

GROUND CONTROL TECHNIQUES IN THE POLICE FIELD

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Abstract

With this paper, I will help my fellow Law Enforcement Officers understand the dynamics of the force that police officers use to apprehend and arrest a suspect. I will address the different hand to hand techniques used by officers and how the public views use of force. This paper will bring insight into new ways of gaining compliance from a resisting suspect that is more appealing to the public view.

Keywords: force, compliance, and hand to hand.

Back in 2006, when I started my career in law enforcement, there was very little coordinated or strategy-based training that was given to me in reference to the use of force. I was shown how to walk up and put hand restraints on someone that was not resisting, how to swing an ASP baton, how to spray OC spray, and a few pressure point techniques. Over the years, every involvement in a resisting suspect situation, it was a free for all with officers just doing whatever technique has worked for them in the past. I would see officers repeatedly strike the suspect, yell at the suspect, knee the suspect, or struggle to the point of exhaustion trying to put the suspect's hands behind his or her back. An interesting technique was watching the 'two-man tug-a-war' contest officers would have with each other while yelling at the suspect to put his hands behind their back. No matter what type of force the officer was going to use, at some point the suspect was going to have to comply or flee. Once the incident was over, the supervisor then encountered citizen complaints, suspect injuries, or even officer injuries. Another problem police face with this 'old school' style of use of force, is the modern-day advances of technology. With the general public using cellphones to record the police, coupled with the police officers wearing body cameras, you are now obtaining more police use of force incidents on video. All the extra cameras helped the public catch the police just doing what they have always done, the way they have always done it. The difference is that some of the public would edit the video and ridicule the police on the internet. The video would never catch the beginning of the altercation where the suspect went for a weapon, attacked the officer, or provoked the officer into an altercation. It would only show the part of the altercation where the officer was beating the suspect to gain compliance.

There are other use of force options that have come around over the years like tasers and JPX pepper guns. These are both good tools to have, however, but both have limitations on their use. One limitation of using a taser might be that the suspect is wearing thick clothing. This will prevent the penetration of the taser probes. A JPX limitation might be that you are inside a house and when the JPX is deployed, you expose everyone in the room to the effects of the JPX pepper gel and gas. The other issue with the JPX is that you have two shots and if the suspect moves and you miss you have to take the time to regain your aim and deploy the second round at the suspect. This gives the suspect time to close the distance on you, creating a potentially dangerous situation.

According to Chris Leblanc, “Law Enforcement Officers (LEOs) go “hands on” in both armed and unarmed physical confrontations more often than perhaps any other armed professionals.”(Leblanc, 2007). With that being said, the other issue we as police officers face in a hand to hand situation is what happens when the altercation goes to the ground. It does not matter how you ended up on the ground, it only matters if you know how to defend yourself on the ground or if you know how to control the suspect while on the ground. I read an article from Dave Grossi and it said: “There’s an old adage among police force trainers. It goes something like this: “If you’re on the ground and not handcuffing, you’re losing.” Some may dispute this statement, but it does have some validity. Why? Because the guy who’s fighting with you has only one thing on his mind: beating your brains in. You, on the other hand, have a lot more going on inside your head, not the least of which is securing your gun; or your OC; or your Taser; getting to your cuffs or getting on the radio; the calling for back up and giving out your location.” (Grossi, 2015) I have watched my fellow officers over the years and even watched

video after video of police dealing with suspects once they hit the ground. Some of the things I saw were that officers would hover over the suspect while trying to gain control of the arms giving the suspect the opportunity to stand back up. Once the suspect was back on their feet, the fight started all over on the suspect. I also noticed that when officers would pile on top of the suspect, it looked more like a game of football without any strategic planning. You would see multiple officers grabbing for the same body part and then pull in all directions fighting with each other. The scariest thing I saw when the fight went to the ground was when the suspect ended up on top of the officer. If the officer did not know how to get the suspect off of him/her, then the officer ended up being beaten or seriously injured by the suspect. The longer I encountered combative suspects and situations, the more I started to wonder if there were other hand to hand options available to me. I wanted to be able to gain compliance from the suspect on my feet or on the ground. I also did not want to give the appearance of police brutality to the viewing public. Averi Clements wrote an article in April of 2019 talking about a situation where a police officer found himself in a hand to hand altercation with a suspect. Clements wrote the following: "The importance of hand-to-hand combat training for law enforcement officers can't be understated. We've seen countless situations where a police officer's training in grappling (or lack thereof) completely changed the outcome of a situation, and in a viral video that's been making the rounds, it could've made all the difference for one cop."

