

# Paintball Training for Wildlife Officers

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*Abstract:* The utilization of paintball scenarios is a viable part of any department's ongoing advanced firearms training program. They isolate potential tactical problems, allowing the firearms instructor to concentrate his efforts in these areas during regular live fire exercises. Most importantly, paintball training gives the individual officer much needed, and henceforth unavailable feedback from a living, breathing target.

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Ready on the right, ready on the left, ready on the firing line. Chances are, you have heard this chant from your firearms instructor many times, especially if your career spans more than a few years. This preparatory command signaled the beginning of another firearms qualification. It told us that we were loaded and ready to fire another exciting NRA or FBI course.

The whistle blows, and stage one of the course begins. Following a brief flurry of gunfire, the whistle is again sounded. Precious empty brass is meticulously placed in the ever present brass bucket beside the 2 x 4 barricade. The instructor explains the next stage of the course as each officer reloads his or her respective weapon. Additional ammo is placed in pockets or pouches, while the B-27's patiently look on. The drill continues until all stages of the course have been fired and the targets scored.

How many times have we repeated this scene during our time on the job? How many departments still repeat this scenario on a regular basis? The answer, I fear, is too many.

## Program Development

For many years, the Kentucky Department of Fish and Wildlife firearms training program closely paralleled this scenario. The training was limited to 36 rounds per qualification. This qualification occurred yearly, provided something important didn't come up to replace it.

Our program began its evolution in fall 1980. The director of law enforcement asked for 9 volunteers, 1 from each of the 9 wildlife districts, to become firearms instructors. Training was to be provided by personnel from another division within our department.

These 9 officers attended a 40-hour NRA police instructor class. After completing this course, we learned that the instructor had allowed his certification to expire, and we were unable to obtain certification from the NRA as firearms instructors.

The director then decided that we would send 1 officer to an NRA class in Alabama, after which he would return to certify the other 8 officers as instructors. Wrong again! The class that he attended could only certify him as an instructor.

Late in 1981, another officer was sent to an NRA class at Camp Perry, Ohio. We now had 2 full-fledged NRA certified firearms instructors.

The idea of an instructor per district had, by this time, faltered. Early in 1982, it was decided that each of the 2 firearms instructors would be responsible for their respective half of the state. Training was scheduled on an annual basis.

Two surplus boat trailers were remodeled to haul our metal target frames from district to district. Qualifications were still primarily static NRA and FBI approved courses of fire. Money for training was not abundant. Ammunition and targets were strictly rationed, imagination and improvisation, on the other hand, were not! Both were used freely and frequently.

We obtained 24 AR steel pepper poppers. They were immediately put into service and became an important and prominent part of our training program with total cost of about \$600. These targets are still in use today.

We obtained some train fire motors from military surplus. These motors were used to build a set of battery powered turning targets. These targets were far from a dual-a-tron system, but they worked much the same way. They provided us a way to present shoot/don't shoot type scenarios to our officers. More importantly, it was fun. The qualification shoot was gradually accepted for what it should be: a learning experience.

The training schedule gradually progressed from once a year to twice a year, and finally to 4 times a year, which we still maintain.

Instructors continued to integrate new systems, all home made, into the training program; falling plate tables, pop-up targets, running man targets, metal headplates, and additional turning targets. The cost of these systems was minimal compared to commercial versions.

In 1986 we began experimenting with cotton ball training. For the first time, we were able to create dynamic scenarios that allowed man on man role playing, rather than previous static, man on target training. However, this type of training is very limited in its application, i.e., very close range, and was used primarily as an in-service and academy training aid.

Early in 1991, we completed transition to auto pistol. During this period we added an 18-foot enclosed trailer to our training inventory. This trailer is equipped with a generator, video equipment, armorer's equipment, targets, and all other equipment necessary to conduct firearms training and weapon maintenance.

One instructor has assumed full responsibility for firearms training statewide. Equipment is transported to each individual district, and with the assistance of another instructor and an armorer, he provides on-site training for field personnel.

### **Prevalent Problem**

As our equipment and training techniques improved, it became apparent that we were not getting through to many officers. Tactical mistakes such as improper use or no use of cover, team movements, searching techniques, etc., were consistently repeated, irrespective of the methods used to correct them. Most officers, when critiqued on their poor performance on any given course, usually replied that they would not have handled it that way if it were a real situation.

