WE recently attended Michael de Bethencourt’s class, Mastering the Defensive Snub Revolver. For those who do not yet know Michael, he is a nationally known knife and firearms instructor with over 20 years of teaching experience. Michael teaches both police and armed citizens alike through his Massachusetts-based Northeastern Tactical Schools.

In all of Michael’s classes he specializes in demonstrating that conventional wisdom is not always wise. We say that because Michael takes a hard look at every detail of a technique, analyzes and refines it. Often his result is the opposite of the conventional wisdom or what other instructors promote. While his methods are unique, you will find he can confidently justify and demonstrate his choice. Michael gives credit to other instructors, saying that his techniques are a compilation of many others’ and small details he has picked up elsewhere. In whatever he learns and teaches, Michael’s goal is always to combine all of the subtle changes into a new, more efficient manual of arms. His revolver class is a testament to that ambition.

Mastering the Defensive Snub Revolver teaches you how to get every advantage out of the snub. The class consisted of lectures, demos, and hands-on practice. While we say “lectures” you will never mistake a de Bethencourt lecture for a schnauzer, unyielding, and tedious exercise. He likes to say that he takes his work seriously but not himself. There was no contradictory evidence to that statement. Delivered with the exuberance of a fairground carnie (one of his youthful vocations), Michael mixes valuable insight with his experiences, related references, collaborating evidence and a few tall tales and jokes thrown in for fun. Once you experience Michael in all of his glory you will not soon forget him, and more to the point, you will not forget his lessons.

In a world of machismo, autoloaders rule. Michael, as you might deduce, is a revolver fan. While this may seem a fancy from a time long gone, interest in revolvers is surging, and for good reasons. As the saying goes, “What is old is new again.” Michael illustrates this point by noting that when attending fire- arm classes with well-known attendees and instructors, they practice with their fancy 1911s and other autoloaders, but at the end of the day, most often, they put the heavy guns away and stuff a J-frame in their pocket.

Sacrilegious you say? Size, weight and convenience are just a few reasons that snubbies rule according to de Bethencourt. A few of the other benefits include: superior reliability (no feeding or magazine problems), minimum maintenance requirements; they are great for pocket carry, no ammo sensitivity, and you are less likely to have a negligent discharge due to the 8-pound-plus double-action-only pull.

Whether you use a snub nose revolver as a back-up or primary weapon, Michael’s class is full of specific techniques and tactics to maximize its usefulness as a defensive tool. He covers ammunition choices, shooting through pockets for the fastest engagements, reloading with the dominant and non-dominant hand, one-handed loading, 50-yard shooting; using a snubby as an emergency impact
tool, contact shooting, loading with a flashlight, and much more.

Everyone that we know loads a revolver by first switching it to the support hand, then using the shooting hand to feed in the fresh ammo. Well, everyone besides Michael, that is. Michael deftly demonstrated that it is faster to load a revolver while keeping it in your shooting hand and feed it with your support hand. Logic dictates that the less number of movements required, the faster the procedure will be. Since switching hands back and forth increases the number of steps needed to reload the gun, Michael shows how to do it faster by maintaining the weapon in the shooting hand.

Michael is correct; there are fewer steps. In theory, it is quicker to reload by not switching hands. However, our own experience betrayed that logic because we are far from ambidextrous and found it difficult to manipulate small objects into small holes with our less dexterous hand. We suspect, however, that our troubles were caused mostly by the fact that we have reloaded re-
volvers the other way for so many years. By the end of the class we did find ourselves increasingly adept with our newfound reloading skill and expect additional practice will greatly help. Since it is the most efficient method of reloading, it is a practical way to teach beginners who do not have to unlearn other techniques.

Michael de Bethencourt can be described as a realist. He works in the real world, looks at things with a realistic tactical mindset, and develops techniques that work on the street. He realizes that while speedloaders can be the fastest way to reload a revolver, their size and shape makes them hard to conceal and carry. We concur. Often in an environment where a concealment cover garment would be out of place, we carry our snubs in pockets, and have never found a convenient way to carry speedloaders. With that in mind, Michael prefers speed strips. His tips and techniques bring new life and purpose to the often belittled tool.

