

10 Things You Probably Didn't Know About the Filipino Martial Arts

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1. Sticks are an extension of the hands; without the hands, there can be no sticks.

This is worth knowing because people still like to ask, sometimes sarcastically, "Why do you practice stick fighting — it's not like you carry sticks everywhere you go?" It's good to be able to answer them, and it's good to be able to remind yourself when you need to.

Although practitioners of many styles do lip service to this statement, only practitioners of the Filipino martial arts back it up by doing the same exact techniques with and without weapons.

2. The Filipino martial arts (kali, escrima, arnis) teach weapons first, after which come the empty-hand techniques.

Although it may seem backward to some martial artists, most, if not all, FMA hand-to-hand combat techniques originate from the principles that underlie the historical stick and sword movements.

3. The Filipino martial arts represent the most well-rounded and practical fighting techniques in the world.

How so? They're well-rounded in that they cover all distances in which combat takes place: long range (kicking), middle range (boxing, elbowing, kneeing) and short range (grabbing, poking, biting, grappling). They're practical in that they don't focus on fancy or complicated moves that are likely to fail under duress.

Even the forms (*anyo*) used by some Filipino systems are composed of actual fighting moves. Historically, those components were hidden in a dance (*sayaw*) for a variety of reasons.

The practicality of the Filipino arts is enhanced by the versatility of the weapons. At long range, you can use the tip of the stick or sword; at middle range, you can use the body of the stick or the blade of the sword; and at short range, you can use the bottom part of the stick (*punyo*) or handle of the sword.

4. The Filipino martial arts are the only ones that can complement any other fighting style.

They don't conflict with other styles; they actually strengthen them. That includes kicking arts, hand-based arts, pure self-defense arts, and grappling and throwing arts.

5. Stick fighting is suitable — and beneficial — for everyone.

For children, *sinawali* is appropriate. This form of double-stick fighting strengthens the limbs and develops hand-eye coordination as well as any sport. Kids also benefit from the character training that occurs when they learn how to safely handle weapons that are potentially dangerous. For many, this setting is preferable to the old way — which is how I learned. When I was young, my grandfather taught me to handle a live blade while learning how to use it for survival and self-defense. (My first lesson: how to hand a knife to another person.)

For women, the Filipino arts are perfect because even the smallest hands can hold a knife and wield it in deadly fashion. With minimal training, a woman will be able to keep almost any sane attacker at bay. For the insane ones who approach anyway, they risk getting cut or killed. Don't believe it? Try this experiment:

Give a woman you know a marker, then attempt to get close to her without getting inked. It's not easy to do. Once she's taught how to discreetly carry and draw the weapon, your task will be exponentially tougher. Suitably armed, she'll be able to truly protect herself, even against multiple attackers. For police officers and members of the military, the Filipino arts provide an essential set of skills — namely, those that involve the tactical knife. Our fighting men and women need real blade skills, both offensive and defensive, and the Filipino arts are among the few on earth that have been tested in battle.

6. The Filipino martial arts help you connect the dots in your self-defense training by focusing on versatile concepts rather than a different technique for every situation.

FMA instructors talk about angles of attack rather than specific attacks. Once you're able to discern whether an attack is coming from the inside or the outside and whether it's from the left or the right, you have the base you need to deal with it. After that, your training will be about progressions and combinations involving those basics.

If your instructor is good, you won't ever find yourself splitting hairs over whether you need to defend against a punch, a grab or a push delivered from the front because in FMA, they're treated the same — as a direct straight attack.

7. Stick fighting is not just about using your weapon.

It's also about using our opponent's weapon against him. That phrase is often invoked but seldom does it manifest in practice.

8. Filipino weapons training encompasses much more than just traditional sticks and knives.

The methods you learn in FMA work with sticks and knives, but in some locales, people aren't allowed to carry such defensive implements. Fortunately, you can apply the skills to pretty much anything — a cane, a cellphone, a credit card, a toothpick, an umbrella or even a bottle of water.

9. Taking up the Filipino martial arts can reinvigorate your training, whether you're a beginner or a master.

It's the reason they're so appealing to practitioners of other arts. Once you have a solid foundation, you can learn many of the moves using books and DVDs. But don't forgo master-to-student interaction altogether. The meaning, principles, importance and history behind the techniques and drills are, for the most part, hidden. You'll need a legitimate master to help you interpret them.

10. Although some instructors focus on sport, the Filipino martial arts are a form of reality-based self-defense and a great example of a complete MMA system.

Don't get fooled by the stick-fighting tournaments you hear about. The Filipino arts are multidimensional. As Bruce Lee said in *Enter the Dragon*, "Do not focus on the moon or you will miss all the heavenly glory!"