Details on this situation are sparse, but the clip shows an officer going to check out a situation and then deciding to make an arrest. The situation is already tense, with the cop having to manage the situation with both the suspect and bystanders who are upset with the suspect. As the

officer goes to make the arrest, he inadvertently pulls the suspect on top of him, resulting in him getting beaten up by the suspect.

The bystanders' quick action ultimately saves the officer from serious injury or worse. They jump onto the suspect and begin beating him up. However, one member of the group avoids striking the suspect and instead focuses on controlling him, bringing him to the ground and dropping his weight on him to control him without injuring him further. He tries to calm the situation down, and as the officers make their way over, he's able to get the suspect's wrist behind his back while controlling him with knee pressure." (Clements, 2019)

This situation very easily could have happened to me or anyone else on any day of the week. As I progressed in my police career, I found myself encountering more and more situations that could have put me in the same situation as the officer in Clements' article. I decided in 2013, I no longer wanted to find myself into an encounter with a suspect where the outcome would be me fighting for my life. I decided that if my department was not going to give me the training I needed to be able to handle a hand to hand situation, then I was going to find someone on my own, who would.

In 2014, I was introduced to the Gracie Survival Tactics curriculum. The program did not teach me how to be a world class fighter, but rather gave me a better understanding of how to gain control of a suspect in various positions. The program gave me techniques that I could practice, learn, and that would ultimately help me control or gain control of a suspect if the altercation ended up on the ground. This class was not a class you could attend, be shown the material, and then just go back to your normal life. I had to practice the things I learned and become proficient

with them. The program claimed the following: “Gracie Survival Tactics (GST) is a revolutionary defensive tactics system based on Gracie Jiu-Jitsu that incorporates time-tested techniques into an easy-to-learn system designed to help officers humanely prevail against larger and stronger opponents.” (Gracie, 2019). The one thing that stood out about this program was that a smaller officer could humanely control a larger stronger suspect through the use of these tactics. Being that I was about one hundred fifty pounds when I began the search for self-defense options, that particular quote stuck out to me. I located a local gym in my area where the main instructor was an active police officer who had taken the Gracie Survival Tactics program himself and was now teaching it to local officers. He coupled the program with some other techniques that he thought would be relevant to the police field and taught it to any officer who wanted to learn and train.

After about four months of training in the gym for three to four hours a day, for about four days a week, I was ready to put the techniques I had learned to the test in a training environment to see if I could handle a larger, stronger opponent better than I had before starting the training program. The main instructor recruited several of the biggest guys he knew, all of which who were currently training in this particular gym. He sent them onto the mats with me one at a time. Ultimately, the goal was for me to take on the role of a law enforcement officer engaged in a combative situation with a larger opponent. In order for the exercise to be successful, I had to gain control to the point that the opponent would give up or could be handcuffed. The opponents ranged in weight from two hundred pounds to two hundred seventy-five pounds. All the opponents were not only larger than me, but also did regular weight training. At the end of the experiment, I had managed to gain control of all but one of the participants. This experiment in

