

On a related note, it's also important for you to prepare by doing the specific exercises/activities in the same manner that they're to be done in a fitness test. If you're not allowed to "kip" or swing your body during pull-ups, then don't prepare by doing them with a kip or swing; if you're supposed to touch your chest to the ground during push-ups, don't prepare by doing them with a partial range-of-motion. If you're not used to doing pull-ups and push-ups in the manner that's required, your performance will suffer when you take the test.

In addition, keep in mind any time limits for the exercises/tasks. If you have to run 1.5 miles in 12 minutes, don't prepare by running 1.5 miles in 15 minutes and expecting to suddenly run faster on the day of your test. It's much better to show up for a fitness test knowing in the back of your mind that you've been able to meet the requirements in your training.

If the fitness test involves a run, it's important to know whether it's to be conducted on an outdoor track or literally "on the road." It's much easier to pace yourself when running laps on a track at a local

school than on a trail at a local park. Suppose, for example, that you're required to run 1.5 miles in 12 minutes. One lap on a standard outdoor track at a high school or college is 400 meters. In order to run 1.5 miles, then, you'd have to run six laps. And in order to do this in 12 minutes, you'd need to average two minutes per lap. (Actually, running six laps on a standard outdoor track is about 15.33 yards short of 1.5 miles because 400 meters is about 2.55 yards less than one-quarter of a mile. But at that pace, running 15.33 yards would take about four seconds so the difference amounts to less than one second per lap.)

If this is done at a park, you might have to start at one point in the park and run to another point that's 1.5 miles away. Or, you might have to run one large loop around the park. In both of these instances, it will be difficult for you to get a feel for your pace. Another possibility is that you might have to start at one point in the park, run to another point that's 0.75 miles away and then return to where you started. This scenario isn't much better since you only know your pace once: at the halfway point.

The point here is that if a fitness test involves a run of some distance, you need to be aware of its location. If the run is to be performed on a trail at a park, don't prepare by running on a 400-meter track at a school. Instead, prepare by running on the same trail as the test and note landmarks along the course that may help you to determine your pace.

SEQUENCE

Often overlooked in preparing for a fitness test is the sequence of the exercises/activities. If a test consists of push-ups and sit-ups followed by a 1.5-mile run, don't prepare by running 1.5 miles followed by push-ups and sit-ups. Sure, your performance in the run will be better if it's done before doing push-ups and sit-ups rather than after doing push-ups and sit-ups. But if you're not used to completing the exercises/activities in the same order as required, your performance will suffer when you take the test.

EQUIPMENT REQUIREMENT

Something else to consider is the equipment requirement for a fitness test.

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Are you required to take the test in PT gear, meaning a T-shirt, shorts and sneakers? Or are you required to wear certain elements of your operational gear such as a ballistic helmet, body armor, tactical footwear and so on? Don't underestimate the importance of this in your preparation. You can run as much as you want in sneakers and shorts but if your test is to be done in "boots and utes," you're in for a very rude awakening.

Maybe a test doesn't require you to wear specific work-related clothing but you must do pull-ups with added resistance to simulate the weight of that gear. If so, you'll need to prepare by doing pull-ups with added weight. And to be as specific as possible, you should use the same weight as required in the test. If a test involves doing pull-ups with a 25-pound weighted vest or 25-pound dumbbell strapped to your waist, then your preparation should include doing pull-ups with 25 pounds of additional weight.

While on the subject, what if you're required to do pull-ups with 25 pounds of additional weight but cannot do any? You should start by doing pull-ups with your bodyweight and gradually and systematically progress in the amount of resistance that you use. To illustrate, let's say that you have to take a fitness test in 12 weeks. If you do pull-ups with your bodyweight in Week #1 and add 2.5 pounds every week, you'll be using 25 pounds of additional resistance by Week #11. That will give you two weeks to prepare for the test using that specific weight.

ENVIRONMENTAL CONDITIONS

It's important for you to consider the environmental conditions in which a test will be conducted. No one has to remind you that the summer weather in New Jersey can be absolutely brutal. If you know that you have to take a fitness test in August when the temperature and humidity are very high, don't prepare in an air-conditioned fitness center. Certainly, some of your training can be done indoors. But at some point, you have to expose your body to the temperature and humidity of the outdoors in order to acclimate to the conditions of the test. Be ready or be sorry.

FREQUENCY

Finally, the frequency of a fitness test should be considered. Even if you've been training on a regular basis, don't wait until the week before a test to begin preparing for its exact requirements. Give yourself plenty of time to prepare.

On the other hand, this doesn't mean that you have to train as specific as possible for an entire year to prepare for an annual test. For example, even if a test requires you to do a 1-RM on the bench press with a barbell, there's no need for you to do this all of the time. For much of the year, you can train in your usual fashion with your preferred program. But as a test approaches, your training should become more and more specific to its requirements.

THE BOTTOM LINE

Remember the ancient, alliterative and oft-used Five-P Rule of the military: Proper preparation prevents poor performance. Or instead of that tongue-twisting advice, remember that training is specific.

Matt Brzycki is the coordinator of Recreational Fitness and Wellness at Princeton University in Princeton. 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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