

Strength Training and Functional Fitness

Valor Voices Podcast Transcript



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John Bouthillette: Hi, I'm John Bouthillette, and I am a lead instructor with the VALOR Program and the host of this edition of VALOR Voices Podcast. I'm joined today with Lieutenant Brandon Post from the Provo, Utah, Police Department. Brandon is one of our VALOR instructors who's a expert on physical fitness and wellness. Brandon is a certified physical fitness specialist and a member of the Provo Fitness Committee and has taught on the topic of fitness health and wellness for 15 years. Brandon, how are you doing today?

Brandon Post: I'm doing great. How you doing, John?

John: I'm doing great.

Brandon, we're here to talk about the concept of physical fitness. It's kind of strange that we have to have this conversation as law enforcement officers, but I'm going to ask you a pretty simple question: Why do we need to talk about fitness especially as it pertains to the profession of being a law enforcement officer?

Brandon: Well, as we all know, fitness is very important to us as a species. We know the why's. It's been drawn into us for years and years and why exercise is important; yet with all the knowledge, the data shows that less than 10 percent of the population exercises vigorously at least three times a week. Despite the knowledge, we don't do that great with it. When you talk about us specifically as law enforcement, obviously we have a physical job. We need to take people into custody often that don't want to be taken into custody, so we need a certain degree of physical capability to do that. Now, if the average person doesn't hardly ever exercise, you'd think it'd be easy for us to overcome that person or safely physically restrain them. But there's been study and data that's come out and compared us, the average officer, specifically to the average individual and sadly, all those results have come out showing that we are fatter, weaker, less flexible, less energetic than the average person, so it's important we talk about fitness and why we are this way.

John: Yeah, I agree with you. One of the things I've done in my career, especially in the earlier parts of my career, I was big on strength training. I think that was the trend back when I first started with this job, and I still it's an important piece of what we do today to stay physically fit and increase our physical wellness. Let's talk about that for a little bit. I like the way you started this, Brandon, comparing the profession, the law enforcement profession, to the general population. Let's keep going with that a little bit and I'm going to ask you a quick question. Why is strength training important for the general population to begin with?

Brandon: Well, we know strength training, as we get older we just naturally lose muscle. Our metabolism slows and we naturally gain fat. What's amazing about strength training is at any age, and they've done this with geriatrics even, strength training it adds muscle that increases our metabolism, which absolutely helps in terms of fat loss. I don't know about any other departments out there, but we have had a ton of light-duty people in the last several years. Strength training absolutely helps to reduce the risk of injury. If your joints, your muscles are used to that forced exertion, suddenly when you find yourself out on the road restraining someone, you're not as likely to succumb to injury, and many other things. High blood pressure, which three-fourths of law enforcement has high blood pressure. It really helps to reduce high blood pressure.

The one that I've always liked is, let's say you're a pear shape. You want to change the shape of your body and you decide you're going to do a lot of running. Running's awesome and does fantastic things for you, but if that's your solution to change the shape of your body, the only thing that's really going to happen is you're going to become a smaller pear. The way you sculpt your body is through strength and weight training. It's the only way to change your body shape.

John: Yeah, and that's interesting too especially when it comes to that strength training. One of the things that I've always realized and I've come to realize when I got older, was that a lot of the time with police work that we're in a sedentary state. A lot of our work is done with, what they say from where I came from, a pencil and a pad, but now it's a computer in the car.

Brandon: Yep.

John: Then all of a sudden that lid comes off that, we get those calls or respond to something that's going on that requires us to be at our maximum best. I was just wondering, does strength training actually have an impact on that when it comes to law enforcement or the fact that we go from sedentary state all the way to a full 6,000 RPMs? Does that have an impact on how we do that?

Brandon: Absolutely, that's a fantastic point to bring up. Because if you look, okay, I love MMA, UFC stuff, so you're watching these extreme athletes, or NBA or NFL or whatever the sport is, these are the most fit people on the planet, and before they compete you watch and they're all doing a rigorous warm-up. It's because even though they are in superb physical condition, they know that it's just not healthy to take the body from zero to 60 with zero warm-up or zero prep time.

