

# PROTECTING PUBLIC VENUES FROM TERRORIST ATTACKS

By Mark Lang

Students are challenged in training to shoot on demand to save lives.

In March 2008, the FBI and Department of Homeland Security issued an assessment asserting that stadiums and arenas are potential targets during events. Further, it was stated, “it’s just a matter of time before terrorists target a major sports event.” Open-air venues where fans gather to watch sporting events or concerts are extremely vulnerable to attack.

In January 2009, DHS issued an assessment report titled “Threats to College Sports and Entertainment Venues and Surrounding Areas.” This report expounded on public transportation and infrastructure as a target of attack if the venue is perceived as being secured.

## PAST ATTEMPTS

On Oct. 1, 2005, Joel Hinrichs detonated an improvised explosive device (IED) on a bench 200 yards away from the University of Oklahoma football stadium, where nearly 85,000 people were in attendance. The FBI concluded that it was an accidental suicide, but the agency could not prove or disprove that Hinrichs intended to enter the stadium and detonate his IED.

In Tampa, Florida, in 2008, a male named Kurt Havelock mailed a manifesto to local media outlets stating he would “shed the blood of the innocent” and threatened to shoot people at the upcoming Super Bowl game. Armed with an AR15 rifle and 200 rounds

of ammunition, he changed his mind at the stadium and turned himself in to the police. (His conviction on mailing threats was later overturned on appeal.) These and other incidents underscore the very real threat to those who attend sporting or non-sporting events in large venues. Many in law enforcement may be unaware of just how attractive a target and how lax the security is.

Where do we start the process of hardening our public venues? Our friends and family attend a variety of events at large venues, and the expectation is one of security and safety. However, as we look at what assets are present at the venue, are they enough to

combat terrorism and prevent it from happening? This article examines the current response and potential threats, and focuses on what police snipers and SWAT can add to prevent tragedy at a sporting event.

### **SOFT TARGET OR HARD TARGET**

Public sporting venues are generally considered to be soft targets, meaning there is a minimal uniformed officer presence and a higher presence of unarmed private security personnel. These police officers and private security handle traditional disturbances and traffic flow control prior to and after the event. Ask yourself, the last time you attended a sporting event at your local venue, what did you observe? How many uniformed officers were there compared to soft security? How easy would it be to compromise the security of the event, even with the use of manometers and handheld devices? What is the level of training for those using those devices? Is there an immediate action plan that has been trained if there is a directed attack? What is the status of the uniformed officers at the ingress/egress points at the venue? If a shooting occurs, does every officer run toward it, creating a prime location for an ambush while other terrorists lie in wait to kill patrons running out of the exits?

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### **THREAT ENVIRONMENT AT PUBLIC VENUES**

Threats at public venues could be international or domestic terrorism, a threat from a lone wolf or one from an insider. The method of attack could be an active shooter, a vehicle- or person-borne IED, an air attack or a chemical, biological, radiological or nuclear (CBRN) agent.

**Active shooters.** This threat could cause multiple victims and have major economic ramifications in the sporting venue economy. Active shooter incidents have taken place in all areas of our country and in different settings for many years. The assumption that the present level of security in venues is adequate could prove tragic. Also of concern is the lack of standardized active shooter training in place for the uniformed officers who work the event. After Columbine, many police departments realized that they had to train for active shooters in an unconventional way. Push to contact and stop the shooter(s) was paramount as old and new officers alike trained to a new tactic. A standard should be in place requiring uniformed officers working events at public venues to have passed active shooter training from their respective agencies. Police must be working off the same plan in a crisis.

**Person-borne improvised explosive devices (PBIED).** How do you stop a person with a bomb intent on killing as many as possible? There is no simple answer. The rank-and-file officers are not exposed to this type of training, so the responsibility falls on SWAT, SRT and ERT teams. Does your team regularly conduct IED/suicidal bomber training? You may not be surprised to find out that post-9/11, there are teams that do not. Either they do not have the knowledge or they continue to train for bread and butter operations that they know best.

New Mexico Tech, through the Department of Homeland Security,

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offers a first responders program that is conducted at the Energetic Materials Research and Testing Center in Socorro. This program offers critical IED, PBIED and VBIED training. The training is free for law enforcement and is critical to staying abreast of this emerging threat. Suicidal bombers can detonate their device several ways (dead man's switch, handler or timer). Operators must know where and how to strike the suicidal bomber. If you cannot stop the device from detonating then you must train how to mitigate the blast if possible.

