

MORE THAN JUST A RIDE TO THE FIGHT

THE NEED FOR RECURRENT DRIVER TRAINING AND SKILL MAINTINANCE



Advanced skill development and maintenance are

integral components of the training process at many if not all of the most highly regarded agencies, departments and/or specialized units within the law enforcement community. The same can be said for certain private sector entities, ranging from proprietary corporate security departments to contract security firms, particularly those that protect critical infrastructure, where the inherent risk requires a high level of proficiency in detecting and responding to a myriad of threats. Over the years numerous research studies have proven that the most effective solution to maintaining proficiency with regard to perishable skills is periodic refresher training. More importantly, anecdotal evidence borne out of numerous violent or potentially deadly encounters has proven that the higher the proficiency level of the officer or agent the more likely they are to prevail at the moment when it means the most – when lives are on the line and time is of the essence.

Beyond palpable benefits in terms of survivability, skill enhancement and maintenance has proven to be one of the most effective risk management tools in today's litigious society. Nowhere has this become more evident than in the realm of firearms and use of force training. Through a litany of high profile civil and criminal actions over the last two decades the complexion of training in these critical areas has evolved rapidly and dramatically. However, one area of training that has been somewhat slow to catch up has been driver training. Agencies and departments almost universally require all sworn personnel to undergo some form of academy based training of which both driving and shooting are required subjects. But upon closer examination there are two glaring differences when it comes to the philosophy of training in these different disciplines. The first is the fact that while virtually all departments quantify and qualify the prospective agent or officers firearms proficiency they may not do the same for that individual's driving ability. Firearms proficiency is demonstrated by achieving an acceptable score on the firearms range, to meet or exceed the standard a sufficient number of rounds must strike the target in a clearly defined area within a specified amount of time. On the other hand, driving proficiency is often demonstrated by meeting the rather dubious standard of executing the slalom, evasive lane change or braking exercise without hitting any cones. Speed and time are as critical to demonstrating proficiency behind the wheel as they are to demonstrating proficiency behind the trigger, yet the minimum standard is not based on any combination of those factors. The second difference in training philosophy revolves around the issue of periodic or "refresher" training and requalification requirements; how many agencies require their officers to re-qualify with their issued firearm on an annual or semi-annual basis?

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The answer is fairly straightforward; most agencies require that their personnel qualify with their issued firearm(s) either annually, periodically or in some instances, more frequently. Now, how many of those same agencies require their personnel to re-qualify with their “standard issue” vehicle?

In order to make the connection between firearms/use-of-force training and defensive/evasive driving training we need to look no further than the circumstances within which an officer or agent might have to use either of these potentially deadly tools, the gun and the car. The skills needed to effectively deploy and use a firearm are most valuable in, and applicable to, situations where the risk to oneself or others would be greater if one were not to use deadly force than if they were; for example, confronting an active shooter. While the firearms handling and deployment skill set needed under those circumstances is not needed on a daily basis, individual practitioners are required to periodically refresh those skills to ensure that they are prepared to deal with the situation if and when it does arise.

Now let's look at driving. Yes, the majority of law enforcement agents, police officers and security professionals spend a tremendous amount of time behind the wheel of a vehicle. And much like the case with firearms, a great deal of that time is spent avoiding having to use the weapon and the skill sets required to prevail in a life-or-death situation. However, absent a mandate for re-qualification or periodic refresher training in defensive/evasive driving, if and when a situation arises that requires the proper application of certain driving techniques to ensure individual survival or the survival of those in the vicinity, there exists a deficit that can and has proven to be deadly. Any argument that every minute behind the wheel is, in effect, refresher training makes nearly as much sense as saying every minute spent carrying a gun in a holster is refresher training in tactical pistol techniques. It is time to come to terms with the fact that the only way to develop and maintain the perishable skills needed to recognize and avoid hazardous or dangerous situations while maintaining control of a vehicle is to practice in a realistic environment that requires the driver to use judgment with regard to speed, braking and turning.

If the goal truly is to improve driver safety and proficiency in the most demanding situations such as high speed pursuits, vehicle takedowns and the like, then the first step is to utilize an initial training program that establishes a standard for qualification and allows objective measurements of the individual drivers' performance in comparison to that standard. Developing such a program would likely take years of time, energy and considerable financial resources all of which are, as any training officer or administrator will tell you, invariably in extremely short supply. However, as some agencies (such as the Federal Government) are discovering or perhaps more accurately, rediscovering, such a program already exists.

Over the course of many years PFC Training, the preeminent name in defensive driving program development, application and presentation has continually gathered and applied scientific data and the laws of physics to determine the performance capacity of any given vehicle and, in turn, has developed the metrics to evaluate the driver's capability in relation to the vehicles capacity to perform. The process is much less complicated than the theory that makes it possible and perhaps most importantly, it provides the instructor the necessary tools to

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be able to evaluate and improve the skills a driver needs in those situations when maximizing the vehicles potential may mean the difference between life and death.