We don't get the luxury of a warm-up. Obviously, they're not going to notify us if they're going to resist or something—we're going to have to pursue or fight or get in a shootout. We just don't get the opportunity to warm up. If you've been doing strength training, you're just that little bit less likely to actually succumb to the injury because the muscles in the joints, the tendons, they're used to that kind of strenuous effort. They're used to resistance and working as opposed to someone who hasn't worked out in a long time and now suddenly they're ramping up to "6,000 degrees," as you said, with zero, and this is the first time in months or even years that they've done that. Injury is almost a certainty in that case.

John: Yeah, and also like I said, in my days in patrol, strength training was a big piece of what I did, and also was the process of that professional law enforcement officer that I wanted to look the part. We used to call it where I came from in New Jersey, I didn't want to look like a soup sandwich, so I spent a lot of time making sure that I looked good in uniform. Do you think that plays a difference as well in how we do this job?

Brandon: I believe so. But I think any of us that have been on the road for very long also believes so. Just like if we're sizing up someone wondering if this person's going to resist how am I going to be able to take him, they are absolutely doing the same thing to us. If we got an individual looking at us and they realize, "You know what, this guy's squared away, he can handle himself." "You know what, I'm going to cooperate in this instance," which may not be as likely if they size up the person and think, "I can take this guy. I can get away from him."

John: Yeah, and I think that it's an important part. I want to just really quick go over that. We came to that conclusion during a study called "The Deadly Mix" that the FBI did. It's one of the foundational pieces of the VALOR Program that what you just said, Brandon, is exactly true, that you're constantly being sized up, you're being evaluated. If you're perceived to be weak or indecisive, the greater that chance that you would be challenged. I'm a firm believer in that process. Do you agree with me on that one?

Brandon: Oh yeah, absolutely. I think it goes along the line too that, not only is it to give you confidence in not only your appearance and how they judge you, but really when you get into some of the strength training, some of it, now this is a little more advanced stuff than somebody who doesn't just start out to do this, but sometimes it can hurt a little bit. You can have some pain, the body wants to quit, it wants to shut down, but because you're not done with whatever set/rep scheme you're doing, your mind is going to push you through it. It's going to push you through the pain, and you're going to learn things about yourself. My body can do more than I think it can. I think that is directly applicable to the job because if you find yourself in an alleyway in the middle of the night and somebody's not cooperating and they're between you and going home, you realize you can push harder. Your mind and your body have been trained to understand that I can get through this even though it hurts, and I'm going home. I can continue to produce and overcome this person.

John: The strength training part is important to mind-set and preparation?

Brandon: Very much.

John: Okay, now we talk about strength training and just go on the internet or watch TV and you'll constantly be bombarded with different types, different things, different gadgets. What are the actual different means of strength training that you're aware of?

Brandon: I think we're probably all aware of just traditional or "bro" training, as they like to call it. It's sets and reps, and there's been a lot of people who's gotten a lot of success over that on the years. It's effective for what you're trying to achieve with that which hypertrophy, which means muscle growth. Cross workout is excellent for making your mind fully comprehend that you can do hard things, you continue to push through. That's where it excels. There's constant muscle confusion which means, just different things going on with the cross workout does very well with that. Circuit training, which is a predecessor to a cross workout, just full-body training rather than the old "bro" style, which you're going concentrate on just your chest and back on this day. Circuit training you're just hitting full body every time. Also an effective approach. Body weight training, there's a fantastic one, which is basically a timer. There's different studies that have shown how effective it can be for our cardiovascular system, but basically what you're doing in this one is you're going 20 seconds on, 10 seconds off, 20 seconds on, 10 seconds off.

Just for a simple example, if I'm going to do push-ups, I'm going to do as many push-ups as I can in 20 seconds, then rest 10 seconds, as many as I can in 20 . . . You do that eight times, and you get a vicious workout with no equipment in two minutes that gets your heart rate running.

John: That's interesting, because again, I keep dating myself here, but you quote the "bro" sets; I was a bang-and-clang. Plates, plates, plates, plates, plates, that's all we ever did, and when you work out with cops, you'll understand that. If one officer does 300 bench, the next officer wants to do 305, and it gets out of control. I know we just used the term "bro training," but when we mean "bro," we're talking about both men and women in law enforcement, correct?

