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with Charles Remsberg

10 Critical Habits for Winning a Gunfight

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Police encounters against armed assailants are on the rise —
how can we ensure that cops win those fights?

Editor's Note: In the article below, PoliceOne Senior Contributor Chuck Remsberg speaks with John Farnam, an occasional contributor to PoliceOne and president of Defense Training International, based in Fort Collins, Colorado. Farnam's training and tips (as well as his "Quips" e-mails) provide valuable food for thought for cops. To learn more about training with John Farnam, go to www.defense-training.com or e-mail him at JSFarnam@aol.com.

John Farnam is a nationally-known firearms trainer who is fond of saying, "We learn more from our failures than from our successes." And that's why he's a strong proponent of live-action scenario training that incorporates simulated ammunition. When you fail to use good tactics, you get slammed with sham rounds that punctuate your mistake and teach you not to make it again, especially in a genuine gunfight.

After wrapping up a recent Airsoft training day in which officers encountered role-players in increasingly complex shoot / don't shoot situations — in both on-duty and off-duty settings — Farnam reflected on what he most often sees trainees learning from such scenario experiences.

"There are certain lessons officers report over and over again," he told PoliceOne. In his mind, these comprise critical habits you need to develop and continually drill in order to win on that fateful day when you face a determined armed adversary for real.

1. Keep Your Head Up

"Officers often say an attack 'came out of nowhere,' " Farnam says. "No, it didn't. They probably had their head down and missed seeing danger cues, and the assailant was just waiting for that distraction.

"When you're in public, whether you're on duty or off duty, you're in a dangerous place. You need your eyes up, watching other people and what they're doing. Notice details. Look to each side and behind you.

Farnam says that in his training shootouts, "if something unexpected happens, like a stoppage or running out of ammunition, many officers plant their feet in cement and gawk down at their gun. That seems to be very natural but it's also very lethal.

"You need to practice in the dark so you can smoothly do everything that's necessary to keep a gun functional without having to look at it. Your eyes should be busy feeding you information, not tracking your fingers."

2. Learn to Identify What's Significant

"As you work your shift or move through your daily life off-duty, you're bombarded by visual and aural input," Farnam says. "Most of this information is worthless distraction. Some of it may be interesting, but not important.

"What you need to know when you're out in the world is what affects your safety and your continued existence. Develop the habit of paying attention to things you may have to react to quickly.

Distinguish the significant from the insignificant. You want to perceive as far in advance as you can anything that might represent a threat so you can alter your behavior to protect your best interests."

3. See with Honest Eyes

“Developing the skill to rapidly size up threatening situations is important,” Farnam says, “but the key is then having the courage to admit the facts even when you don’t like them.”

In his scenarios, as on the street, “denial is often a problem. Officers may see danger signs compounding but they don’t want to confront what they’re seeing. So they make excuses in their mind: ‘Yeah, this looks bad but it isn’t, really,’ because they don’t want it to be.”

Sometimes denial and delay are rooted in a fundamental misunderstanding of human nature, Farnam believes. “Take a scenario in which an officer confronts a bad guy who’s with his family. The officer may not face up to pre-attack behavior exhibited by the suspect, thinking he wouldn’t try anything because he’s with his wife and kids. In truth, suspects are likely to be more dangerous in that circumstance because by backing down they risk embarrassing humiliation in front of people who are important to them. The same with a gangbanger who’s with a group of his peers versus one who’s alone when you stop him.”

Farnam says that you “need to avoid imitating an alcoholic, pretending reality isn’t true, and face the situation squarely, whatever the circumstances.”

4. Have a Plan

“You view the world through a filter that’s composed of your collective life experiences,” Farnam says. “The more diverse your experiences, the more sophisticated you’re likely to be in analyzing and reacting to what you see.

“Extensive and varied scenario training, like real-life time on the street, adds to that diversity. The more exposure you have, the more likely you are to recognize a potential threat situation and relate it to something you’ve already confronted and controlled in the past. You’ll have a greater sense for what will work and what won’t, based on previous results.

“You can’t lock in to a detailed plan from start to finish, and you should not expect that whatever you do will be perfect. Aggressive action is far more important than perfection. But you should have in mind at least the beginning of what you will do — a starting point — when things go bad with any contact. Rehearse potential responses in your actual training and in your imagination as you patrol.

