

TRAINING

How to Watch the Hands

It is imperative that you be able to recognize when suspects are using their hands to access and deploy weapons so you know how to respond. Never bring a control hold to a gun fight.

Mike "Ziggy" Siegfried

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Source: POLICE

Editor's note: View our "[How to Watch the Hands: 3 Scenarios](#)" photo gallery for extended coverage.

Every year, the FBI publishes a report titled "Law Enforcement Officers Killed and Assaulted." Year after

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Law Enforcement Officers Killed and Assaulted. For the past year, the report outlines the fact that most officers are killed by firearms. But even when the suspect does not use a firearm, he or she may use other weapons to kill officers. The attacker may grip an edged weapon, use a blunt object, or steer a car into an officer. In all of these instances, suspects use their hands to kill.

From basic training to field training, officers are told, "Watch the suspect's hands." But you are not taught how to do it. Why haven't law enforcement trainers developed an easily understandable method to teach you the specifics of suspect hand movement awareness? One answer is that trainers and veteran officers who are skilled at hand watching often have a hard time articulating how they do it. So they use simple phrases like, "Just keep an eye on the hands," or "It's important to always watch the hands."

But this isn't enough. It is imperative that you be able to recognize when suspects are using their hands to access and deploy weapons, so you know how to respond. Never bring a control hold to a gunfight.

How to Watch the Hands

It wasn't until I did some training a few years ago with Roy Harris, a world class martial artist and martial arts hall of fame member, that I learned how to watch the hands of a suspect. I could not believe how much this awareness training increased my officer safety. I

shared this technique with academy trainees and advanced officers. I now have a very simple way to explain dangerous suspect hand movements, and I think you should too if you want to stay safe.



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use this knowledge when I testify as an expert witness defending officers in use-of-force cases.

Harris began the training with a question: "How do people access weapons systems?" I naively replied, "With their hands." He said, "OK, but how?" I didn't have an answer.

Plain Talk About Handcuffing and Searching

Harris explained that under most circumstances, when a person brings a weapon into play, she has to make at least two movements with her hand. First, the thumb and index finger move toward the center of their body. Next, the elbow moves out away from the body. By focusing on these telltale movements, officers can perceive when a weapon might be coming into play and respond accordingly.

Although they might be a precursor to an assault on the officer, movements of the hands away from the center of the body where the thumb and index finger are not extended are less of a threat than movements where the thumb and index fingers are moving to the center of the body.

Forecast Hand Movements

One underutilized technique is forecasting the hand movements of a contact. For example, if you want to determine the identity of a contact, you will typically ask for a driver's license or another form of identification. Instead of saying, "I need to see your license," say, "Where do you keep your identification?" You need to know where the suspect's

hands will be going in order to perform the requested action. You also should ask, "What form of ID do you have?" There is a big difference between someone saying, "I keep my driver's license in my wallet," and "I keep my release from prison paperwork and my parole card in my wallet." In either case, you need to know where the suspect's hands are going.

The reason this is so important is a person makes the same hand motions to get a wallet from his rear pocket as he would to access a weapon from the same area. First, the thumb and index finger move toward the center of the body. Next, the elbow moves out away from the body. You don't want to overreact to a movement that you told the suspect to make.

A better option is to forecast the movement, and to have the subject turn sideways so you can see what he is retrieving from his pocket. Tell the subject to use only his thumb and forefinger to slowly remove his wallet. Once the wallet is out, tell him to remove his identification. Many agencies do not take wallets from contacts prior to arrest. This is a good practice because it limits the subject's ability to allege that an officer took something, like money, from the wallet during the initial contact.

A More Court-Defensible Technique

In court, your actions are judged by citizens who have little or no law enforcement experience. You may be interested in securing a conviction, or you may be defending the actions of another officer. Either way, having a definable system of how officers are trained

to watch the hands makes it easier to explain to a jury or a judge why you thought an offender was accessing a weapon.

It's not enough to say, "I couldn't see his hands." You need to be able to explain to a jury what not seeing the subject's hands meant. What were his hands doing? How did you interpret these movements and why? What actions were appropriate for that moment? If you can explain that the subject's thumb and index finger moved toward the center of his body and his elbow moved away from the body, and that these movements are often indicative of weapon retrieval, the judge and jury can better understand your reasoning and actions.

5 Moves That Could Save Your Life

Training Methods

One way to integrate this concept into training is to create scenarios that expose the trainee to subjects who make motions that are indicative of accessing a weapon. This approach allows the instructor to see how the trainee responds.

After the scenario, the instructor asks the trainee to articulate what movements the suspect made that caused her to believe the suspect was accessing a weapon. After the trainer determines the student can recognize weapon retrieval movements, the trainer evaluates the tactics and techniques the student used to neutralize the threat. An important element of this training is to encourage the student to verbalize her instructions to the subject. The student should also

instructions to the subject. The student should also consider verbalizing the fact that she is concerned about the subject's hand movements.

Use an Audio Recorder

I am a big advocate of officers using audio recorders. In almost all circumstances, they help in civil and criminal investigations. It is important to remember that recorders do not record what you do not say. I have never attended a defensive tactics training course that included activation of the recorder as part of the "real time" tactics training. Why not?

There have been numerous times when I have made statements to suspects because I was recording the contact and I wanted the person hearing that recording at a later date to understand what I was seeing. Make statements like, "I see that you are making a fist. Let's not go there. You and I don't need that kind of trouble." Make these statements for the person, usually a supervisor, who will be conducting the use-of-force investigation if the situation deteriorates.

Imagine two officer-involved shootings, both captured on audio tape, where the actions of the suspect are identical. In the first shooting, you hear the officer struggle with the suspect and then the gunshots. In the second shooting, you hear the struggle, but this time the officer says, "Keep your hands away from your waist," followed by, "Partner, he's getting something!" and then gunshots. Which of these incidents is easier to defend in court, the media, and public perception?

Watching the Hands Can Save Your Life

Dr. Bill Lewinski of the highly respected Force Science Research Center co-authored a study with Dr. Joan Vickers titled "Gaze Control and Shooting Performance of Elite and Rookie Police Officers During a Force-on-Force Encounter." Veteran officers who were studied directed their attention to the suspect's gun hand or arm. In other words, they were better at watching the suspect's hands, especially the gun hand. This skill allowed them to perform at a higher level and to react to deadly encounters more efficiently and effectively than rookie officers. Effective hand watching can increase the likelihood of an officer surviving a lethal force encounter.

There is no foolproof method for knowing when a suspect is obtaining a weapon. You must use common sense and choose reasonable solutions to difficult problems. I have provided several techniques for how to tackle this important issue. By implementing these techniques, rookie and veteran officers can avoid becoming FBI statistics.

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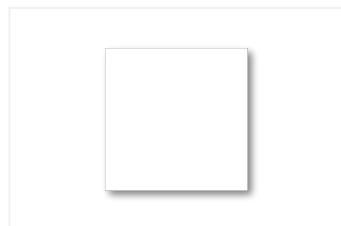
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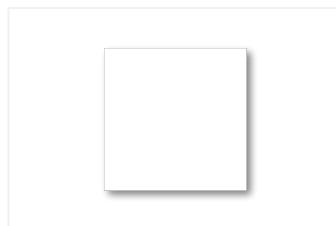
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