

# THE SPEAR SYSTEM

A photograph of Tony Blauer, a man with short brown hair and a serious expression, wearing a black t-shirt and dark pants. He is in a defensive stance with his hands held out in front of him, palms facing each other, fingers spread. He is wearing a gold ring on his left ring finger and a silver ring on his right ring finger. The background is black, and the lighting is dramatic, highlighting his face and hands.

Tony Blauer Shows You  
6 Self-Defense Moves  
Based on Real Street Fights

Interview by Robert W. Young  
Photo by Rick Husted

Back in 1982, a decade before the Ultimate Fighting Championship and years before other reality-based-combat simulations, Tony Blauer created the “panic attack,” a training drill that accounted for the way a real-life adrenaline dump affects a martial artist’s breathing, focus and complex motor skills. He discovered what everyone else found out once the UFC burst onto the scene: Theory and practice are not the same.

**Black Belt:** The result of your latest research is called the SPEAR. What does that mean?

**Tony Blauer:** SPEAR is an acronym for Spontaneous Protection Enabling Accelerated Response. Understanding the theory behind the acronym is the first step in understanding how and why many self-defense systems are predisposed to fail in a real, sudden, violent assault.

**BB:** Why do you think most self-defense systems will fail?

**Blauer:** Most of what martial artists practice is not real. The moment there is consent, there is awareness — which means there is preparation. These psychological components completely change your mindset. In a real situation, there are so many emotional and psychological factors that the sensory overload can negate all those years of training. The remedy is to address the problem of how real fights occur and what is behaviorally realistic. In other words, you must proactively analyze how you are likely to move and think in a real assault and train around that model.

**BB:** Is that what your system does?

**Blauer:** My system focuses on “adversity drills.” We are always working on recovery principles. Most people focus on the offensive, not the protective. In other words, most people tend to fixate on what they will do to the opponent, not what their opponent will try to do to them. This slight perspective shift is the difference between a proactive training session that increases perception speed and decreases reaction time. And that’s a fundamental difference. Our focus is on a simple three-tiered premise that seems to elude most self-defense curricula: One, real fights are not fun. Two, real fights are technically messy. Three, real fights are those confrontations in which emotionally we wish we were somewhere else.



**WRONG WAY TO RESPOND:** As a verbal confrontation begins, the stress builds and the defender (right) may experience an adrenaline dump (1). When the attack is initiated (2), the defender flinches (3). When his arms instinctively come up to protect his head, the attacker can easily land his blow (4).



**RIGHT WAY TO RESPOND:** Using Tony Blauer's SPEAR system, the defender (right) can convert his body's natural reactions into a protective tactic. As the punch begins (1-2), the defender moves forward to intercept it before it attains maximum power (3). Once the defender has nullified the attack, he is in position to follow up with a close-quarters technique (4).

**BB:** How does the SPEAR fit in?

**Blauer:** The SPEAR is genetically inspired and intuitively engineered. Our true survival system in concert with our intellect, experience and instincts can combine to enhance safety if we don't botch it by learning contradictory muscle-memory sequences or wiring presumptuous decision-making programs. Behaviorally speaking, we all move away from danger, but tactically, the only way to stop a close-quarters physical threat is by moving *toward* the threat. Real fights happen inside the space of a phone booth.

**BB:** And the SPEAR addresses this?

**Blauer:** Yes, the SPEAR is the only behaviorally based self-defense system that analyzes and uses the survival flinch spawned through a survival/startle mechanism in the brain. In a true ambush moment, your brain experiences a delay between stimulus and response. In reality, it's not a response; it's a reaction. This is the paradox of martial arts training. When we agree to fight, we can mentally adjust and respond. But when the attack is a true surprise, we are more likely to react rather than respond.

**BB:** How does the SPEAR use the body's natural reactions?

**Blauer:** Over the past 20 years, I've analyzed the most common responses to surprises and designed cognitive drills around them. Methodical practice of these tactics turns your natural flinch into a trigger to engage your close-quarters arsenal. In other words, it helps you convert a genetically supported reactive response to a real threat into a protective action. You learn to move from a reactive state to make a responsive statement. I have not invented a new style; I have created a realistic and effective bridge so you get to the style you are trained in. If you lose it in that initial contact moment, it may be too late to recover.

