

APPENDIX P

Saber Challenge Course: A True Stress Inoculation Training Program¹



The *Saber Challenge Course* being conducted on outdoor range. Instructor #1 (foreground) fires Simunition FX Marking Cartridges from Instructor Point #1 at participant as the participant moves from Point A to Point B. Instructor #2 is visible at Position C at left. Portable target system is set up down-range at left.

Note: This lesson plan, though somewhat unconventional, has been implemented with great success during specialized training iterations, as well as during basic recruit firearms training iterations. It has also been professionally evaluated by several seasoned firearms trainers, a behavioral psychologist, and an attorney. All have found it an efficient model that accomplishes several critical objectives as described in the text.

Introduction

In September 1999, while running a team of law enforcement special operations personnel through an old paradigm style “combat”² firearms training program, I observed many of them commit a common tactical error.

The program required the officers to traverse across the range, moving from cover to cover, while engaging various targets with their handguns. The targets included life-size, stationary paper targets that depicted subjects presenting a threat (or no threat) to address judgmental firearms skills training requirements, several pepper poppers, and a moving target.

The error many of the officers committed was found in their improper use of the provided cover.

¹ This material has previously appeared in the following publications: *Police Marksman*, *New Jersey Cops*, and the *American Society of Law Enforcement Trainers (ASLET) Journal*.

² This terminology will not be used in any New Paradigm programs UNLESS the program incorporates actual combat-type elements (i.e. Simunitions training).

Many of them would not fully employ the cover to their best advantage, leaving themselves exposed to the simulated downrange “adversaries.” Some of the officers stopped completely in the open while moving from cover to cover in order to get into a traditional shooting stance and engage the targets.

While obviously neither taught nor desired, this response was understandable, given the fact that most of the officers had been conditioned to stand upright with their feet planted directly in front of the target for years while participating in commonly-encountered, departmental firearms “qualification-type” courses.

It was at this point that I decided it would be worthwhile to try and develop a program that would not only encourage the participants to utilize cover, but would actually condition them to use it to the best of their ability by employing the proven principles of operant conditioning.

As explained in the first section of this book, operant conditioning employs a simple model. First, the subject is presented with a **stimulus** (Discriminative cue). The subject then displays a **response** to the stimulus. If the subject displays *the desired response*, the subject then receives a **reward**.

The first step I took while developing the program was to examine the operant conditioning method that has been used so successfully to condition military personnel to fire at identified enemy targets. This method, which uses pop-up targets, works like this: The soldier is in a fighting position, wearing duty gear and equipped with a personal weapon. The man-shaped pop-up target (**stimulus**) is displayed down range. The soldier fires at the target (**response**). If the soldier hits the target, it falls (**immediate reward**). The immediate reward is later reinforced when the soldier is recognized for his skill with the personal weapon, given marksmanship badges, and held in high regard by his peers.

The second step I took was to turn the

successful model outlined above around in order to achieve the desired result. This was accomplished in the following manner:

The officer, wearing duty gear, is presented with a defined area he must negotiate by traversing on foot.

Various types of cover are provided for the officer to employ as he makes his way across the area.

As the officer makes his way across the area, Simunition FX Marking Rounds are fired at him (**stimulus**³).

The officer must think, move, and utilize the provided cover to the best of his ability (**response**) to prevent himself from being hit.

If the officer is successful, he will limit the number of times he is hit, or will not be hit at all (**immediate reward**). The immediate reward is then reinforced when the instructor and his peers recognize the officer as being successful. It can be further reinforced after all participating officers have completed the course, the scores are tallied, and the officers are again praised for what they did right while completing the program.

The third step involved fine tuning the program to make it a more efficient training exercise. This was accomplished by incorporating additional stressors into the program, as well as some specific controls.

The additional stressors included timing each participant as he negotiated the course, as well as requiring the participants to follow simple commands and then deal with a moving target set up to present subjects displaying different threat levels.

The controls included limiting the number of rounds that could be fired at each participant, ensuring that the moving target was set to operate at the same speed for all students, and not allowing participants to observe the other participants negotiate the course until they themselves had gone through it.

³ May also be referred to as the discriminative cue, or conditional stimulus.

Several safety mechanisms were also incorporated into the course. All of these mechanisms are fully described in the lesson plan that follows.

The course, including the moving target, is easy to set up and explain. The principles behind the development of the course should be explained to the students prior to their participating. Students can complete the course (on average), within 3 minutes, which makes the course intense, but time-efficient.

In addition to being conditioned to use cover to a degree that traditional firearms training cannot achieve, each student also accomplished the following:

- 1) demonstrated a safe administrative unloading procedure
- 2) experienced a true high-arousal state (the type of which can not be induced simply by having the student physically exert himself by performing pushups or jumping jacks) while negotiating the course
- 3) been conditioned NOT to freeze or fall down “dead” should they be hit by incoming rounds
- 4) performed a safe emergency loading drill while in a true high-arousal state
- 5) had the proper use of cover immediately reinforced while employing their own firearm to deal with a briefly appearing target
- 6) demonstrated judgmental firearms skills while in a true high-arousal state
- 7) engaged a moving target (if necessary)

The program has been successfully administered numerous times with great success. No serious injuries have been accrued. Both the students and the instructors learn a great deal from it. Several layers of departmental liability insulation can be attributed to the program content.

