

SAFETY in TRAINING for the FIREFIGHTER

by David Dodson

Your academy experience is only the start of your fire service training – you will train dozens, if not hundreds, of times a year during your career. Unfortunately, the fire service has a less-than-desirable safety record when it comes to training activities. Current statistics indicate that eight firefighters die each year in training accidents, and thousands are injured. It is likely that as you read this article, one or two firefighters will be injured during a training activity.

A firefighter injured during training activities brings stress – for you, your team, and your department alike. So how do you and your team *PROACTIVELY* prevent injuries during training? The answers lie in an understanding of how and where injuries occur and by taking specific steps to ensure you are engaged in SAFE behaviors.

Where Training Injuries Occur

A historical review of training incidents reveals trends that help us understand where and how injuries (and deaths) occur. If you are aware of these trends, you will likely be more aware of the potential and hopefully take steps to avoid a negative outcome. These are the more-common events that occur during training:

- Falls – typically from ladders or roofs.
- Being struck – by apparatus, heavy equipment, and falling objects.
- Overexertion – leading to heart attack, stroke, thermal stress, and dehydration (renal failure). Strains and sprains are often the result of overexertion.
- Burns – during live fire training.
- CO poisoning – from exposure to smoke.

What is compelling is that most training accidents are preventable. While it seems impossible to eliminate all training injuries in a profession as complex and dynamic as firefighting, this should be our goal.

Preventing Injuries

Safe, effective firefighter training relies on a combination of efforts between your department (administrative control), the instructor, and YOU. These three influences must work together to ensure a safe training activity. The following text provides suggestions for a general approach to training activities, as well as some specific ideas to help you do your part.

Speaking in general terms, an individual can exercise safe behavior by always employing three concepts:

1. **Be Ready.** Being ready is more than just words – it's a universal approach to engaging in any training activity. Make sure your issued Personal Protective

Equipment (PPE) is complete and ready for use. A good firefighter is always checking issued equipment for completeness, damage, and wear. Once your PPE becomes wet, take steps to dry the gear and get it ready for its next use. Once your gear is dried, prepare it for immediate donning – you never know when an instructor will test your donning skills. Readiness is also achieved by doing your homework. If you know the topic of the next drill or activity, review what you know and be prepared to show that you have done your homework. Finally, be *physically* ready. The potential for overexertion begins with firefighters who have not “pre-hydrated” or eaten. We know that firefighting activities require considerable physical effort – and therefore energy. You can prepare your stores of internal energy for this exertion by drinking water and eating stable foods (carbohydrates, fats, and proteins) prior to the incident. An energy bar or “wrap sandwich” are good sources of fuel for the metabolic energy you’ll need for the upcoming drill.

2. **Have a SAFETY attitude.** Once again, this isn’t lip service. A safety attitude starts with the basic belief that training-related injuries are NOT ACCEPTABLE. You can further this attitude by avoiding horseplay, peer competitions, and jocularly. Keep focused and perform – remember you are establishing habits during training. As the late Vince Lombardi once said, “Practice doesn’t make perfect – PERFECT PRACTICE makes perfect!” Establish good habits early and don’t start looking for short-cuts.
3. **Be Aware.** The safe, successful firefighter is one who develops the ability to perform a task while being aware of the changing environment that surrounds the activity. This is difficult to do if the training is introducing a new tool, procedure, or approach – your natural tendency will be to focus on the skill. When possible – try performing the task in a non-threatening, controlled environment first. For example, make sure you know how to run the tool BEFORE you go to the roof to cut a hole; that way you can concentrate on your surroundings. Awareness also includes watching out for others. When a fellow firefighter is taking their turn at a task, watch the area around and behind your teammate. In other words, be the “wingman”!

Let’s now explore some specific ideas to help you be safe during training activities.

1. **Give apparatus a wide berth.** The number of injuries and deaths associated with apparatus is increasing at a dangerous rate. In 2004, three firefighters died because apparatus backed over them. Retrieving tools, pulling hose, and working around apparatus is obviously necessary – so develop the habit of approaching apparatus from a position that can be seen by the apparatus operator – make sure you are visible. Take this a step further and make sure you’ve been acknowledged. Even with an acknowledgement, be mindful of blind spots. When walking around the apparatus, give yourself a wide path in case the apparatus surges or a door/compartments opens. Drill ground activities

often place several moving apparatus in a small space – look around, and walk with your head up. Don't surprise a driver by darting out from between obstacles or vehicles.

When riding apparatus on the drill ground – like for repeated drills – avoid the tendency to skip using the seat belt. Remember, perfect practice makes perfect.

2. **Step “ON” the hose.** Charged and uncharged hose lines are trip hazards that move suddenly; stepping on the hose (rather than stepping over) reduces your chances of being “attacked” by the moving hose.
3. **Keep sure footing and a sure grip.** The majority of falls from roofs and ladders are a result of inattentiveness to footing and grip. A good rule for climbing ladders is to always have three-point contact. In essence, make sure three contact points are solid before you move the next hand or foot. When operating on roofs, make sure your footing is visible and can support your weight. Ask yourself “if I were to trip, where would I fall?”; this simple question can make you more aware of your footing and proximity to fall hazards.
4. **Be seen and be heard.** When performing physical tasks, make sure that you are being seen by others and you can be heard if you speak out. Developing this habit is a life-saver.
5. **Pace yourself.** There are few training activities that require full-speed accomplishment. Use the practice time to perfect your skill; speed will come with repetition. Jumping right into a speed competition is a setup for strains, sprains, and trauma. The competitive nature of firefighters is natural but can lead to injuries – especially when the competition is spontaneous and not closely supervised. Pacing yourself also means aggressive rehab. Make sure you are drinking water (8 ounces every 15 minutes is best when performing physical tasks in full gear). Don't be bashful or embarrassed when you are fatigued – let someone know.
6. **Acknowledge your weaknesses or difficulty in performing a task.** Training is the opportunity to explore any weaknesses. If you are having a difficult time comprehending or performing, talk it out. You'll be surprised how easy it is to discover proficiency if you just acknowledge the difficulty you are having. You'll also discover how helpful others can be. Pride, shame, and embarrassment can impede progress and team development.
7. **Practice, practice, practice.** Early in your career, you'll learn hundreds of skills in a short amount of time. It is not reasonable for anyone to retain all they've been shown during formal training events. Your part of the safety equation is to take ownership of what you've been shown and work towards

proficiency. Most veteran firefighters invest thousands of hours of their OWN TIME to make sure their skills don't degrade over time.

If there is one absolute about firefighter training, it's that your training will never end. The firefighting profession requires that you train RIGHT, train OFTEN, and TRAIN SAFE.