

# Physical Fitness Standards for Police Cyclists

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A question that has been asked of IPMBA, nearly on a weekly basis, is: "is there a standard or physical test required of officers who would like to take the police cyclist course?" The answer, simply put, is "no." That is not because IPMBA does not believe that physical fitness is important, but because it is not as simple as it sounds.

Some law enforcement departments do have some type of physical assessment test that officers must pass before they can take the PC class. At the conference in Utah, I heard about all kinds of different tests, like having to complete a run, do a certain number of push-ups, and then swim 100 yards; or a three mile time trial; or just a straight mile-and-a-half run. These are just a few of the various tests given prior to enrollment. But for every department that has some sort of pre-screening for bike officers, many more do not.

It is time to take a stand; every department needs to have standards to determine whether or not an officer is physically capable of performing the tasks required of a bicycle officer. But where do the standards come from? If you are using a physical assessment or an entry test to qualify an officer for the PC class and you use one of the aforementioned skill tests, I ask you, what do push-ups have to do with riding a bike? And what does swimming have to do with a bicycle officer's performance? Unless you're trying out for the Iron Man Competition, not much. And what about females? Can you and should you use some type of curve? The point is that the physical test must pertain to the position, for example, SRT, SWAT, ERT, Marine Unit, Mounted Unit, etc. Do you get the picture?

Here's an example. About eight years ago, I tried out for our department SRT, and I did pretty well. Out of ten people, I came in second in the timed physical agility test. This is what I had to do: first there was a 100-yard run to a 5' fence that I had to jump over. Then I had to crawl under a bunch of bushes to go into a building, then kick down a door, enter a room, and pull out a 185-lb dummy. Oh, did I say what I had on? I was loaded down with the whole SRT thing – the bullet proof vest, jump boots, helmet, duty belt, and rifle. I had to drag or carry the dummy back to where I started. Wow! That was hard, but no one questions why it was necessary.

The Marine Unit is another good example. To qualify for our department's unit, you have to be able to swim 500 yards without stopping and be a certified diver. You also have to agree to take Black Water Diving, Search and Rescue, and spend two weeks in a Boat Handling course before you can start on the water. Makes sense, right? You wouldn't want a marine officer who wasn't a strong swimmer.

My point is this – all special units place special demands on the officers in those units, and all require above-average physical fitness and the completion of specialized training. Bikes are no different. The demands of bike duty are different than those of the average patrol officer, and you need to have some way of gauging a candidate's ability to meet those demands. That is why you should require a pre-test prior to enrollment in the PC class, and why you should require that your bike officers maintain or improve upon that level of fitness. After all, a bike officer who is unable to exert himself and then recover quickly is likely to do more harm than good.

As mentioned earlier, there are lots of ideas on what the best type of physical screening is, but all good assessments have one thing in common: they are all related to the job performance of a bike officer. That is why the P.B.S.O. adopted the Three Mile Time Trial. For those of you that don't know what I'm talking about –

maybe you missed the article in the Fall 2001 *IPMBA News* or were unable to attend the workshop at the conference – let me explain just a little bit. All prospective members of the P.B.S.O. bike unit are required to complete a three mile ride in less than a set length of time. A straight out-and-back course is laid out with the turnaround at the 1.5 mile mark. We don't include any turns or curves because we are measuring the fitness level of the riders, not their biking skills. The men have to finish in under 12:30, and the women have to finish in under 14:30. We have a 100% pass rate to date. All the people who tried out for the bike team wanted to be there and knew it was not an easy course.

When we first hit upon the idea of doing a time trial, we asked ourselves, “is this in line with our departmental policies? And will it comply with EEOC (Equal Employment Opportunity Commission) rules?” We weren’t about to find out the hard way, so we took it to Legal and to Human Resources. They determined that we weren’t asking the prospective bike officers to do anything more strenuous than they might be called upon to do while on duty. We were then able to adopt it as a pre-screening tool. We are now trying to take it one step further by requiring that officers not only have to meet the standard when they join the unit, but they also have to continue to meet it in an annual in-service training. Some of our special units already do this. When officers apply to a special unit, they sign “pre-employment contracts” agreeing that they are required to meet and maintain whatever job-related physical fitness standards are established. If they don’t, they may be removed from the unit. Now, there’s an incentive.

So why is this a good test? Two reasons: liability and training. We looked into both sides when we were developing it. On the liability side, we found a court case that some of you might already be familiar with, *Parker vs. Washington D.C.* Mr. Parker had a warrant for armed robbery. Officer Hayes of the D.C. Metropolitan Police, who had just been released back to patrol from light duty due to an arm injury, was sent to arrest Mr. Parker. In the course of the time that Hayes was on light duty (four years), he had had no physical training. Mr. Parker was in his vehicle while the Officer Hayes tried to arrest him. Mr. Parker did not want to be taken to jail and resisted arrest. The officer attempted to subdue him physically and due to his prior injury was unable to do so. The officer lost control of Mr. Parker and could not get him out of the vehicle, at which point, the officer resorted to deadly force, pulled his weapon from his holster and fired at Mr. Parker, killing him.

The court case was brought against the city because the officer was placed back on patrol, after being out on light duty, with inadequate training. It might have been a justified shooting, but Mr. Parker did not have a weapon, so the whole thing was over the officer’s inability to perform due to lack of training in the four years that he was on light duty. This cost the Metropolitan Police Department \$425,046.67.

This brings up the next reason, training. The point is that not only do you need to be physically fit, but you need to keep your skills sharp. Therefore, you need training all the time. If you don’t get the in-service training you need to allow you to perform at the physical level required for your position, whether it is bike patrol, mounted patrol, SRT, SWAT, ERT or marine patrol, this could happen to you. Any officer who rides a bike should be in good physical condition so he can perform to the best of his ability.

Let me give you a scenario that could happen to any officer, Anywhere, USA. You are on patrol in a community, strip mall, or beach, and a call goes out that another officer is down. He is three miles away, and your patrol vehicle, if you have one, is four miles away in the other direction. You decide to go help your brother officer and ride your bicycle to the call. If you are in good physical condition, you should be able to ride there and take hold of the problem. If you are not in good condition, you may become part of the problem. Here you are, riding at your top speed and you make it the whole three miles. You are so winded that you almost fall down because your knees feel like rubber and you can’t catch your breath. Now, not only is the officer that you were going to help down, but so are you. NOT a good thing. I know I wouldn’t want that, and I know that you, like me, want to go home after shift, DON’T YOU?! Without a high level of physical fitness and special training for your job, you become a liability to not only yourself, but to your department as well.

Ask yourself, “is there anyone in my bicycle unit who may be a liability to themselves or to the department?” Just remember *Parker vs. Washington D.C.* That’s where the Physical Assessment Pre-Test and In-Service Training comes into play.

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