

WHAT WOULD YOU DO?

Whether you're aiming to be an MMA fighter or just don't want to get beaten up outside the pub, the SPEAR self-defence system claims to harness your instincts to prepare you for any violent situation. *MF* tries it out... the hard way

Words **Mark Bailey**
Photography **Naki Kouyioumtzis**



On the face of it, self-protection guru Tony Blauer's unique system of personal defence - codenamed SPEAR - sounds fantastic. Unlike boxing, which discourages blinking in the face of punches, or Muay Thai, where you're expected to greet kicks with a smile, Blauer actively encourages you to embrace your cowardly instincts. The idea, he claims, is that you can use the same reflexes that shy away from sudden movements to avoid attacks and use your natural physiology, rather than hours of training, to toughen yourself up.

It certainly looks impressive on YouTube, and the theory is sound. Which is why I've come, early on a Saturday morning, to sit in a Manchester gym alongside brawny policemen and professional fighters... and watch a 1981 episode of *Parkinson*.

Startle at the beginning

Thankfully, there's method in this madness. Blauer, whose system has been used to train US Army soldiers, US Navy SEALs, police officers in England, UFC fighters and civilians, is teaching the basics of his system. Its scientific cornerstone is that the body's genetically hardwired 'startle-flinch' response to an attack is faster and more reliable than any learned combat skill. To prove it, Blauer shows us a classic meeting of minds between Parky, Muhammad Ali and comedian Freddie Starr. After reeling Ali in with a long, macabre ghost story, Starr suddenly lunges at Ali's face. The three-time world heavyweight champion instinctively flinches against this 'attack' from a diminutive funnyman in a white frilly shirt.

'It's an amazing example of the startle-flinch reflex and the science behind the SPEAR system,' says Blauer, looking tough and tanned at 50 years of age. He boasts veiny, muscular forearms and the deep growl of a WWE wrestler. 'Why didn't Ali just parry his attack? Why didn't he nail him? Think of Ali's muscle memory and his reaction times. The lesson is, if you're surprised, you will fucking flinch - you, me or Muhammad Ali. The question is, can you convert that into something useful?'

Don't blink

Blauer, who was born in Montreal and now lives in San Diego, grew up as a Bruce Lee junkie with a passion for tae kwon do, wrestling and boxing. In 1979 he set up the self-protection research company Blauer Tactical Systems and developed

various pioneering concepts, including the Panic Attack System, a no-holds-barred fight simulation designed to acclimatise people to the raw intensity of a street attack.

Blauer's epiphany, though, came in 1988, during what he calls a 'sucker-punch drill'. Blauer, playing the defender in the scenario, was only allowed to parry or evade the incoming blows, but his attacker could encroach, distract him with verbal assaults and throw shots anywhere, any time. 'If I tried to do complex motor skills learned from martial arts, like parries, I got hit,' he says. 'But when I just flinched, my arm blocked the attack. That proves your reactive brain is faster than your cognitive muscle memory.'

Certain he was on to something, Blauer intensively studied the science, psychology and biomechanics of the body's natural flinch, which he discovered 'sparks an instinctive withdrawal away from the danger and the raising of the arms to protect the head'. Blauer's research involved watching hours of CCTV and surveillance footage of fights, car crashes and attacks and reading detailed medical studies. 'This reflex is so fast you find trauma wounds on the forearms of car crash victims who somehow raise their arms before they hit the dash,' he says.

Armed with this information, Blauer used it to develop the Spontaneous Protection Enabling Accelerated Response (SPEAR) system, which converts the natural flinch reflex into protective or combative solutions. 'It's behaviourally based around what the body wants to do and grounded in science, which makes it the most natural way to protect yourself,' explains Blauer. 'That's why we're the only system verified by doctors on three different continents.'

Tip of the SPEAR

The theory makes sense, but I'm joining Blauer's Personal Defence Readiness instructor training programme in Manchester to discover exactly how the SPEAR system converts this raw, primal self-defence mechanism into a weapon.

Everybody here has something to learn. Other attendees include Marc Duncan, an MMA fighter based in Holland who's eager to experience a 'simple, no-bullshit way to defend myself', and Ricky Lam, a tae kwon do instructor from Leeds who hopes it could help him in 'a real-life confrontation when my skills won't work'.

Before we begin the physical drills, we're taught the two crucial physiological building blocks of the SPEAR system: keep your elbows extended beyond 90° and splay your fingers out. First, I'm instructed to bend my elbow at 90° and push against a partner's chest as he attempts to bear-hug me. After a brief struggle, my arm swiftly collapses. Next,

I extend my arm beyond 90° and try again. This time I can resist.

'Pound for pound your extensor muscles, which extend or straighten a joint or limb, like your triceps, are stronger than your flexor muscles, which bend a joint or limb inwards, like your biceps,' says Zeb Glover, one of Blauer's instructors. 'Keeping your elbow extended beyond 90° and splaying your fingers recruits these extensor muscles and activates all three heads of the triceps, making your protective flinch stronger.'

