

Self Defence and Competition Sparring

By Brett Kimberley

Okay so, the title of this essay seems to suggest two different topics, to write about, and I suppose one could say that they both are two totally different aspects of Taekwon do.

However like Grand Master Choi Hong Hi described that all areas of technique are so closely related that it is impossible to segregate one phase of instruction from another.

I would like to share some of my views on the two subjects that may make us feel that they are more closely related than we first may think.

Let's start with self defense. If you were to ask a T.K.D. Practitioner "why did you start training in our martial art?" Chances are they will say, "to learn to defend myself". I know that's what I have said on many occasions, though of course the longer we train and gain a more in depth understanding of the art we realise that it offers so much more than a few moves to help us get out of as tricky situation.

So why do people feel a need to learn self defense? We only need to look around and see that society is becoming more and more violent and sadly violence is becoming accepted as the norm. And even more sadly is that violence in our society tends to target younger males more than anyone else. The younger males that sit around together participating in role playing video games, where you can drag a little old lady from her car, beat her up, then steal her purse and drive off in her car, or be a so called "gangster" and run around shooting at people and police..... this sounds unbelievable but is a fact and if you have ever seen a game called Grand Theft Auto, you will understand what I mean. Needless to say I find those types of game disgusting and have banned them from my house (as I have a teenage son).

A kid can go into a dairy and buy a drink that has a catch phrase "no limits, no laws" or "it's good to be bad" and of course there are many violent clips that can be found on the internet that by today's standards are classed as entertainment. This list could go on but I will stop there.

To me it is pretty obvious that there is an evil at work in today's society that is encouraging violence and we hear week in week out of people being assaulted, beatings, stabbings, gang violence, home invasion and road rage. Once again this list could go on.

I could elaborate more on these problems as I feel very strongly how they are affecting our youth of today.

So to me it is fair to say that violence is definitely on the rise, therefore the chances of being assaulted must also increase as well.

I don't want to give the impression that my answer to this rise in violence is to fight fire with fire and I certainly don't condone reciprocating violence in answer to violence. The best way to beat it is to avoid it. Be smart! Don't deliberately place yourself in a position where danger is lurking.

To share my particular view on this subject however I must ask the question, "what if it happens, through no fault of your own that you suddenly find yourself in the position where it's too late, you are being attacked and there is no talking your way out of it or running away from the situation?" Without trying to paint a too vivid picture or to channel ideas into a small area of thought such as saying to yourself "you can do this" or "you can do that" you suddenly find yourself scared, your heart is racing, that horrible taste appears in your mouth, Thoughts start running through your head. What are those thoughts? I should point out at is time that this essay is not a what to do lesson if a self defense situation arises. So many thoughts are racing through your mind, maybe something like "stay calm" or "move fast" or maybe you ask yourself a question such as "am I ready for this?" or "is all that training that I have done about to pay off?" Of course no one can answer this question as there are thousands of possibilities that could happen.

The only thing certain is that as Martial Artists studying the art of Taekwon do, we need to be constantly training, developing speed, technique, balance and all the other necessary skills that we need to increase our chances of walking away from a dangerous self defense situation.

This is where I would like to bring competition sparring into the equation. I feel there are many factors of competition sparring that will increase our chances of staying safe.

All members of the International Taekwon Do Federation are lucky because of the way competitive sparring is held and performed. A member can gear up and get in the ring and have

a fight in an extremely controlled environment. It doesn't last too long and contact is monitored and governed. So compared with other fighting sports such as boxing and M.M.A where bouts are long and violence is paramount, as the object is to knock your opponent out. I feel there are many benefits for the Taekwon Do student. We can pit our skills against an opponent of a similar skill and level, without the fear of being seriously hurt. By being given the opportunity to compete and as most of us can be quite competitive at times, we can then use this desire to win to our advantage, by developing our skills not only in the ring, but for self defense situations as well.

So the style of technique we develop for sparring rules out grabbing, locks and take downs of course, but many if not all the other skills are extremely important for self defense.

Let's start with balance.

In the ring we must stay on our feet as falling over is not permitted. In a self defense situation we should always aim to stay on our feet. Probably 95 percent of the skills we develop are performed standing up as obviously the ground is no place to be if you are being attacked.

Speed

Anyone who has competed in the ring will tell you that speed is of the utmost importance. In order to score you must be able to beat a block. In a self defense situation to move faster than your attacker is also extremely important, not only with delivering a strike or block but with quick foot work as well. Good footwork could get you into a position for escape by moving around an attacker or attackers.

Counter Attack

This is a skill that should be considered a must for both sparring and self defense. In a situation of attack, you are more likely to be on the defense than the offense, meaning you are less likely to attack first, therefore a sound block followed by a fast counter attack is of the utmost importance.

Accuracy

Because competition sparring is so well controlled and target areas are very specific, competitors hone their techniques to be very accurate as a good clean shot to the target area scores. Now I know that in a self defense situation one is more likely to pick a target area that differs to those in sparring i.e. groin, throat, knee and temple etc, but the basic skill is still there. A well developed sense of eye, foot and hand coordination.

Stamina

Another factor to be considered is stamina. Two times two minute rounds in the ring doesn't sound like a long time, but I can tell you it is a lot tougher than one might think. It takes all your mental and physical energy. All of your muscles are working overtime, especially the big muscle groups in your legs and arms. These are the ones that zap as much energy as you are able to give. So as there is no way of knowing how long you may need to be in a serious form of defense mode in a situation, surely good stamina and physical and mental fitness must work to your advantage.

There are probably many more factors we could compare that connect training for free sparring and training techniques for self defense, but I will finish with one more....

Confidence

Anyone who is about to go into the ring and face a strange opponent will say that they are nervous, the adrenalin is pumping and fear is a factor. We have trained and now it is time to lay it on the line. But like anything the more we do the more our confidence grows. The more we use our techniques the more confident we become with them. And of course the more useful they will become if or when we need them in a serious situation. Learning to overcome fear is important,

by doing competition sparring we are doing just this, learning to step out of our comfort zone and getting in and having a go to develop one more skill to maybe one day see us through a self defense situation.

So if we look at our top competition free sparrer's and the extreme level of skills they have developed through the intense training programs they use to prepare for a bout in the ring. One could say "wow I would not want to mess with them out on the street", or something along those lines.

If you have just finished a round of competition sparring and you are standing there puffed and out of breath....., whether your arm is raised or your opponents, whether a medal is placed around their neck or yours. You have just achieved something very important in developing your skills. And this means you have both won!

After a match is over one should take time to reflect and look back at what just happened in the ring and ask themselves some questions such as, what were my strengths or weaknesses?, what techniques worked well for me?, and what could be improved? Not only for the next time they compete but for if their skills are needed in self defense as well. Understanding what techniques are most effective for the individual are more likely to be the ones used in a real situation.

There are many other skills to be developed for self defense of course such as learning our wrist locks, learning how to use joint manipulation and studying the vital spots of the body etc. If the practitioner blends these techniques with those used for competition free sparring, surely an advantage is gained for a self defense situation and through this we are bound to become more effective martial artists. After all we can do our line work to develop our technique thousands of times, but until we put them into a realistic contact situation we may never know what we are truly capable of.