

Ground Dynamics: Down But Never Out!

By Richard Kay

No other information has received as much attention as statistics that purportedly show that more than 90 per cent of physical altercations 'go to the ground'. Many arrest situations involve little or no force, and minor resistance does not qualify as an 'altercation'. Semi-compliant persons are often stopped by a mere order to comply or with firm control of an arm for handcuffing. Nonetheless, even these low level uses of force may require use of force reports.

Statistics from a recent study show that five patterns accounted for 95 per cent of the altercations. In each of the five scenarios, four combative actions by subjects accounted for almost 65.8 per cent of injuries to the officer: kick (23.4 per cent), punch (16 per cent), throw/trip (15 per cent), bite (11.4 per cent). The average officer had less than three altercations.

The five patterns were:

1. Subject pulls away from officer's attempt to control their arm (33.7 per cent) – officer grabbed subject by the arm and subject pulled their arm away; most frequent second act was the officer applying a compliance hold (32 per cent); most frequent final subduing act was the subject taken to ground (46 per cent).
2. Subject attempts to strike the officer (25.4 per cent) – subject ran at the officer and attempted strikes; most frequent second act was the officer evading the subject and striking him with the baton (26 per cent); a close second was taking the subject to the ground (22 per cent); most frequent final subduing act was taking the subject to the ground (35 per cent).

3. Subject refuses to adopt search position (19.3 per cent) – subject refused to adopt search position as verbally ordered by officer; most frequent second act was the officer applying a compliance hold (35.5 per cent); most frequent final subduing act was the subject taken to ground (36.5 per cent).

4. Subject flees and officer pursues (10.5 per cent) – subject ran from the officer and officer chased; most frequent second act was the officer taking the subject to the ground (40 per cent); most frequent final subduing act was also taking the subject to the ground (39.5 per cent).

5. Subject takes combative posture, but does not attempt to strike officer (6.8 per cent) – subject assumed a fighting stance but did not attack the officer; most frequent second act was the officer striking the subject with the baton (38 per cent) and this was also the most frequent final act (41 per cent).

The study also included the percentages of injuries based on targeting of the attacks – kicking resulted in injuries to the legs (36 per cent), the head (27 per cent), the rib cage (22.5 per cent), and the groin (14 per cent). The most common injury was a bruise to the legs, head, ribs, or groin. The most common injury suffered in ground fighting was a strained lower back.

Nearly 62 per cent of the altercations ended with the officer and subject on the ground with the officer applying a compliance hold and handcuffing the subject. When officers physically fought with subjects (versus simply encountering minor resistance or non-compliance which required a minor use of force,

but did not escalate into an altercation), 95 per cent of the time those fights took one of five patterns, and 62 per cent of those five types of altercations ended up with the officer and subject on the ground with the officer controlling and handcuffing the subject.

Another study measured the frequency in which officers were forced to the ground by attackers. Respondents were asked whether a subject had ever attempted to force them to the ground. 52 per cent reported this had occurred. Of that number, 60 per cent reported that their attackers had been successful in taking them down. Of the 60 per cent taken down, 52 per cent reported receiving ground control training prior to the event, and 40 per cent after. At the time of the assault, most of the subjects were under the influence of alcohol and/or drugs.

- The circumstances of attempts to take officer down occurred during interviews (45 per cent), at handcuffing (40 per cent) and at escort (10 per cent).
- Standard assault patterns took the following forms – pulling the officer to the ground (33 per cent), pushing the officer to the ground (28 per cent), tackling the officer to the ground (24 per cent), and striking the officer to the ground (15 per cent).
- Once officer was down, subject continued to assault officer once officer was down (64 per cent), subject fled (31 per cent), or subject waited for officer to get back up to continue the fight (5 per cent).
- Of the ground fights, subjects generally continued with grappling and pinning



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techniques (77 per cent), or used strikes (66 per cent). However, in 21 per cent of the cases, the subjects attempted to disarm the officer, with 5 per cent being successful.

- On the ground, the officers tended to use weapons – OC spray (29 per cent), impact weapons (26 per cent), hands, feet, compliance holds, etc (24 per cent), and firearms (1 per cent).

Statistics should be viewed as guidelines, not specifics. The study does not show that ‘90 per cent of fights go to the ground’; it shows that 95 per cent of altercations took on one of five familiar patterns, and of that 95 per cent, 62 per cent ended up with both the officer and the subject grappling on the ground.

Obviously, being professionally charged with restraining someone versus being primarily focussed on escaping an attack will change the dynamic of a confrontation after the initial engagement. This is why officers in an arrest situation are more likely than a citizen in a self-defence situation to stay on the ground during a physical encounter.

