

THE LOWDOWN

Sheriff Charles S. Blackwood

Deputies often respond to calls involving conflict, extreme emotion, and sometimes violence. A deputy faced with a tense, volatile situation has two primary goals: de-escalate the situation without the use of lethal force and provide for the safety of everyone at the scene, including him or herself.

Obviously, deputies arrive at a call with powerful tools at their disposal. They have non-lethal tools, such as handcuffs and pepper spray, and a highly lethal weapon, a Glock.40 semi-automatic handgun. If trained and certified, a deputy will also have a Taser, a conducted electrical weapon. Although rarely lethal, a Taser causes intense pain, and a person may suffer injury after falling to the ground.

However necessary it is for a public safety professional to have tools like firearms and Tasers, they are tools of last resort. In this month's edition of *The Lowdown*, I want to discuss two training initiatives I employ in my office designed to provide deputies with the skills and confidence to achieve their primary goals without the use of lethal force.

The first is a system pioneered by Dr. George Thompson known as verbal judo. Thompson's research convinced him that injuries almost always resulted from an escalation in a situation that occurred after law enforcement arrived at a scene, rather than from violence already underway prior to the arrival. He believed those trained in verbal judo would stay calmer in the face of the elevated emotions of others, deflect verbal abuse directed their way, and effectively lower hostile emotions through the use of empathy. Although Thompson died in 2001, his beliefs echo through my office and countless other law enforcement agencies across the nation. I arranged for the Verbal Judo Institute to train my deputies because I wanted them to be as competent with words as they are with firearms. I firmly agree with Thompson's main premise: it is safer for everyone if deputies are able to achieve voluntary compliance through verbal judo, rather than use the strong arm of the law to force it.

The Institute not only taught deputies new skills, it also increased their confidence and lowered their anxiety in interactions with distressed, emotionally charged individuals. Deputies with verbal judo skills tend to exude an air of calm confidence others pick up on. This confidence is also built through the other training initiative we've invested in since I became Sheriff. Gracie Survival Tactics (GST) is a modification of Brazilian Jiu-Jitsu developed by Helio Gracie in the 1920s. The system helps peace officers and military personnel prevail even against larger, stronger

opponents using skills such as leverage and redirection. The system recognizes the unique concerns of law enforcement, for example, if a deputy has to go “hands on” with someone, he or she not only needs to gain control of that person with the minimum amount of force, the deputy also has to do so while protecting his or her own weapon.

Jon Daniel, one of my deputies, introduced me to his friend, Sunny Yu, who owns a Gracie dojo in Durham. In order to hold a GST “train the trainer” workshop, at least 40 people must attend. Sunny helped us enroll 64 participants, mostly from our agency and the surrounding area, and some from other states and countries. Members of the Gracie family came from California and spent five intensive days teaching participants the techniques of their proprietary system. Attendees practiced extensively and learned progressive methods to teach the skills to colleagues. We also invested in wrestling mats and had them installed under the detention center. Every week, my deputies and officers from the surrounding area have the opportunity to practice “rolling” with each other to improve their skills and build muscle memory.

GST, like verbal judo, is a game changer. A deputy should never look to fight, but it is ironic that those best at grappling need to do it least often. This is because they tend to project a quiet confidence that minimizes someone else’s desire to test them. This confidence also reduces a deputy’s anxiety in a tense situation, helping him or her better remember and utilize other skills and knowledge to help resolve the situation safely.

Our goal is to protect and serve everyone – even those who are agitated, intoxicated, angry, and perhaps looking to do us harm. We practice verbal judo and GST because they are effective, non-lethal ways to help us accomplish this goal.