

# **Meeting the Need of the New Demographic: The Older Taekwondo Student**

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## **Introduction**

As of 2009, nearly 40 million people or 13% of the total U.S. population are age 65 or older. The Census Bureau anticipates that by 2025 almost one in five Americans will enter that demographic group.<sup>1</sup> A properly designed fitness program can delay the effects of aging and can improve the quality of life in older people.

When I began teaching taekwondo, my student base consisted of athletic men and women around my age; mainly people in their twenties. From there, I expanded my school to include teenagers and then younger children. But as I have grown older, so has my student base to include parents and grandparents.

My Taekwondo experience spans almost 35 years. I started taekwondo at the age of 18 at Cal State Hayward<sup>2</sup> under the direction of Professor Robert Zambetti. When I graduated, I moved to Sun Valley Idaho and opened my own taekwondo School in 1978. In 1980, I met Dr. Min at the Korean Martial arts summer camp in Cody Wyoming and went on to direct six subsequent Korean Martial Arts Summer Camps myself. During that time, I developed four different taekwondo schools in four different communities in

addition to helping start the Boise State University and Mountain Home Air Force Taekwondo programs in the late 1980's. I also built the Idaho Taekwondo Association, which eventually grew to include 10 schools and 250 athlete members. I held the position as state president as a member of the United States Taekwondo Union for 23 years. In 1992, I completed a year-long curriculum and earned a graduate degree in Athletic Administration.

As a teacher and coach, my past approach to meeting the needs of the younger athlete was based on a linear athletic progression of developing strength, flexibility and endurance. Also included in the training program was the history of taekwondo and its dynamic development. Health and fitness levels were fairly easy to handle. Most of my students were physically active in other sports and used to the rigors of a demanding physical routine. Now that I teach older students, I must work with them regarding chronic illness, old injuries, arthritis and other issues.

The purpose of this paper is to evaluate the effectiveness of my program for my students ages 40 and over. I strive to be the most effective instructor I can be. In order to accomplish this task, I must identify the most effective ways to develop and teach taekwondo techniques to my students and have them be able to execute those skills in an efficient manner. In addition, it is important to address the health and fitness levels of the students so they can continue to improve their skills and participate in their taekwondo training at a higher level.

Many studies have shown the benefits of strength, aerobic and flexibility training on delaying the aging

process.<sup>3</sup> A well planned taekwondo workout addresses all three of these training areas.

Strength training offsets the loss in muscle mass typically associated with the normal aging process. Weight bearing exercises causes muscles to pull against bone, thereby increasing bone density. Another benefit of improved bone health is the reduction of osteoporosis and improved stability in the individual which reduces the risk of falling and the injuries associated with falling.<sup>4</sup> The best load bearing exercises require your muscles to work against gravity. They include but are not limited to such activities as such as jogging, weight lifting, hiking, stair climbing, step aerobics, dancing and other activities. In a typical taekwondo class, strength training exercises include kicking drills, stance training, plyometrics and bag kicking, where the latter also enhances ones sense of balance and coordination.

Aerobic or endurance training is beneficial to cardiovascular health.<sup>5</sup> Reducing the risk of heart attacks and stroke as well as other circulatory disorders are associated with aerobic exercise. Regular aerobic exercise is also associated with significant increased brain volume of both gray and white matter in adults aged 60-79 years.<sup>6</sup> Participating in aerobic exercise a minimum of 20 minutes, several times per week, as taekwondo students are apt to do, also helps to maintain or reduce body fat to a healthful level.

To prevent muscle or ligament injury, flexibility is a key element of any exercise routine. Being able to maintain or improve range of motion will also assist in improving balance and stability. Regular stretching at the beginning and end of each class is a staple of all

taekwondo workouts. Agility and flexibility are enhanced by engaging in kicking and blocking drills that increases the students' range of motion.