Brandon: Oh, absolutely. In fact, "bro" is the term. It's obviously not a gender-neutral term, but it's meant in a gender-neutral way where it goes with both. Women can get just as much benefit from strength training as men. Contrary to some of the myths that have been perpetuated in the past, women are not going to get very bulky with strength training.

John: Of course, when we talk about this, we're talking about the law enforcement profession, so at the moment we have this discussion as we continue forward, we're talking about both men and women, so at the end of the day, we're talking about that thin blue line and making sure that they get the most out of strength training as they can.

Brandon: Absolutely, we're all walking that line together.

John: But what we talk about now, and I think it's more important to the discussion, is the concept of that even though that strength training is important, it's the concept of functional fitness. That's an idea that I came in contact with the VALOR Program and actually introduced it through you, who brought it to my attention. Can we talk about the concept of functional fitness and why it's important to law enforcement?

Brandon: Absolutely. Just full disclosure, I'm a big fan of traditional “bro”-style bang-and-clang sets and reps, and I still do it frequently.

John: That's a good thing.

Brandon: But functional fitness, what functional fitness does is it's trying to replace real-world activity, motion in the gym. Your body becomes accustomed to doing these compound multijoint movements which, obviously if you're chasing someone if you're in a fight, you're trying to restrain someone who doesn't want to cooperate. You're not doing it isolated. When I say multijoint, if you think of a bicep curl, you're isolating just the elbow into the body and the only joint that's moving in this exercise is the elbow, so it's a single joint exercise and you are isolating the bicep trying to make it be the only thing that's functioning because that's what you're trying to hit is a bicep in this exercise. A compound motion or functional fitness, we're thinking more of dead lifts, squats, twists with medicine balls, things like that are involving multijoints. A lot of joints are moving, a lot of muscle, different muscle groups are being used. The real benefit of this is sometimes you can get imbalances if you just train single joints too often, where the multijoint compound exercises are hitting so many muscle groups it creates an overall balance.

If were going back a couple years, just a quick story about functional fitness. I had been doing a lot of just traditional weight lifting for quite some time, felt I was in pretty good shape. Went out with a buddy where we're going to do more functional fitness workout, and we had to grab these medicine balls. You take the medicine ball, crouch down, and you just throw the thing up as high and as far as you can behind you, so it's using a whole lot of your posterior muscle chain group, your glutes, your hamstrings, your back, things like that. It's rep one, I'm all warmed up, even, and I bent down and threw that ball and my entire posterior chain locked up because I wasn't used to . . . I hadn't been doing well with my functional fitness. It was a very quick lesson that I needed to expand what I was doing.

John: When we talk about functional fitness—let's see if I remember this correctly as been taught by you—is that it's just the one piece of the strength training tends not to be enough. It's good, it's a good start, but there should be a multilayered attack to the strength training process, correct?

Brandon: Absolutely, yes.

John: Yeah, I think that works out best for all involved. Now, here's the other thing you always hear, Brandon, and you probably do that in your agency, the excuses why I can't. I can't do this, I can't do that, I can't strength train, we all heard the excuses. Either it's they don't have the time to go to the gym or there's no gym in their agency, but let's talk about that. What do you say to those excuses that you always hear?

Brandon: It seems simplistic, but we make time for what's important to us. So many of us work multiple jobs, we've got family commitments, mandatory overtime, low staffing, it results in a very busy, chaotic lifestyle. Then to compound it with all the . . . I don't know that we have time to go into all that, but all the epinephrine and cortisol that gets released in your system from being vigilant as a police officer all day in your shift. When you get off shift, you go home, that stuff kills your energy and you're exhausted. That, coupled with no time, makes it very difficult to force yourself into an exercise. I would say, as far as the time goes, another quick example.

My family, we're big goal people, New Year's resolution goal people. I love to read and I hadn't been reading as much as I wanted lately. My wife and I sat down and we're just going through our schedule like, "When could we fit some more reading time in here," because we live very full, busy lives, and it came down to typically our pattern is we put the kids to bed and then we'd watch a half hour of comedy.