With the exception of the initial cost of the moving target system and Simunition equipment, minimum resources are required to administer the program.

Students consistently report that in addi-

tion to getting a lot of value out of it, the program is also challenging and enjoyable to participate in.

This program has also been videotaped and reviewed by students after participating in it. In this way, mistakes can be clearly seen by the participants and learned from. Successes can be analyzed and emulated.

Bottom line—after completing the program, both instructors and students have stated that they believed this course would absolutely help ensure what must be the one true objective of any law enforcement firearms training program—to save lives.

The lesson plan, set-up diagram, and sample score sheet are offered here for consideration and use.



Top photo: View from down-range. Instructor #1 seen in background at Instructor Point #1. Pads are used down-range when course is conducted on hard surfaces. Bottom: Instructor #2 oversees as Student engages moving target at Position C. Bucket used to contain unloaded pistol visible in front of student. (MSP archives.)

COURSE OF FIRE: 0-15 ROUNDS

THE SABER CHALLENGE STRESS INOCULATION TRAINING PROGRAM

(Sample Series No. 4 DUTY PISTOL TRAINING COURSE, Scenario-based, Dynamic Interactive Experiential Learning)

- Description:** A dynamic, operant conditioning/stress inoculation training program designed to reinforce proper tactical movement and cover utilization responses by exposing the student to an appropriately realistic stimulus.
- The dynamic conditions incorporated into the exercise, combined with inducement of a true high arousal state, will also allow assessment of the student's ability to maintain self-control and employ proper judgmental and tactical firearms skills while engaging a moving target.
- Equipment:** *Instructors:* Simunition FX Marking Cartridge-equipped firearm, stop watch, cardboard box, moving target system, cover/barricade items.
Student: Duty carry gear, pistol and ammunition, firearm, Simunition protective equipment.

NOTE!!! This program involves the controlled use of **BOTH** a **SIMUNITION FX Marking Cartridge** equipped firearm and a standard, working firearm loaded with penetrating-ammunition. **SAFETY IS THE FIRST PRIORITY.** Instructors must be knowledgeable and competent. Student must be briefed regarding exercise requirements prior to participation in program. If all safety procedures as outlined in this lesson plan are followed, the risk of firearms injury to any person/s should be extremely limited.

- Preparation:** Range is confirmed to be safe and clear. Various barricades/cover items are placed traversing across the range from Point A to Point B. A position of cover will also be in place at Point C directly in front of the moving target system.
- Instructor #1** is posted at **Instructor Point #1**. Instructor #1 is equipped **ONLY** with a Simunition-ready weapon and FX Marking Cartridge ammunition. **No other weapons or ammunition are allowed at Instructor Point #1!**
- Instructor #2** is the **control/safety officer** and will not participate in the exercise in any other capacity. **Instructor # 2 will be UNARMED.**
- Student** is equipped with duty handgun and ammunition, protective head gear, eye gear, and throat gear (Simunition Protective Mask is recommended for use.) Additional equipment (**NO ADDITIONAL WEAPONS**) may be added to increase level of difficulty/realism. (i.e. Gas masks, tactical vest, etc.)

THE SABER CHALLENGE STRESS INOCULATION TRAINING PROGRAM, CONTINUED

PHASE 1: **Instructor #2** instructs Student to conduct a safe administrative unloading drill while facing downrange at **Point A**. After Student completes unloading drill, Instructor #2 checks weapon to ensure it is safe and clear. Instructor then takes control of Student's weapon, magazine, and/or any loose rounds. Student is then asked if he/she has any other weapons on his/her person. **NO OTHER WEAPONS CAN BE CARRIED BY STUDENT DURING THIS DRILL.** (A pat-frisk of the student's outer garments should be conducted at this time.) Instructor #2 then asks if Student is ready / has any questions. Instructor #2 then proceeds to **Point C** with Student's safe and clear weapon and ammunition. **Student stands ready at Point A.**

PHASE 2: Once **Instructor #2** is clear from fields of fire, Instructor #2 places the Student's weapon, magazine, and/or any loose rounds into a cardboard box, bucket, or other suitable container. The container is then placed behind the cover located at **Point C**. **Instructor #2 then checks to ensure Instructor #1 is ready.** Instructor #2 then begins the drill by signaling to the Student and activating the timer/stopwatch. The Student then traverses across the range moving from **Point A to Point B** using proper movement and cover utilization techniques.

STUDENT'S FOCUS MUST BE UPRANGE AND DIRECTED AT INSTRUCTOR #1 WHO WILL BE STATIONARY AT INSTRUCTOR POINT #1 on opposite side of cover.