my world was a big victory and an eye-opener to the fact that the techniques I learned could help save my life on the streets. According to the FBI, “In 2016, of the 57,180 officers assaulted while performing their duties, 28.9 percent were injured. The largest percentage of victim officers (32.2 percent) were assaulted while responding to disturbance calls. Assaultants used personal weapons (hands, fists, feet, etc.) in 78.0 percent of the incidents, firearms in 4.2 percent of incidents, and knives or other cutting instruments in 1.9 percent of the incidents. Other types of dangerous weapons were used in 16.0 percent of assaults.” (Washington DC, 2017) In 2017 the FBI stats found: “In 2017, 76.8 percent of officers who were assaulted in the line of duty were attacked with personal weapons (e.g., hands, fists, or feet).” (FBI, 2017) In the FBI findings, 78 percent of all attacks on police officers in 2016 were hand to hand combat situations and in 2017 the number was 76.8 percent. According to the two articles, there is a high change that at some point in your career you will be in a hand to hand altercation with the suspect. I found one article that said, “The FBI reported that 57,180 officers were victims of line-of-duty assaults in 2016. With 525,600 minutes in a year, that breaks down to an assault every 9.19 minutes. Adjusting for the 10 percent of agencies that didn’t report any data, that’s an officer assaulted every 10.3 minutes.” (Tobias, 2018) When I discovered this article, I thought to myself, why are officers not learning how to control the suspect standing up or on the ground? Why are we relying on the same old tactics officers have used for years instead of looking for new ways of doing the job not only effectively but also more safely.

After the experiment in the gym, I took what I was learning and started applying just those techniques on the streets when I found myself in a hand to hand use of force situation. The techniques were new to me and at times I found myself wanting to do things that I felt

comfortable doing, but I stuck to the training. After an altercation on the streets, I would go back to my instructor and we would break down the scenario and troubleshoot the techniques I had trouble with. Over the next few years, I improved the implantation of these techniques and would find myself using them as if it were second nature. The ground fighting techniques started working so well that when I assisted other officers with gaining control of a suspect, they would make comments to me about how easy it was to get the suspect under control and in handcuffs. I went from wanting to strike the suspect with my fist as my first reaction to a hand to hand fight, to taking the suspect to the ground and using ground control techniques until the suspect gave up the fight and was placed in handcuffs.

Learning how to control the suspect on his feet or on the ground also helped the way the public viewed my use of force against a fellow citizen. The public is always quick to post about an officer who is seen beating on someone with a closed fist, baton, etc. One example is the famous Rodney King incident that is so highly publicized. Here is what the American Civil Liberties Union said about the incident, "In the early hours of March 3, 1991, a police chase in Los Angeles ended in an incident that would become synonymous with police brutality: the beating of a young man named Rodney King by members of the Los Angeles Police Department. An amateur video, televised nationwide, showed King lying on the ground while three officers kicked him and struck him repeatedly with their nightsticks. No one who viewed that beating will ever forget its viciousness." (ACLU) The key point I took from this incident and others like it, is the fact that the public saw this situation as a beating rather than an arrest. I did not want to be a similar headline. What I found with ground fighting and ground control techniques is that I am able to safely gain control of the suspect without reverting to a boxing match. I also have had

people from the public or family members of the suspect come up to me and talk about how professional I was while handling the resisting suspect.

One of the hardest things for police officers to do is to learn new ways of doing something. People are creatures of habit and like to do things the way they have been doing it for years. This is true where I work when it comes to teaching other officers new control techniques. The training was not only being offered to every officer in the community, but it was being offered at no financial cost. Even with the training being free, officers still refused to take the time to learn new skills. According to the Justice Department, "The appropriate use of force and the use of the least amount of force in effecting arrests are essential values which characterize a department that respects the sanctity of life. Officers and departments that fail to train in and demonstrate the use of appropriate force, not only create the potential for heightened racial conflict, but also raise high municipal liability risks for their communities. Officers who are skilled in conflict resolution will find ways to avoid higher levels of confrontation. Where conflict cannot be avoided, less than lethal force can be employed by law enforcement personnel in accord with changing community values." (DOJ, 2003) This statement is so true and we as officers should be taking the time to learn new techniques that will help us adapt to the changing community we serve. This is especially important in not just in defensive tactics, but in all areas of policing.

WHY DO POLICE OFFICERS CONTINUE TO USE THE SAME USE OF FORCE TECHNIQUES?

The longer I trained, I found myself being called upon to go to calls where there was a possibility that the suspect may be combative. I found that officers would rather call me to assist them, than

to take the time to learn the techniques themselves. I never could understand why officers would not take advantage of this beneficial training that they themselves could be effectively using on the streets.