Training an officer to be proficient with a weapon is, in most cases, not too difficult. He is first taught the nomenclature of the weapon, then how it works, and basic marksmanship skills. The officer is then allowed to apply the skills that he has learned by shooting live ammunition at a stationary target. He receives feedback, positive or negative, depending on whether he hits or misses what he shoots at. Human nature dictates the need for positive feedback, so he will continue to practice until he fulfills that need. That fulfillment is usually reached when he can place all his bullets in a small, well-centered group on a paper target.

At this stage, we begin to teach the officer to integrate his marksmanship skills with tactical skills. At this point in training there is a breakdown in the feedback process. The officer does not receive any feedback, positive or negative from his target, in relation to the effectiveness of his tactics. In many cases he will ignore the instructor's comments, for example, that he was not properly using cover or that he was using concealment rather than cover. The only positive (as perceived by him) feedback that he received was the center mass hit on the target.

### **A Lifesaving Game**

The solution to this perplexing problem is simple. Pit one officer against another in a live fire exercise. The survivor will learn the necessary lessons about use of cover, speed, etc. Of course this is not very practical, nor is it cost effective. Training a new recruit is very expensive!

After discussing this possibility (in jest) at length, we realized that maybe it was possible to accomplish this very thing without injury to anyone. The popular game of paintball held some promise as a solution to our problem.

At the outset, we did not have enough information available to justify the cost of buying our own equipment. In addition, we were concerned about acceptance of such a radical training technique by field personnel. Would they view it as viable training or as a waste of their time?

The decision was made to try paintball. The necessary equipment was rented from Blast Paintball Games in Lexington, Kentucky. This included several paintball pistols, rifles, protective helmets, propulsion gas, paint balls, and other accessories. The total cost for training 130 officers was slightly less than \$1000.

Instructors and training staff worked with a few selected officers before the scheduled training sessions in order to familiarize themselves with the equipment, and to develop pertinent scenarios.

The first thing that we learned from this early testing was that the equipment we had could not be used for close range training, such as car stops or exercises inside very small buildings. Even on the lowest power setting, a paintball rifle or pistol is capable of breaking a single pane of window glass at close range (under 20 feet).

We also learned that the paintballs themselves required some sort of refrigeration during hot weather. This was a minor problem and was solved by placing the paintballs in a protective plastic bag and storing them in a large picnic cooler filled with ice. The paintballs were then removed as needed to refill guns.

The pistols that we rented operated on small CO<sub>2</sub> cylinders of the type commonly used for BB and pellet guns. Each cylinder produced about 40 shots before replacement. The rifles utilized a larger 7-ounce refillable CO<sub>2</sub> cylinder which allowed it to fire perhaps 200 or more times before a refill was necessary. Both pistols and rifles were made by Tippmann Products Co. They were, with one exception, pump actions. The exception was a rifle which fired semi-auto.

Paintballs are loaded into a tubular magazine atop the barrel of the pistols and are gravity fed into the action. The rifles hold a larger quantity of paintballs in a small hopper positioned on top of the gun. As with the pistols, the rifles are gravity fed. Each time the action is opened, a paintball is dropped into position for chambering, and as the action is closed, the ball is pushed forward into the chamber. The gun is then ready to fire.

Problems sometimes occurred when an officer tried to cycle the action too quickly. Double feeds or squashed paintballs were the result. The double feeds could be shot from the gun, but the broken paintballs usually required a quick cleaning to restore the gun to full effectiveness.

Another lesson learned early on was the need for heavy clothing. With good head protection, the possibility of serious injury, even at extremely close range, is slight. However, a close range hit to an unprotected arm or neck is quite painful, and will cause a slight bruise or welt.

From this point, the training followed our normal firearms training procedures with our instructors traveling around the state to all 9 wildlife districts. The district captains usually make prior arrangements for training sites within their respective districts. Our traveling shooting show is entirely mobile, so an elaborate range is unnecessary, even when using live ammunition. All that is required is an open space such as a wooded area, strip pit, open field, etc., with a safe backstop. All the necessary target frames, metal targets, running targets, popups, barricades, and other props are carried in the trailer.

The scenarios used in the paintball training varied according to range sites. Some range sites had old buildings or barns, while others did not. Buildings were utilized when available, and are preferable. Although our officers are not involved in that many building searches, we found that the level of stress is dramatically increased when the officer is confined to a small space.