Taekwondo may be able to contribute to overall health of an elderly population. Such contributions may result from better balance, assisting in fall prevention. Better muscle tone and coordination may also assist in fall prevention.<sup>7</sup>

## **Description and Goals of the Survey**

In order to test my effectiveness as an instructor, I developed a survey for my students who were over 40 years of age. The survey also served the purpose of identifying variables that would be beyond my control. Twenty students ranging in age from 40 to 72, white belts to 3<sup>rd</sup> Dan black belts responded to the survey.

Respondents identified their age, gender and length of time they have participated in taekwondo. Discovering what their preconceived ideas of taekwondo were as well as expectations at the time they began classes and how these ideas and expectations changed over time were the next area explored by the survey questions. Additionally, the survey asked students about their health and fitness levels when they started the taekwondo program and their assessment of progress in those areas at the time they responded. Discovering the number of classes the students attend per week and identifying barriers that prohibit them from training consistently were goals of the survey. Having respondents identify their short and long term fitness and personal goals (excluding belt rank promotions) was also important. Participants

were also asked if they felt their training in taekwondo helped them to achieve these goals and if the practice of taekwondo had made a difference in other areas of their lives: socially, spiritually, physically, or mentally, and if their self-esteem improved. The students were also asked to identify any hurdles they needed to overcome in taekwondo. Finally, they were asked if they would recommend taekwondo to others over 40 years of age.

## **Expectations of Results**

My general feeling was that both health and fitness will have improved. I also believe that even though I am working with older adults, their sense of accomplishing something new and different helps to improve their self-confidence and therefore, their self-esteem. I believe I have removed the mystery and media perception of martial arts and replaced it with an understanding of its long and rich history and its role in the development of taekwondo. In understanding the background of taekwondo they may see the importance of its long term development and the importance in recognizing and respecting the time and effort that goes into achieving higher belt ranks. I feel that this will have the greatest impact on my older student's self-esteem as they look back on their own lives and see what they have accomplished.

## **Description of Results**

Gender: Split 10 men and 10 women

Ages: Range 40 to 72

**Q How long have you been a part of this program?**

Less than one year: four respondents

Six to ten years: sixteen respondents.

**Q How often do you participate in classes?**

Average 3 to 4 classes per week.

**Q What were your preconceived beliefs about the study of taekwondo?**

75% had no preconceived ideas and came in with an open mind.

25% thought it would be very athletically challenging. Two of these thought only young athletic people could advance very far.

**Q What are your beliefs now?**

There was an overwhelming response. Taking on new challenges, believing in yourself and rising to the challenges by dedicating yourself to following through. For example, one student wrote:

*Over time I began to recognize and enjoy the physical benefits of taekwondo. Later I enjoyed watching the way it helped young students mature into young men and women by overcoming the challenges presented to them. It wasn't until recently that I understand that I was also changing and growing by facing those same challenges.*

**Q Health Assessment**

Most of the students, 18 out of 20, considered themselves in good health. One of my students had a full heart transplant nine years ago but has no restrictions. One other had heart bypass surgery one year ago and is still restricted from any contact to his chest. Other health issues mentioned but not

considered major problems are: Knee injury (no cartilage), bone spurs, weight, old injuries (broken bones that had healed poorly), and work stress and one cancer survivor.

**Q What barriers do you have to participate?**

Lack of confidence, coordination, church, family, cost (gasoline), injuries (aches and pain linger), heart surgery (sparring), lack of flexibility.

**Q Fitness level**

90% considered themselves to be in fair to good fitness condition when they started. All of the surveys said that their level of fitness improved since they began taekwondo.

**Q Goals**

Short term: Improve taekwondo skills, increase fitness level, improve eating habits, flexibility, rehab injured knee and improve core strength. Regain strength and agility, manage time better so they can come to class more often.

Long term: Maintain fitness level, stay healthy mentally and physically, improve technique and become more confident in teaching. Strengthen family and personal relationships. Stay active in taekwondo and keep their children involved. To learn to not be so judgmental.

