

SPECIAL FORCES SELECTION TRAINING: A Theoretical Approach

By Andy Stumpf

WHY:

The nature of Special Operations requires that an individual become a "jack of all trades," with proficiency across a broad spectrum of skill sets and job requirements. The physical demands required during dismounted urban combat operations versus combat swimmer operations, or protective security details versus close quarters battle (CQB) are as different as the missions themselves. Inherent in special operations are both violent, short duration activities, and slow deliberate endurance efforts. Most special operations missions will have a combination of both, a long hump/hike to the set point followed by violent intensity on target. Traditional military pt, consisting of low intensity calisthenics followed by distance running (3-5 miles) is not the path to a foundational level of general fitness required of the special forces operator. "Strength training" in the form of chest/tri's on Monday, back/bi's on Tuesday and a run on Wednesday may get you the body you want for a sunny southern California beach run, but it will leave you lacking when you need to productively apply that strength/force in a combat environment. Training in isolation does not build functional strength; training in isolation makes you strong at gym isolation exercises. I have yet to encounter a preacher curl bench or smith machine on the battlefield.

Engagements on the battlefield may last for hours or even days, but in my experience, the "combat" engagement with the enemy is a short duration, violent action repeated throughout those hours or days. No soldier, whether Special Forces or army infantry will ever know when or where the enemy will attack. Nor will that same soldier be able to forecast the intensity or duration of that engagement. How can the soldier train in preparation for an event of unknown duration with certain high intensity?

Hours are spent on the rifle range confirming zeroes and holds at various distances, shooting and moving, practicing dynamic entries and room/structure clearing. Days and weeks during the workup/pre-deployment phase are dedicated to the various skill sets that are required of deploying units, urban warfare, desert warfare, air operations, diving operations, CQB/CQC, reconnaissance, patrolling, vehicle operations, not to mention the hours required of each individual to master their own specialties and equipment. Truly there is not enough time in the day.

I consider the above skill sets (urban warfare, CQB, etc.) to be the "sport specific training" of Special Forces, where the endgame "sport" is combat. The foundation from which those sport specific skills must be built upon is a high level of general physical preparedness (GPP). Without a solid foundation, all of the skills above will suffer in one capacity or another. This is not to say that you will not be able to complete your objective or task, I am saying that you will be working at a fraction of your potential, you will be working in-inefficiently. By improving your general level of conditioning, all of the above skill sets will improve. You will be able to move faster with your operation kit, patrol longer, climb higher, push harder, and recover faster.

The level of fitness required of the Special Operations soldier and the Special Forces selection candidate differs by degree, not type. The Special Forces soldier needs to improve and maintain a GPP in order to most effectively deal with the unknown challenges inherent in combat operations. The selection candidate must improve his GPP in order to meet the task specific requirements presented in special operation selection programs, i.e. timed runs, swims, obstacle courses.

In Basic Underwater Demolition/Seal training, each student is tested weekly on a timed 4 mile beach run, 2 mile ocean swim, obstacle course, conditioning run of unknown distance, and physical training 3-4 times per week. Roughly every two months the standards are raised on the timed evolutions, if your times do not get faster, you are dropped from training.

HOW:

The ten recognized physical skills of the CrossFit program are: cardiovascular and respiratory endurance, stamina, strength, power, speed, coordination, flexibility, agility, balance, and accuracy. Your level of fitness is determined not by the domain in which you are strongest, but by the domain in which you are weakest. This program was developed to enhance the individual's competency at all physical tasks, not increase their proficiency at one task. This philosophy could not be more applicable than in the special operations arena.

I believe the first step in training for a Special Forces selection process is to establish a high level of general physical fitness. By general physical fitness I am referring to the ability to perform well at any and all tasks encountered in the training environment. While focusing on your general level of physical fitness, the "sport specific" aspects of a particular selection process should be introduced. The "sport specific" skills required in a Special Forces selection process will vary in each course of instruction, but in every course of instruction there are physical standards and tests throughout. Most if not all of the modern day physical requirements a potential candidate will be tested on, run/swim/obstacle course/ruck-march times and pt test standards, are available on the internet or in published literature. By increasing work capacity, the soldier and candidate will both see significant improvements in their performance and ability to complete their assigned tasks.