**Vehicle-borne improvised explosive device (VBIED).** Cars, vans, trucks and even motorcycles can carry large amounts of explosives and are mobile delivery mechanisms. Most notable is Timothy McVeigh and the Ryder truck bomb he used outside the Murrah Federal Building in Oklahoma City in 1995. How do you prevent a vehicle loaded with explosives from accessing the vehicle entrance that is present at most venues? These venues have this access point for deliveries and player parking. Most lead directly to the playing surface. If there is nothing to stop a VBIED, it can drive near or onto the playing surface and detonate. What is in place to stop it? Closed venues present a magnified problem if the detonation occurs. Mitigation is the important word here. SWAT teams must be prepared to stop and take action against the driver and/or the vehicle.

Assets are in place for traditional disturbances like angry or rowdy fans

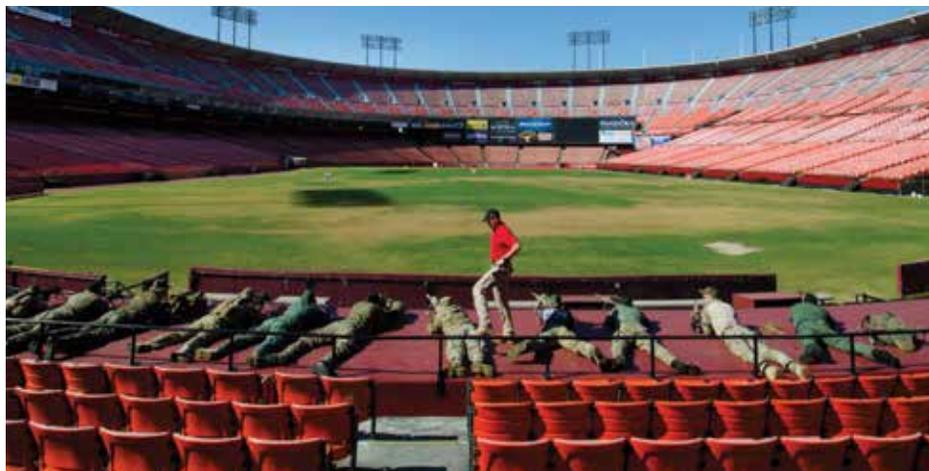
and traffic control, but not for a terrorist attack. Law enforcement continues to operate in a reactionary mode. A shift from traditional thinking to proactive thinking and a reallocation of resources is required. If someone told you that he was going to punch you in the face and break every bone, what would you do? Would you allow it to happen? Of course not — you would defend yourself and guard against the attack. Terror groups have said that public venues are potential targets. Why, then, is little being done to prepare?

**Air attacks.** Any destructive device or substance that can be delivered via the air must also be a concern to law enforcement. Typical Saturday and Sunday football games at open-air venues are usually what first come to mind. When temporary flight restrictions (TFR) are in place, officers can be alert for an unauthorized presence of a prop plane, helicopter or even a drone. Before 9/11, prop planes pulling advertisement banners were rampant. That has since decreased significantly and should warrant suspicion if seen on game day. Sniper/observer teams have the capability to observe FAA tail numbers to report any unauthorized aircraft. Countermeasures to such must be given

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Police snipers are challenged after a 270 yard run to shoot on demand.  
Photo courtesy of Dustin Penman.



Instructor analyzes targets with students on a purpose-built MGM Stadium trap.  
Photo courtesy of Dustin Penman.

thought and not merely dismissed due to the probability of the occurrence.

**Chemical, Biological, Radiological and Nuclear (CBRN).** These types of attacks could be delivered via an aircraft and must not be overlooked as a possible method. The National Center for Biomedical Research and Training (NCBRT) at Louisiana State University provides much-needed training in areas of domestic and international

terrorism, weapons of mass destruction and high-consequence events to first responders. This and other relevant training is critical to understanding the potential threats to venues and the complexity of the problem.

**THE ROLE OF THE POLICE SNIPER**

It starts with a properly trained police sniper; one who is not new to the rifle, but seasoned and experienced in

marksmanship and fieldcraft. Unbeknownst to many, every weekend there are police snipers that deploy in overt or covert firing positions at public venues. This trend of placing precision rifles in venues is not new and has been occurring for quite some time. The protocol or threat matrix for deploying snipers may vary from agency to agency but there are many that deploy for every event or game at the venue for which they are responsible. This occurs at events for the NFL, NHL, MLB, NCAA and NASCAR.

