

Sensei Knows Best

Martial arts as a path to both physical and mental wellness

By MATT J. SIMMONS

Sweat drips off my nose and onto the floor as I do push-ups with someone pressing down on my back. My arms shake with the strain and my core is tight and sore. A few push-ups later I collapse, exhausted. Next? Sit-ups with my partner punching my abdomen every time I go back down to the floor. And this is just the warm-up.

Training martial arts can be excruciating. But, strangely, every time I leave the capoeira academy, I feel energized and alert—despite the aching muscles—even on days when I went into it two hours earlier feeling tired and unmotivated. Every class I learn something new, hone something old and condition my body just a little bit more.

Most martial arts strive to use the body to its fullest capabilities. Training is usually tough and demanding, but different for each discipline. Some focus on training the core; some upper body, some lower. But all disciplines help students to have better and more complete control over their entire bodies.

A capoeira workout typically consists of jumping jacks, pushups, sit-ups, squats, lunges, sprawls, leg lifts and a series of other physically demanding exercises. This is followed by stretching, which shares a lot of techniques with yoga routines. Finally, the class moves on to actual capoeira techniques: kicks, sequences and



sparring. This routine, and comparable training regimens in different disciplines, develops fitness and general health.

But beyond being fit, martial arts provide benefits for the body that transcend mere strength and flexibility.

"I personally believe that martial arts—jijitsu in particular—gives you a keen sense of kinesthetic awareness," says Sensei Ari Bolden of Victoria Jijitsu Academy. "Learning how the body moves, reacts and flows under 'stressful' conditions helps you keep your head on straight when everyone else is losing theirs."

Some martial arts take into consideration the full gamut of body, mind and spirit, while others stimulate mind and spirit more as a by-product. Alertness though, is one mental discipline all martial arts promote.

Sihing Bill Stewart of Dynamic Defence, a local kung fu academy, says his Wing Chun style of kung fu "forces students to inhabit their own skin and be fully in the moment".

Wing Chun—developed from famed Shaolin kung fu—is a form of self-defence that stresses simplicity. "Wing Chun is an excellent way to connect the body, mind and spirit," says Stewart. "Our fast-paced society tends to isolate us not only from other people, but even from our own feelings. When too many demands are made on you, it's easy to lose touch with what you really want and how your body and mind really feel. Aside from self-defence, the point of all martial arts is to help people reconnect."

He goes on to say the fulfillment of martial arts is in that spiritual development. "Helping people discover their true power and centre themselves physically, mentally and spiritually is the most fulfilling attribute of martial arts." Bolden agrees. "I've had students benefit from taking the art [in ways] that almost sound cliché," he

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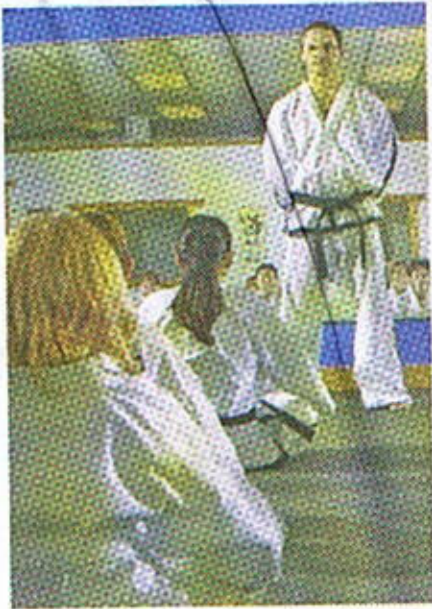
"After an hour session, my face returned to the shape of what it was 10 years ago."

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says. "For example, I've had students lose 30 pounds through training. I've had them overcome fears and gain confidence. I've seen some become accomplished competitors. It is amazing."

When you're in touch with your body, your mind tends to be more relaxed (there's less to worry about, maybe?), or perhaps it's less distraction from an aching back or a headache. Whatever it is, it means that the two work in harmony with each other. It's interesting to note that when you train a martial art, you tend to be more aware of your body and its needs. Eating well becomes part of the routine. So does sleep.

And ultimately, situations—whether physical violence or mental challenge—seem easier to deal with when everything's functioning together, when body, mind and spirit are one. **M**

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