I'm starting to understand. With these simple physiological tweaks, I can galvanise my flinch to block an attack.

Basic instincts

The SPEAR system teaches you to convert your natural flinch into protective or combative postures. There are three main

stances: primal, protective and tactical. To demonstrate the 'primal' stance, Blauer moves a hand towards my face. Sure enough, I instinctively pull away and raise my hands close to my face. 'That's the primal flinch, which defends against close attacks,' he says. 'Now we convert that.'

The second, 'protective' stance, used to block attacks from a distance, requires me to extend my lead hand (beyond 90°, fingers spread), position my other hand protectively near my face and adopt a powerful sprinter's stance with my legs. To demonstrate its efficiency, 'attackers' attempt haymakers, but I'm able to push away the blows.

This is beginning to make sense. Because this protective stance mirrors my instinctive startle-flinch reflex, I'm able to adopt it incredibly quickly, shifting from my instinctive primal flinch to the



MF's Mark tries to stay calm as he's manhandled by SPEAR instructor Zeb Glover

Surprise attacks can defeat learned martial art skills



On Parkinson, Ali reacted to Starr with pure reflex



protective stance in milliseconds. That gives me speed. My strength derives from having my elbows extended beyond 90° and fingers splayed, boosting the natural power of the flinch, as demonstrated in the earlier drills. This is my own lightbulb moment: the SPEAR system exploits the speed and kinetic energy of the flinch and the muscular power of my extensors to create a naturally strong protective shield.

'All the drills exploit the speed, power and reliability of your natural flinch reflex'

Ready for battle

SPEAR teaches you to convert your instinctive flinch into these three defensive and combative stances

1 PRIMAL

During the initial shock of a surprise attack, your primal startle-flinch reflex kicks in. You will withdraw instinctively away from the threat and raise both your hands to protect the 'command centre' of your head. This is your natural defensive mechanism and will spark into action quicker than any defensive 'skill' you could learn through cognitive muscle memory.

2 PROTECTIVE

Convert this instinctive primal reflex into a protective shield by extending your leading arm beyond 90° and spreading your fingers, intersecting the eyeline of the attacker with your hand. Your other hand should protect your face. Bend your knees into a powerful sprinter's stance. With these physiological adjustments, you recruit more muscle power to push away or block the danger.

3 TACTICAL

To form a more attacking tactical stance, move your torso to face the threat and shift your axis forward, putting pressure on the balls of your feet. Drop your head low and look through your thumbs. Aim to drive the ulna bone of your leading forearm into the attacker's centre mass, a sensitive area of nerves in and around the neck.



The third stance - 'tactical' - is a more offensive posture which again mirrors your natural flinch mechanism, but with your weight further forward, your head tucked behind your hands and the ulna bone (the hardest part of your forearm) used as a weapon. During drills, we aim for the attacker's 'centre mass' - the sensitive nerve area which intersects the sternum, pec and neck. I practise a drill in which an attacker circles me and I repeatedly try to block, push away and counter his attack by flowing through the three stages of the SPEAR stance. It's quick, natural and effective.

More advanced drills teach how to recover from being tackled, deal with 'malfunctions' (for example, when your arm gets clamped against your body) and

unleash an armoury of instinctive combat skills, such as rakes, palms, elbows, kicks, sweeps and knees. The SPEAR system can also be adapted to cope with specific scenarios such as knife attacks. Each of the drills prepares you for different situations that you might face, but they all have one thing in common: they exploit the speed, power and reliability of your body's natural startle-flinch reflex.

Another dimension

How the drills are performed, however, is just as crucial to the SPEAR system. 'We follow a three-dimensional philosophy which includes psychological, emotional and physical training,' says Blauer. That means your 'attacker' screams verbal threats and assaults you with force. 'You need to experience the fear, the

Fighting Instincts

strength, the speed and the sounds,' says Blauer. It helps to stress-inoculate you.'

This core belief lead Blauer to develop High Gear, an impact-reduction suit which allows students to perform fight drills at maximum intensity. This Darth Vader-like assemblage, which costs around £1,000 and includes a masked helmet, a chest guard and leg and arm pads, weighs just 3.5kg. Made from lightweight smart foam, it allows optimum movement to ensure drills play out at a realistic speed and, crucially, reduces but doesn't negate pain, giving you accurate biofeedback so you know what a blow feels like without getting badly hurt. Even the mask ratchets up the fear factor, transforming your attacker into an intimidating, unknown entity.

'I wanted the drills to be credible, and High Gear makes that possible,' says Blauer. The kit is used in advanced SPEAR training to enable drills to be played out with the visceral intensity of a street fight, but has also been quickly adopted by professional fighters. MMA instructor Greg Jackson, who trains UFC welterweight champion Georges St-Pierre, is a fan.

