

the **CrossFit**[®]

JOURNAL ARTICLES

Combat Calisthenics

Tony Blauer



I've been training and teaching martial arts and combatives since 1967. During a career that has now spanned 30+ years as student, athlete, instructor, and coach, I've been exposed to a variety of conditioning and training advice. I've worked with every type of student, from children to soldiers and everyone in between. Before I delve into the heart of "combat calisthenics," let me offer a disclaimer: This article is not intended to criticize or condemn any form of exercise. In a nation plagued with laziness and obesity, I respect, admire, and support anyone who is working out. But that doesn't mean that every training regimen produces equal results or exploits every resource it can. At the end of the day, performance is paramount. In fact, performance is everything.

On game day, we all want to win. This applies to a recreational game of tennis, a chase, a battle, or a street fight. But to improve your chances of winning, your training regimen must provide a balance between conditioning your mind and conditioning your body and between general physical preparedness and skill-specific training for your "event." Your fitness routine must suit your event.

To develop event-appropriate drills and skills, I use a reverse engineering process

1 of 4

Combat Calisthenics (continued...)

that asks 1) Why are we training? and 2) What are the worst-case conditions we would need to perform under? While these conditions certainly include things like weather, austere environments, etc., I'm concerned with more fundamental emotional and psychological conditions, such as sudden stimuli that elevate your heart rate, reflexive responses, and fear-triggered physiological responses that affect complex motor skills coordination. My interest is in training for situations in which you're physically and psychologically taxed and at the same time require bombproof performance at common general physical skills like running, climbing, and jumping and some specialized skills like realistic close-quarter measures.

Necessity is the mother of invention

Functional combative training became a major focus from the time my very first student got his butt kicked in his first real-life self-defense confrontation. I took his loss seriously and personally. How had I and my training tools failed him? That fateful fight back in 1980 helped spawn my training methodology, inspire a new combative system, and revamp my approach to conditioning for self-defense and combat.

As a result of that first fight and many observations made during subsequent training, I started to question the applicability of conventional conditioning when it came to martial and combative athletes. While my conclusions were mostly intuitive, there were a variety of signs of the problems:

1. Average performance from above-average athletes.
2. Seemingly unrelated or irrational injuries.
3. Complex motor-skill failure during intense scenarios or real street altercations.

Out of respect for the opposition and concern for the outcome, performance enhancement became the key objective to training for real life self-defense. The result of this introspection gave birth to an approach to training I refer to as combat calisthenics.

The paradigm shift

Modern athletes generally cross-train in a variety of disciplines to work their stamina, strength, and endurance. Contact sport athletes also train their skills competing in their chosen sport to force targeted athletic demands on the specific motor skills they need. This

allows these athletes to utilize conventional conditioning because they are also getting skill development during sparring or competing.

Combative sports like boxing, Thai boxing, kickboxing, and mixed martial arts allow practitioners to spar with the same rules, rounds, and types of contact as when the athlete is actually competing. Realistic self-defense training and combative training, however, does not provide the same sport-model options, and it's this paradigm shift that is crucial to fully appreciate the rationale for the combat calisthenics approach. In reality, most athletes training for street defense are still using conventional training methods because the notion of combat-specific calisthenics is little-known or mistaken for sparring.

Separating sport and street

Every contact sport has structure and parameters: time, place, rules, weight divisions, safety gear, allowed targets, and so on, are agreed to. This allows the athlete to fully visualize competition scenarios, train specific tools and targets, and condition specific to the timeline of the match. Simply put, in the sport realm there is consent, awareness, and preparation for every event, no matter how physical or how potentially dangerous. This is not the case in combat and self-defense. In combat, in the street attack, there are no weight divisions, there are no rules or refs, there is usually just one round, and that round is often really really short (10 to 20 seconds).

In the street attack and in combat, there is no true consent (at the time of an assault). Preparation is based on theory and anticipation. There truly are no rules. Most telling is that when something goes wrong, it goes wrong fast. There is no padded floor or mouth guard, no medic standing just outside the ring. It is vital that preparation for the street take these essential differences into account.

Enter combat calisthenics

While there are many iterations and evolutions of this program, the short explanation and philosophy is this: Train using drills that replicate actual real-life attacks. Study specific portions of real fights and then replicate key "Murphy moments" in training. Our athletes execute specific attacks at slow to medium speeds so that attacker and defender replicate the actual angles present in real-world incidents. Resistance training

Combat Calisthenics (continued...)

is based on a force-on-force formula where athletes, working as partners, train core, stabilizers and flexor/ extensor motions through gross and complex motor skills. Rather than warming up with jumping jacks, we warm up with real-life attacks.

Here's an overview of the components in the combat calisthenics recipe:

- **Replication theory** - Use scenario analysis to identify common attacks and off-balance positions.
- **Three-dimensional training theory** – Train based on real scenarios in order to integrate the emotional, psychological, and physical elements of real confrontations into our drills.
- **The “off-balance/point of domination” training model** - Take into account the fact that in a real fight, when you are the target, you are off-balance.

Drills start off-balance on purpose. The defender starts in a position of adversity and then uses micro adjustments including isometric and isotonic principles to regain balance and hit the “point of domination” (a tactical and athletic position of advantage).