A lot of class time was spent on learning techniques to speed up recharging the gun. One of Michael’s exercises was designed to test the time it takes to load a revolver with a different number of rounds. We loaded the speed strip with five rounds and tested the time it took to load the gun with 2 rounds, 4 rounds and 5 rounds. Obviously, it took the least amount of time to load only 2 rounds. The lesson? If you are in a hurry, you do not have to load your gun completely: load only one or two and fire! Even with the extra time it takes having to shoot through empty cylinders, it’s faster. As testament to that argument, Michael recounted the story of a police officer who
That's not a knife, THIS is a knife!

MASTERING THE SNUBBY

To reload with the support hand, start by placing the thumb of the strong hand on the hammer (1) with the index finger on the side of the cylinder. (2) Using the thumb of support hand, press or slide the cylinder release (3) while the index finger of the support hand pushes the cylinder out. (4) Turn the gun straight up and press or hit the ejector rod downwards with the support thumb or hand. (5) Aim the gun down and load with the support hand. (6) The index finger of the strong hand should remain against the cylinder to keep it still. (7) Level the gun, cupping the support hand under the cylinder then press upwards to rotate it shut.

was shot at point-blank range while reloading his revolver. He was reloading his last round when the attacker ran up and shot him in the head. If the officer had simply reloaded just 2 rounds he probably would have had time to shoot and save his own life.

Similarly, we tested the time it took to load both 4 rounds and the full cylinder of five. We found that the last round was the most difficult to load because there is only one charge hole left to choose from. We needed to re-grip the speed strip and rotate the cylinder around to access it, which took a lot of time to get it aligned properly. We surmised that of the time it took to load all 5 rounds, we spent a significant amount of the reloading time on just the last round itself! The lesson? You may have guessed; load 4 and get back into the fight. The time you save by not loading the last round may save your life.

One more reloading tip from the class: If you choose to load only 2 rounds, do not load them in adjacent charge holes. Load them across from each other to decrease the number of times the cylinder needs to rotate to fire the gun. In a real life gunfight, you probably will not remember or have time to perfectly align the cylinder before closing it. If you load the bullets together, the worst case is that you will have to pull the trigger four times to fire the gun. If you load them opposite each other, in the worst case you will only have to pull the trigger three times to get a live round. Additionally, loading them in that manner doubles the chance that you will have the cylinder rotated in the proper position to fire the gun the first time. One of Michael's supporting live-fire exercises was to reinforce shooting with a partially reloaded gun. He suggests this in order to get into the practice of shooting through empty cylinders until you hit the live rounds.

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Carrying a snub revolver in a pocket offers a big tactical advantage; you can shoot ultra fast by eliminating the draw and shooting through the pocket! Since firing in an enclosed pocket is different than out in the open because the hot gas does not escape as readily, it is a good idea to experience the sensation of the extra heat on the practice range so you know what to expect if you have to do it for real. Tip: Rather than ruining a good jacket, Michael brought a “pocket” sewn out of scrap material for each of us to practice with. It is sewn on three sides to simulate an enclosed pocket, saving more valuable clothing for its intended purposes.

One of the many topics included on the class syllabus was the long shot—shooting at 50 yards. Honestly, we chuckled when we first saw that, thinking that neither our shooting skills nor a 2.25-inch-barreled revolver was up to the task. Kenik’s snub of choice is the Ruger SP101. He likes the fact that it has the power of .357; its considerable heft helps with recoil and follow-up shots, and he loves the shape and feel of the factory grip. Well, the class lined up on the shooting line and one by one, emptied our 5 and 6-shooters into the 50-yard berm, hoping they passed through the target along the way. Going last, Kenik held the sights up to his eye, slowly pulled the double-action trigger, trying not to jerk the trigger as he usually does (especially when being watched), held the trigger back for follow-through and repeated four more times. He was elated to find four holes in the IDPA-sized target. The point of Michael’s exercise was to prove that the gun can do it and with some practice you can do as well. With the vast majority of gunfights happening within just 7 feet, we doubt there will be a need for long-distance shooting with our snubbies. However, if the need ever arises, it’s good to know that both gun and shooter are up to the challenge.

Michael’s final grade? The class was informative and entertaining. His many valuable lessons earn him an “A”. If you take his class, expect to look at your revolver in a new light and with new-found respect.

In addition to the revolver class, Michael also teaches folding knife techniques and weapon retention, disarming, and recovery class. Information on Michael de Bethencourt’s classes can be found at Northeastern Tactical Schools’ website. Arrangements can also be made for him to teach at your local club, school or police department.