Implementation of the CrossFit model of training to prepare for a special operations selection course will vary with each individual. Your current level of fitness, current training program, and time to the start of the selection course are all factors. Regardless, the focus of the training will remain the same, increasing work capacity across broad time and modal domains (In the near future, 6 week through 6 month PT programs will be available). In addition to increasing work capacity, the Special Forces selection candidate needs to prepare for an increase in daily physical activity. This increase may present itself in the form of multiple physical evolutions throughout the day, or because the candidate will no longer be able to control his time, tempo and intensity.

Work capacity for the soldier is the ability to function in, and physically dominate the battlefield. The soldier who can perform during short, medium, and long distance endurance efforts has a work capacity across broad time domains. The soldier that can perform well at anaerobic and aerobic tasks has a work capacity across broad modal domains. By not specializing in any one time/modal domain, the soldier can increase his level of proficiency in all time/modal domains. If a soldier were to focus solely on long ruck marches or distance running, anaerobic capacity will suffer. By focusing only on strength and power, aerobic conditioning will suffer.

The CrossFit program uses the 800m athlete as its model for an athlete that is optimally suited in all three energy pathways and across broad time domains. The 800m athlete will not have the endurance of the long distance runner, or the strength of the power lifter, but will be able to productively apply force across all three energy pathways and varied time domains. The distance runner and power lifter are able to productively apply force only in the arena in which they specialize.

It is the interval training at anaerobic levels that allows for aerobic benefits without taking the extended time to actually train in the aerobic pathway. By not specializing in aerobic training, you will preserve muscle mass and save valuable time to work sport specific issues. Consider the marathoner and 800m runner. The 800m runner has a body that is built for both speed and strength; the marathoner's body is built only for "speed," and his body type is reflective of the amount of time spent training in the oxidative pathway (aerobic).

To focus on increasing work capacity, while still introducing the "sport specific" activities of a selection process a 3 on 1 off, or 5 on 2 off program should be established. Depending on the individual, and their current level of fitness the determination can be made as to which regiment to begin. All selection

processes that I know of work at least Monday through Friday, with some working beyond. Because of this I believe the soldier should strive for a 5 on 2 off program to simulate the activity/rest cycle of the selection process model.

In a 3 on 1 off program, two days of training need to be dedicated to CrossFit WOD efforts. One day of the 3 day cycle should be devoted to technique/sport specific training. Sport specific training could include distance running, obstacle courses, swimming, ruck marching, anything your selection course may require. By incorporating interval training into your sport specific training (sprinting between obstacles, swim technique coupled with sprints) you will be working towards increased work capacity as well as “sport specific proficiency”. As your general level of fitness increases, strive to implement a 5 on 2 off program.

In a 5 on 2 off program, 2 days of CrossFit WOD efforts, one day of “sport specific” work, and 2 days of CrossFit WOD efforts could be used. As the selection course nears, and your gpp increases, your focus can shift by replacing CrossFit WOD efforts with specific training for testable events during the selection process. Again, the introduction of interval work will allow for sport specific and work capacity training.

In both the 3 on 1 off, and 5 on 2 off program, additional training on CrossFit WOD days will be necessary. The purpose of this training is to raise your daily activity level and further prepare the soldier for the rigors of a selection course. This additional training is the perfect opportunity to introduce “sport specific” activities, but the focus needs to remain on technique. Unless the daily workout is “sport specific” effort, the focus and intensity needs to remain on the CrossFit WOD.

