

EXCLUSIVE INTERVIEW: Coach of the Gracie Barra Brazilian-Jujutsu Team

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TARGET-FOCUS TRAINING

I first learned of Target-Focus Training through an ad in *Black Belt*. The system, which touts itself as easy to learn, results-oriented and ultra-effective, is the brainchild of Tim Larkin. (Any fans of reality-based fighting who happened to read “40 Hours of SCARS” in the May 1999 issue of *Black Belt* will know the name.) Larkin is a tall, well-built former associate of SCARS-founder Jerry Peterson, and as such he gained loads of experience while training military, law-enforcement and private security groups around the world.

Prior to his involvement in SCARS, Larkin

DOES
IT
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MARK?

by Mark Cheng, L.Ac.

In target-focus training, all parts of the human body are fair game. Here, Tim Larkin executes a thumb gouge to the eye as part of a fighting sequence. Injury is always the objective; defense has no place in the system.





TFT courses involve the real-world application of techniques in real-world environments. Because lethal strikes are often involved, safety receives equal billing with correct technique. Students practice on concrete as well as grass, dirt, cinders and mats.

himself was poised to graduate from Navy SEAL training with honors, but a diving accident sidelined him with a ruptured eardrum. With black belts in two martial arts and a background in boxing, Larkin was fortunate to remain part of Naval Intelligence—in the research and development team on hand-to-hand combat. On Uncle Sam's dollar, he had the luxury of spending countless hours researching different fighting arts and combative systems to see how

what Larkin had seen at other martial arts schools. Absent were the rituals of bowing, the rules of competition and the pleasantries of civilized fightsport. While many criticized Peterson for being arrogant and abrupt, Larkin defends his former mentor. "Jerry wasn't rude, but he certainly was blunt," he said. "Jerry had the personal life-or-death combat experience to know exactly what works when there are no rules, no ref and no restraint.

So he called it exact-

the creation of TFT, Larkin issued a twofold call to arms: The first mission was to examine all the available data on violent encounters to see what they had in common, and the second was to develop a means to convey the understanding of effective violence to the public.

The TFT group set to work analyzing data from law-enforcement, military and prison reports. Larkin says the most useful revelations came from the actions of inmates. In prison, violence is considered business and involves little or no fanfare because the perpetrators are out to attract minimal attention



the SEALs might better do their job in the field.

When a Drug Enforcement Administration friend introduced Larkin to the SCARS school in San Diego, Larkin knew he'd struck gold.

Peterson's no-nonsense approach to fighting was the polar opposite of

ly like he saw it firsthand. That's part of what made him so great."

When Larkin decided it was time to leave the nest, he created his own system and dubbed it Target-Focus Training. It's a true fighting system that's solidly backed by cold, hard research. During

im Larkin's TFT system is composed of strikes and locks that are known to work in real altercations. Furthermore, students receive instruction in what the most likely reactions to each technique are.

from guards and other inmates. Larkin paid careful attention to the factors that led to success—usually survival—and which ones ended in failure. The result of this distillation was an understanding of violence on a molecular level, a collection of methods that worked in virtually every type of fight.

Larkin and crew then set about forging their findings into a system that could meet the needs of the average Joe. The challenge was to find a way to get socially constrained, normal citizens to

execute a violent act when necessary to save their own lives. That's where I came in. I wanted to find out whether Larkin's claims of success in having developed such a system were accurate. I would give him and his people two

TFT teaches six Base Leverages, which enable practitioners to break any bone in the human body. In this sequence, Tim Larkin demonstrates a wrist break using Base Leverage 3. He seizes the opponent's wrist (1) and flexes it against his body (2). Larkin then executes a knee thrust to the body (3), and once the opponent is on his back, he drops his knee onto the man's throat (4). Note that in TFT, there's no memorization of movements. The actual sequence of techniques is never predetermined.



and a half days, the duration of one of their Live Training courses.

CROSS SECTION OF AMERICA

The people who signed up for the TFT camp I attended represented a cross section of America—everyone from a nuclear physics professor and a special-ed teacher to a housewife and a 16-year-old schoolgirl dragged there by her father. A few had had some martial arts training, but the majority didn't. Body shapes ranged from lean and mean to the opposite end of the spectrum. Not one of the people I spoke with was law enforcement or military, but several said they'd found out about TFT from friends or family members who worked in those fields and recommended the course.

The TFT team for this camp included four instructors: Chris, Torin, Tung and Safy. None of them possessed Larkin's formidable frame, and they weren't particularly fearsome-looking. They all

exhibited warm and approachable demeanors. None wore a flashy uniform or embroidered belt.

