

LESSONS LEARNED FROM



THE DEBRIEF

BY JON BECKER

CAKE, NOT ICING

WHAT WE'RE GETTING WRONG ABOUT PERFORMANCE

I recently spent some time with a group of friends who are all members of different tactical teams. Over lunch, the conversation turned to the inevitable discussion about the various nutritional supplements, peptide stacks and “other supplements” they were each using to achieve peak performance. As I listened to their discussion about HRV, peptide viability and which influencers they trusted, it struck me that virtually all of them were some combination of sleep deprived, injured from workouts or training, and/or seriously over-worked and over-stressed.

This conversation got me thinking. What constitutes good physical fitness for a tactical operator? The majority of us have absorbed our ideas about fitness from a steady stream of YouTube personalities, supplement company ads and “device manufacturers’ science.” I started to realize that these sources all have a structural incentive that runs counter to providing

good information. Any YouTube channel or “influencer” that just says “eat well, sleep enough and exercise normally” will never get clicks. As a result, the content cycle forces them to constantly produce the next thing: the new supplement, the new protocol, the new gimmick or the new device. Over time, this has driven most of us to believe that real physical performance is built on weird, novel things. The problem is that the real experts who actually work with elite units completely disagree with this approach.

The conversation with my friends sent me back through my interviews with four performance experts I have spoken with on The Debrief: Dr. Nathalie Pattyn (Episode 66), Kelly Starrett (Episode 30), Casey Glass (Episode 51) and Dr. Brittany Loney (Episode 42). Between them, they have worked with the world’s most elite tactical units, special operations forces, astronauts and pilots. What struck me was how much they agreed on, and how much of that agreement cuts directly against what the current health and fitness boom is selling to operators.

There are a lot of reasons to build physical fitness. Performance, longevity, aesthetics, mental health. For a tactical team member, two reasons matter most. The first is the obvious one: the ability to do the required tasks. Climbing caving ladders, running under load, carrying a wounded teammate, breaching a door, etc. The second is less obvious and arguably more important. Physical fitness is the foundation that keeps your heart rate low under stress and preserves access to your higher cognitive functions when you need to make complicated, life-and-death decisions. An operator who is physically maxed out is also cognitively maxed out because decision-making is the first thing to degrade.

Of course, a full discussion of what builds tactical physical performance, nutrition, sleep, training, mental health,

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all of it, is beyond the scope of a single column. But the gap between what the experts say and what the fitness boom sells is worth examining directly. This article is about that gap. More specifically, it's about the five things that I think many teams may be getting wrong about building tactical physical performance based on my interviews with the experts.

1. Seeking marginal gains at the expense of foundation

The current health and fitness boom is structured around marginal gains. The HRV monitor that promises to optimize your recovery. The peptide stack that promises to enhance your performance. The breathwork app that promises to lower your resting heart rate. Each of these tools is sold on the promise that it will give you a small but meaningful edge. And in fairness, each of them can, under the right circumstances.

The problem is they provide very small gains and only under the right circumstances. Marginal gains tools work when the foundation is solid. They produce small improvements on top of a robust base. But they do nothing meaningful for an operator whose foundation is broken. Or, even worse, they distract us from the things that really matter with a promise of a magic elixir.

No one I have interviewed makes this case more strongly than Dr. Nathalie Pattyn. Pattyn is an MD/PhD who has worked with some of the world's most elite teams (e.g. SOF operators, astronauts and fighter pilots) in the world's most challenging environments (space, war and the Antarctic). Her job is ensuring that her clients perform at the highest possible levels in their mission-critical roles despite a harsh environment. When I asked her what she would do if she were given a tactical team and full authority to build their performance program, she gave a simple answer. She would start with what she calls the four pillars of health: nutrition, sleep, physical activity and mental health. She would refuse to talk about anything else until the four pillars were solid.

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Her frustration with the marginal gains industry was visible. “My job as a scientist is to generate knowledge,” she said, “and I feel like there's no point in generating more knowledge because the knowledge we already have about human performance and human functioning is not being applied. So why would we bother investigating new techniques to enhance performance when we don't even cover the basics?”

The metaphor she returned to was about cake. The four pillars are the cake. Everything else is icing. “Stop asking me about icing on the cake,” she told me. “We have no cake. If people don't sleep well, if they don't train well physically, if they are not well fed, if they don't rest, there's no point investigating some fancy headband that will trigger specific brain wave to enhance recovery because your basics aren't there.”

