Tim Larkin, Black Belt’s 2011 Self-Defense Instructor of the Year, knows how to get people’s attention. One of his favorite ways involves rattling off a statement that just happens to form the nucleus of Target Focus Training, the fighting system he founded: “Violence is rarely the answer, but when it is, it’s the only answer.” Intrigued? Want to find out how this notion fits into Larkin’s self-defense paradigm and how it can improve your survival readiness? If so, you’re guaranteed to find this interview enlightening.

—Editor
We’ve covered Target Focus Training before. Could you explain it for our new readers?

TFT fills in the gaps that exist in most combat sports and martial arts; I don’t see it as a replacement for them. It all comes down to the question, When do you have to take action on the street? People wonder what they should do against knives, guns and multiple attackers, but the real question is, How do I differentiate a situation that’s avoidable from one that involves life or death? TFT examines the difference between anti-social aggression and asocial violence.

What is the difference?

Anti-social aggression is the name we give the “avoidable” category. You have a choice about whether you will participate with violence. This is when your ego can get you in trouble.

Such as when you’re in a bar and somebody challenges you to go outside?

Yes. A lot of people feel they have to get involved, but really they don’t. You should be thinking about avoiding all the avoidable situations. You have to know how to talk your way out. It’s a social skill. There are plenty of people who base their careers on teaching people how to deal with anti-social aggression.

What we primarily deal with is asocial violence. It refers to those rare instances in which you need to respond with violence; if you don’t, you’re essentially participating in your own murder. You don’t have to use TFT in this kind of situation; it could be any martial art or combat-sports training you have.

What is TFT, then? Is it a set of concepts and principles, as well as a set of physical techniques?

TFT is the result of the 25 years I’ve been teaching. The physical training is designed to help you make better decisions about when and how to use violence. Hopefully, that’ll lead to a more peaceful life. Our tag line is, “Violence is rarely the answer ...” and people love that part of the statement ... “but when it is, it’s the only answer.” That’s where the physical training comes in and where you really need clarity. We believe that if you truly feel threatened, you can’t afford to use any fighting method that doesn’t produce an injury.

What kind of injury is needed to stop an attacker?

An injury, as we define it, is breaking something on the human body—either a sensory system or a structure—so that part of the body no longer functions during the time you’re involved with that person.

Short of getting in a fight each time you want to test an idea, how do you know what will produce the kind of injury you’re looking for?

In TFT, everything is based on science, not just theory. There’s plenty of bad information out there about the physiological effects of strikes—I once saw martial arts book that taught the side kick to the femur and showed an image of a femur that was broken in a car crash. A side kick would never produce enough of an impact for that to happen. That’s the kind of thing we avoid.

How exactly do you avoid it?

We show what can happen to the body and what force is required—using studies from sports medicine. If you learn how to plow your bodyweight into and through an area that can’t take trauma, you can wreck that area. You have to assume you’re facing someone who’s bigger, stronger and faster, that he’s with friends and that they’re carrying weapons. With all those assumptions, you don’t want to just hurt him. You want to find a part of the body that’s vulnerable and break it.

How do you convey this message to students?

We show lots of videos of injuries that occur in sports and combat sports. There may be two highly trained guys beating the crap out of each other round after round—it’s amazing what the body can take—and then something goes wrong. Somebody gets punched in the liver and drops. It drops him because that region, the lower margin of the rib cage, can’t take trauma.

We show videos of people getting poked in the eyes, of people landing wrong and breaking an ankle, of people getting hit in the side of the neck with a forearm and getting knocked out. These all involve bodyweight going through an area that’s not rated to that much force—even though they’re highly conditioned people.

And we show videos of real violence—murders, stabbings and shootings—not to be gratuitous but to show people what they’ll be facing in an asocial-violence event. A lot of what’s out there flies in the face of the way killers actually operate. You don’t want to be training to crime stats that aren’t realistic.

For example, look at knife defense. In reality, people “punch” with knives. People who survive a knifing say they never saw the blade. They felt they were being punched. That stat told us we had to alter the type of training we were doing with knives. It’s why we teach you to injure the other person rather than try to control the knife. It’s better to take out the man, to put him in a nonfunctional state.

What do you mean by “nonfunctional”?

He’s injured to the point where you can turn your back on him and he’s no longer a threat, or he’s unconscious or dead. Only then can you disengage. If he’s not in one of those states and you turn to get away and he pulls a...
A key concept of Target Focus Training is the delivery of one's bodyweight on a part of the opponent that will result in an injury that renders him nonfunctional. To demonstrate, Tim Larkin acquires a target—in this case, the side of the neck—and strikes (1-2). Instead of making contact and retracting his leg, Larkin plows forward until his body has moved past the target's original location (3).

Do you teach students to attack a set of body parts that are especially vulnerable?

No. We teach them to look at a variety of structure targets—usually the joints—as well as other weak areas like the lower margin of the rib cage, the clavicle, the groin, the throat and the eyes. We also teach things like striking the ear to upset the equilibrium. We highlight the regions that give you the most options. When you put injury into them, as the person is responding to trauma, the body is basically betraying the brain. It's like when you touch something hot and pull your hand away—it's an involuntary movement. The body reacts to protect itself, bypassing the brain. The brain gets informed after the fact, after the reflexive movement.

We show you how to exploit that reflexive movement. If you keep the person's brain disengaged through injury, he can't think—which means he can't do what he wants to do to you. It comes down to this: If you throw your bodyweight at the proper part of the attacker's body with the proper tool—say, a heel stomp or a forearm strike—you'll get this result. And we back it up by showing videos of people getting struck in those areas.

How does target selection change according to the opponent's position?