Training scenarios can include ambushes, pub fights, bus assaults and attacks by multiple assailants. There are YouTube videos that demonstrate the blistering power and pace of High Gear drills, as bodies collide in a flurry of raw, instinctive punches, elbows and knees, or collapse to the mat in a frenzied grapple for supremacy.

These drills may look crude, but they acclimatise the student to how a street attack might actually feel. 'High Gear drills are scenario-based and controlled, but you learn how to deal with the force of an attack,' says Glover. They demonstrate how the SPEAR stances and close-quarter combat tactics can

Blauer, 50, has worked on defence techniques for most of his life



'The High Gear suit enables drills to have the visceral intensity of a street fight'

be 'instinctively' executed in a high-pressure situation. It is a wake-up call for technically trained fighters unaccustomed to the ugly brutality of a brawl. As Blauer says, 'It's not about what's right, but who is left.'

Stay out of trouble

Despite all these physical drills, SPEAR is not a martial art, a style or a technique. It's a self-protection system and therefore places heavy emphasis on avoiding

Fighting chance | How to ensure your survival in violent circumstances



What if... I'm punched in a bar?

Try to identify 'pre-contact cues' from your attacker (on the right in all pictures), such as a sharp intake of breath. Allow your instinctive flinch to fire, but ensure your leading arm extends beyond 90° and splay your fingers. The speed of your flinch and your natural strength will help you to block the punch. If necessary, adopt the tactical stance, subdue your attacker and escape.



What if... I'm grabbed while at a cashpoint?

Your instinctive flinch will cause you to raise your shoulders and drop your chin to protect your throat. When you flinch, spread your arms to prevent the attacker getting a tight grip. Grab at your attacker's forearms and pull them away. Unleash elbows to the ribs or kicks to the legs until you can swivel around and push him away.



What if... I'm tackled by a thug?

Your natural crossed-extensor reflex will lead you instinctively to grab hold of the attacker. This makes you vulnerable. When you're being driven off-balance, recognise the danger and release your hand. Splay your fingers and drive your leading forearm into the attacker's central mass until he can no longer sustain the tackle. Engage your core and drive the attacker away.

confrontation. The system is built upon the three Ds: detect, defuse and defend. 'We don't just teach defensive tools,' says Blauer. 'Ideally you can detect or defuse a confrontation first.'

That's why Blauer refuses to glorify stories fed back to him from the front line about how SPEAR has saved lives. 'You wouldn't want a driving instructor talking about his students getting in car crashes, so I don't like talking about my students having to fight,' he says.

Detection includes everything from highlighting your vulnerabilities – do you always walk home alone on Friday night? – to telegraphing auditory, visual and tactile cues before an attack. Blauer dissects a haymaker punch in slow-motion,

'We don't just teach defence. Ideally you can detect or defuse a confrontation'

pointing out the attacker's target glance, his sharp intake of breath, the flinch in his fingers and the flex of his pectoral muscles. 'By reverse-engineering attacks, we train your brain to mentally blueprint the attack and catalogue the pre-contact cues,' he says. 'That will stress-inoculate you and give you extra time to react.'

SPEAR also teaches you to defuse an attack, using choice speech and non-violent postures. 'If they can be persuaded to talk, they can normally be persuaded to walk,' says Blauer. The course reveals how active listening, such as nodding and repeating what an attacker says, or using humour to break the tension, can help to deflate aggression.

Blauer's instructors also demonstrate how non-violent postures, such as the 'negotiating position' (both hands up at shoulder level, fingers splayed) or 'crossed arms' (bottom hand holding your lat, top arm on your triceps) appear to an aggressor as communicative, non-hostile stances, but can be converted into a SPEAR stance if necessary.

Master of the universal

After sampling the system, I'm impressed by the programme's philosophy. This isn't a series of drills, but an entire system which trains

High Gear

This impact-reduction suit ramps up the intensity of combat drills

Sensory freedom

The helmet enables you to speak clearly and hear vocal threats to create realistic 'street' training scenarios

Biofeedback

'Smart foam' reduces but doesn't nullify a blow, so your body can acclimatise to how an assault might feel

Range of motion

The suit's ergonomically designed components allow use of any grappling or fighting system

Full force

Padding on key strike areas permits safe use of punches, jabs, knees and kicks

Lightweight

The suit weighs just 3.5kg, ensuring attacks unfold with realistic speed and intensity

you physically, psychologically and emotionally to detect, defuse and defend against attacks. I'm also struck by the range of its applications. I've taught military units in the Middle East and 50-year-old care workers, but the principles are the same,' says Glover. 'You're harnessing the speed and power of your natural flinch.'

'It's universally applicable because everybody already has the tools,' Blauer says. 'Cavemen would flinch when they fought off sabre-toothed tigers. Roman soldiers, knights, the samurai... they all flinched. The desire to protect your life is the most basic human principle but, for many of us, it's been forgotten. SPEAR just teaches you to use tools you already have.'



Visit mensfitness.co.uk/links/spear for more information