

FIRST 15 SECONDS: HOW TO SURVIVE THE CRUCIAL MOMENTS OF A STREET FIGHT

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# The First 15 Seconds

## What Happens During the Pivotal Moments of a Street Fight and What You Should Do About It

by Dave Young

Photography by Rick Hustead

In case you're not old enough to have witnessed it, I'll summarize: During the past 50 years, there have been important changes in how physical confrontations take place. They have to do with the way criminals attack and the types of weapons they use. During the 1960s and '70s, most fights involved the fists, with a stick, chain or knife thrown in from time to time. In the '80 and '90s, thugs freely used their fists, but they didn't hesitate to escalate to other weapons they happened to be carrying. Now, in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century, the bad guys are more apt to use a firearm; they resort to their fists when a gun isn't around or when the noise one would make might attract too much attention.

That's the bad news. The good news is, it doesn't matter which weapon or weapons your attacker chooses to wield against you. Why? Because there are three stages in any physical conflict, and if you control them during the first 15 seconds of the fight, you can more easily manipulate the outcome in your favor.

### 1 Initial Threat Stage

By definition, this is the start of the attack. It usually takes the form of a verbal exchange that progresses to first contact. The escalation may be slow or lightning fast—regardless of how it transpires, your goal is the same: to effect a passive resolution to what could become a physical confrontation.

The initial threat stage is when you should begin “mental



*A kick that's delivered from the proper distance can be effective during the action-reaction stage of a self-defense encounter, but one that's attempted from too far away can tire you out and reveal to your opponent how you prefer to attack.*

sparring.” That entails raising your state of awareness and attitude, sizing up your adversary, making eye contact, adopting the appropriate facial expression, looking at your opponent’s hands, noting his tone of voice and choosing your words wisely.

You should also pay attention to how he’s behaving. Is he repeating himself? Is he letting you control the conversation? Is he interrogating you? Do you have to shout to be heard? Remember that you’re in control of everything he sees and hears.

At this stage, you should establish your mental and physical position. Show that you’re emotionally committed to the encounter. Make the decision to physically engage, disengage or, if things go wrong, effect a tactical retreat. Note your zones of approach and escape, as well as whether you’re close enough to grab or be grabbed or to strike with your hands.

While you’re doing that, evaluate his position. Are his arms folded or hanging at his sides? Are his hands in his pockets, perhaps holding a weapon? Is he close enough to be a target for a knee thrust or kick? Is he close enough to strike you? Is he in a balanced stance that will permit him to attack and maneuver? >>

## Media Exposure

Dave Young (with Roy Bedard) wrote his first *Black Belt* article for the November 2009 issue, but long before that, he began receiving some much-deserved attention from TV producers. He’s served as a spokesman and consultant on CNN and Fox News, sharing his knowledge of officer survival and equipment safety. He also hosted, wrote and performed his own stunts for a miniseries titled *Crash Test Human* on the National Geographic Channel.





Dave Young (left) recommends using rapid-fire kicks (1-2) to maintain distance before closing the gap and striking with the hands (3) and elbows (4). The kicks can also be used to weaken the opponent, thus stalling the action until help arrives. Young's strategy here is to attack low with angle kicks to the man's thigh—first on the inside and then on the outside—before going high with blows to the chin/throat and the face. Note how Young puts full power into the elbow strike.

## 2 Action-Reaction Stage

This is the middle of the attack, when your fight-or-flight response kicks in. The key to winning is deciding which tools and weapons you'll bring to bear. Are you playing defense and merely protecting yourself from his onslaught—or, worse yet, have you frozen in your tracks and rendered your body unable to react? Or are you playing offense and taking it to him? One crucial point to remember: If you're not hitting your attacker, there's a good chance he's hitting you.

The action-reaction stage requires deeper thought than what's involved in fight or flight. Are the actions you're taking working? What will you do if your best response fails to end the encounter? If you need to do something else, how will you approach that? If you need to disengage and retreat to another location, can you?

Mental preparation is one of the most overlooked components of self-defense. It's what will

## More Reality-Based Training!

To read "Forgotten Realities of Reality-Based Training: What to Look for When You're Choosing an Instructor," by Dave Young and Roy Bedard, log on to [blackbeltmag.com/reality-instructor](http://blackbeltmag.com/reality-instructor).



*The terms “target punching” and “base punching” refer to the practice of supporting the part of the opponent’s body you’re striking. Because it minimizes the rearward movement of the body part, it increases the transfer of energy.*

enable you to stand face to face with the threat and commit yourself to overcoming it. Because not everyone is born with killer instinct, having a mantra can help you clarify your goals before things turn ugly. You can repeat a statement such as “I am calm during chaos,” “Survival is not an option; it’s my choice,” “In battle, I will be the victor, not the victim,” or “In the end, I will prevail.”