But in the relatively barren interior—save for the well-matted floor and a life-size anatomical target chart—of a converted Las Vegas warehouse, they delivered the goods. They set a goal of blowing the minds of the participants and challenging their every notion about martial arts and self-defense, and they succeeded.

VIOLENCE AS A TOOL

Before a single move was taught, Larkin set the tone for the entire training camp. The first lecture we received dealt with the taboo topic of violence. Noticeably absent were the philosophical fluff on the need to harmonize with an opponent's energy and the danger of the mystical "death touch." The only constant was the cold, hard reality of violence—what it looks like when it erupts

and what can happen if you choose not to use it to save your skin.

"Violence is just a tool," Chris explained. "And like any tool, what makes it bad or good is the intent of the person using it. The tool itself isn't what you should be afraid of, but rather the brain of the person who's using it."

Larkin hammered home the importance of this concept: "Nobody has a patent on violence, and nobody's immune to it. If someone decides that they want to pick up a rock, sneak up behind you and bash you in the back of the head with it, there's nothing you can do about it. But if he's intent on crushing your skull and you see him coming, you have to make a choice. What you have to understand is that when violence is the answer, it's the only answer. TFT is just a guide for you to understand how to use violence when you have to."

Corroborating comments came from Torin: "We don't teach you how to do TFT to someone. We train you to use violence effectively. There's nothing romantic or cool about it, but this is what you have to know how to do if you face a life-or-death situation."

MEDICAL SCHOOL REVISITED

That thought-provoking line still ringing in our heads, we were taken through an endless array of attacks to a person's saphenous nerve. Running roughly along the inseam of your pant leg, the nerve is what screams bloody murder after an opponent buries his shin in your inner thigh. Chris, Safy and Torin demonstrated a dozen or so ways to punish the saphenous nerve, then ran us through variants in which we blasted away with shins, elbows, knees, heels and foreign objects. We effected the attacks while standing, kneeling, lying on our backs and lying face down, yet we quickly learned how to hit with just enough force to drop our partners.

As the day progressed, we were introduced to more targets and methods for striking them, bringing the target-focus-training methodology into clear view. With the introduction of each target came an explanation of the results

that can be expected from a properly executed strike to it. The descriptions were on a par with what you might hear from a medical professional. There was not a single oversimplified hit-him-there-and-it-hurts pseudo-explanation. After each strike was demonstrated, we were treated to an analysis of exactly which anatomical structure was being hit, how it feels, what the reaction will be and what other possible outcomes might result. For example, a diagonal stomp just above the inside of the ankle (medial malleolus) will buckle a man's leg, causing him to stumble or fall. That might cause him to hit his head on the pavement, which could cause a concussion, a knockout or death.

Since my specialty is orthopedics,

or impair human functionality for the sake of survival. If someone is fully intent on harming you and you can't leave them in a nonfunctional state, all your training will be for naught."

TRAINING METHODS

We were instructed to execute our strikes while transferring our weight through the target but with reduced speed. That simple command meant the difference between beneficial training and serious injury. Every day, Larkin urged us to take it slowly. "People who are going too fast aren't concentrating on targeting," he bellowed. And sure enough, as I took a moment to look



TFT instructors demonstrate a live free-fighting session at the end of a 2-1/2 day course for new clients.

I listened carefully for anything that sounded off the mark. But nothing did. On more than a few occasions, I felt like I was getting a refresher course in anatomy and physiology. "The human body just functions in one way when you're alive," Torin explained. "While some people use an understanding of anatomy and physiology for preserving that functionality, we're more interested in how to apply that knowledge to alter

around the room, I saw that those who came into the course with a preconceived notion of machismo or martial capability were the ones who were going too fast—myself included.

Larkin later explained that moving too quickly while working on targeting is often a sign of anxiety, stress or fear: "You have to be able to pick your target and strike it without becoming emotionally involved in the process. If you start

training with a panicked state of mind, you'll react that way in a real situation and likely freeze up."

After a water break, we took seats along the wall so Larkin could tell us a tale about a fastidious range master who required that police officers shooting on his range empty their spent cartridges into their pockets instead of on his floor. Later, when some of those cops were killed in a shootout, they were found with empty cases in their pockets. "The lesson here is that people will do as they train," he said. "If you practice kicking a pad and then separating so the referee can call a point, there's a strong likelihood that you'll do the same in a real situation. Those policemen were trained to pocket their empties, so in a real-life situation, they wasted crucial seconds under fire doing that. What we want you to do is to train like you're going to fight for your life; the only difference is the speed with which you're doing your movements."

