WHEN YOU HAVE NO CHOICE

Reality-Based Self-Defense System

by Edward Pollard     Photography by Rick Hustead
If someone wants to kill you, he won’t bother to aim the gun and make a threat. He’ll point and shoot. Unfortunately, outside of awareness and luck, there’s nothing you can do to keep that from happening. When an attacker’s immediate goal is not to kill you but to get your wallet or your keys—or even to kidnap you, put you into a car trunk and take you to a different location—you have opportunities to do things.”

So says self-defense instructor and all-around close-combat strategist Amir Perets. A former member of the Israel Defense Forces who now trains elite police and military units around the world, he knows what works on the street. He’s in high demand these days—in addition to his regular teaching duties at the Krav Maga National Training Center in Los Angeles, he was recently selected to demonstrate his interpretation of reality-based self-defense for the National Geographic Channel’s Fight Science series—but Black Belt managed to catch up with him so he could share his ideas with our readers.

Laying the Foundation

The tough neighborhoods of Tiberias in northern Israel inspired Perets, as a young martial artist, to choose self-defense over competition. Incidents of terrorism and urban violence were nearly as common then as they are now, and that forced him to adapt to his environment. “Growing up on the streets, you run into certain situations that are more violent than others, and you have to develop strategies if you want to survive,” he says. “Everything leads to a self-defense mentality.”

General awareness and an instinct for avoiding trouble served Perets well, but after a few occasions when threats arose and he couldn’t get out of the way, he discovered that he had two options: Do nothing and suffer the consequences, or do something and increase his chances of surviving. It was that heads-or-tails proposition that he later used to develop his own fighting system, called Combat Fitness and Self-Defense.

“The first rule in any situation is to not get hurt,” he says. “If you get home safely with only a bruised ego because he got your wallet, that’s fine. But if you have the feeling that you’ll get hurt even if you cooperate, you have no choice. My program is all about what happens at that point.”

Mixing the Arts

Perets began his formal self-defense training in Dennis Hisardut, a mixed martial art created by Dennis Hanover long before the Ultimate Fighting Championship came along. “It’s a combination of jujutsu, karate and judo,” Perets says. “I’m a former national heavyweight champion in Israel.

“When I was 18, I started doing muay Thai and pursued other martial arts. I was always looking for techniques that are better and easier.”

From there, Perets moved on to the military, where he became a combat fitness and Krav Maga instructor for the special forces and infantry. The young martial artist was then selected to create a hand-to-hand combat program for Israel’s version of the U.S. Navy SEALs and teach it to soldiers. His brainchild was an amalgam of moves designed to function while standing, on the ground, with weapons and against multiple assailants.
The martial artist tucks in his chin, bends his knees and explodes backward as he stretches his arms forward, removing the weapon from the man’s grasp (4). Perets twists to his right and executes a groin strike with his right hand (5), after which he slams his elbow into the assailant’s throat (6). With the man incapacitated, Perets retreats to a safe distance (7), where he holds him at bay while scanning his surroundings (8).
While Amir Perets chats on the phone, the attacker approaches him and makes his demand (1). Perets simultaneously moves his head backward and uses his left hand to seize the weapon and redirect the muzzle (2). He bursts forward, rotating the barrel 90 degrees away from his body, and “punches” the gun down to the height of the attacker’s hips while counterattacking with a hammerfist to the face (3).

Next, Perets slides his right hand along the man’s body (to keep it off the line of fire) and grabs the hammer (4). He rotates the weapon to weaken the attacker’s grip, then yanks it horizontally out of his hand (5).

**Gun Tech**

Q: When defending against an assailant with a firearm, how significant is the danger presented by the blast that will come out of the barrel if the gun is fired? And if you’re holding a gun during a takeaway, will you be burned by the hot barrel?

A: I wouldn’t worry. In such a high-risk situation, if you can follow the steps I described, you’ll be all right. If you’re holding the barrel, the gun shouldn’t be able to chamber a second round. And if you’re faced with the choice of being shot and being burned by a hot barrel, how much will you be bothered by a hot barrel? Those are the things that you learn with experience. Your skin can get caught between the barrel and the frame when the gun is reloading—many things can happen. But again, in a kill-or-be-killed situation, sometimes it takes sacrifice.

—E.P.
“I believe that to make a good defense against a right straight [punch], you need to know how to deliver one,” says Perets, who holds a fourth-degree black belt in Krav Maga. “Likewise, when you train in weapons, you need to know both sides, not just the disarms. To defend against a handgun, you should know how it operates and how to hold it. It’s very important to learn how weapons work, what their advantages and disadvantages are, and what they can do.”

By familiarizing yourself with weapons, you minimize any fear of them you may have, and you enable yourself to read an assailant’s intentions before he strikes, he says. “For example, you can tell the attack he has in mind just by the way he holds his knife.”