**BB:** For years, you have been on a quest to learn exactly what happens in a real fight, and now that path has led to the SPEAR. How did it begin?

**Blauer:** In 1986 and 1987 I developed the sucker-punch drill. I wore only a mouth guard for protection, and my training partner wore 16-ounce gloves. I was not allowed to strike; I could only evade and avoid. The drill always started with dialogue at close quarters, and I had to maintain that close proximity while trying to verbally defuse it.

**BB:** Did that drill develop from your trademark panic-attack drill?

**Blauer:** Yes. It's important to understand the evolution and progression. There were a few groups out there trying to push the envelope. They were sparring hard and doing multiple-assailant drills. Some were wearing gear, but there was always something missing: real-time evolving dialogue and reciprocal risk. In other words, once the fight started, both the role-player and the defender had equal opportunity.

**BB:** How is that different from the sucker-punch drill and the SPEAR?

**Blauer:** If you spar hard or against several opponents, it's still sparring and there's still the [aspect of] consent and awareness. If you are doing scenarios and only one person attacks, there is no real risk. The adrenaline dump is created by performance anxiety, not a potential threat or the fear of failure. Many people, especially some of the newer groups doing simulations, do not completely grasp this. And those two components are the missing ingredients in a real dynamic simulation where a true "emotional blueprint" is created. If there is no dialogue and no unpredictable risk for both parties, the simulation is partial. You can't jump in a swimming pool and wrestle with a rubber shark and then believe you're ready to handle "jaws." And that insight is why the panic attack is uniquely different from many simulation systems. Our effort to develop attack-specific responses within scenario-specific simulations is why the sucker-punch drill was developed. I wanted to create a close-quarters isolation drill to address the sudden attack.

**BB:** Why is scenario-specific training so important?

**Blauer:** Because scenario-specific training is the only process that can mature and develop the body/mind connection. And it develops the pre-contact stage, the missing link in all training. Sparring, no matter how you do it, is still just sparring. It is not scenario-specific, and there's a huge difference between attack-specific training and scenario-specific training. Attack-specific is when you work on how to get out of a choke or how to get out of a multiple-assailant



The versatility of the SPEAR allows it to be used to defend against a realistic attack such as a tackle. To illustrate, Tony Blauer (right) simply lowers his center of gravity to jam a charging grappler.

situation. Scenario-specific is about the situation and how you got there. It induces a different adrenaline state, and most important, it creates the mental blueprint that can heighten your awareness in a real-life confrontation.

**BB:** How are surprise attacks related to the SPEAR?

**Blauer:** Everybody forgets that in a real attack, you are somewhere doing something else, not waiting for someone to signal the start of the fight. Predators look for victims they can surprise. In real life,

you don't know when or where someone's going to hit you. After creating the panic-attack system, I wanted to be able to refine special moments in a conflict. We had verbal-assault drills and pain-management drills, and I wanted a sucker-punch drill since that big right hand was common and fairly predictable. Embracing all I had learned in the role-playing panic attacks, the sucker-punch drill was pretty obvious. Phase one would start with a hostile verbal exchange that was escalating. The conversation was crucial to the success of the adrenaline dump and the element of surprise. I refer to this principle as adversity training — creating drills where the probability of failure was greater than the probability of success. Too many martial artists spend most of their time worrying about looking good rather than recovering from a Murphy moment.

Anyhow, we'd be in a heated verbal exchange, and even though I knew one punch was coming, I didn't know when or where. It could be a punch to my groin, a shot to my bladder, an uppercut or an overhand. I found that once the adrenal system kicked in, the first thing to go was breath control and lucid verbal skills. Hyperventilation compromises blood flow to the brain. That's a problem if you want to think clearly. That is the magic of a truly behaviorally based approach.