“Having ‘When/Then’ options in mind is critical. Your worst enemy is dithering — not knowing what to do because you haven’t thought about it. Don’t depend on making up a blueprint as things are going to hell. The action may unfold so fast you can’t keep up with it. The creative part of your brain will shut down under the sudden stress load, and you’ll be forced to rely on what you’ve already practiced and embedded.”

5. Avoid “Cerebral Fibrillation”

That’s Farnam’s term for panic. “It doesn’t take much for most of us to become overwhelmed,” he observes. “During World War II, many soldiers froze up or didn’t shoot at all in combat. Or they fired into the air with ‘comfort shots’ — making themselves feel ‘comfortable’ by making their gun go off. “Scenario exercises that are progressively more difficult can help you learn to flow through your plan, moving smoothly from whatever you’re doing to what you need to do next to stay ahead of a developing situation.”

And keep breathing! That’s another important discipline you can develop through repeated scenario training. “Holding your breath is a part of panic,” Farnam says. “When you don’t keep oxygen flowing to your brain, you can’t think clearly.”

6. Stay in Motion

Stopping and standing still is a frequent reaction to scenario attacks, Farnam reports — “just the opposite of what’s desirable.” To maximize his chances of a successful attack, “a predator needs to get you stopped in a particular place. The longer you stay in one spot, the more likely his plan will progress to completion.

“Get off the X. When you sense danger, move laterally to the threat. When you move forward or backward in a straight line, your relative positioning doesn’t really change.

“Keep moving until you’re behind cover, when it’s available. Your moving will cause your attacker to continually reset his plan and keep you harder to hit.

“If you’re driving when attacked, stay in motion. Don’t stop. Bullet penetration is much less likely when a vehicle is moving.”

7. Actually Use Cover

Many times in his scenarios, Farnam says, he sees officers “stand right next to cover and fire from there” without ever moving behind it, where they’d get some actual protection. “Standing beside a tree is common,” he says.

“Always be conscious of your nearest cover possibility. That means something that’s big enough to allow most of you to get behind it and stout enough to stop bullets, particularly lower-caliber handgun bullets, which you’re most likely to encounter. They’re stopped by a good many common items, from utility poles to kitchen appliances. Refrigerators, for instance, have multiple layers of construction, and bullets tend to break up as they go through the layers.”

When nothing better is available, getting behind even something that probably wouldn’t impede most ammunition — like a stuffed sofa, say — may be superior to standing stock still in the open.

“Attackers usually will try to shoot around any obstacle rather than through it,” Farnam explains. “If the bad guy hesitates to shoot because he thinks you’re behind cover, then it is cover in his mind.

“Your goal is always to present your adversary with a more difficult target, without compromising your ability to defend yourself.”

8. Fight Through “Speed Bumps”

In scenarios, Farnam sees officers needlessly “turn solvable problems into Mt. Everest. Running out of ammunition, stoppages, being wounded — they’re all just speed bumps. Get over or around them quickly and move on.

“People tend to make more of problems than they actually are. Don’t spend time looking for excuses to lose. Get out of self-defeating thinking and focus on ways to win! Outcomes are often determined by who gives up first.”

9. Maintain the Offensive and Finish the Fight

“To win, you have to overwhelm the suspect with so much precise force that he can’t deal with it and he is defeated. You eliminate his options until he has none left but surrender,” Farnam says.

“Often this can be done without a shot being fired. That’s the ideal. Establish control early on. Don’t hesitate in applying your best justifiable force option to shut down resistance fast. Agencies that properly designate the TASER by policy as a low-level force tool give their officers a great advantage and usually end up protecting officers and suspects alike from serious injury.

“Once you seize the offensive, don’t give it up. Stay in control and carry through to completion. You don’t want a protracted give-and-take battle. The longer resistance goes on, the likelier you are to get injured. Pitched battles make great novels, but they’re lousy police procedure.

“When things go well and the suspect appears to be cooperating, officers tend to slack off, relieved. Actually, this can be the most dangerous time. Don’t drop your guard. A strong finish is as important as a strong start.”

10. Reinforce Rigorously

“Drilling in good tactics through scenario training is not an entertainment enterprise,” Farnam says.

“Done right, it’s arduous, it’s challenging, it’s sometimes frustrating—it’s work. But regular, repeated rehearsal is the core component of warrior performance. When your life is on the line, it’s the habits you’ve cultivated that make will the difference.”