The picture this produces in practice is the one I saw at lunch with my tactical friends. Operators who can name three peptides off the top of their heads, but who slept four hours the previous night and are running their body on Monster energy drinks and coffee. Operators who can debate the relative merits of two different HRV monitors but who haven't sat down to a good meal in a week. Operators who are spending real money on supplements while running a chronic caloric deficit and undereating protein by 60%. The icing is being applied carefully, but the cake is completely missing.

2. Not allowing for recovery in training, work or life

Modern life is hectic at best. Everyone has too many things to do, too little time to do it and way too many things clamoring for our limited attention span. The result is that we are all over stimulated, overworked and over stressed. This results in a huge silent recovery epidemic that is even worse in law enforcement. Pattyn tells a story about a zebra that, more than any other illustration in any of my interviews, captures this problem:

A zebra grazing on the African savanna sees a lion approach. The zebra runs. Its body activates a stress response that has evolved over millions of years for exactly this situation. Blood is diverted to the brain, heart and muscles. Heart rate and blood pressure climb. Breathing accelerates. Non-essential systems like digestion, reproduction and immune function shut down. Anything that is not directly relevant to survival in the next few minutes is temporarily suspended while the body throws everything it has into outrunning the lion.

The zebra either escapes or it becomes lunch for the lions. If it escapes, the chase is over in just a few minutes. The stress response deactivates, digestion resumes and the zebra goes back to grazing. Its body goes back into a rest state, refills its resources and ensures it is ready for the next lion. “That is peak

performance,” Pattyn explained. “It's throwing everything in and sacrificing everything else that doesn't matter in the next half hour. By definition, it is unsustainable. If you take lab animals and you submit them to that kind of stress reaction repeatedly without deactivating, they die very quickly because it's unsustainable for the body.”

Her diagnosis of the problem with modern life follows the zebra. “We are a society that is constantly surfing on that stress reaction. Just look at the news. Everything is an emergency. Everything is crisis management.” Tactical operators live this even more acutely than the general population. The radio could go off at any moment, the phone could ring with a callout, or the next email could be the one that ends the shift 12 hours late. The body never gets the signal that the chase is over, and it instead remains over-modulated all the time.

The obvious result is a gradual breakdown of the body due to the absence of a recovery state and rest. A less obvious cost of chronic activation is what Pattyn calls rigidification. The body adapts to constant stress activation by blunting its stress response. The operator who lives at maximum activation cannot ramp up further when the real call comes. The crisis response the operator depends on for survival is the same response that has been gradually worn down by years of inadequate deactivation. “If you're constantly jogging, you will lose the ability to run really fast when you need to,” Pattyn said.

The same physiology applies to physical training. Casey Glass spent 11 years as a special operations strength and conditioning coach and now runs Warfighter Health and Performance, where she translates her SOF experience for law enforcement. Glass makes a structural point that matters for the LE audience. SOF deploys and recovers in cycles; recovery is built into the institutional rhythm. Law enforcement is deployed every day. The recovery cycle SOF takes for granted does not exist.

The principles of recovery matter more for law enforcement operators, not less. Glass frames the underlying physiology as a water bottle. Each operator has a fixed-size container for weekly recoverable energy. The size of that bottle is determined by sleep, food and life stress. The training stress that gets poured into the bottle has to fit inside it. Pour too much in and you do not get adaptation. You get overflow, which manifests as injury, illness and chronic soreness. Recovery is what determines the size of the bottle. Without recovery, no amount of training produces adaptation.

The implication is that rest, distinct from sleep, is itself a foundational practice. Rest is what allows the autonomic nervous system to deactivate during waking hours. “There has to be something between being busy and being asleep,” Pattyn said. “You need moments to rest.”

Pattyn's definition of rest is simple: deliberately being idle. It is not measured, it is not goal-oriented and it cannot be optimized. The moment you start tracking it, posting about it, or trying to make it productive, it is no longer rest. The commute that used to be downtime, half-listening to the radio, has now become work time filled with audiobooks and conference calls. The lunch that used to be a meal has become a transition between meetings. The result is we never deactivate during the day and consequently struggle to deactivate at night.

Recovery is not the absence of work; it is its own foundational practice that requires the right conditions for the autonomic nervous system to deactivate. Anyone who does not build this in, in workouts, in work and in life, is forcing their body to live in a state it was never designed for and setting themselves up for failure.

3. Training for peak performance and not for robustness

Professional athletes train for peak performance. This is because they have a known event on a known date that they must prepare for. They periodize their training, taper into the event, peak on the day and then recover afterward. Their training programs are built around this event because they can be. By contrast, tactical team members face an entirely different problem. There is no known event, there is no known date, and there is no recovery window scheduled afterward, because there is no “afterward.” The modern law enforcement tactical operator has to be ready for an unknown demand, of unknown duration, at any time, in any condition, and ready again the next day. This requires different preparation and renders many of the modern YouTube influencer approaches destructive for tactical use.