I have asked several officers over the years to learn ground control techniques and the most common response is that they do not need to learn something new because they are having success with their current techniques. The problem is not with the officer choosing to use their fist, baton, foot, or knee on a suspect. The problem is that the public (especially the minority public) sees those techniques as brutality against a fellow citizen. Another issue I have seen with my fellow officers is that one good fist strike to the head of the suspect can break the officer's fist, rendering him useless for the apprehension. I once saw one officer trying to hit a combative suspect with his flashlight during an altercation and he missed the suspect several times but managed to hit his backup officer in the legs more than once. In this incident, the other officer lightened up on the suspect because he was being hit by his fellow officer. This caused the altercation to last longer than it might have if the two would have worked together to control the suspect. I asked the older officer why he used his flashlight instead of the ground control techniques he has been shown. He told me that his flashlight has worked in the past on a combative suspect and so he used it again. I read a de-escalation article from the New York Times and the author wrote this statement, "But some of the officers' reactions in Seattle show just how hard it might be to change entrenched ideas about what their job involves." (Williams, 2015) Although this article was talking about de-escalation, the statement reminded me of the officer I spoke about above and how he is stuck in the same old way of doing something with no intention of changing.

Other issues that may be causing officers to use the force they use is how the media and social networking sites speak about police use of force. I read an article from a company called Benchmark Analytics. The article talked about that the media and social networking may play a part in police officers having to use force during citizen encounters based on what the report tells the viewer about police interaction with the public. Here are a few lines from the article: "In a similar vein, citizens are more likely to believe that all police interactions can result in sudden unexpected violence, based on the frequency of media reports covering police use of force. Such beliefs can lead some people to experience far more anxiety, or react unexpectedly, during routine police actions such as traffic stops. Otherwise innocent encounters may result in citizens resisting police control simply because they fear being the victim of "police brutality". Tragically, regardless of the cause, officers would be forced to respond to such resistance, leading to a perpetuation of the vicious cycle favoring a narrative focused on "police brutality" rather than one focused on legitimacy and improved relationships with citizens." (Smith, 2019) I have seen this first hand where officers have had to use force on a suspect and later ask him/her why he/she resisted. The suspect will tell them that he/she resisted because the police are just out trying to hurt people, so he/she did not want to be hurt by them.

I worked a double homicide this year and went to interview the suspect's mother and his sister to see if they could help me locate the suspect. When I walked into the house to speak with them, the first thing I was told was that they would bring the suspect to the police station. The mother of the suspect was a white woman who had a bi-racial son and daughter. The suspect's mother and suspect's sister told me they would turn the suspect in because they did not want the police to find him. I asked them why and they said, "because the police are going around killing black

people.” This is the image that is portrayed by the news media and social media articles. This statement is offensive to me because this is not how I police the community I live and work in. This is not an issue that is going on in my community, but like the information I quoted earlier, they watched TV and believe that what they saw on TV is how every police officer in every city conducts themselves. All it takes is one news article, video, social media post, etc. to give a bad perception of the police. The video can be from anywhere and it will affect how people in your community perceive you as an officer. We need to change the way the public views how we use force on people even if the force is justified.

HOW DO WE CHANGE THE PUBLIC’S VIEW WITHOUT COMPROMISING OUR SAFETY?

How do we as police officers change how the public views hand to hand use of force? One way is to learn how to control a combative suspect without reverting to punching, kicking, or striking the suspect with a baton. Taking the time to learn wrestling, Jiu-Jitsu, and possibly Judo may help one learn how to control someone without having to turn to striking as your first response. This does not mean that these are the only things you need to learn to control someone or that they will work on everyone in every situation. According to bjj-world.com, “There are people resisting arrest that do not merit the use of more power, like tasers or striking. This is where Jiu-Jitsu for law enforcement comes in. Subduing a suspect is not going to be easy, but it is going to be much faster and more efficient with a solid BJJ background.” (Dzabirski, 2018) The article also stated that: “Another example of control is holding someone down until backup arrives. Obviously, the moment an altercation hits the ground, BJJ reigns supreme. If you know how to handle yourself on the ground, you’ll have no trouble keeping even a much larger person at bay.