Understanding the Basics

Perets’ preferred self-defense strategy is to remain cognizant of his surroundings at all times. “Awareness helps us recognize danger early, and that can increase our chance of dealing with it successfully,” he says. “However, awareness fluctuates during the day. My awareness now is not the same as it is when I’m walking down a dark alley. My awareness coming to work is not the same as when I’m going home tired. We have to pay attention to how that influences us.”

The next phase of handling violence involves Perets’ aforementioned two choices: freeze up and become a victim, or fight back and prevail. “We stress the second option,” he says, smiling.

While being involved in a violent situation will inspire fear and elicit an adrenaline dump, training can
help you channel the extra energy in the right direction, he says. “We constantly put people at a disadvantage, then teach them how to recognize a threat, how to defend against it and how to counterattack so they can leave the area as safely as possible.”

No machine, whether mechanical or biological, will run without fuel and a tune-up—especially in a high-stress situation. That’s why Perets emphasizes the importance of diet and exercise, which can help your body regain control when your heart rate skyrockets, your bloodstream is flooded with hormones, your vision narrows and your hearing deteriorates.

“If something happens suddenly, you can lose your ability to react,” Perets says. “But through training, you can gain confidence, determination, vision and positioning so that responding feels natural, at least to the point where you won’t freeze. You’ll function better and increase your chance of preventing or surviving a violent confrontation.”

Training to Improve Response

Because reaction time is crucial in a fight, Perets believes it’s more effective to learn a few techniques that are versatile enough to apply in a variety of situations. Then, when you’re faced with a specific attack, your brain has only one option—and instantly signals your muscles to take action. That’s far better than having two or more options, which forces your brain to evaluate them before choosing the best one.

“Proper training can improve reaction time and execution speed immensely because you’ll be familiar with what’s going on,” he says. “After many repetitions from many angles and approaches, you’ll become more determined in the way you do things. To be fast, you have to train fast. To function under stress, you have to train under stress and become familiar with it. I can’t emphasize enough how important it is to use training scenarios designed to improve your angling and leverage, peripheral vision and positioning.”

The next step is practicing drills designed to boost your ability to apply your knowledge, speed and technique, Perets says. Just remember to stick with what you’ve trained your muscles to do.

“You can’t fight certain people on their level,” he says. “Don’t try to outbox a boxer or outgrapple a grappler. It’s better to shift to a different attack.
Jonathan Dugas holds a blade to Amir Perets’ throat (1). Perets uses his right hand to capture the opponent’s wrist while angling his head back, after which he begins to raise his left hand to further secure the weapon (2). (Because of their body orientation, the man cannot see Perets’ arms being lifted.) Perets places his left hand on top of his right and pulls the knife down, keeping his wrist against his chest and lifting his right shoulder slightly for better control (3). Next, he turns and moves his right leg diagonally backward while maintaining control of the knife (4). He then wraps his hands around the man’s hand and wrist while keeping his elbow trapped against his head and shoulder (5). From this position, he can use the attacker’s weapon to stab him or maneuver the limb behind his back for a disarm. Finally, Perets creates distance and evaluates the situation (6).
or approach, one that he won’t expect. If you look at it from a sport perspective, if the guy is very good with his hands, you might want to shoot in and take him to the ground.”

In general, it’s unwise to allow your opponent to dictate any terms of the altercation. “Don’t stay where he wants you to be,” Perets says. “Shift to a position where you have strength. If your lower body is stronger than your upper body, use a hard kick to the groin rather than punches.”

**Learning About Weapons**

As soon as a blade enters the picture, the threat level skyrockets because even a slight movement of the wrist can allow the assailant to cut you from a different direction, Perets says. “Another problem is that you don’t usually see the knife. You feel like you’re in a fistfight, and all of a sudden you discover you’ve been stabbed. Many of my friends have been in those situations.”

Despite the elevated danger, Perets says that proper training can help you recognize the threat sooner, after which you can employ an explosive move that takes your attacker by surprise and neutralizes him.

The key to victory is to even the odds quickly, he says. As soon as you realize you’re in a knife fight, look for an object you can use as a makeshift shield. That will enable you to safely increase the distance between yourself and your attacker. If retreat isn’t possible, make sure his knife arm is immobilized while you execute your counterattack. “Remember that if the knife moves, you can get cut,” Perets says.

Gun defense requires that just as much effort be put into controlling the weapon before you try to disarm your enemy or launch a counterstrike. “Remember that if the line of fire away from your body—and make sure your counter doesn’t position any part of your body in front of the muzzle again. Focus your strikes on neutralizing him, then take possession of the weapon, he says.

Obviously, Perets’ system exists on the cutting edge of reality-based self-defense, partly because it’s been stripped of all extraneous techniques and partly because it remains open to change. Every police and military group he teaches has the opportunity to critique the system, and that helps it evolve. “It’s all tested eventually on the streets,” he says. “If you get caught up in anything other than reality, you’ll be in trouble.”

About the author: Edward Pollard is Black Belt’s managing editor. For more information about Amir Perets’ Combat Fitness and Self-Defense, visit www.blackbeltmag.com.