“To attack my advancing years aggressively”

**Q Overall change: Has the practice of taekwondo made a difference in these areas of your life?**

**Social:** 90% said it made them feel part of a team and that they felt our club was their taekwondo family. 10% said it helped their confidence in social situations.

**Spiritual:** The students with more than five years of

experience stated that understanding the deep and rich history and beliefs of taekwondo and taking care of others gave them a sense of connectedness.

**Physical:** Resounding yes in very positive ways.  
100%

**Mental:** All felt that their memorization and focusing skills had improved and enjoyed the constant positive challenge.

**Q Personal hurdles to overcome in taekwondo?**

Nervousness (lack of confidence while performing in front of others), working through physical pain, teaching others, making time to be more consistent, physical (pain from injuries) comprehension and memory. Feeling like a little kid, afraid to challenge one's self. Don't want to get hurt sparring and don't want to hurt anyone else. Flexibility.

**Q Personal benefits of taekwondo training?**

Benefits: Strength, flexibility, focus, growing personally, maintain mental and physical agility, fun, more active and able than friends in same age group, increased confidence. The ability to integrate thought and task.

**Q Would you recommend taekwondo to others over 40 years old?**

Yes!

**Q How has the practice of taekwondo affected your sense of self-esteem?**

It is gratifying to do something that wasn't easy and then do it well. Improvement tied to setting and achieving goals. It makes me feel adequate about myself even when I make mistakes.



## **Conclusion**

Although I feel that my program is successful, reinforced by the survey, I feel there are areas I can elaborate on and refine. In order for them to understand taekwondo I feel I need to teach and expose my students more to the Korean culture in addition to the history and why the investment of time is so critical to their advancement. The more you practice the deeper your understanding.

In the area of health and fitness, I will have students fill out a health and fitness evaluation when they begin their taekwondo training program with me. This way, I can help individualize a more productive progression for a successful taekwondo experience. In addition, I plan to have annual evaluations to assess their progress. Finally, I will help my students to understand the benefits of taekwondo exercise to their overall health in areas including cardiovascular fitness, strength, flexibility and balance. What a fun way to delay and in some ways reverse the effects of aging!

Spirituality I feel is an exploration into one's own beliefs. Not necessarily tied to formal religion, but by developing a sense that they are connected to something bigger. By understanding how the Korean history and culture nurtured and developed taekwondo, first out of necessity then as part of their development as a person, will help them feel the same pride in perfecting and understanding what they have accomplished.

Taekwondo is an excellent form of exercise for the elder student if it is carefully planned out and monitored. Their physical and mental health can be

enhanced and the experience enjoyable. By making these adjustments, I expect the older taekwondo population in my club to grow.

After 30+ years of being a taekwondo instructor, I am still constantly trying to enhance the quality of my teaching. Success in competition for my students has been wide spread and it continues to improve through the years. I developed state champions at the junior and senior levels. My students earned medals and eventually gold medals at the Junior Olympics. The success grew to students becoming senior national quarterfinalists, and finally, I was able to put athletes on the podium at national championships as well as at the US team trials.

The other tangible area of success of my program is in student retention. I currently have 40 black belts ranging in ages 10 to 60 years of age. So why am I concerned with refining my teaching skills? I have always believed and also taught my students to strive to be better and never to be satisfied with just maintaining their skills at a certain level. So, I better lead by example. At 53 years of age, I continue to work on refining and improving my taekwondo skills. It only makes sense to try and improve the effectiveness of my taekwondo instruction. I have always believed that confidence is developed by self-discipline. Doing what is needed may not always be what you want to do, but having the discipline to be consistent and to continue to challenge yourself, usually leads to success.

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## Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> Cooper.
- <sup>2</sup> Now known as California State University, East Bay, or CSUEB.
- <sup>3</sup> Fitness.
- <sup>4</sup> Mazzeo.
- <sup>5</sup> Kinesiology article.
- <sup>6</sup> Colcomb.
- <sup>7</sup> Brudnak.