

The Card Workout— A Generalized Warm-up Strategy

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Introduction

The idea of warming-up at the beginning of any exercise session is to give the students an opportunity to get their bodies and minds loosened up and primed so they can safely participate in whatever the following workout might require of them.

There are probably as many warm up strategies in various martial arts as there are different martial arts schools. Some schools have very short warm-ups so they can quickly move on to teaching techniques. Some have very long, very aerobic warm-ups that are meant to help the students develop and maintain their stamina. Often warm-ups are oriented towards whatever topic is being taught that day. Some warm-ups push strength, some endurance and some stretching. One might argue that a good warm-up should combine aspects of all three of these to create a well-rounded student.

Often the types of warm-up exercises are chosen to complement the subject that is to be emphasized in teaching that day. For example, the legs and hips are warmed up well if there is to be a large number of kicks thrown. Wrists, elbows and shoulders are emphasized during the warm up on a day that wrist and arm throws are to be emphasized.

The quality of the warm-up is usually subject to the physical and mental state of whoever is running the warm-up. Thus, if there is a hyperactive 18 year old running the warm-up, then there is often less stretching and more emphasis on speed- and strength-building drills. On the other hand, if a more senior (and older) member of the club is running the warm-up, then the opposite might be true. The bottom line is that the personality and current condition of the person leading the warm-up usually determines the quality and type of warm-up that is given.

There is also the issue of orienting the warm-up towards a particular type of student. Since many classes consist of people in varied states of conditioning it is sometimes hard to lead a workout that pushes all members of the class regardless of their current body fitness. Thus, it is desirable to have a general warm-up that is flexible, quantifiable and avoids the personal whims of the person leading the class. The following warm-up regime, referred to as a 'card workout' is proposed as an alternative type of workout that minimizes the input of the person running the warm-up while giving the individuals participating in the workout a number of quantifiable goals to strive towards.

Description of a Generic Card Workout

Over the years I have seen people try a number of variations of card workouts but the version presented here is one that I have found works with the broadest spectrum of students.

Overview

A card workout begins with the shuffling of a standard deck of cards (52 cards with no jokers). Often a senior rank is asked to do this and another senior rank cuts the deck to give the process an air of fairness. The deck is placed face down on the ground in view of the class and with the start of a timing clock the first card is turned up. Each of the four suits represents a specific exercise and the value of the card indicates how many of the given exercise the class is to perform. When a certain percentage of the class has completed the proscribed exercise (I often use 75%), the leader flips the next card up, calls out the card and corresponding exercise and everyone continues on with the new exercise. This process is continued until the class has completed the entire deck of 52 cards. With a large class with each student having enough space, a good time for completing a deck is 25 minutes. An elite group of students can complete a deck in under 20 minutes.

Generic Exercises

The following description is for a generic card workout that is oriented to towards giving an all-around exercise routine. For this routine the number of repetitions of the designated exercise is calculated from the face value of the card. For numbered cards we just use the face values of two through ten, face cards are worth ten and aces are eleven. Each suit indicates a pre-designated exercise. A generic set of exercises are described in the following paragraphs. Following the regimen as described below results in the performance of 196 kicks, 196 pushups, 196 sit-

ups and back arches, and an additional 294 assorted techniques by each participant.

Spades

Spades represent “times two kicks”. Thus, when the five of spades comes up, the class performs ten kicks of their choice. If a spade comes up near the start of the deck then most people take the opportunity to throw stretch kicks. As the deck progresses, participants are encouraged to practice kicks that are commensurate with their rank and ability: basic kicks and combinations for lower ranks; turning, jumping and spinning kicks and combinations for upper ranks.

Hearts

Hearts represent “times two pushups”. Thus, when the jack of hearts comes up, the class performs twenty pushups. Like the kicks (spades), pushups should also reflect the relative ability of each student. A student who is in great shape might try to do all the pushups as clapping pushups. I have even seen people try to go through the entire deck doing handstand pushups with their feet on a wall...but I have *never* seen anyone complete an entire deck (a total of 196 pushups) in that manner. Students who are not in such good shape should be encouraged to perform easier versions of pushups. Some of these are pushups from their knees and/or not going all the way down. It is considered more important that a student keep moving than to perform picture perfect exercises.

Diamonds

Diamonds represent “times two sit-ups AND times two back arches”. Thus, when the ace of diamonds comes up, the class shall perform twenty-two sit-ups and twenty-two back arches. Again, the students should be encouraged to keep moving and some may have to vary the type of sit-ups they are going to perform in order to keep the pace. Crunches are often the sit-up of choice, but knee-bent sit-ups (which can be rough on the lower back) or V-ups can also be performed. The back arches also vary. Usually the student is on their stomach and they simultaneously raise their outstretched arms and legs momentarily up into the air. Common variations include keeping the hands on the ground and raising the feet or keeping the feet on the ground and raising the chest off the ground. It is important to balance each sit-up that is performed with a back arch to try to keep the torso exercise well balanced.¹

Clubs

Clubs represent “times three techniques”. This can be practice any technique, ranging from kicks or punches, to fit-ins for throws, to rolls or falls, all done in any combination. So when the nine of clubs comes up, one might perform ten kicks, ten punches, and seven fit-ins, for a total of twenty-seven techniques.

Card Workout Specifics

In our program, an etiquette was quickly established for conduct during a card workout. Some

of the specifics are described in the following paragraphs.