During the continuous slow-speed training, which reminded me of my own *tai chi* practice, I strove to maintain balance and posture while an instructor pointed out each time I faltered. Like an NFL athlete watching a slow-motion playback, I felt like each and every false step was clearly on display, but that made it easier to understand and correct.

During the next debriefing session, the issue of speed was brought up by a participant who wondered how such slow-mo training would help him if he were attacked. Chris explained that TFT participants who'd been in altercations were usually surprised at how quickly they finished the encounters. "Have you ever experienced a punch coming at you in seemingly slow motion, but you can't seem to get out of the way fast enough?" he asked. "Well, let's put a new spin on it. If you're targeting correctly and you're doing the hitting, the adrenaline rush makes everything seem like it's moving in slow motion while you're thinking that you're not hitting fast enough for a real-life situation. In reality, your strikes are injuring one target after another before your attacker has time to react."

Indeed, as the injury from one strike causes a reaction, the fighter has already perceived and moved on to the next target

and the next, not waiting for the attacker to change position and give a green light. Everything revolves around constantly moving through your target with your entire body—footwork, weight transfer and strike. As Torin succinctly explained, "When it comes to striking, it's all of me, all of the time."

SO WHAT'S THE DIFFERENCE?

The rift between the martial arts/combat sports and real fighting often hinges on training methods and sparring regulations. "Martial arts generally revolve around some set of rules or etiquette," Larkin said. "Violence inherently has no rules. If you want to know how to beat a certain guy, look at how he trains or how he competes. Find out exactly what isn't allowed, then go and do just that.

"We're not interested in points or a submission. This is about causing injury. Pain is subjective. Injury, on the other hand, is an objective state—and injuries are the only way to render your attacker nonfunctional." Such is the street wisdom of TFT.

There are other differences between it and conventional systems. Technically, the dynamic nature of TFT is a glaring point of disparity. Larkin uses no heavy-bag sessions or striking dummies because such training accustoms you to handling a static target. On the other hand, going up against a human partner subconsciously teaches you the body awareness you need to strike through your target. It's this penetration of force that ties into another of TFT's more interesting concepts: no blocking.

Blocking per se is not a means of causing injury and is, therefore, considered wasted motion. "Wasted motion and time means that you're giving your attacker more opportunities to introduce you to the afterlife," Torin said. "Understanding that all targets are equal allows you to strike the first available target that catches your attention. When you injure that target, the central nervous system automatically responds with a natural protective reflex. That gives you time to continue penetrating into the other guy's space until he's neutralized.

Injure, penetrate, rotate and repeat until satisfied.”

THE ULTIMATE GOAL

Larkin explained that the goal of his system is to give you “the tools necessary to survive a violent encounter so you can live a more peaceful life.” While some may decry the brutal nature of TFT’s techniques as a surefire recipe for doing just the opposite, it isn’t true. Because of the team’s careful explanations of the physiological effects of each strike, whether a kick to the saphenous nerve or a shin to the trachea, we left with a greater appreciation for the fragility of the human body and a greater sense of social responsibility.

On the last day of the camp, Larkin and his men explained the difference between social aggression and asocial violence. Social aggression occurs when one person tries to assert dominance over another without the goal of killing or maiming him. For example, someone pulls up next to you, curses and flips you off because he thinks you cut him off in traffic. Asocial violence is a markedly different issue. An example might involve a man who drives his car into yours, striking you full-on and sending you over a cliff. Such discussions helped delineate the differences between fighting, aggression and violence—words that are used almost interchangeably in our society but that have different meanings to those who possess a clear understanding of them.

“You never know just by looking who’s a sociopath and who isn’t,” Larkin said. “If anything, my years of studying human violence and creating TFT have made me more aware of proper conduct, good manners and humility. Simply because I don’t want to run the risk of losing my own life or killing someone else, I’m the first to say, ‘Please excuse me,’ or ‘I’m sorry,’—even if I’m not the one at fault.”

Throughout the weekend, the instructors devoted an incredible amount of time to conditioning each participant’s thought process. By Sunday afternoon, we saw that the target-focus principle

was applicable in any situation, even against an armed assailant or multiple attackers. More than one of the participants gave the course their highest possible endorsement.

For me, a veteran of the martial arts and a medical professional, it was just as spectacular. I heard explanations that would befit a trauma specialist and learned principles that most martial arts masters save for their advanced black belts. Without cloaking techniques in mysticism, without diluting the realities of combat in

a sporting format and without sacrificing safety for realism, Larkin and his men delivered an uncompromising course on the intelligent and responsible use of violence. TFT is right on target for anyone who’s serious about survival. ✕

About the author: Mark Cheng is a contributing editor for Black Belt. For more information about Tim Larkin’s program, visit <http://www.targetfocustraining.com>.