The sucker-punch drill messed with all the notions of control and focus. I had to proactively design verbal defusing and distraction segues for real assaults: What can I say if I am being mugged? What can I say if I am at an ATM or in my car? Years later, I was explaining the process to a researcher in Texas who develops nutritional supplements, and he called it a genetically inspired self-defense system. He said I was wiring into the tactics that the human survival system wants to do, whereas other martial arts are based on learning and muscle memory.

**BB:** How did that evolve into the SPEAR?

**Blauer:** With the sucker-punch drill, I was trying to use a physical tactic when I had no knowledge of where my opponent's attack would originate. Because the sequential relationship of the martial arts has no basis in reality, I got hit. That's because most tactics are based on

## STUDENTS OF THE SPEAR

**In case you're wondering just how legitimate Tony Blauer's SPEAR system really is, check out this partial list of agencies that have paid big bucks to learn it:**

- **Australian Federal Police**
- **Dallas (Texas) Police Department**
- **Federal Air Marshals**
- **Federal Bureau of Investigation**
- **Houston (Texas) Police Department SWAT Unit**
- **Illinois State Police**
- **Rochester (New York) Police Department**
- **Tampa (Florida) Police Department**
- **U.S. Coast Guard**
- **U.S. Department of Defense**

your anticipation of a specific physical attack. The drill totally changed all that. Here's the most important aspect for instructors: I could've changed the drill because I was failing, but I didn't. I wanted to understand why my training didn't support this.

**BB:** What conclusions did you arrive at after studying the outcome of that drill?

**Blauer:** A couple times I completely escaped the moment of impact by flinching. As I flinched, my shoulder would come up, and my hands would protect my face. Or I'd duck. I realized that flinch speed, which is born of your survival system picking up the danger, is faster than cognitive speed. The body is genetically wired to survive. We slow it down by saying, "My style says I should do this," because that thinking process requires us to identify the attack and then diagnose it before treating it.

**BB:** Why don't more people realize that?

**Blauer:** Because most martial arts training is done through imitation. And most of it is codified. The paradox is that we're taught to maintain or create distance and then engage the other person in calculated movements. We teach people to spar to prepare for a real street fight, and that's wrong. You should be able to turn into the creature from *Alien*: Get in the guy's face, knock him on his butt, give him a rebirthing experience so he's flashing back to being in his mother's womb and forgetting that he's a serial killer or a violent mugger. Maybe that's a little dramatic, but the potential must be there. The only way to reverse the predator/prey relationship is to make the predator pray.

**Black Belt:** You mentioned phase one of the sucker-punch drill; what other phases were involved?

**Tony Blauer:** The drill evolved so my partner could do as many shots as he wanted. Phase two had two strikes, phase three had three and so on. From this drill, the SPEAR system was born. It teaches us to convert flinching into tactics. It also addresses the paradox of moving away from a threat rather than engaging it.



**Tony Blauer (right) uses the tactical SPEAR to intercept a roundhouse kick. As he charges inside the attacker's defense and positions himself too close to be kicked, he can easily disrupt the other man's balance.**

**BB:** Explain how the drill developed.

**Blauer:** The only way I could control my partner was by moving toward him and jamming him. If I tried to block, parry or evade, I got nailed during phase three and up. There's no way to not get hit if you maintain a distance where you allow your opponent to reload — another missing link and paradox of standard training. Because of the unpredictability of the attack, my initial move was a flinch. Performance ego demanded that I try various moves from my theoretical/cognitive arsenal. They usually failed. So quickly I recognized that flinching speed, triggered by unconscious neuromuscular communication, was much faster than conscious neuromuscular communication. I then created drills that were attached to the primal, midbrain responses. In time, I learned how to trigger my cognitive brain as I flinched. It allowed me to move toward the threat sooner. Again, the behavioral paradox is that when we are in danger, we want to move away, but the tactical directive is to move in.