Pattyn captures the distinction with an automobile metaphor. “We have to stop wanting to make people very fancy Formula 1 cars that need massive pit stop crews and which drive 0.01% of the time,” she told me. “What you need in a tactical operator is not a Formula 1 race car. What you need is a versatile, super robust Hummer-type vehicle that will go through any terrain, carry whatever you need to carry at that time, and never fail. That is robustness.”

The Formula 1 car, like the professional athlete, is built for peak performance and is fragile by design. The Hummer is built for something different; it is less impressive on a track but ready when the call comes. The training program that produces a professional athlete, applied to an operator with no event date, produces soreness, fatigue and injury without producing the adaptation desired. The very thing training was supposed to provide, readiness, is the thing it eroded.

Pattyn draws one more distinction that matters here. Before we talk about resilience, we have to talk about robustness. “Resilience is how fast do you get back on your feet

after having been knocked down,” she explained. “But the first question is how come you were knocked down? Was this preventable?” Robustness is how many punches you can take before you get knocked down. Resilience is how fast you get up if it happens and resilience without robustness is just a constant cycle of injury and recovery. Robustness is what prevents the injury in the first place. The correct approach is to train to be the Hummer. Instead of training for peak performance, we must train for robustness and reliability across different conditions.

Glass adds one more principle that makes the system work in practice: auto-regulation. Programming should flex with daily readiness, not lock to a fixed percentage of one-rep max. The session that was supposed to be hard becomes moderate if the operator is depleted. The session that was supposed to be moderate becomes hard if they are fresh. The body, not the program, drives the daily load. Auto-regulation is what allows training to fit inside the water bottle rather than overflow it.

4. Trading movement quality for single-muscle strength

Most people were taught to think about fitness in terms of muscles or muscle groups. Biceps v. delts or chest, back, legs, etc. As a result, they measure progress by how much weight they can move on isolated exercises. Bench press, pull downs or bicep curls — the whole framework assumes that fitness is the sum of strong muscles, and that the way to build fit operators is to make each muscle stronger.

Kelly Starrett, a doctor of physical therapy who has worked with elite tactical units and professional sports teams, argues that this entire framework is the wrong approach. In his view, the body is wired for movement, not for muscles. Performance is the product of access to position and the ability to deliver force effectively in that position. Fitness is not the size of any individual muscle but the ability to apply force or work when needed. Yet most people train for single muscle strength rather than effective application of force and give no thought to range of motion, power and speed. The bicep curl that built your arm size did not build the shoulder extension that you need to climb over a fence. In fact, no amount of strength compensates for lost range of motion.

Starrett’s framework names seven archetype shapes, four for the shoulders and three for the hips, that together encompass every position the body needs to access. Shoulders: overhead (arms locked out above the head), press (elbow behind the ribcage, the bottom of a push-up), hang (elbow behind the body at chest height, the deadlift set-up), and front rack (arm holding a load in front of the body, like the catch of a clean). Hips: squat (which includes the hip hinge), pistol (single-leg bent under the body with the other leg extended forward), and lunge.

The trade-off the title of this section discusses is the one most people make without even realizing it. They spend their gym time chasing bench press numbers and squat PRs while quietly losing the ability to put their arms over their head, sit on the ground or lunge into a full range of motion. The strength numbers go up but their movement quality goes down. By the time they are 40, the strength they built no longer compensates for the movement they lost. The result, as Starrett told me, is bleak: “Eighty percent of Marine Force Recon retires on full disability. We can do better.”

The corrective approach in Starrett’s view begins with reframing what training is for. The point of training is to identify what your body can and cannot do, restore the positions your job demands, and then build durability across the ranges of motion you need. Strength in his view is a byproduct of movement quality, not its substitute. The operator who can access all seven shapes, under load, under fatigue, under speed, is far more operationally capable than the operator who can bench six plates but cannot put their arms over their head.

Starrett’s reframe of pain also belongs here. Most operators treat pain as a medical problem: If it hurts, go to the doctor; if it doesn’t hurt yet, ignore it. Operators wait until they cannot do their job, by which point the damage requires surgery. The better frame, Starrett argues, is that pain is a request for change. A check engine light, not a medical emergency. Treated early, it is solvable. Ignored, it becomes catastrophic.

Beyond designing strength work around range of motion, Starrett gives three practical prescriptions. Sit on the ground 30 minutes a day, in any position (cross-legged, kneeling, side-saddle) while watching television or answering email.

