

# Sustaining the Warrior Spirit in a Post-Conflict Army

by MAJ Russell Nowels

The past decade of combat operations created a tough and resilient force. The long deployments, difficult operating conditions and an adaptive enemy required mentally and physically fit Soldiers. The years of conflict, combined with arduous home-station training, resulted in a collective adaptation by the force: the adaptation of the warrior spirit. Now, as the Army begins to transition to a post-conflict (and budget-constrained) organization, how will it sustain the warrior mindset within the force?

It is critical for leaders to consider this question to ensure preservation of the warrior spirit as combat missions wind down and the force transitions to a garrison Army. The recent conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan demonstrated that the enduring demands and pressure of combat forges warriors; however, in a garrison Army, a comparable warrior spirit is best nurtured through daily physical-readiness training (PRT), an aggressive combatives plan and a competitive sports program.

## PRT

PRT is the foundation of the daily training schedule and an effective venue to build physical and mental toughness as well as a sense of camaraderie among Soldiers. PRT's importance is highlighted by the fact that it is the only training event that takes place every day while in garrison. This guarantees leaders the opportunity to train the warrior-athlete daily.

PRT's intent is to prepare "Soldiers and units physically to be successful in the conduct of full-spectrum operations."<sup>1</sup> This is accomplished through tough and realistic physical training, which causes Soldiers to embrace unique physical, mental and psychological challenges that promote a "never quit" attitude and resiliency.

Further, the rigor of unit PRT enables Soldiers to demonstrate the focus and drive to remain committed to themselves and their comrades in the face of adversity. This is



why reinforcing these qualities is paramount for future success during combat.

## Combatives

Combatives is another physical-training activity that improves conditioning while instilling the warrior virtues of courage and confidence in Soldiers. As a fitness task, combatives delivers all the essential elements of fitness: strength, endurance and flexibility.

This aspect alone should encourage unit leaders to plan for combatives weekly on the training schedule. However, the real advantage of combatives training is the physical assurance and psychological benefits gained, which strongly correlates to military functions. Through hand-to-hand combat or ground grappling, Soldiers achieve an "understanding of controlled aggression and the ability to remain focused while under duress."<sup>2</sup>

A training event that requires Soldiers to close the distance, gain dominant body position and then finish the fight yields the proper fighting attitude necessary in armed conflict. However, the advantages of combatives proficiency go beyond the lethal environment. Through combatives training, Soldiers develop a physical poise, which is beneficial during noncombat missions that restrict the use of force such as peacekeeping operations, humanitarian assistance or disaster relief. It is evident that combatives training results in "building personal courage, self-confidence, self-discipline and esprit-de-corps," all of which are characteristics of a strong warrior spirit.<sup>3</sup>

## Sports

A competitive sports program is arguably the most valuable and overlooked tool in developing warrior-leaders. Competitive sports are fun and unique training events that provide Soldiers a valuable opportunity to develop an aggressive combatant spirit on the confines of unit athletic fields.

Following World War I, GEN Douglas MacArthur said, "Upon the fields of friendly strife are sown the seeds that upon other fields, on other days, will bear the fruits of victory." This quote refers to MacArthur's belief that sports are an indispensable tool in preparing Soldiers for combat. Through sports, Soldiers

develop critical teamwork and communications skills while embracing competition.

Similar to the actions on contact battle drill, athletic competition requires Soldiers to understand the environment, assess the situation and make split-second decisions against unpredictable opponents. Also, team sports teach Soldiers how to cooperate with each other in the pursuit of a common group objective. The parallel between sports and combat is why GEN Alexander Haig thought that "sports provided the only peacetime activity where the stressors were similar to those on a battlefield."<sup>4</sup>

The importance of sports in developing characteristics desirable in combat was obvious to generals MacArthur and Haig. Likewise, leaders today can prepare for future conflicts by cultivating these warrior traits through the participation in sports.

## Nurturing warrior spirit

The post-conflict Army will be challenged to maintain the combat proficiency gained through a decade of war. Budget constraints and changing priorities will limit the resources available to train the physical tasks and skills so critical during combat operations. Vanishing are the days of abundant ammunition and range time, many live-fire exercises and vehicle maneuvers. Leaders must adapt and realize that during these challenging periods, opportunity still exists.

Although many physical combat skills requiring resources and repetition will become dull or deteriorate altogether, the proper warrior mindset for combat can still be trained and maintained. This mentality, which is every bit as valuable as core combat tasks, can be exercised through PRT, combatives and sports. Keeping a Soldier's mind and body sharp, while simultaneously nurturing the necessary warrior spirit, only requires the unit physical-training field or post athletic fields.

Take advantage of the opportunity by keeping the physical-training gear and mouth-guard close – it's time to train like a warrior!



*MAJ Russell Nowels is a training manager with the Joint Navigation Warfare Center, Joint Functional Component Command for Space at*

Kirtland Air Force Base, NM. His previous assignments include instructor, Department of Physical Education, West Point, NY; commander, A Troop, 1-10 Cavalry, 2-4 Infantry Division, Fort Carson, CO; regimental adjutant, 3<sup>rd</sup> Armored Cavalry Regiment, Fort Carson; and executive officer, G Troop, 2-3 Armored Cavalry Regiment, Fort Carson. His military schooling includes the Armor Officer Basic Course, Armor Captain's Career Course, Intermediate-Level Education, Space Operations Officer Qualification Course and Joint Professional Military Education Phase II. MAJ Nowels holds a bachelor's of science degree from the U.S. Military Academy in geography and a master's of science degree from Indiana University in kinesiology. He is a certified Army master fitness trainer, Modern Army Combatives Level II instructor, USA Track and Field Level I coach and a CrossFit Level I coach.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Headquarters Department of the Army, Training Circular 3-22.20, **Army Physical-Readiness Training**, Washington, DC, Aug. 10, 2010.

<sup>2</sup> Headquarters Department of the Army, Field Manual 3-25.150, **Combatives**, Washington, DC, Jan. 18, 2002.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Pim, Ralph, **West Point Competitive Sports Program**, West Point, NY: Academy Print Plant, 2011.

### ACRONYM QUICK-SCAN

**PRT** – physical-readiness training