

Kung Fu Fitness

The kicks and chops of martial arts can be more fun than rote exercise—and along with a fly physique, there are mind and body benefits. Here's how to start

February 16, 2006 By Patricia Jacobs

If you're still hanging on to those overplayed Bruce Lee videos or have busted your butt more than once trying a Jet Li kick, you've probably got a yen for Asian martial arts. But if you think that Japanese karate, Chinese kung fu, Korean tae kwon do, American or Thai kickboxing—or any of the 1,000 or so variations—are all about putting a hurtin' on someone, there's more to it. The martial arts are a seamless blend of the physical (incorporating self-defense moves and requiring some degree of strength), mental (using meditative movements that help stimulate the internal organs like an inner massage and release feel-good endorphins) and the spiritual (helping increase confidence, create self-discipline and release stress).

But knowing how to fight can come in handy. In 1998, Rana Walker, 38, was introduced by a friend to kickboxing, a high-energy contact sport that uses both feet and hands. "I loved it," says the Emmy Award-winning life coach (for *Starting Over*) and president of Diamond Cutter LLC, a wellness company (www.diamondcutterllc.com).

But a year later, she suffered a major trauma. "I was date raped," she reveals. The devastating event could have left her walking around in fear. Instead, Walker studied the sport she loved even more, giving her an outlet for her anger. Now, the American kickboxing instructor dares potential attackers to bring it on: "If I were to encounter a situation like that again, I feel empowered enough to handle myself."

And who doesn't want to feel more empowered? According to New York City-based Simmons Market Research, about 18 million Americans took part in some form of martial art in 2003. And more African Americans (7% overall) than Asians or Caucasians (5% each) have tried at least one discipline. And that includes everyone from young children to folks in their seventies and the superskinny to the obese.

It's so popular because there is a style to fit everyone, whether grappling (like wrestling), contact (karate and kickboxing) or flowing (tai chi). And, regardless of age, gender or fitness level, the

benefits are huge. Kids achieve structure, improved self-esteem, assertiveness and discipline. Adults can experience improved health, lowered stress (you can't fuss about home while you're trying to execute a perfect side kick) strength and coordination.

But before you grab a robe (or workout clothes, as each discipline has its own dress requirements) and head for the dojo (classroom), there are a few things to consider. What shape are you in? A young adult male in reasonably good shape may like to kick and throw down, while an obese woman with joint problems would benefit from something more low-impact (always check with your physician before you start). Can you take orders? If being told what to do sends your neck into automatic swiveling mode, listen up: Martial (as in military) arts are very structured; in the dojo, the sensei (instructor) rules. What he or she says, goes—or you go.

And, you're expected to commit. Classes—a minimum of two per week—last 45 minutes to one and a half hours. Don't be late!

"It can take three to seven years with a minimum two classes a week to get a first-degree black belt," says Max Scruggs, a fifth-level black belt from Nashville. Belts (or for kickboxing, shorts) represent levels of proficiency. Each dojo follows a curriculum, during which you learn specific moves and vocabulary, like uke (block) or geri (kick). After a while, you're tested. If you're successful, you win a belt—white being the lowest, dark blue or black the highest—then keep moving on up. Costs can range from \$80 to \$130 per month. The Max Scruggs Karate Center in Nashville charges \$120 per month, while programs at the Universal Touch Center in Chicago start from \$160 for 12 weeks. So if you can't commit, you may as well quit—now.

Most of all, go in with eyes wide open. Visit several schools and take a few introduction classes before you enroll. Is the instructor respectful to the class and willing to help when needed? Do you have touching issues? Be aware that there is a lot of bodily contact in martial arts, whether it's the instructor correcting your positions or grappling with a partner. And yes, that means you might be rubbing up on someone else's sweat from time to time.

"Sparring is not mandatory," Scruggs points out, "but not doing it can affect your ability to perform in a real-life situation." And it bears saying: Be aware of teachers around your children. Pedophiles love sports with kids involved. Check references, observe classes and talk to other parents before you enroll your child in a program.

So what else can you gain with martial arts? A lot of fun. "You never know what's going to happen in class or where it can lead you," reports Scruggs. Just remember that a black belt can be won by a 13-year-old kid or an adult with a 50-inch waist: It's ability—not physical strength—that counts. Yes, that's why your class was led by that shorty from round the way.

Which Martial Art Is Right for You?

Before you throw down your fists full of dollars, read up on the differences in styles

Aikido

A defensive Japanese throwing art involving smooth moves like Osae waza (pinning technique) and some weapons (check the movie *Exit Wounds* with DMX). Suitable for women in their fifties in reasonable shape.

Kung Fu

Chinese art with graceful, fast-paced moves (think Quentin Tarantino's *Kill Bill Vol. 2*) with names like praying mantis. Great for smaller-built women and also anyone in their fifties in reasonable shape.

Kickboxing

Thai form using hands and feet with physical contact, including the front kick. Jean-Claude Van Damme did it best. Good for men on the heavier side with some familiarity with strength training and aerobic exercises.

Tai Chi

A low-impact, meditative form focusing on breathing, stress relief and balance. But make no mistake: Chinese tai chi is not for wimps (try the horse stance). Great for anyone with joint problems or issues with obesity.

Karate

A Japanese defensive sport using hands and feet to strike vital nerve centers and pressure points (like yoko geri—side kick). For kids and anyone who competed in sports as a kid and who can do pushups and jumping jacks.

Getting Strong for Life

Max Scruggs touts martial arts to empower youth

Expert profile

For Max Scruggs, martial arts were a way to get the neighborhood toughs off his back—literally. “I was a bookworm at 13 and as skinny as a rail—not even 90 pounds,” recalls the sensei (karate instructor) of the Max Scruggs Karate Center in Nashville. And even though the 47-year-old fifth-degree black belt was raised in a middle-class neighborhood, his mother enrolled him in a karate class to help his self-esteem—and to defend himself.

Scruggs believes that team sports like basketball and football can fuel an often dangerous group mentality, while martial arts can empower youth. He advises parents to enroll their children in classes when they're around the ages of 7 or 8 and can really begin to understand the demonstrations. Also, look for nonchallenging, friendly instructors. “A lot of people misunderstand discipline,” he says. “With children, you'll get better results if you gently steer them in the right direction instead of punishing them.”