This restores the hip mobility most adults have lost, without equipment. Walk 30 to 60 minutes a day, five days a week, for the aerobic base most operators are missing. Hang from a bar daily, working up to three minutes total. For operators who work in body armor, this single practice does more for the neck, back and shoulders than anything else.

Of course, none of these practices builds a bigger bench press but all of them build the durable, movement-capable operator the job actually requires. Starrett’s example of what he is trying to build captures the contrast with the strength-focused gym model and aligns with Pattyn’s view exactly even if the car is different. “I want your body to be that Toyota Hilux that’s in every austere environment. That is your body. That goes 100 miles an hour, and you can roll it down a cliff. That’s really what I’m interested in building.” The vehicle that goes anywhere, carries anything, takes a beating and keeps running.

5. Overlooking organizational culture

The first four errors are rooted in individual training decisions. But the fifth is structural, and it is the one that determines whether any of the others can be fixed in a durable way.

The four errors all share something. They are mistakes operators make about their own training and their own bodies. They also are mistakes that operators cannot fully solve on their own, because the conditions that produce them are largely outside the operator’s control. This is the reason that teams have so many of their members on injury status, that team members medically retire, that they are physically broken and that recruitment numbers have been declining for a decade among tactical units. The culture around



tactical teams is too focused on the organization’s needs and not focused enough on individual team members’ health and wellness.

When I asked Pattyn what she would do as the team physician for a tactical unit, her first answer had nothing to do with sleep, training, or nutrition. It was about leadership and culture. “Before I try to implement whatever it is ... on

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an individual or team level, I have to make sure that I have a system in place,” she told me. “There’s no point telling people to sleep enough if their work regimen implies 80-hour working weeks because they’re understaffed.”

This is the structural problem only the organization can solve. Operators cannot sleep if the schedule does not permit it, cannot recover if they deploy every shift, cannot deactivate if the operational tempo never stops and cannot maintain movement quality without time to practice it. The individual can do everything right and still fail, because the system breaks the foundation faster than any individual practice can rebuild it.

This is not a new theme in this column. I have written before about how the same cultural failures prevent the prevention of traumatic brain injury (*The Tactical Edge*, Winter and Spring 2025) and undermine the practice of stress inoculation (*The Tactical Edge*, Fall 2024). The pattern is consistent across all three problems, and the root cause is the same in each case: organizations under-resource the unit and the work that produces durable operators, then act surprised when their operators are not durable.

The leader who absorbs every operational request, finds a way to staff every mission and makes the system work no matter how broken it is, is actually teaching the organization that the foundations do not need to be protected. The leader who refuses missions when staffing is inadequate, who puts the team on red status when foundations are compromised and who makes the systemic problem visible to leadership, is the leader who actually protects the operators.

Pattyn’s most uncomfortable statement is one I have not been able to stop thinking about since I heard it: “If you never say no, you’re part of the problem.” There is no neutral position. There is no middle ground. The leader who never refuses a mission is teaching the organization that the

current operational tempo is sustainable, even when it is not. The leader who never says no is, by default, part of the system that breaks operators down.

The cultural shift required is significant. It means leaders who measure their success not by how many missions they execute this quarter but by how many operators they keep operationally ready over years and decades. It means cultures that value rest and recovery as much as effort. It means measuring training success not by total volume but by adaptation and durability. It also means refusing to fill an under-resourced position with the willpower of the operators who remain, because doing so destroys them.

None of this is what the YouTube fitness ecosystem sells and the supplement industry markets. A unit’s culture either protects the foundations or breaks them. There is no neutral ground.

Conclusion

The wellness industry has trained all of us to think that performance comes from the next supplement, the next protocol, the next device. The experts who work with elite tactical units tell a different story. They advocate training for robustness, letting recovery do the work that effort cannot, training for movement, focusing on foundation practices and building a culture that protects them.

To achieve this, a fundamental mindset shift has to occur. Ian Carver, a strength and conditioning coach, author and retired SWAT commander who has spent years working at the intersection of these two worlds, puts it this way: “Much of the solution to these issues lies in self-awareness and the understanding that in order to be a top performer in this profession, the human body must be nourished, trained and provided adequate recovery in the most optimal means, as often as possible. Care should be taken as to where information is obtained and whether it’s vetted and what legitimate training and supplementation protocols are followed. Rest days between training sessions are not a suggestion, they are a necessity.”

As Carver puts it bluntly, “You can’t expect to look and operate like a Ferrari if you’re peeing in the gas tank and running the engine in the red all day.” So, the next time you find yourself in a conversation about HRV monitors and peptide stacks, ask yourself the harder question: Do I have a well-built cake? If the honest answer is no, then stop focusing on the icing and build the cake.

About the author

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