It is interesting to note that more than half the officers reported that subjects had attempted to take them down, and that the subjects accomplished this 60 per cent of the time. Of that number, 77 per cent stayed on the ground grappling with the officer. When considering these patterns of assault, they are of the same nature as criminal assaults on citizens. In other words, the mechanics of an assault (versus the mechanics of arrest) do not change simply because one of the people involved is an officer.

Being on the ground can happen during serious altercations, and having skills to effectively deal with this situation is an essential part of operational safety, reducing the likelihood of injuries.

Many instructors state that ‘all street fights will end up on the ground’. However, this is not necessarily the case, unless one trains to go to the ground deliberately. Many officers resign themselves to the fact that if they get into a physical confrontation, they will end up on the ground. As a result, they decide to train themselves to grab and hit the deck, instead of strike and stay on their feet. Ground fighting is very effective for those who practice it, yet often most are not performing the same techniques in the same way while dressed in full operational uniform.

Some of the safety issues concerning with ground fighting for officers include:

Train as you work

Officers should dress in training as they dress on the street: including duty uniform and duty equipment. It is unrealistic for officers to train in tracksuit/t-shirt/runners if they are not working in them. Various takedowns, as well as purposely locking oneself to a subject on the ground, are unrealistic when duty equipment is worn, as these techniques offer access to an officer’s weapons. Movement on the ground is different wearing a duty belt, where gear can dig into the officer or get snagged on things and restrict movement.

Multiple attackers

If there are multiple assailants involved during a confrontation, it does not make sense for an officer to go to the ground to apprehend a subject. In the movies, the bad guys fight the good guy one at a time. They stand on the sidelines in a fighting stance and wait their turn. Reality is an officer grappling with the subject as the other subjects put the boot to the officer’s head, stomp legs and body, or assault with a weapon... maybe his own.

Loss of mobility

There are two problems here – less mobility to employ weapons and unarmed skills, and loss of an easier escape should the situation go bad. If an officer is tied up on the ground fending off one or more subjects, it is harder to employ power development techniques to strike, and harder to either access a weapon or escape.

Unintentional personal injury

It is bad enough sustaining an injury by falling, or getting knocked to the ground. By grabbing a subject and deliberately going to the ground, the officer creates unnecessary risk for injuries caused by hitting the ground with not only their own body weight, but that of the subject as well.

Difficult to disentangle

When officers grapple with a subject on the ground, they tie up limbs trying either to wrap the subject up to gain control, to gain a position of advantage, or to prevent being put in a position of disadvantage. All of this hinders the officers’ ability to defend against other possible

attackers or escape if necessary. Depending on the officer's physical condition, they may not be able to fight for their weapons and/or life while on their back.

No clean finish

Even if officers succeed in subduing the subject on the ground, they need to untangle, maintain the advantage, and secure the subject all at the same time. A good striking technique which succeeds in stopping the subject keeps officers in a position of advantage while they secure the arrest.

Size and weight differential

It does not make sense for an officer to risk their safety by tangling on the ground with a subject who is heavier, larger or stronger. The potential for injury is extremely high. The greatest number of injuries during officer empty hand skills training seems to occur during 2-on-1 drills. When two officers have difficulty taking one subject to the ground, they all fall on each other as they

go down. If this happens in training, imagine the potential during a real life confrontation? It is foolish to do this on purpose.

There are three types of situations involving groundwork that may occur operationally:

1. Officer standing, subject on ground as a result of restraint, handcuffing or search procedures, or the officer may have knocked or taken the subject to the ground.

2. Both officer and subject on ground as a result of the subject grappling with the officer and pulling them down, or during the situation one or both people slip.

3. Officer on ground, subject standing as a result of officer slipping or the subject putting the officer down. This is the most dangerous, as the officer is at a distinct tactical disadvantage.

An officer dressed in uniform with duty equipment does not want to be on the ground. It generally negates any advantage the gear provides, and once on the ground, grappling is usually the state of play. In this situation, weapon

retention becomes critical. If an officer goes to ground, they should endeavour to stand up immediately, or if they cannot, do whatever it takes to distract and disengage.

Ground fighting is a dangerous situation for a uniformed officer, and does not account for multiple attackers, the introduction of weapons (usually the officer's weapons) and the loss of advantages that an officer may have started with. Staying on your feet makes you harder to beat. If you do get knocked to the ground, employ the same operational safety principles that you employ standing. Your goal is not to tangle on the ground, but to get to your feet, and use the advantage of your equipment.

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