For many, the opportunity to conduct live-fire training at their venue has been denied. An entire article could be devoted to changing closed-minded thinking on the part of police administrators and venue managers that prevent this. Nonetheless, police snipers

are at these venues. The problem that exists is lack of formalized training. Snipers must train what they are asked to do. To simply deploy snipers at the venue in elevated positions who have never been given the chance to live fire sets them up for failure. Documentation and confidence are critical to the police sniper. Many sniper teams are deployed in somewhat of a checklist manner for their agency, with their superiors having no expectation that they could intervene to save lives. However, this creates a frustrating state of mind for those SWAT officers. Sniper teams in elevated positions are invaluable in directing SWAT assets to a problem if there is a threat in either the inside or outside areas. Their skills sets in observation and equipment are optimized for potential issues at public venues.

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## THE ROLE OF SWAT

As mentioned previously, police snipers deploy at venues every weekend across the country. The mere placement of two, 2-man sniper/observer teams to cover the inside and outside of a venue is not adequate. Those teams are usually in an elevated area and it is impossible to have coverage for 100 percent of the venue. There is inherent dead space that cannot be seen or covered with the precision rifle. Those deploying in this manner need more assets to be effective, and therein lies the need for the SWAT asset to be present at the venue, and not in a reactionary role. These smaller, quick react teams can be placed throughout the venue to respond to any incident that may occur warranting their response. Additional sniper teams may deploy in a quick roll out fashion as well to supplement the QRF with precision rifles.

The teams must be flexible and well-placed to respond quickly to problems inside and outside of the venue. The common mistake is to assume that an attack will occur inside the venue. The outside parking lots and roads must be of great concern and sniper/observer teams must have enough assets or the ability to quickly relocate to cover these areas. Other additional assets may include covert officers who can surveil a potential suspect(s) undetected and relay critical information to the teams and command and control. Command and control is paramount to the success of any incident at the venue and thought should be given to advantages of locating it onsite or offsite.

One area of concern is vehicle access to the playing surface. A VBIED could penetrate the usually soft security checkpoint and travel into the venue. It is advisable to place an armored vehicle somewhere between the checkpoint and the playing surface to block such an attempt. The vehicle should be manned prior to, during and after the event with



Police sniper and observer working as a team in public venue overwatch.

SWAT personnel. If the VBIED can be stopped before it penetrates too far into the venue, it could potentially save lives. Remember, if you cannot stop the blast, mitigation is your next priority.

### OVERT OR COVERT DEPLOYMENT

Of usual concern is whether police snipers and SWAT are seen by the public at the venue. No police administrator wants the attention from the media, but the overt, visible response can create a sense of safety for the public and be greatly appreciated. Do not underestimate the public that attends these events, as they can appreciate seeing SWAT officers and not react negatively. However, in today's climate, it very well may be a wiser decision to place snipers and other assets in a covert manner considering the continuing spotlight on the militarization of the police in our country.

Both aspects can be accomplished depending on the mission of the deployment. Sniper/observer teams and SWAT QRF can be in hidden

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positions throughout the venue and remain undetected for the duration of the event. These areas can be identified prior to any deployment to determine accessibility and usefulness. The covert method of deployment is the most commonly used throughout the United States today. SWAT officers are sometimes seen from a distance but weapon systems and other items are held out of public view. It is possible to run a covert operation with these assets at the venue ready to react in a timely manner to any threats. Conversely, these assets can also be deployed overtly.

The advantages are voluntary compliance and possibly thwarting an attack if the terrorist views the presence to be too much to fight.

**CONCLUSION**

Every weekend throughout the country police snipers and SWAT officers deploy to events held at public venues. By and large, most of these officers have not conducted live-fire training with their precision rifles in the venues. This is where the gap begins, and it continues to widen as some have not conducted full-scale training in the venue to test and validate their plan in the event of a crisis. The time to train is before the crisis. Unfortunately, this does not always occur. Political or internal obstacles, or simply not fully understanding the capabilities

of a trained police sniper, may be the culprit. Nonetheless, these officers are out there every weekend and we owe it to them to give them the most relevant and realistic training available to set them up for success.

Unfortunately, it is only a matter of time before an organized terrorist cell, group or lone wolf attacks a sporting venue with success. Only then will real, tangible changes occur in how we proactively secure public venues. We live in dangerous times and idly sitting by hoping that these attacks will not come will prove to be tragic. SWAT and police snipers trained in venue response can be the driving force for keeping many citizens attending these events safe. The terrorist threat is known. What will you do about it? ■

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**ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

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