Just as we have come to learn with firearms and use of force training, initial training is just the first step in becoming proficient while the more pressing issue becomes how to maintain individual levels of proficiency. Once again, keep in mind that we are discussing driving skills that far exceed the norm needed to safely operate a vehicle under normal conditions or circumstances and, as such, these skills are just as specialized and perishable as the skills needed to effectively engage a moving target from behind cover with a firearm. Make no mistake about it; refresher training for drivers can be resource intensive, though there are viable solutions available to the creative training administrator or program coordinator.

One such solution, if supported by the layout/design of the training facility, is to set up driving exercises in close proximity to the firing range during re-qualifications, albeit in a safe area free from the hazard of stray rounds, and fill the individuals down time at the range with some driver training. An interesting by-product of this sort of program is the fact that, if you can get the timing right, you will introduce a higher degree of realism into the firearms training provided it takes place while the body is still recovering from the physiological and psychological stress induced by the driving exercises. For the more forward thinking administrator or instructor this represents the first step toward integrating driver and firearms training into a seamless tactics and techniques program that maximizes the potential of all of the tools in the individual officers' tactical toolbox. As is always the case, safety is paramount and this sort of integrated training requires capable instructors and range safety personnel as well as a comprehensive risk management plan.

While the primary focus of refresher training has always been maintaining proficiency or refreshing critical skills an additional benefit is that deficiencies in drivers or, for that matter, the initial training program itself can be identified and corrected preemptively, as opposed to identifying and correcting the fault or deficiency after some tragic event occurs. The ability to identify such deficiencies, take corrective action and measure the effectiveness of those corrections or revisions hinges upon accurate record keeping. In light of the fact that a civil or criminal action against a law enforcement entity and/or individual officer/agent can have consequences that are as far reaching and catastrophic as those associated with a violent physical confrontation, the importance of accurate record keeping can not be overstated. Driver training records should encompass overall program and individual exercise development, vehicle baseline performance data (referred to as "vehicle norming" by PFC Training certified instructors) student evaluations and the like. Liability concerns also drive the need for written testing in conjunction with practical skills or demonstrative testing. A properly designed written test will allow the instructor to evaluate how well the student grasps some of the fundamental concepts associated with defensive driving such as braking distance, the interrelationship between time and distance and the impact the environment and vehicle may have on driver proficiency and potential.

If refresher training or re-qualification is required the next logical question is how often should it be done? The answer to this particular question is not set in stone but is, in fact, driven by the specific needs of the department or unit in question. Those units or personnel that spend a

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considerable amount of time behind the wheel or who may, by virtue of their respective mission profile or assignment, be more likely to encounter a situation that demands finely honed driving skills should retrain or re-qualify more often than those that face a lesser likelihood of mayhem on the road. Likewise, while the content of a refresher course may be fairly straightforward and reflective of the initial training program, there are occasions when assignments, circumstances or events dictate a need for a more narrowly focused refresher or recertification program.

Developing refresher programs, be it a generic program or a more specialized mission or task specific program, requires the application of the very same fundamentals common to the most effective initial training programs. Exercises must be designed within the parameters of the laws of physics and vehicle capabilities. Instructors must perform certain driving exercises multiple times with each individual training vehicle to establish the performance baseline for that specific vehicle, once again referred to as vehicle norming. Objective performance standards and goals must be established based on the capacity of a given vehicle to perform under the conditions created by the exercise and documentation of the entire process, from course and exercise design to student performance, must be compiled and maintained.

Regardless of whether you are the training administrator for a large agency or the training officer for a small department, given the amount of time that the individual agent or officer spends behind the wheel of a vehicle coupled with the circumstance under which those individuals may be required to operate those vehicles, the need for comprehensive driver training programs can not be ignored. In fact, in the landmark case that established the constitutional standard for deliberate indifference to inadequate training, *City of Canton v. Harris, 109 S. Ct. 1197 (1989)* the Supreme Court referred to both firearms *and* driving when commenting in it's opinion that "it may seem contrary to common sense to assert that a municipality will actually have a policy of not taking reasonable steps to train it's employees". Effective risk management in terms of driver training begins with the administration of a comprehensive program that consists of initial training to include written testing coupled with objective performance standards and qualification, documentation of course development, execution and participation and periodic refresher training and re-qualification.

About the Author:

Tony Shepherd is a former Illinois police officer with a combined 33 years of public and private law enforcement management experience. An accomplished SCCA national autocross competitor; the President of PFC Safeguards, a PFC Group of Companies organization; and a certified Emergency Vehicle Operations (EVOC) Instructor.