**BB:** So the SPEAR capitalizes on the flinch reflex?

**Blauer:** The flinch is the foundation and spark of the SPEAR. Our close-quarters arsenal is based on this conversion process. It's based on an instinctive single-mindedness for the survival system to protect the command center: the head. Consider this: A guy gets punched and goes down. He may be getting kicked in the stomach, but his hands will still be covering his head. He's not moving his arms or covering the parts of his body that get hit. Whenever you are blitz-attacked and not sure what's happening, your hands come up. Irrespective of your training, if a stimulus is introduced too quickly, you will flinch.

**BB:** What is the physiological purpose of flinching?

**Blauer:** It's the physical response to an emotional startle where we intuit a physical threat. The flinch is designed to protect the body's command center: the eyes, ears, throat and brain. When you realize you're in danger, the flinch happens. For those on a path of self-discovery or looking for a realistic survival system, it's imperative to appreciate and incorporate the flinch mechanism. It takes courage because you need to consider the conflict of contemporary training methods. In sparring, you're taught to step back. You're actually moving into the trajectory of the attack because the attacker is always a step ahead of you in an ambush-type assault. The real fight is when you're ambushed, not when you're the sniper.

**BB:** Did you modify the flinch, or do you just go off whatever comes naturally?

**Blauer:** Through thousands of evaluations of how people move and from research that involved talking with people who were attacked, I was able to identify three [kinds of] flinches that are triggered by proximity sense and angle of attack. If somebody suddenly charges at you from a distance, the flinch is to widen your power base and thrust your hands out to push away the danger. If someone comes running at you with a machete or a baseball bat, you don't run toward him. People think they'll run away, but running is not an immediate primal response. Hesitation, freezing and denial are the common behavioral responses. Then the fight-or-flight syndrome might kick in, but in real life, it's more like the fight-flight-or-freeze syndrome because people often hesitate when they should jump out of the way.

**BB:** What's the second type of flinch?

**Blauer:** The second one is from striking range. Somebody comes at you from just outside arm's reach — for example, while you're having a verbal confrontation over a coveted parking spot,



**FLINCH VS. KICKING ATTACK:** As the attacker prepares to deliver a kick to the head, Tony Blauer positions his arms to intercept the leg (1). Blauer then thrusts his arms into the attacker's shins before the kick can attain maximum power (2).

the guy lunges. Is it a shove, a choke or a hook punch? Who knows? Who can actually see it at that moment and distance? And here's the point: Your reactive brain just screams "Look out!" and *voilà*, flinch No. 2. Your hands come up to protect your head, your weight gets transferred to your back leg, you close your eyes and you turn away from the danger.

**BB:** And the third type?

**Blauer:** The third is similar to version two, but the angle is more severe because the threat is much closer. In this flinch, you do what I call a shielding action in which you actually cover your head with an arm. It's like holding a medieval shield against your forearm as you block and strike. From that shielding position, you kind of twist or "corkscrew" away from the attack.

**BB:** How does the flinch manifest itself in combat?

**Blauer:** Well, this brings us back to the contradiction of athletic performance-based trained versus adversity drills and trying to replicate the conditions that'll be present in a real assault. Here's a metaphor: Look at the patriotic war films that came out after World War I and II, then look at *Saving Private Ryan*. It's fantasy versus fact. The SPEAR system is about proactively analyzing fact and creating the most realistic "fake" drills we can. So when real-life conflicts happen, your adaptation challenge is minimal. Here's a graphic example that relates to the frustration of classical training and how a reactive response triggered by a real-life assault can short-circuit your whole theoretical arsenal. Often, a murdered police officer will have defensive wounds on the hands: bullet holes or knife slashes. The assumption is that the officer was trying to wrestle for the weapon. I disagree. Those wounds do not come from trying to grab the weapon. They come from flinching. When you grab, you grab toward the wrist or along the side of the weapon — not at the tip of the knife or gun. Those incidents most likely happen like this: The cop is chasing a suspect, who pulls out a gun and turns quickly. The cop flinches. He doesn't parry the weapon like he was taught. His hands come up in front of his face.



**BB:** Is the first step in learning the SPEAR simply accepting that we all flinch?

**Blauer:** Yes. By accepting the flinch, two things occur. First, you realize that it's a survival mechanism that you will do whether you like it or not. Second, you realize that the fastest thing you can do is work off the flinch. Ask anybody who's been in a real explosive fight what the first thing he threw was, and he'll say: "I don't know. It happened so fast. The next thing I knew I was drilling the guy in the head."