John: All right.

Brandon: Some little short episode.

John: Okay.

Brandon: What we decided to do is take that out. We're not doing that anymore and we're just sitting on the couch and reading together for that half hour. I think fitness is the same way. The studies show that the average person today is spending two hours a day on social media. How much TV are you watching? There's things that you can cut out as long as you label fitness as more important than those things and create a habit system, it becomes . . . and start small, just something really short: 10, 15 minutes of working out, start with that until it becomes a habit; then we can expand on it as needed.

John: Yeah, and I think you focus on the fact is what we do for a living, the very nature of what we do as law enforcement officers, requires us to have some level of physical fitness.

Brandon: Absolutely.

John: I think it's incumbent upon police officers today, if you consider yourself to be a professional police officer, to maintain that level of physical fitness. One of the things I've done and I'll defer to you again is, instead of having to worry about

going out or getting home and going back out to a gym or finding that time to go to the gym, can you give me some insight into how to set up your basic own home gym? How hard would that be to accomplish the strength training that you talk about?

Brandon:

I don't believe it's hard at all. Actually, in fact, I have a home gym and I love it because the biggest thing is I don't have to get off shift, come home, get my gear, and then be away from family even more time and drive over to a gym to get a workout. The pattern, I talked a little bit about habits. Being consistent with this stuff, I think, is all about habits. My habit is, right before I'm getting off shift the last thing I do, I take my pre-workout so I know I got to drive home and start my workout, but it's at the home and I'm able to be with my family. They come in and talk to me while I'm working out. I'm not away from my family while I'm doing this.

The very basics of a home gym are, how much space do you have, what's your goal? If you're going start really small, start with things simple like a flat bench and very simple dumbbell set, a jump rope, a pull-up bar. Just little simple things that you can add until you start getting more advanced and maybe a little more time, space, and money, and now you're adding things like a squat rack. I think there's pretty significant advantages to having a home gym because it's pretty difficult to come up with an excuse why not to work out when the gym is attached to your home and is always available.

John:

Yeah, and I totally agree. I have one in my house, and basically what you just talked about, some simple dumbbells. I have a treadmill and I have a flat bench. I find that works very well for me. I always like to end these podcasts with a takeaway. Now you gave a lot of great information today, Brandon, and I hope people realize why you are one of our subject experts on the topic based on what you told us today, but can you recommend a simple strength training workout that someone can do with little time and little equipment, and we'll give that to anybody listening today and give them a starting point?

Brandon:

Perfect, yeah. Start small. Biggest recommendation, don't do too much too soon, start small. Bruce Lee has an excellent quote where he says, "Long-term consistency trumps short term-intensity," and Bruce Lee knew what he was talking about. Just a very simple, do a circuit if you're just starting. Do a circuit and hit each muscle group. I would start with chest. You're going to lay down if you got a flat bench, you're going to lay down and do 12 reps with some dumbbells for chest, then you're going to switch to shoulders, 12 overhead presses. Switch to pull-ups, 12 pull-ups. Just basically you're hitting every, and then you're going to go to legs with 12 squats. You're going to do those one after the other and then to throw some viciousness in it at the end, maybe just five burpees. But you're going to do that as a round, rest 30 seconds, do it again as another round, rest 30 seconds, and there's a decent workout to start out with.

John:

That sounds like something that anybody could do.

Brandon: Yeah.

John: Like you said, "Start out with an achievable goal and work from there," that's what we're saying. That's the good stuff.

Brandon: Perfect.

John: Hey, really, and Brandon, I just want to say right off the start, hey, thank you for taking time out of your day. I know you're very busy at Provo, Utah. I just want to thank you for your time and talking to me about the topic of strength training. Also, I want to encourage our listeners it's easy not to do anything, but you have to do something, so please, exercise, get healthy, and get healthy to get home. That's what we talk about in VALOR. You have to get home, and by increasing your level of activity and doing the strength training is one of the ways that you'll do that. I also want to remind everybody, don't forget to visit the VALOR website for additional information about this topic as well. Brandon, anything you want to add before we close it out today?

Brandon: No, thank you for the opportunity and everyone be safe.

John: Okay, thank you, sir.

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