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Martial Arts: for Anyone, Anytime, Anywhere

Human cockfighting, children in pajamas getting black belts at 7, and overweight robed men flailing arms at each other while claiming they can blast invisible energy - to many, these were what came to mind when the topic of martial arts was discussed just a decade or two ago. Thankfully, most people are now aware of the UFC or MMA fights in general, so this topic receives a little more respect when discussed. What exactly is it that leads a person to these disciplines? Whether someone experiences violence, harassment, or if a person just wants to get in a good workout, there are a myriad of reasons that draw people to martial arts.

While there are nuances and blurred lines, martial arts are typically divided into two camps: grappling and striking. Grappling is the art of grabbing someone, putting them on the ground, controlling them there, and applying a submission to finish the fight. All of this happens without throwing a strike. In the striking arts, ultimately the goal is to generate enough kinetic energy on specific points on the opponent’s body to incapacitate them. This is typically done with punches, elbows, knees, or kicks.

Given the spectacle that is the UFC, it should come as no surprise that some of these fighters have a violent past. Featherweight contender and multiple time title-challenger Brian Ortega’s is quite dramatic. From being a witness to drive-bys, being in gang-sized street brawls, and holding a dying friend in his arms, he has witnessed a great deal of violence (Okamoto). From the age of five, Ortega was put into martial arts by his father, starting with Muay Thai, a more complete form of kickboxing, before transitioning to Brazilian Jiu-jitsu (BJJ), a grappling-based art, at 13 (Okamoto). At 17, after having many illegal amateur fights, he then reintegrated striking, in the form of boxing, to facilitate his pursuit of becoming a professional mixed martial artist (Okamoto). Ortega is on the extreme end of the spectrum, as far as witnessing violence is concerned. There are many other athletes and participants in martial arts that have much less exposure to these things.

Joe Rogan, while not a fighter, is a well-known and well-respected martial artist. He is arguably the most recognizable commentator for the UFC, having been one of their primary voices since 2002. As a child, Rogan did not witness a great deal of violence outside of his martial arts training. He recalls his main push into the martial arts stemming from a scuffle in a locker room with another child; Rogan was put in a headlock, thrown to the ground, but not struck (Rogan). Due to this, he started wrestling and doing karate at the age of 13, before dropping both of those a year later and transitioning to Taekwondo (Rogan). After becoming a decorated competitor, he expanded into other striking arts, as well as later adding BJJ (Rogan). After nearly 40 years of martial arts experience, Rogan continues to train in all facets of the game.

In addition to the scuffle he had with that child, Rogan also credits a lot of harassment as his motivation to start and continue training. On many occasions, Rogan has described his experience of moving to Jamaica Plains, Boston; growing up around rough children, being picked on, and feeling insecure led him to seek ways to defend himself. It is a common sentiment among martial artists; the desire to have the ability to protect oneself and those they love.

Georges St. Pierre, previous UFC champion, Hall-of-Fame inductee, and regarded by many to be the greatest fighter of all time, also experienced a great deal of harassment as a child, “Like in nature, predatory animals always hunt the weakest in the group. I was one of those (kids). I didn’t have good self-confidence…I used to walk, look down, shrug my shoulders. It showed in my demeanor, and I think that’s the main reason I was getting picked on” (Samano). At seven years old, St. Pierre began training karate; he credits this as the primary factor behind his lifelong success and continues to train and teach karate to this day. At age 16, after his karate instructor died, Georges began training wrestling, BJJ, and boxing (Samano). During his amateur fighting days, St. Pierre began to train with a now-legendary figure in the MMA community named Firas Zahabi.

Firas Zahabi is the owner and head instructor of the world-renowned Tristar Gym. He produces, and works with, world-class fighters and champions from all over the world. He credits seeing a tape of Royce Gracie winning “UFC 2: No Way Out” as his inspiration for beginning martial arts (Wray). Royce, as an average-sized person, was able to defeat men who often weighed more than 100 pounds more than himself, which was unimaginable at this time. Zahabi found this so appealing because, as an often smaller-sized man, he was often picked on, and felt the desire to have the ability to defend himself. To this day, he continues to train twice a day, five days a week, as well as spar with his professional fighters. Among other aspects, he credits the training itself as one of the primary reasons he can continue doing so; not only do his skills improve but doing the martial arts themselves provides him with a phenomenal workout.

In the grappling arts, whether on the ground, standing, or transitioning between the two, both the anaerobic and aerobic systems are heavily taxed. In addition to strong cardiovascular work, multiple muscular strengths are also involved. While grappling, there will be moments of intense dynamic movement, as well as periods where one or both people are locked in a tense, static position. These target both the “slow-twitch” and “fast-twitch” muscle fibers. Additionally, it is necessary to use the arms, legs, and head to control and submit, or throw, an opponent. This improves coordination across the entire body, as well as builds all the small muscles and stabilizers, as well as the core.

Building stability and the core is a point heavily focused on in the striking martial arts. Not only that, but these arts are also absolutely focused on power and explosion, with mobility and flexibility being a necessary aspect to achieve some of the most effective strikes. Due to the power-focused nature, these arts are primarily anaerobic, with an emphasis on training a general aerobic base outside of the art.

If a person is overcoming a past of violence or harassment, is looking for a great workout, or for any other personal reason, many avenues lead to martial arts. It does not take drive-bys, street brawls, and holding a dying friend to push someone towards martial arts. Something as simple as a locker-room scuffle where no strikes are thrown can get someone there. Even if a person has no violent experiences, something as relatively minor as consistent harassment can push them towards the benefits and promises that martial arts offer. Whatever martial arts a person chooses to engage in, they are sure to find that it provides a fantastic way to stay fit and improve their overall health. Martial arts can help any person in an innumerable number of ways. From the obvious to the subtle and hidden, martial arts are a vehicle for developing a person’s potential in life.

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