

Martial arts

by Mike Rayner

*Everybody was kung-fu fighting
Those cats were fast as lightning
In fact it was a little bit frightening
But they fought with expert timing*

Kung Fu Fighting by Carl Douglas

Martial arts have never been more popular. Recent Hollywood action blockbusters featuring acrobatic fight scenes like *The Matrix* and *Charlie's Angels* have been hugely successful, and the popularity of martial arts films from Hong Kong, China and Taiwan have turned actors like Jet Li and Jackie Chan into international superstars. While the closest that many martial arts enthusiasts get to a dojo is playing *Mortal Kombat* and *Street Fighter* in front of a TV screen in their living room, others are keen to hit the mats and have a go at martial arts themselves.

From the graceful, dance like moves of t'ai chi and capoeira to the explosive fighting styles of kung fu and karate, there is a martial art to suit every taste. Rock stars to bus conductors, vicars to politicians - people of all ages and from all walks of life are discovering the physical and mental benefits of practising a martial art.

Music

Rock stars have often used martial arts to spice up their live performances. Elvis, who was a karate black belt, entertained his fans on stage with his karate kicking antics, and Madonna's recent tour features dance routines heavily influenced by martial arts. Jean Jacques Burnel, the French bass player in British punk band *The Stranglers*, shared Elvis' love for karate and often demonstrated his skill to fans. Unfortunately, however, his enthusiasm sometimes got the better of him – in the punk era he was well known for using karate to intimidate rival bands and music journalists.

Health

Many doctors have realised that practising martial arts can replace drug therapy for patients suffering from psychological conditions. The more aggressive styles such as kendo and kick-boxing appear to help people with problems such as depression, while the softer disciplines of aikido and t'ai chi can help people who are anxious or under a lot of stress. Lou Reed, singer and guitarist from the seminal New York rock band *The Velvet Underground*, who has a notoriously difficult artistic temperament, says he has tamed the rock and roll animal in his soul by practising t'ai chi for three hours a day.

Politics

There can't be many jobs more stressful than being a politician. American president Theodore Roosevelt was perhaps the first head of state to be associated with martial arts – he became fascinated by judo after watching a demonstration by a Japanese teacher at the White House, and was the first American to get a judo brown belt. Vladimir Putin, Russian president and ex-KGB official, holds an advanced rank in judo, and has won both junior and senior tournaments in Russia. Ryutaro Hashimoto, the prime minister of Japan from 1996 to 1998, has been practising kendo since he was a child, and reached a very high level in the sport. In kendo "the way of the sword", opponents wear heavy armour and masks, and try to hit each other with bamboo swords. Hashimoto's speeches as prime minister were peppered with phrases comparing politics to samurai battles, he once famously said, "If you don't pay attention to your rival you get hit on the head," when talking about a Japanese trade agreement with the US.

Difficult jobs

Of course martial arts were originally developed as effective ways of attacking or defending yourself against enemies. It comes as no surprise that soldiers and police forces around the world are trained in fighting arts, but people in other jobs who may often face difficult situations can also benefit from a knowledge of martial arts. Vicars in London have been trained in tae kwon do, a Korean form of karate, after a survey showing that they were at high risk of attack. Taxi drivers in Birmingham have also been offered courses in self-defense, and

female bus conductors in Hyderabad in southern India learn shotokan karate to help them protect themselves from sexual harassment. Officers whose job is to hand out fines to people caught littering in Hong Kong are now given training in aikido, a Japanese martial art which can help to calm people down, after a series of attacks by angry law breakers.

So, perhaps it's time to put on your gi, turn off the video, put down the joystick, and head off to your local sports centre to uncover the joys of martial arts for yourself.

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