All districts received the same training scenarios. The first scenario consisted of a series of barrels and barricades haphazardly placed in a relatively open area. The officers, working in teams of 2 were told that they would be walking down an old road or through an open field, responding to a call from dispatch. They were told to expect at some point an encounter with other persons.

The second scenario utilized a building, when available, or a tent camp. The officers again worked in teams of 2 and were told they had a warrant to serve, or that they would be checking a deer camp. Each team went through each course 2 times.

Instructors acted as bad guys during most of the training. We tried using a few of the officers who had already completed the training as role players. The results of this exercise reaffirmed a fact learned many years ago: when using role play in dynamic training exercises, especially those involving weapons, use only training personnel familiar with role playing.

I can not stress this enough. Anytime role playing is used, the potential for disaster is always present. The players, both good guys and bad, can easily get out of hand unless they are closely monitored. Even then, and with surprising frequency, weapons such as knives, sticks, etc., which were not a part of the planned scenario will appear in the hands of role players as if by magic. Any exercise of this nature, including paintball training must be kept under complete control. Tempers sometime flare from a close range hit, or when an officer is shot again after being declared dead by a referee.

Officers must know at the beginning of any role playing exercise, who is in control. In paintball scenarios, the use of referees is encouraged. These referees may be instructors or officers and should have complete authority to stop or redirect the action as necessary. Hits on heavy clothing or from long range are sometimes not felt, and the officer must be told that he is dead or disabled. Those persons acting as referees should wear the same protective headgear as the participants in the scenario. The referees are usually on the edge of the action, so heavy clothing is an option left up to them.

Instructors, or anyone playing bad guys, must wear heavy clothing. The bad guys usually sustain extensive hits to all parts of the body during a day of scenarios. Groin protection is encouraged! We used folded towels tucked into the pants in a strategic location.

Role play instructors should be rotated or allowed a rest period after 3 to 4 scenarios. Being a bad guy is a rough life. On a hot day, a combination of headgear, heavy clothing, running, and stress soon takes a toll. You will be soaked with perspiration.

We found that most scenarios lasted an average of 5 minutes. Some, of course lasted much longer, while others were over in seconds. The time frame can be manipulated a great deal by the instructor.

It is very easy for the instructor to set up the scenario so that the officer will always get killed. However, this should not be encouraged, and is certainly not the objective of the training. Unless strict restraints are imposed, a scenario can

become a free-for-all between role players and officers. The officers will usually lose, and this is not what we want.

Scenarios should be winnable and as realistic and job related as possible. This does not mean that role players should be lambs for slaughter. They should be allowed to capitalize on any tactical errors that the officers make. Their objective should be to reinforce previous tactical training by forcing the officer to do it correctly.

Instructors (role players) should, by their actions, force the officer to use proper tactics to accomplish a preset goal or objective. For instance, our objective in a given scenario might include teaching an officer or team of officers how to withdraw from a potentially violent situation. An exercise of this nature would begin with dialog, between the conservation officer (CO) and the bad guy (BG):

BG—Hey, who are you?

CO—State Conservation Officer John Doe, what's your name?

BG—None of your business, now get off my property.

CO—Oh, is this your farm?

BG—Damn right it is, and I don't want any game wardens on it.

CO—Well sir, I think we may need to talk about that—

BG—I don't have anything to say to you. I told you SOB's last year if you came back on my land I'd shoot you, now I mean for you to leave, or there's going to be trouble. (At this point the instructor might move toward a gun)

Through the exchange of dialog, it should be apparent to the officer that additional talk at this point will probably accomplish little. Our objective in this exercise is to show the officer that he has other options, in this case, withdrawal. If the officer does not properly respond to the verbal stimuli, then he may be forced to engage in a gun battle with the irate landowner, who may, at this point be joined by a hidden crony. The usual result: the officer(s) will get shot with a paintball(s).

Immediately after completion of the scenario, the officers are critiqued on their performance by the instructor. Most of our officers learned, or in some cases, reaffirmed several important lessons from such an encounter:

1. Being alert and aware of surroundings.
2. Slowing down; not rushing into situation before assessing.
3. Having a plan.
4. Communicating with signals rather than voice.
5. Recognizing nonverbal clues given by the suspect.
6. Need for speed when reacting to deadly situation.
7. Providing cover fire for retreating partner.
8. Preventing tunnel vision.
9. Cover vs. concealment.
10. Continue to fight even when hit.