**BB:** Has that happened to you?

**Blauer:** In the first big fight I can remember, a guy winged a punch at me while I was talking to him. My hands naturally came up to protect my head, and they deflected his punch. Because he threw it so hard, he was jammed against me in a spontaneous clinch, so I just grabbed his head and shoulder and did a hip throw. He fell because of how the flinch intercepted his haymaker — not because I stepped in, caught his arm and executed a judo throw.

**BB:** Did you use any formal martial arts techniques?

**Blauer:** Because I'd had a huge adrenaline dump, my next move was certainly not a fine-motor skill like "the third metacarpal bone must be twisted this way." He was on his butt trying to get up, but he was winded from the fall. I grabbed him by the hair and threw him into the furniture right beside us. Again, it was spontaneous gross-motor tactics.

**BB:** How hard is it for the average martial artist to learn how to work off the flinch in a natural way?

**Blauer:** Not hard. The SPEAR is truly a genetically inspired system. This means the foundation isn't something you have to learn. It is built on unique drills that coordinate the instincts and body mechanics that human beings are all born with. It is easy to get started with the SPEAR, and it's actually easier for a layperson to learn than for an instructor to teach — as paradoxical as that may seem. But if you just scratch the surface, you will miss the best of it. And if you look at it once and never look back, you'll only be exposed to the stuff I developed yesterday —



**FLINCH VS. STRIKING ATTACK:** If he is lying on his back, Tony Blauer can use the SPEAR to stop a punch. Once he detects the incoming blow, Blauer readies his arms (1). He makes contact with the attacker's biceps area because it moves more slowly than the fist and imparts less force (2).

which is good, but it's constantly getting better. If I had developed my system in the 1960s and then stopped researching, the foundation would still have been sound. But the trends and issues of surviving today are different from those we had to be concerned with back then.

**BB:** Is it a matter of just listening to an instructor or watching a videos, or does a martial artist actually have to do some kind of drills?

**Blauer:** It's a combination. You could just listen to [an instructor] and start incorporating the principles. They're that natural. Remember that it's easy to learn because it's based on how the body actually moves, not on how some animal moves or on reconfiguring your body to acquire a new muscle memory. It's based on spontaneity. There are also drills to develop it. One of the ones I created is called the "range rover"; it takes you out of the driver's seat and puts your training partner in control of your arsenal. A chess master once said that the height of strategy is not doing your best move but doing the worst move for your opponent. Yet people are always practicing their best move, and they try to use it all the time. They should be looking at where their opponent is open or where he doesn't think he's going to get hit because that's tactically the best thing you could do to hurt him physically and psychologically.

**BB:** In a fight, do you flinch and then think about how you can strike, or do you actually modify your flinch into an attack?

**Blauer:** It should be both. It depends on what the bad guy's doing and how much homework you've done. You could say to yourself, "I'm going to hit him from where I flinch." Because flinching is so primal, it actually locks and loads your most dangerous close-quarters weapons: elbow strikes, eye rakes, head butts, eye gouges and so on.

**BB:** Exactly when in a fight do you initiate the SPEAR?

**Blauer:** The SPEAR is the conversion, so anything you do right from a flinch is a SPEAR. Many people misinterpret the SPEAR as the physical move I often demo in which contact is made with my forearms. But since the flinch is triggered by the aggression of the opponent, you may find yourself flinching away and side-kicking while leaning over a chair in a bar. If you throw the kick without worrying about repositioning to get in your stance, you have "SPEARed" your opponent because you struck from where you were and *spontaneously protected* yourself. And the startle/flinch combo *enabled accelerated response*.

