MODERN HIGH-TECH BATONS

By Tony Lesce

The traditional straight police baton is yielding to modern replacements. The lead-filled "sap" and the "billy club" are now "passe", partly because of improved materials and techniques, and partly due to liability. A suspect, subdued by an officer using a sap or billy, often had enough contusions to require a trip to the emergency ward. This, often enough, brought forth the accusation of "excessive force," regardless how much force the suspect utilized in resisting arrest. This is why there has been an unrelenting search for better non-lethal force options.

Since chemical sprays and various forms of stun guns have not turned out to be the cure-alls the manufacturers and retailers promised, the baton still belongs in police practice. In modern form though, it's quite different from older versions, and serves as more than just an impact weapon.

Product Support

A major difference lies in the back-up provided by modern baton manufacturers. Traditionally, the supplier would sell the hardware, and the police officer or agency would be responsible for its use. With the development of product liability, and several court decisions laying out responsibility for training officers in the use of equipment, the trend is to provide both.

Liability is a major concern with police officers, police administrators, and equipment manufacturers. Although most individuals bringing "excessive force" lawsuits against police officers don't win, a single settlement can be quite high.

This is why the manufacturers who provide training and continuing support for officers who use their equipment, have the edge. In a courtroom, the police officer, whose attorney can demonstrate that he was properly trained by competent instructors, has a better chance of winning his case since the negligence approach is then closed.

Use of Force

The basic concept of the baton has also evolved. The term, "impact weapon," is no longer totally accurate. The "Use of Force Continuum," as presented by Dr. Kevin Parsons, shows that there are several intermediate force levels.

Force levels range from dialogue and verbal commands through unarmed control techniques, non-lethal weapons, and finally use of deadly force. American legal tradition dictates that police officers may use only the force necessary to control the situation. This usually translates into the expression "minimal force." Police officers find that the lower levels of force usage are most often enough to cope with situations and in fact, few American police officers ever kill anyone in the line of duty.

There have been "excessive force" lawsuits over baton use, which is why much current attention centers around its use as a "compliance" tool An arm-lock with a modern baton can persuade a drunk or a demonstrator to follow the officer's lead, without the paid or physical damage of a baton blow. Public relations are also important, especially in communities which take pride in their police officers' good images. A passive demonstrator under control by an officer using a compliance hold, is more photogenic than an image of the officer subduing him with baton blows.

As might be expected, striking techniques have also undergone profound changes. Overhead blows are forbidden in modern training courses, since striking at the head and neck can be lethal. Likewise, the clavicle or collarbone, is no longer a favorite place for a baton blow. Breaking a collarbone can inflict crippling injury as well as the possible rupture of the subclavian artery, leading to a life-threatening hemorrhage. Striking at he kidneys and groin can also produce severe and permanent injuries.

Therefore, today's baton training focuses on blows to the arms and legs, concentrating on the main muscles and joints, to cause pain and shock. More importantly, there's a margin of safety. A misdirected blow is far less likely to be life-threatening when it's aimed at the extremities.

Several years ago, the US Secret Service formulated criteria for intermediate--force weapon selection. In its view, the intermediated weapon should be reliable, dynamic, and effective. Today's batons with their various modes, approach this ideal more closely.

A baton, unlike a spray can or electronic weapon, is very reliable. It can't clog, run empty or suffer from a dead battery (usually when the officer needs it most). The baton is dynamic due to the training the officer gets in its use. Effectiveness depends upon selecting the right situations for application, and skill in baton employment. These, in turn, depend heavily on training.

ASP collapsible batons are one choice. These are compact "taper-lock" sticks that snap out as long as 26 inches with a flick of the wrist. Smaller models have extended lengths of 21 and 16 inches, collapsing to 8 and 6 inches respectively. The advantage of a small baton on a belt lies in the fact that the officer will probably always have it available.

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More often than not, bulkier predecessors were often left in the car when the officer made his exit.

The above point is crucial as police officers encounter situations requiring intermediate force far more often than they meet deadly force confrontations. Yet, they always have a firearm on their rigs, but leave behind the often more useful baton.

The smallest of the ASP line, the P9, is a two-section baton that expands to 9 inches when flicked open. This was originally a super persuader, but has found new uses, one as an aid to searches. Searching suspects, especially in drug related offenses, brings the danger of injury from infected needles in the pockets, cuffs, collars or clothing seams (ed. note: The recent AIDS epidemic with the susceptibility of addicts to the HIV virus has recently intensified the problem).

The P9 assists the searching officer to feel out solid objects before touching them. Bikers often place fish hooks and razor blades in their clothing to injure frisking officers. The P9 helps officers to cope with this tactic.

Space-age materials also have altered the baton. Poly-carbonate plastic is practically unbreakable, yet no heavier than old-style dense wooden nightsticks. The Monadnock PR-24 comes in a virtually indestructible poly-carbonate model. The ASP "RISC" straight-handle baton is made of another synthetic, Aspinite."

Foam handles ease the shock on the officer's hand when using the baton for impact. It also provides a much firmer grip than the traditional wood and lacquer finish. The RISC baton has a built-in foam handle, as does the expandable ASP Model F16.

Among agencies which have adopted the ASP batons are the Illinois State Police, the US Capitol Police, the US Drug Enforcement Administration, the Wisconsin State Patrol, the US Coast Guard, Tampa, Florida Police Department, Hillsborough County, Florida Sheriff's Officer, and the Kent County Sheriff's Department.

Instruction is equally important, and several agencies have recently approved ASP training courses. The Texas Commission on Law Enforcement Standards and Education has approved the ASP Basic Certification and ASP Instructor Certification programs. The State of Georgia is also seeking statewide certification for the ABC and AIC programs.

Low-Profile Use

An idea which has taken hold during the 1980's is the low-profile baton. Although expandable batons have existed for decades, practical models for American police use have not appeared until recently.

The major reason the US Capitol Police adopted the ASP Baton lies in discretion. The baton is secured in an inconspicuous belt scabbard until the officer deploys it. Not having a large and unwieldy baton swinging from the belt avoids the "goon squad" image. This is important to a police agency which deals with tourists and dignitaries on a daily basis.

Batons can even have plainclothes use. Investigators, plain-clothes, and undercover officers can't walk around with batons on the belt or in the hand. ASP batons fit in a belt scabbard or in a pocket, remaining out of sight until needed.

The low-profile baton also permits versatility in tactics. Collapsed, the baton appears to be a short black rod, and this helps the officer present a non-threatening profile while still keeping prepared for an escalation of force.

Holding the collapsed baton behind the thigh, or close to the chest, allows striking and deploying it to full length in one swift motion. If the officer responds to a threat with this sort of strike, the subject doesn't see it coming. During the swing, the baton snaps out to its extended position, taking the subject by surprise.

No responsible instructor claims that the baton is an adequate response to a deadly weapon, but often the baton is in the officer's hand when the offender produces a knife or gun. This allows the officer to buy time by striking the offender's hand or weapon, then letting go the baton on the follow-through and drawing his firearm. Adequate training teaches the officer how to do this in one smooth motion.

The Modern Baton

Today's police baton is a developed design, much improved over the first wood striking instruments of a century or more ago. Materials have changed, but more importantly, thought behind baton usage has evolved.

Today's police batons, such as the ASP models, are not only high-tech devices, but part of a program that includes legally defensible doctrine and training for today's peace officer.

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