Counting

One of the hardest things to do during a card workout is to keep an accurate count of the number of exercises performed. For example with the jack of spades the student is suppose to perform twenty kicks. The easiest way for me to count is to innumerate each kick, “One, one, two, two, three, three, ten, ten”. In this way you are counting up to the card value and thus don’t have to be continually thinking of the math. Another example would be if the seven of clubs comes up then I would count as I performed each technique as follows, “One, one, one, two, two, two, three, Seven, seven, seven”. I always encourage the upper ranks to add one to the card to cover any small errors they might have in counting. Thus if the eight of hearts is turned (calling for sixteen push-ups), I always add one, thus pretending that it is the nine of hearts and do eighteen pushups instead. Of course, this also has the added benefit of pushing the more senior ranks to work harder than their lower rank peers.

Luck of the Draw

The random order that the cards appear is half the charm of this exercise. No two decks are the same. Invariably there are evil decks where a long run in a single suit is encountered. A long string of large hearts near then end of a deck can push students hard and make the workout all the more invigorating.

Cheating

On occasion, people are inclined to cheat during a card workout. All in all I believe that ones conduct during the card workout is a matter of personal pride. Naturally I keep a sharper eye out on black belt candidates than on white belts and often you see an infraction and are obliged to let it go. However if someone is “going for time” then they really should keep to the highest standards they can maintain. Pushups should touch the chest to the ground on the down stroke and straighten the arms on the up stroke. The kicks should represent “test quality” examples and the techniques should reflect something above the minimum. For example, I would accept for the seven of clubs (twenty-one techniques), a white belt standing in a horse stance doing twenty-one punches. For a black belt candidate, twenty-one spin kicks or rolls is a more appropriate exercise.

Altering the Exercises

Over the years I have heard and tried many alternatives to the generic card workout described above. I encourage experimentation but also recommend that the author of a new variation run through an entire deck using their suggested exercises before inflicting it upon a class. For example, once we had a gung-ho third dan instructor change the exercises to: Spades are times five kicks; hearts times four pushups; diamonds times three squat kicks; and clubs times three full turning burpies (a pushup followed by jumping in the air and spinning three hundred and sixty degrees). Not only did the class not finish the deck in this instance, but there were a

couple of injuries (mostly from knee twists from the fast squats and spins) and a number of minor muscle strains and pulls. The card workout should be designed to push the class, not break them!

Daisy Chain Decks

When running an elite class, a single deck is not sufficiently strenuous. On occasions with such a group more than one deck of cards is prepared. Running through two (or even three) decks of cards is enough to invigorate even the friskiest group. What I prefer to do is to have the second and third decks be run only if the last card of the previous deck happens to be from a red suit. This gives the warm-up an element of surprise and unpredictability, as the group may be doing one, two or three decks during a given session.

Card Workouts for Time

Obviously the time required for completing a card workout will depend on the exercises selected, the physical conditioning of the participants and the quality of the exercises performed. As mentioned earlier, a pushup and be anything from a full “marine” pushup (body straight, chest touches on the down stroke, arms straighten on the up stroke) down to hardly shrugging one’s shoulders while pushing up from the knees. If a group or individual is “going for time” then they should be encouraged to adhere to some previously agreed upon standards.

Using the generic exercises and standards described above (all kicks chest high or above, marine pushups, sit-up crunches, techniques with no hand

strikes), a good group time is under 25 minutes. The best time I have ever witnessed (with good quality exercises being performed) was 18 minutes and 50 seconds.

Stretching

As with any vigorous exercise, the participants should be given time both before and after to stretch. We often allow for a few minutes of individualized, unstructured stretching, but it is just as easy to incorporate stretching exercises into various group activities should the class make-up demand a more structured approach.

Individual and Group Goals

There are a number of goals that can be set and strived for with a card workout. For some participants, a fair goal will simply be reaching the ability to complete all the exercises without skipping any cards. Other individuals may wish to complete all of a given exercise in a proscribed way, such as doing all of the pushups in the “marine” style. Enforcing such proscriptions with a heterogeneous group is not such a good idea, as the range of stamina and ability found across a typical group makes it rather likely that some participants will be over-challenged while others will not be pushed enough by such a program. Consequently, at the group level, striving to beat a specific time for completing the entire deck is the best approach, for it allows for individual variations of ability while still pushing the class to meet or exceed standards set in past outings.

Final Thoughts

I have found that a card workout is an excellent way to quickly break a sweat with a group. Often I'll announce the card workout at the bow-in and then give the group five minutes on their own to stretch and loosen whatever they need in anticipation of the exercise. The card workout itself lends itself to an atmosphere of "the group versus the cards" and I often witness people pushing each other to perform better or cheering them on during a particularly rough stretch of cards.

A card workout is certainly not a replacement for learning the techniques that the exercises require (e.g. kicks and rolls) but it can be used to push a class of varying physical abilities to increase their strength and wind.

Endnotes

- ¹ Numerous papers have been written warning that people who strengthen the stomach out of proportion with their backs are at risk of severe back injuries.

See, for example:

"Back-Care Basics," taken from the International Dance Exercise Association publication *Idea Today*, by A. Peter Winfrey and Shaily E. Estrella, posted online May 10, 2004 at

<http://www.enmu.edu/services/wellness/physical/Back%20Health.htm>. Accessed July 30, 2004.

"A Patient's Guide to Rehabilitation for Low Back Pain," posted online (undated) at

<http://www.spineuniversity.com/public/spinesub.asp?id=85>. Accessed July 30, 2004.