The right mind-set can be fostered by combining hours of drills with whatever real-life experiences you accumulate. In that case, it’s essential to know that responses under stress come from the midbrain, the region from which all gross-motor skills originate. That means fine-motor moves, often the most intricate parts of martial arts techniques, might not be available.

Having the inner and outer strength needed to execute the techniques you’ve learned is important, but it’s more important to select the technique that’s best suited for the task at hand. And you must feel confident enough with the move to be willing to go for it.

Example: Striking an opponent in the face with your fist can yield quick results, but it might break your hand in the process, leaving you vulnerable to attack. Depending on the opponent and the situation, that might not be acceptable.

Likewise, executing a kick that’s not designed to function at the distance you are from your assailant can be counter-productive because you’re revealing a part of your skill set and wasting energy you might need later. Remember that in a fight for your life, you are your opponent’s television. You control what he knows about you, and therefore you should

## Knife Knowledge

In a knife fight, your chance of being cut is high. Even so, your chance of being attacked by someone who’s skilled at using a knife is low. The smaller the knife, the bigger the danger. No matter its size, if you’re overly worried about being cut, you won’t be able to focus on your actions and reactions. Your goal is to follow these steps: Stop the motion of the knife, disable the limb, and control or disengage from the threat after he’s been disarmed. Remember that avoiding the blade is preferred to fighting against it, so focus on creating distance, using kicks and strikes to keep him away, and grabbing a makeshift weapon if you can. Only when those options are off the table do you engage a knife with your empty hands.

—D. Y.

strive to limit the amount of information he has access to during the fight.

Final point for the action-reaction stage: You absolutely need to have a plan B in case your initial response fails. In some cases, you’ll need a plan C, D and E, too. Never assume that everything you do will work.

## 3 Resolution Stage

This is the final stage of the encounter. You must continue to evaluate the threat, your surroundings and yourself. How successful has he been in achieving his goals? What weaknesses has he shown? What strengths? Is he breathing hard and showing signs of fatigue? Has his stance changed? Does he appear



*Knee strikes are among the most effective techniques in the reality fighter's arsenal, Dave Young (left) says. They're perfect when you're in grappling range and have tied up with your opponent or when you've grabbed a supporting structure such as a wall or fence. Shots to the inside of the leg work especially well because no one can build up muscle there, Young says, which leaves the area vulnerable. Note how he uses an inside grappling position to control the man's movements during the blow.*

to be injured?

No matter why the altercation started or how it has unfolded, there are three probable outcomes:

- You survived the attack and are mentally and physically intact, and you prevailed in the courtroom. Congratulations! You did everything right.
- You survived the attack and are relatively unscathed mentally. However, you didn't fare quite so well physically and have medical bills that will likely take years to pay off. At least you won in the courtroom, where the attacker could have been awarded damages large enough to bankrupt you.

Keep telling yourself that as bad as it is, it could have been worse.

- You survived the attack physically, but you've sustained emotional scars that could last a lifetime. The condition you're left in leaves you with a lack of confidence and self-esteem, which will probably have life-altering consequences. You might have failed to prove your case in the courtroom, which could haunt you for years. This is not where you want to be; it's also why you need to formulate a plan to navigate the first 15 seconds.

Which brings us back to the title of this article. Why does it stipulate 15 seconds? Because you must take all the above-mentioned facts and information into account and process them to make a series of decisions to engage or disengage the threat. You have, on average, 15 seconds to do that. If you don't, your adversary will probably succeed in initiating his plan and putting you on the defensive. A good

## Gun Guide

When a gun disarm is attempted, one of three things normally happens: The attacker pulls the trigger, he yanks the weapon back to regain control of it or he thrusts it forward to get control. No matter which one becomes reality, you should assume the weapon will fire. When it does, the gun will be very hot and very loud. You may get shot in the hand, and if you do, you'll have to work through it. If you want to survive, you can't stop until you have control of the weapon.

—D.Y.

defense might help in a football game, but in a street fight, it's a bad idea. If you don't give him a reason to stop hitting you, he won't stop until you're unconscious. Or dead. ✕

*About the author:*

*Dave Young is founder and director of ARMA Training. A mixed martial artist since 1977 and a former Marine, he graduated from his first law-enforcement academy in 1985. He's educated civilian and military law-enforcement personnel for 30 years. For more information, visit [armatraining.com](http://armatraining.com).*