

PHYSICAL FITNESS FOR FLORIDA WILDLIFE OFFICERS

DAVID E. MELVIN, Florida Game and Fresh Water Fish Commission, Tallahassee, FL

Proc. Ann. Conf. S.E. Assoc. Fish & Wildl. Agencies 33: 787-788

Physical fitness programs in the past have been given "good idea, but . . . not practical" labels for too long. With rising medical costs, salaries and workman's compensation claims, what agency can afford to have a man out of service due to unnecessary and preventable injury or illness? No agency has ever expressed satisfaction with out of shape, overweight or routinely ill law enforcement officers. Yet these same agencies, by not having a physical fitness program that is either required or encourages participation, only help to develop these officers into overweight, de-conditioned and unsatisfactory employees.

This is the position our Division of Law Enforcement found itself in, in 1977. The physical fitness of law enforcement employees had been sort of lost in the shuffle. It was brought to light in the spring of 1978 when we were thinking about ordering new leather for all of our law enforcement officers. Out of 300 belt size requests sent to the field, one-third came back over size 36. Ten percent came back above size 40. That opened our eyes to the problem. At the same time the three-year time limit set in the collective bargaining agreement with the Police Benevolent Association (PBA) for giving each officer a physical examination was running out. Since the monies had already been allocated for the medical examinations and we had been awakened to the need for a physical fitness program, it was decided to make full use of the required medical examinations by incorporating them into our physical fitness program. Word of the upcoming physical fitness program was disseminated through the regional captains and reminders placed in our quarterly law enforcement bulletin. A few small brush fire grievances about threatened job security and the like were quickly put out by adopting a stand that if you cannot do your job, that's one thing. But we are not going to can you because you cannot do 20 push-ups.

Billing procedures were set up and coordinated with our Purchasing and Fiscal Department to handle the medical bills as expeditiously as possible. Training files were set up to receive the medical examination forms and secretaries were briefed on the billing and processing procedure to be followed. Other departments in the Game and Fresh Water Fish Commission were invited and encouraged to participate and were notified of testing dates and locations. In the spring of 1979 the program was set and the basic package mailed to each officer. It contained a memorandum from the Director of Law Enforcement outlining the philosophy and procedures to follow including the billing procedures, deadline dates, the examination form and what the physical testing would entail. One month later the regional captains were notified of the recommended schedule of firearms training and physical fitness evaluation to ensure a balanced program for both the law enforcement officers and the training staff. The program was laid out whereby the officer would go to the physician of his choice and obtain a physical examination using the standard examination form. A copy would be mailed directly to the central headquarters in Tallahassee. The physician would be allowed to keep one copy for his records and the officer would retain the last copy. Should the officer be limited in his participation by the physician for one reason or another he would bring an extra copy to the testing location and that would be his excuse for not participating in any one of the events.

The basic allotment per physical was \$50. If the officer wished a more thorough physical he could apply the \$50 towards the total bill. The physical fitness examination form was similar to the applicant physical examination form except for statistical purposes; height, weight and body frame were added at the top of the form. At the bottom of the form a statement by the examining physician was added stating that the individual was or was not cleared to participate in the exercises listed below.

The statewide evaluation results were sorted into four age groups: 20-29, 30-39, 40-49 and 50-59. The results were then tabulated to show the individual officer's performance against everyone else in his geographic region in his same age group and also to compare his performance with all the other wildlife officers in the state in his age group. Based upon his performance a personalized memorandum from the director compliments and comments on each officer's performance and gives philosophy, guidance

and direction to point out the importance of physical fitness not only to the individual officer but to the Commission as a whole.

One of the problems with our physical fitness program is the slowness of any sign of improvement to appear. We expect to see a decrease in our sick leave hours and a decrease in hours lost due to on-the-job injuries. Actual improvement and physical fitness evaluations will not be detected until the spring of 1980 when we can compare officer performance against 1979. Any trends will not be reliable until the spring of 1981 and future projections will not have any reliable data base until 1982. The commitment to an ongoing physical fitness program cannot be of any benefit if it is not a long-term commitment with a uniform testing program with uniform processing of the data.

A compounding problem that has been lying over the horizon for this agency as well as other state law enforcement agencies is the justification of the use of preemployment physical fitness testing procedures and validating these standards with the Florida Department of Administration. By adopting our physical fitness program to include the same medical examination, the same physical fitness tests and the same pass/fail criteria, we have not only been able to improve the physical fitness of our officers but to validate our physical fitness testing procedures that help to ensure our continued recruitment and employment of physically fit officers.

Preemployment standards and minimum requirements are statistically equivalent to the standard performance of our officers during the physical fitness evaluation last year. Their performance has indicated that our preemployment requirements are valid and are fairly positioned in the fair and average categories for each event.

SUMMARY

Physical fitness evaluation and testing is a year round program of the Florida Game and Fresh Water Fish Commission that is designed to encourage officer participation by encouraging officer preparation throughout the year. Competition between regions is growing, with competition between different lieutenants and sergeant's areas being the key motivating element. Local YMCA chapters, police departments and county sheriff's departments have made equipment accessible to our officers. The result being that officers are making physical fitness a part of their weekly activities while on their own time.

Legal Considerations

It is not too difficult to imagine the day will come when a case may be brought before the court which will find that a police department and its *administrators* are found derelict if there has been little or no effort made to keep the officers at a physical level where they are able to overcome any opposition from an arrestee.

In a study of the New York City Police Department it was pointed out that in cases where the police officer performs inadequately because of his lack of physical training leading to injury of the plaintiff, the court will rule for the plaintiffs.

Conclusion

It is incumbent upon wildlife law enforcement administrators to provide their personnel with an adequate on-going physical training and evaluation program. In a study conducted by the New York City Police Department, interviews with all the physical instructors at the academy revealed that a policeman in poor physical condition is more accident-prone, more likely to sustain injuries in his work and more likely to have a poor attendance record due to illness than the better conditioned policeman. Kenneth H. Cooper in his book *Aerobics* sums it up. "Fitness is a desirable state for anyone who wants to lead a zestful and productive life and realize his fullest potential." If the career officer's potential to do his job is restricted because of his physical condition and this condition can be improved, it is negligent from the officer's aspect as well as administration's aspect to cultivate an attitude towards physical fitness that encourages the progressive deterioration of an officer's ability to satisfactorily perform his duties.