These 10 examples are only a few of the many problems encountered in a deadly force situation that must be solved by the officer in a span of seconds.

As a result of these paintball scenarios, we found, as suspected, that our previous conventional methods of teaching tactics had, in many cases, not been

effective. These failures were particularly evident with older officers. We believe this is due in part to earlier training courses, i.e., PPC type courses, which place much stress on accuracy, and little on tactics. These officers were, in many cases, able to hit the bad guy, but not before the bad guy hit him several times.

The paintball training afforded us the opportunity to view our officers' performance under a totally different type of stress than previously provided by normal range scenarios. We saw officers who normally perform flawlessly on the range, fail dismally on paintball exercises. Why? Because they were unable to adjust quickly to that one variable present in any combat situation, but lacking in any training they had previously; a living, thinking target.

Live fire range exercises, no matter how well constructed, can never duplicate the reactions of a live target. The FATS and other similar systems provide the officer with some useful feedback such as his reaction time, proper assessment of shoot/don't shoot situations, etc., but still fail to duplicate the actions of a living, moving, thinking adversary.

Most importantly, these training techniques fail to provide real and meaningful target feedback. Sure, the FATS will tell you that you had 3 shots on target in 1.5 seconds, and that you were right in your decision to shoot. The instructor may add to this information by telling you that you used cover well. You leave with the self-assurance that you can handle anything!

All these systems provide useful information and are definitely a part of any good firearms or officer survival program. However, they may contribute to a false sense of security and preparedness in many officers. A paintball squarely between the eyes will instantly dissipate any and all illusions of invulnerability! No one has to tell the officer that he did something wrong. That fact is evident.

## **Results**

The target finally has the ability to furnish feedback! The effectiveness of this feedback is immediately apparent from the looks of complete surprise and bewilderment on the faces of the officers after being hit 1 or more times with a paintball.

Athletes commonly use the phrase no pain, no gain. With so many officers, we had for years gotten no gain, no matter what we tried. Same mistakes over and over again. After adding the pain, the gain was instantaneous! The slight pain associated with a hit from a paintball was the much needed positive target feedback that we sought.

All the instructor critiques on bad tactics that the officers had heard and disregarded for years, now had a genuine meaning to them. They were able to see, by looking at the yellow spot of paint on their "behind" that the instructor had been right all along when he kept telling them that if you don't get your "behind" under cover, you are going to get shot.

This is the unique thing about paintball training. It provides the instructor a means of training reinforcement henceforth, not available. By viewing the scenario

from the bad guy perspective, he is able to see the officers mistakes and immediately correct them with a paintball. The reasoning behind various tactics and techniques quickly take on a real meaning for the officer. He can see firsthand that they actually do work, and will in fact keep him from getting shot if used properly. Before, this was purely theory, something the instructor said would work. The officer could no longer use excuses to explain bad tactics. The yellow paint spots and the red welts proved that. The only explanation was, my "behind" was not under cover, and I got shot.

Paintball training tends to magnify training deficiencies, which may then be addressed during regular range sessions or during future paintball training. It will certainly increase officer interest and attention at future tactical training exercises simply because of another quirk of human nature: few people enjoy pain, no matter how slight, and will seek out knowledge, or otherwise find ways to avoid further unpleasant experiences.

The training session that we conducted using paintball, although simple, and in its infancy, has probably yielded more valuable information than any other single program yet devised by this department. The information obtained will be instrumental in planning future training scenarios as well as evaluating our present programs.

## **Conclusion**

At this time, we are in the process of buying the equipment that we will need to assure the continuation of this very vital part of our training program. We plan to continue this training on an annual basis. Paintball training will replace 1 of our quarterly firearms qualification sessions.

Part of our equipment purchase includes conversion kits for model 92 Berettas which will allow us to conduct very close range training with marking cartridges. Although we do not carry the Beretta, it is the only gun available at this time that will work in our holster, yet still provide the officer the same feel as our duty Smith and Wesson 4566.

For slightly less than \$5000 initial investment for all the necessary equipment and accessories, this agency will be able to provide its 130 officers with what we think will be some of the best and most meaningful training available anywhere in this country.

Paintball is not just a game! It may be an officer's best chance to live.