It may be until you get handcuffs on or waiting for backup. It may even be in order to prevent them from accessing a weapon. Whatever the case, BJJ is the best tool you can use.” (Dzabirski, 2018) With that being said, knowing how to control someone and feeling confident in your control of the suspect is very important for your safety. When officers feel like they are not in control, then their adrenaline spikes and they end up in fight or flight mode. This leads to tunnel vision and reverting to caveman tactics.

During my years of training in traditional Jiu-Jitsu and police combative Jiu-Jitsu, I have competed at several world tournaments. While competing I was able to subdue my opponent without punching or kicking. Likewise, on the streets, I have been in many altercations with suspects and I was able to control the suspect without striking. Jiu- Jitsu also helped me learn how to control my adrenaline. Controlling my adrenaline helps me stay out of the flight or fight mode or from getting tunnel vision. I have seen this happen many times to my fellow officers, who were in what I would call just a minor hand to hand situation. By minor, I mean a situation where the suspect is resisting but not trying to hurt the officer. In situations where I have seen an officer have an adrenaline rush the following happened every time. The officer would be exhausted at the end of the altercation to the point that he/she needed extended rest before returning to their duties. The officer could not recall the series of events that took place during the altercation. This is not good for the officer because after the incident is over, the officer must document what happened, why it happened, and how it happened. The officer will also have to return to their duties on the streets and go to the next call for service. The problem with not being confident in your ability to control the suspect results in an adrenaline dump and tunnel vision. If

this can occur in minor force incidents, think about what might happen if the officer is faced with a true-life threatening situation.

One of the main things we teach in our police combative program at the gym I attend, is that one must control before submission. We are taught that it is more important to control the suspect rather than to brawl with the suspect. Officers are taught to gain control of the suspect and let him/her dictate when it is time for the officer to handcuff him/her. In other words, we do not pull out our handcuffs and try to handcuff a suspect who is still struggling to get free from us or who is trying to assault us. You gain control and hold that suspect under control until the suspect stops resisting and then you cuff him/her. This is not an easy task to accomplish if the suspect is twice your size, but it can be done. Practicing also helps you control your adrenaline dump. When you control your adrenaline, you learn to control your tunnel vision.

I train with a person in the gym who is a former Green Beret. When I first met him, he was about 275 pounds and very strong. He is the type of person that is dedicated to improving his abilities and skills. We train together and he knows the same techniques I do. When we train, he has been subdued more times by me than I have by him. The importance of this lesson is that I can take on a combative suspect, no matter what the size or strength that particular person has, without having to be put into a position that jeopardizes the safety of all involved. I also believe that if the public views a situation where I am holding down a suspect and keeping him under control without striking him repeatedly, then the perception of hand to hand force by police in my community will improve.

CONCLUSION

There are many different struggles officers go through when dealing with a combative suspect once the officer makes the decision to go hands on. Modern day technology scrutinizes officers' decisions and actions through cameras and cell phones. Every officer should be learning techniques on how to control an aggressive suspect without relying on striking the suspect. With the majority of calls that involve use of force being in a hand to hand altercation with a suspect, one should be eager to learn new techniques. Jiu Jitsu based ground fighting has really been effective for me and it is the form of fighting style that I will continue to learn and use throughout the rest of my career. I believe that learning how to stay in control of yourself during a hand to hand situation is very important. I think that if more officers took the time to evaluate how they handle combative suspects, how the citizens view force on fellow citizens, and take the time to make the change then we would not be scrutinized. We would also not be viewed as 'the bad guys' from the media every time police officers engage in hand to hand force with someone. The more you train, the more confident you will become and the less likely you will have an adrenaline rush that leads to tunnel vision decisions. Ground control techniques will always be a part of the police world and the better one improves at learning these skills, the safer and more effective use of force will become. Confidence as officers will improve and there will be reassurance and peace of mind that professionalism will be exhibited even when the general public may be watching.

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