We examine different parts of the body—for example, the neck. You have the throat, the side of the neck and the back of the neck. We give you a variety of sight pictures. We put a human body prone, on all fours and standing up, and we teach you how to strike his neck in all those positions. That allows you to build your own ability to choose where you want to go. There will be many options depending on your position and your opponent's—you can pick the best one to inflict injury.

Some in the martial arts community complain that traditional arts present them with too many techniques, which complicates the decision-making process. Does having so many options with respect to targets also make choosing difficult?

It doesn't. It actually improves it because you know you're going to be myopic. By having a lot of options, that myopic vision is going to home in on one area of the body, and once you're familiar with the areas that can cause injury, you'll find something. We assume you'll only see that one area; that's why we train you in a low-stress environment. You don't have to memorize.

**THE NATURAL**

*Q: Is there a group of people who naturally take to TFT?*

*A: Hunters. They're used to looking at a situation and focusing not on what could happen to them but on what they want to do to their prey. In violence, you want to be the hunter; you don't want to be focused on trying to protect yourself. When you study videos, you see that the people who are trying to protect themselves rather than injure their attacker are the ones who get stabbed or beaten to death. Hunters naturally understand that.*
A lot of arts tend to be obsessed with striking the eyes, throat and groin, but you teach so many more.

The reason is those three targets don’t require bodyweight to injure. Instructors do that with female students all the time, and it’s a huge disservice. You don’t ever want to limit anybody by saying, “Here’s the top three.”

I had a client who was getting into his Lexus when a guy approached and held a .45 above his head while standing behind the open car door. What was blocked? Groin, throat and eyes. The guy saw, using his peripheral vision, the bad guy’s foot, which was under the door. That’s where he started. He did a knee drop, crushing the bones of the foot, then grabbed the guy’s heel and came up and snapped the leg on the door. The bad guy passed out at that point. The lowly top of the foot, which many people see as a lesser target, worked fantastic as his starting point. If he’d been trained only in the big three, he wouldn’t have had any options.

Earlier, you mentioned “reflexive movement.” Does that, in essence, give you the ability to predict how a person will react to a strike?

It does when you produce an injury—that’s the key. If you don’t put enough bodyweight into the strikes, you won’t get those movements. If you just snap a punch to the lower margin of the rib cage, you won’t do any damage. But if you plow in with a fist or elbow, there’s a good chance you’ll crack the cartilage in the front part of the rib cage or snap a floating rib in the back and possibly lacerate a kidney, the liver or the spleen. There’s a huge difference in trauma there. The first one could just end up annoying the attacker, but the second one, if you get the real bonus and lacerate one of those organs, will send him into acute hypovolemic shock.

Is this what you’re talking about? In the muay Thai ring, you throw a shin kick that catches your opponent near the knee. If there’s not enough force to destroy the knee, you can’t know if he’ll drop, if he’ll just take it and punch you back, or if he’ll take it and move away. But if you hit him hard enough to break something, you can predict that he’s going down. Absolutely.

In TFT, what are the favored tools for striking?

It depends on how much time we have with you. If it’s a weekend seminar, we teach stuff that’s very straightforward. We don’t use the hands at all. There are 27 bones in the hand; it’s very difficult for a new person to correctly form a fist in a way that won’t get one of those bones broken. When you hit with bodyweight using your fists and don’t have the right structure, you’ll do damage to yourself.

We teach straightforward tools of the body that require no preparation. The more you train, the more you’re able to use body tools that require more coordination.

Are there any techniques you advise people not to use?

There are. We tell people that just because they can get a result with something doesn’t mean it’s the best.
way to use their body. The ridgehand is a classic. Can you get a result with it? Absolutely. But biomechanically, it’s not great for your body. Striking with it can lead to problems in your wrist, elbow and shoulder. The body’s not meant to deliver force that way. If you just turn your hand over and strike with the ulna side of the arm, however, you have much better shoulder integrity and structure.

Another thing we looked at was head butts. It’s not that they’re not effective; it’s that your brain is the best weapon you have, so why would you want to use your CPU as an impact device? You can give yourself a mild concussion, blurred vision—it unnecessarily makes you vulnerable. Now, if it’s the only option you have, then fine. Use the head butt. It’s better than having no weapon. But there are better ways to put damage on another person’s body.

How much grappling is in TFT?
We deal with grabs, holds and chokes from the perspective of how to effect an injury on someone who’s doing that to you. When people do jiu-jitsu, they often give up vulnerable parts of their bodies. That doesn’t matter if the rules of competition prevent your opponent from injuring you, but when your life is on the line, you don’t want to be trying to submit the guy. You want to make sure he’s no longer a threat. With that said, I love training clients who have a background in Brazilian jiu-jitsu.

How important is the student’s ability to take a shot?
It’s irrelevant. Everybody’s pain threshold is different. The only thing you can control is what you can do to the other person.

Is it fair to sum up TFT this way?
Many of the concepts and techniques used in conventional self-defense are based on inflicting enough pain to make the other person quit; meanwhile, the concepts and techniques you teach are based on inflicting injury because you can’t predict a person’s reaction to pain?
Yes. Pain is too much of a variable for us. What we strive for is injury. We want a radiologist to look at the X-ray and say, “I don’t care what this guy is feeling; that part of his body isn’t going to work anymore.”

Wrong Way:
The assailant pulls a knife and threatens Tim Larkin (1-2). Larkin tries to create enough distance to draw his firearm (3), but in doing so, he inadvertently gives the opponent the time and space he needs to attack (4-5).

Right Way:
Following TFT doctrine, Tim Larkin reacts to the threat (1-2) by immediately attacking the man’s groin, making sure to deliver his bodyweight on the target (3-4). Because his body is reacting to the shot, the man is unable to continue his attack, enabling Larkin to access his weapon (5). “First injure, then go for your gun,” he says.