

# Protective Suit Training

## Operational Competency Through Experiential Learning

By Richard Kay

Protective suit training plays an important part in developing an officer's abilities in, and understanding of, resistance response options. Though defensive tactics training encompasses many aspects of potentially violent physical encounters, training can often be sterile and unrealistic.

The ability to have a role player suit up in a protective suit and conduct dynamic movements can break through the rote drills and deliver a multitude of benefits. The student's response to stress can be gauged depending on how aggressive the role player becomes, and targets presented by a role player are more realistic than a training bag. Protective suits were designed to protect the role player from blunt trauma injuries so that the training can be more realistic while lessening the chance of injury to both the student and the role player.

Another benefit is the ability for the student to receive **bio-feedback** from impact force, such as being struck or shot with non-lethal training ammunition (NLTA). While this may seem cruel or malicious to the uninformed, many students have never experienced the physical/emotional force of a physical situation, such as a school-yard fight or contact sport. This is partly the consequence of a generational change in society.

During the course of public safety work, there is a high likelihood of an officer being involved in a physical confrontation. During this type of altercation, being 'knocked around' is not unrealistic. It is advantageous for the student to discover the physical and emotional response to being struck while still in a training environment. It is important to allow the student to experience this sensation, but only to the point that it is instructional and controlled. There is a big difference between delivering controlled force to the student to allow them to experience it and pummeling them simply because the role player can.

### Training Objectives

As with any training delivery, it is about the student learning and never about the role player 'defeating' the student. The selection of the role player to wear the protective suit is crucial and should be limited to certified and competent instructors. A person should not be selected if they:

- are more interested in impressing students with their physical skills
- cannot control their own emotions and intensity during the scenario.

Instructors should identify the training objectives and set the scenario to accomplish the objectives with the idea that the student will succeed if they follow the learning points of the lesson. The scenario elements should be as realistic as possible and the role player should act the part as if it were a real situation.

Allowing the role player to improvise or deviate from the scenario for the sake of amusement or self-gratification should never be allowed. It completely alters the training objectives if the role player decides to change the parameters of the scenario, and it also creates safety issues for all participants.



Students should be instructed to take the training seriously and participate as if the situation were an actual operational encounter. If the student believes the training scenario to be real, the brain will be 'tricked' into thinking that the student has already 'been there...done that' when the actual event happens.

## Injury Prevention

Injury prevention during training often conflicts with the need to provide realistic training. Keeping everyone safe requires properly trained staff conducting well thought through scenarios, assisted by properly equipped and trained role players. Protective gear is important but gear cannot protect if the scenarios are not properly designed and conducted. To prevent injuries, the role player must be properly supervised and trained to operate safely and effectively in their protective equipment.

There is no way to absolutely guarantee that the student will not get injured in these activities but there are several things that can be done to lessen the risk. First and foremost is to remember the purpose of the protective suit – it was designed to protect the role player from blunt trauma injury. Though protective suits have hand protection that will mitigate injury to both participants, it was not designed to protect the role player so that they could inflict damage upon the student.

Selecting proper head gear for the student is critical if the role player is allowed to impact the student. The head gear should offer sufficient padding surrounding the head to lessen the risk of head injuries, and the type of protection across the face should still allow the student to clearly see the role player. Even the best head gear will not prevent trauma from a full force impact. It is important that the role player delivers only controlled force that will produce the desired effect.

Having a second instructor as a safety officer to monitor training activities can ensure there are no reasonably preventable injuries to either the student or the role player. While the protective suit itself will protect the role player from blunt trauma injury, there are other ways the role player may become injured unless certain parameters are established for the engagement. A student that becomes panicked, overwhelmed, or enraged, and begins to use tactics that may easily injure the role player, must be stopped by the safety officer immediately.

**Force Relation to Target (FRT)** is the trained energy or force generated by a weapon in motion with proper technique. This concept trains role players in a protective suit movement

and positioning to avoid injuries associated with kinetic energy transfer. FRT is dependent upon the target in its various states or movements for optimal energy transfer, and allows role players to manoeuvre their bodies as a believable, mobile target for the officer without having to take the full brunt of the force directed at them. Manipulation of the target will produce varying degrees of kinetic energy transfer from the weapon to target.

The goal of role players is to manipulate the known targets in such a way as to limit the ability of kinetic energy to penetrate the protective equipment. By manipulating the intended target, a role player can control the point of contact and the kinetic energy transferred. Through a knowledge of previously trained weapons and intended targets, visual identification of the incoming strike and/or developing a sensitivity to compressing gear, role players can manipulate the point of contact, and allow protective equipment to 'catch' most of the intended energy the weapon has generated.'

The components to the FRT concept are:

- Stay loose (avoid muscle tension)
- Do not get rigid (keep joints slack)
- Avoid planting arms and legs (keep weight evenly on balls of feet)
- Do not get braced against objects (ground, walls, vehicles, persons, etc.)
- Do not absorb movement (anticipate student actions)
- Attempt rolling movements (move with the force).

The FRT concept is an important role player tactic, used to keep role players safe and in the game. Safety is assured not by luck – but by training and skill. If you depend on luck you need to be lucky every day. Conversely, you only have to be unlucky once.

## Projectile-Based Training Considerations

Using NLTA in reality-based training (RBT) creates some hazards, as minor soft tissue trauma is unavoidable, but there are many positives from using NLTA, if properly employed.

From a training perspective, a projectile strike is useful only to the extent it can be used for corrective measures; 1-2 shots are usually sufficient. It is wasteful, dangerous and counterproductive to shoot lots of rounds at someone. Being the recipient of a large volume of fire desensitises officers to being shot at, but there is also the likelihood they will condition a flinch response or an aversion to future encounters where they might be shot at, rather than inoculate them to the experience.

Part of the value of NLTA is derived from **pain penalties** for tactical error. The psychology of a

pain penalty in RBT is that an irrational fear causes predictable behaviour that can be leveraged to extract better training value. Many officers have an irrational fear about the possibility of a projectile hit. This raises stress levels to the point where their conscious resources are fully occupied with pain avoidance. If the sympathetic nervous system is activated, a person only has access to skills conditioned to the level of unconscious competence. Attempts by the officer to use skills not conditioned to this level often fail, providing the instructor with insight into their ability to face a critical incident.

A pain penalty is only useful in helping instructors observe technical and tactical deficiencies if the scenario is sufficiently realistic to fully engage the officer like an actual event. The officer actually exhibits adaptive behaviours consistent with pain avoidance, and the instructor is focussed on officer actions to observe tell-tale deficiencies which indicate the necessary problem solving skills are not conditioned to the level of unconscious competence. If these conditions do not exist, a pain penalty simply adds unnecessary hazard to training. Using it for teaching lessons is positive, but using it for frivolous punishment can increase injury potential. Too much padding on an officer nullifies the usefulness of projectiles since officers eventually realise they are not going to feel anything if they get hit, so they are no longer risk averse.

One of the advantages to protective suit training is the capability to assess the student's ability to 'switch on' the force when it is objectively reasonable to do so. Officers that use too little force or hesitate to use force, when appropriate, increase their risk of injury and sometimes end up using a more intrusive level of force to solve a now more dangerous or out of control situation. Just as it is important to assess this 'switch on' ability, it is equally important to assess the student's ability to 'switch off' the force when the subject has submitted.

The ability to conduct successful protective suit training is completely in the hands of the instructors. Keep the training realistic, effective, safe and within the parameters of the learning objectives to improve officer competency and survivability in the operational environment through reality-based experiential learning.

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