**BB:** How does this strategy tie in with the skills martial artists already possess?

**Blauer:** If you're a boxer and somebody sucker-punches you on the street, you will flinch. If you incorporate the SPEAR, you can engage the attacker and then disengage using the SPEAR system to set up your uppercut. If you're a Thai boxer and you are jumped at an ATM, you won't go into a neck hookup and a knee thrust; you will protect yourself first by flinching. The SPEAR nails the person as he's moving in and creates space. Suddenly, you get a chance to throw that knee strike or shin kick. If you're a *taekwondo* player, it's the same. If I'm a foot away from you in a bar and I start something, you won't be able to do a jump back kick or side kick. But you will flinch. And if you can hit me from the flinch using the SPEAR, that's good for you. You can use your flinch, which at that range and in that context is faster than anything else, as an impetus to get tactical.

**BB:** How does the SPEAR work physically?

**Blauer:** The common SPEAR is to use the forearms. This is more natural because of our instinct to



**FLINCH VS. KICKING ATTACK:** The SPEAR allows martial artists to use their body's natural response to an attack to protect themselves (1-2). After neutralizing the immediate threat, they can deliver a knee thrust or any other technique taught in their martial art (3).

cover our head by raising our arms. Getting students to engage the attacker — to actually move toward the bad guy — is a challenge. So the tactical SPEAR demands that we engage the threat. Our movement is like an impaling, penetrating tool. It's not a block; like a traditional spear, it moves in for the attack. The physical evolution of the SPEAR went like this: When I started to develop this penetrating movement, I realized that I could jam a head butt, a haymaker and so on. I started telling my students: "You're the spear tip. Just go right through the attacker." The SPEAR started as metaphor to get people to move toward danger because the paradox is that behaviorally, we move away from danger, while tactically, we need to move toward it.

**BB:** How do you position your arms when you implement the SPEAR?

**Blauer:** You hold your arms just outside 90 degrees so they form a triangle, which is one of the strongest geometric shapes. Your arms create a natural barrier between the attack and your most vulnerable areas — head, temples, ears, carotid region, brachial region, etc.

**BB:** Once someone learns the mental part of the SPEAR and the simple positioning of the arms, can all his previously learned martial arts techniques be blended with it?

**Blauer:** Yes. The SPEAR doesn't replace your system. Good information doesn't displace good information. Good information only displaces [crap]. The SPEAR allows you to get at what's good in your system. If you try to make your system work at what I call the "big-bang moment" of a real street fight, you may find yourself wondering what went wrong. The tactical flinch will intercept whatever he's doing and inflict some pain. The pain will cause doubt and hesitation on his part. That will give you a chance to engage him using the techniques from your style.

**BB:** When you use the SPEAR, are you trying to hurt the attacker or just stop him for a moment and negate his attack?

**Blauer:** If it is a real fight, you are trying to hurt the attacker. If you don't, the fight continues. Just remember that there is a moral and ethical distinction between hurting and injuring,

and instructors must educate students on the legal considerations regarding self-defense. But the best part of the SPEAR system is that it's tactical and protective at the same time. If your attacker truly surprises you, you flinch, convert, make contact and defend. The serendipity of the SPEAR is that it often strikes at vulnerable points on the bad guy, and you weren't even going after them. The most important aspect of all this is that the SPEAR really doesn't interfere with your style. The SPEAR protects you in the moment of ambush — which is not addressed by most systems. The SPEAR allows you to get to your system and to hopefully escape safely. Think of it this way: The faster the attack, the faster the flinch, the sooner you can defend yourself. You can use your survival system to spontaneously protect yourself and use that natural flinch to accelerate your response.

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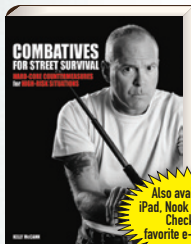
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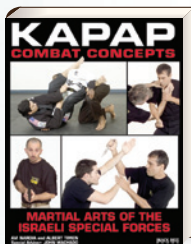
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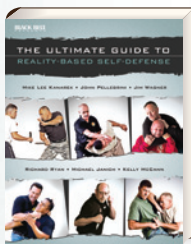
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This six-DVD set teaches you the hard-hitting techniques that Alain Cohen shared with hundreds of security professionals and *krav maga* instructors worldwide. (Approx. 237 min.)

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