While Student traverses the designated area, **Instructor #1** will fire Simunition FX Marking Cartridge rounds downrange at the Student. **No more than 5 Simunition FX Marking Cartridge rounds will be fired at each individual student. No rounds will be fired after Student reaches Point B.** If Student is hit by Simunition FX Marking Cartridge round, Student will continue to traverse range and finish the exercise.

PHASE 3: Upon completing the traverse and reaching **Point B**, Student will be met by **Instructor #2**. Instructor #2 will ensure Student is not injured and is able to safely continue with the exercise. Once Instructor #2 is satisfied that student is capable of safely continuing the exercise, Instructor #2 will instruct the student to don protective eye and hearing equipment if not already worn. Student will then be directed to take up a stationary position of cover at **Point C, FACING DOWN RANGE** toward the moving target system. On the ground in front of the Student will be the container that holds the Student's unloaded weapon (slide locked to the rear / cylinder opened), magazine, and/or any loose rounds.

Instructor #2 will then instruct the Student to make his weapon ready by:

- a) Revolvers: inserting rounds into the cylinder's chambers
- b) Semiautomatics: inserting the magazine and allowing the slide to go forward while keeping the MUZZLE POINTED DOWNRANGE. Any additional loose rounds are to be left in the box.

As soon as the Student's weapon is ready and the **Student is in a position of cover FACING DOWNRANGE**, **Instructor #2** will activate the moving target,

THE SABER CHALLENGE STRESS INOCULATION TRAINING PROGRAM, CONTINUED

allowing it to traverse across the student's field of view *ONE TIME ONLY* at a predetermined rate of movement. The moving target will display a reality-type target that depicts either an immediate lethal threat, a less-than-lethal threat, or no threat. **The student will deal with the target using the most appropriate indicated response.**

After the moving target has completed its traverse, the exercise is completed and Instructor #2 stops the timer.

Completion: **HOT RANGE:** The Student will then a) reload and holster the revolver, or b) holster his loaded semiautomatic pistol and top off the magazine.

COLD RANGE: The Student will perform a safe unloading drill at the direction of Instructor #2 at Point C. The Student and Instructor #2 will then check the moving target for hits (if shots have been fired) and review the Student's performance.

The Student will be evaluated on the following:

- 1) Proper use of movement
- 2) Proper utilization of available cover
- 3) Judgmental firearms skills
- 4) Accuracy in engaging moving target (if appropriate)

Evaluation Form SG-78 may be used to evaluate and record student's performance.

Additional Notes: *Regarding Up-Range Stress...* While the administration of this program may appear to be utilizing "up-range stress", it actually does not. For even though the stressor is being administered by the instructor from up-range, the student is facing the instructor and dealing with the stressor while moving from point to point. Only when the student successfully completes dealing with the stressor being generated from up-range does he turn his attention back down-range, where he must then deal directly with a second stressor.

Regarding a scenario or "back story" for this course... I have used the following to set the stage for this drill, especially when dealing with individuals who believe the course is, at base, unrealistically staged. The scenario is that the student and his partner have been involved in a foot pursuit of a dangerous suspect in a desolate environment. The suspect has taken up a position of concealment and has begun shooting at both officers from this location. The partner, located at POINT C, has been wounded, is bleeding profusely, and requires immediate aid. The student, located at POINT A, discovers that his weapon has fallen from his holster and is lost. In order to save his partner's life he must traverse across the area, using cover as he goes, reach his partner, and employ his partner's disabled weapon to stop the attacker's assault.

Regarding Firing Extra Shots at that "Extra Special" Student... "Lighting up" any particular student during the course for any reason is unprofessional, and will often adversely affect the benefits derived from the program. The rules must be respected by *all* involved.

Regarding the "Running Man Student"... Finally, when administering this course there is usually at least one participant who decides to simply run from POINT A to POINT B. The soundness of this decision is greatly influenced by the pistolcraft skills of the Simunition-equipped instructor.



SAMPLE

THE SABER CHALLENGE TRAINING & EVALUATION RECORD

DATE: ____ / ____ / ____

LOCATION: _____

WEAPON TYPE: _____

WEAPON MODEL: _____

INSTRUCTOR/S: _____

PROGRAM ID: _____

WEATHER / COMMENT: _____

NAME / ID#:	MOVEMENT (Rate 1-3)	USE OF COVER (Rate 1-3)	JUDGEMENT (Rate 1-3)	MOVING TARGET (Rate 1-3)	TIME	INSTRUCTOR NOTES, COMMENTS, OR OBSERVATIONS
1. _____						
2. _____						
3. _____						
4. _____						
5. _____						
6. _____						
7. _____						
8. _____						
9. _____						
10. _____						

Instructor / evaluator notes: _____

Individual Category Rating Scale: 1 - Needs improvement 2 - Good 3 - Excellent

Suggested format of FORM SG-78.