Combat calisthenics: A visual example

SCENARIO: Tackle attempt. Reflexive interception/ jam. Reposition to point of domination.

Here we work startle/flinch conversion (as practiced in my S.P.E.A.R. System[®]), extensor muscle development, and off-balance conversion (stabilizer & core strength development) all through a field of resistance to a tactical “point of domination.” (In essence this is weight and resistance training, but we use the actual angles, resistance, and feel of a human being rather than weights.)

Important training note: Just as CrossFit workouts can, and must, be adapted to individuals’ abilities, combat calisthenics should be scaled appropriately as well. In the scenario above, if Mulligan’s lock and restraint were too much to work against, I would simply ask him to lighten up, the same as selecting a lighter kettlebell or weight plate in a strength and conditioning exercise to avoid injury and continue the set with proper form. Combat calisthenics is weight training—but with a human being rather than a dumbbell.

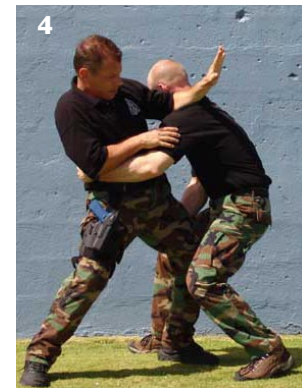


Photo 1: Starting off with an arrest scenario, S.P.E.A.R. coach and police officer Sean Mulligan (right) plays the role of aggressor. **Photo 2:** Mulligan parries the hand and moves inward. Blauer (left) intentionally allows this move to replicate the sudden ambush, so he can catalog pre-contact cues. (Safety note: The initial action is performed at slower speeds to warm up. The parry makes contact with triceps area to avoid injuring the elbow joint.) **Photo 3:** Blauer reacts with the primal flinch to protect his body, but as a research athlete, he allows Mulligan to continue his tackle attempt by driving his shoulder in and grabbing Blauer around the waist. This puts Blauer off balance and in a position of disadvantage. **Photo 4:** Starting in this off-balance position, Blauer begins his counter by driving his arm outward and lowering his center of gravity. **Photo 5:** Blauer continues to drive outward, slowly shifting his axis position forward, applying kinesthetic perception to explore and exploit muscle recruitment until he reaches a full tactical position and point of domination. Repetitions using this methodology build and burn key synaptic paths and help the combative athlete visualize where he needs to be. Real-life tactical proximities are also blueprinted by the combat athlete from repetitive practice.

Combat Calisthenics (continued...)

Combat calisthenics addresses three interdependent training components necessary for theoretical combative confidence. We lovingly call them the tactical training trinity

1. Physical conditioning
2. Physical skills development
3. Strategic and tactical conditioning

The principles and philosophy of combat calisthenics addresses each facet of the trinity in every training session. Each set uses a real world scenario/attack to inspire the conditioning drill. And each rep develops “tactical” core strength while executing a protective technique.

Partner and solo drills

Most of our drills are partner drills because most confrontations involve at least one other person. Your partner/aggressor is like a bio-resistance apparatus. If you were training solo, you could still apply the same principles from the combat calisthenics recipe. For example, when I run I imagine myself chasing or being chased. This adds a scenario to the training. (Did you know you run faster when you visualize yourself being chased?) If I'm doing push-ups, I think of the extensor muscles used in palm strikes, or the lift I need to elevate an opponent on my back, etc., so even though I'm only doing a push-up I'm also visualizing a scenario or a tactical problem or solution.

A combat calisthenics workout also coordinates your skills to suit the actual problem (teaching you the ability to fight a person, not a pad) and allows you to make real-time adjustments and even inject “use of force” choices. Proximity sense is developed (based on a moving opponent, maneuver, or flinching), and you can even incorporate speed and power adjustments, multiple assailant considerations, and possible weapons issues.

Many of my students cross-train in a variety of systems, but, still, the glue that keeps it all together at the skill application level is the combat calisthenics approach. It has not only created more confident and skilled exponents, but it has also reduced injuries.

Always a student

I've been training since 1967 and teaching for 24 years. As a coach and athlete, I've had to explore various

types of training methods to condition, toughen, and enhance my students' and my own capabilities. I've been exposed to all sorts of training principles. While our program has always applied principles of spontaneity, dynamic application, and movement based on natural biomechanics, our focus has been on core strength related to combative positions and tactics, and, in reality, it was lacking in terms of developing total fitness. Since incorporating CrossFit into the training regimen, the changes in our bodies and functional strength have been dramatic.

Most real confrontations are very intense and very short. And while skill and ability are paramount in the outcome of a confrontation, strength and conditioning are huge determining factors as well. CrossFit's short, intense workouts are perfect for all fighters (fire, gun, fist, mat, etc.).

CrossFit is the most intensive, dynamic, functional fitness program I have encountered. Its core principles of functional movement, intensity, and variance are pure, simple genius and resonate at every level with our research and approach to combative training.

Train hard and stay safe.



Tony Blauer is CEO of Blauer Tactical Confrontation Management Systems (BTCMS), a consulting firm specializing in research and development of combative programs for the military, law enforcement, and martial arts communities. He is highly sought out by progressive trainers interested in his S.P.E.A.R. System for counter-ambush and extreme close-quarter tactics and for his High Gear simulation equipment for advanced scenario work. To learn more about Blauer's work, see www.blauertactical.com.