3 on 1 off: Two-week Macro, Sample Schedule (See micro schedule below)

MONDAY	TUESDAY	WENESDAY	THURSDAY	FRIDAY	SATURDAY	SUNDAY
a.m. – CF p.m.- Selection Specific Training	a.m. – CF p.m.- Selection Specific Training	Selection Specific Training	Rest Day	a.m. – CF p.m.- Selection Specific Training	Selection Specific Training	a.m. – CF p.m.- Selection Specific Training

5 on 2 off: Two-week Macro, Sample Schedule (See micro schedule below)

MONDAY	TUESDAY	WENESDAY	THURSDAY	FRIDAY	SATURDAY	SUNDAY
a.m. – CF p.m.- Selection Specific Training	a.m. – CF p.m.- Selection Specific Training	CrossFit	Selection Specific Training	a.m. – CF p.m.- Selection Specific Training	Rest Day	Rest Day

Workout matrix for 3/1 and 5/2 programs: A Micro View

3 Days on 1 Day Off

Monday

(A.M)

10,9,8,7,6,5,4,3,2,1

[Ball Slam](#) @ 20#

[Handstand Push-up](#)

[Pull-up](#)

[Kettlebell Swing](#) @ 56#

Rest 8-10 minutes

[Front Squat](#) 2, 2, 2, 2, 1, 1, 1, 1

(P.M.)

Selection-course, specific, training **

Tuesday

(A.M)

3 rounds for time

50 Pull-ups

50 [Ring Dips](#)

50 [Knees to Elbow](#)

1/2 mile run

(P.M)

Selection-course, specific, training **

Wednesday

Selection-course, specific, training ***

Timed selection course evolution, pt event

Thursday

Rest day

Friday

(A.M)

4 rounds for time

15 x 135# [Clean & Jerk](#)

15 Pull-ups

400m Run

Rest 8-10 minutes

[Deadlift \(Arm position lecture\)](#) 2, 2, 2, 2, 1, 1, 1, 1

(P.M)

Selection-course, specific, training **

Saturday

Selection-course, specific, training***

Timed selection course evolution, pt event

Sunday

(A.M)

1 round every minute at the top of the minute for 30 minutes

5 [Pull-ups](#)

10 Push-ups

15 [Squats](#)

Rest 8-10 minutes

[Overhead Squat](#) 2, 2, 2, 1, 1, 1, 1, 1

(P.M)

Selection-course, specific, training**

5 Days on 2 Days Off

Monday

(A.M)

50 [Thrusters](#) @ 45#

800m Row ([Rowing Basics](#) , [Damper Setting Lecture](#) , [Row Stroke Rating](#))

40 Thrusters @ 65#

400m Row

30 Thrusters @ 95#

200m Row

Rest 8-10 minutes

5k Run

(P.M)

Selection-course, specific, training**

Tuesday

(A.M)

21,15,9

Deadlift @ 225#

[Box Jump](#)@ 24"

Pull-ups

Rest 8-10 minutes

Front squat 2,2,2,1,1,1,1,1,1

(P.M)

Selection-course, specific, training***

Wednesday

Deadlift 2, 2, 2, 2, 2, 2, 2, 2

Rest 8-10 minutes

5 x 800m Run 1:1 rest / recovery

Thursday

Selection-course, specific, training **

Timed selection course evolution, pt event

Friday

(A.M)

For time:

50 Box jump, 24 inch box

50 [Jumping pull-ups](#)

50 Kettlebell swings, 1 pood

[Walking Lunge](#), 50 steps

50 Knees to elbows

50 [Push Press](#), 45 pounds

50 [Hip extensions](#)

50 [Wall-ball](#) shots, 20 pound [D-ball](#) (do not use a regular medicine ball)

50 [Burpees](#)

50 [Double-unders](#)

(P.M)

Selection-course, specific, training ***

Saturday

Rest day

Sunday

Rest day

**On days dedicated to CrossFit WOD efforts, the evening selection-course, specific, training should be composed of physical tasks/skills encountered in a selection course, i.e. runs, swims, obstacle courses. These workouts should be of shorter duration and at 50-75% intensity (Intensity as it's defined by CrossFit: force x distance / time). The main focus of the additional selection course selection training is on technique, not intensity.

***On days dedicated to selection-course, specific training, workouts should be selected based on evolutions and events encountered while in training, i.e. running, ruck marching/running, obstacle courses, swimming, etc. These "sport-specific" days are the perfect opportunity to test yourself against the timed evolutions of a selection course and to gauge your readiness for any given program. These workouts should be at high intensity with maximum effort.