

Sword and Spirit

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— Why Budo? —

Regardless of the times you live in, or the circumstances of your life, success largely depends on things you actually can control:

- **Building strong relationships in a community of achievement.**
- **Forging a disciplined and positive mindset.**
- **Enhancing your physical health and capabilities.**

These are exactly the benefits membership in a dojo provides.

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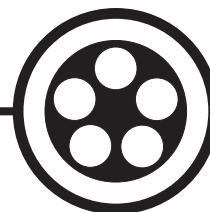
Lessons from Joe Lewis

Joe Lewis (1944–2012), in the opinion of many, was the greatest karate competitor the United States ever produced. Originally trained in Shorin-ryu while on Okinawa during his service with the Marine Corps, he dominated point, semi-contact, and full-contact karate for decades and was an exceptionally gifted instructor. Aside from his superb technique and incredible speed and power, Lewis developed a unique descriptive ability that illuminated very clearly and concisely the principles, strategies, and tactics underlying his physical prowess. I had the opportunity to train with Lewis on three occasions, in 1984, 1985, and 1989. Even better, I had the opportunity to spend time with him socially, outside the dojo: In a local bar while PKA Karate plays on the televisions, sitting across from Lewis and drinking beer while he provides color commentary on the matches, with guys all around the room gaping and whispering, “Do you see who that is?” Priceless.

I have ten pages of handwritten notes from the Lewis seminars, and the lessons he conveyed have influenced me, not only during my time in karate but since then as an instructor of aikijutsu. The first seminar set the tone, while the second a year later impressed me more deeply. My notes on that session conclude with, “This seminar was better than the first both in content, and my comprehension of it. Joe asked me to evaluate the two programs I had attended and tell him which was better and why. He was amused by my answer and commented at length.”

The third seminar was especially memorable. I arrived early to dress and warm up, and was in the gym when Lewis came in to check out the facilities. He called me over and asked how I was doing and how my training was going. After chatting a while, Lewis said, “I have three different seminars I’m currently presenting.” He went on to give a brief description of each and then said, “You get to pick—which one would you like to do?” I chose the topic, “Set-ups.”

In considering this article, I thought initially to explain how I’ve used the lessons from Joe Lewis in my own training, karate competition career, and instructing, but I think instead I’ll simply transcribe a selection of my notes and let you take from the lessons what you might.





During the first seminar I attended, listening as Joe Lewis describes a sparring drill he would be demonstrating.

First Seminar (November 1984)

This session was titled, “Power of Strategy,” and addressed drills for *kumite* (sparring in karate).

A person is not dangerous because of size, strength, speed, or techniques, but because of being “set.” Set consists of being *Ready* (in terms of stance and attitude) and *On-the-mark* (in terms of distancing; being within striking range).

On the basis of static extension of techniques, for targets above the waist, reach with the legs is no greater than reach with the arms (this is a principle for sparring only).

As in European fencing, lead hand (or lead foot) techniques should be thrown by moving the *weapon* first, then following with the shoulder/hip for power. Lewis terms this the “weapons first” principle, and credits the idea to Bruce Lee, under whom he studied extensively.

When attacking, never cover the same path going out that you used going in. Lewis terms the attack “penetration” and the retreat “clearing.” All during the engagement, it is critical to “keep busy” to prevent the opponent from countering.

Me, in the drill focusing on controlling the opponent’s “set.” Movement only; no techniques thrown. Thankfully.

The four components of an engagement are:
1) Approach; 2) Hit the mark / set; 3) Determine the target; and 4) Fire the technique. The time to counter is immediately upon the opponent hitting his mark and ideally before he sets.

To frustrate the counter-technique, either double-up on the lead technique, or keep moving immediately after the technique is thrown.

There are only four times you can be hit: 1) During your lead technique; 2) During the opponent’s lead technique; 3) During one of your follow-on techniques; and 4) During one of the opponent’s follow-on techniques.

There are four, major types of movement for sparring: 1) Walking (normal motion); 2) Spring-step (boxer’s style); 3) Shuffle (change-step); and 4) Creeping (sneaking in with lead foot).

The key to Lewis’s fighting technique is, “prevent the opponent from getting set,” or, put another way, “Control the opponent’s set.” The primary way to do this is by movement (footwork), since every time the target moves, the opponent must re-aim the technique.



Determining the opponent's set is the foundation of strategy. Any time things aren't working (I can't get in; I'm getting hit; techniques don't feel right), go back to determining the opponent's set.

When set is determined, break it up either by movement or by hitting first. Since the person that strikes first has the (momentary) advantage, it pays to move and fire any time the opponent sets.

The key is control of the opponent's set. If you can do this, you will be able to deal much more effectively with all opponents, but especially you will have a specific technique and strategy for fighting larger opponents. The "game plan" for addressing an individual is an outgrowth of the general strategy.

Second Seminar (November 1985)

To disrupt an opponent's ability to fight, destroy his:
1) Distance; 2) Balance; 3) Firing zone; 4) Aim; or
5) Mental state.

"Firing line" is another term for critical distance.

There are three types of defenses (imagine the defender's feet are placed to start in a rectangular box):

- a. Runner — Both feet clear the box.
- b. Blocker — Keeps at least one foot in the box.
- c. Jammer — Closes with the attacker.

There are two types of attack: 1) Lead; or 2) Counter.

When blocking, don't just block—angle the body to add power to the block as well as remove the center line from the attack.

The Lewis side-kick: Initiate a feint with lead hand to cover stepping in with the lead foot; pull the base leg in and fire the kick. Total effect is an explosion—there must be absolute commitment.

"Rocking" is a front/back, back/front, or side/side lean to break the rhythm of your attack. Example: Start to step

in, rock back/front, and execute a weapon-first lunge punch.

There are three options for a lunge-punch: 1) Lead; 2) Start to step, then weapon-first; or 3) Start to step, rock, then weapon-first.

When you are inside, the only ways to keep an opponent busy are to strike or move.

Lewis sometimes likes to kick, take an immediate half-step back, and kick again.



Third Seminar (November 1989 — I got to pick)

This was the "Set-ups" session, focused on advanced topics for sparring.

General information: The "defensive perimeter" equals the firing line, equals the critical distance. Even when floating on the balls of the feet, the shoulders must stay level and in one plane, unless being shifted consciously as part of a defense.

Movement is the key to defeating any advantage of the opponent.

Preparation to release your technique is what triggers the reaction of an opponent. This can be used as a set-up, but the opponent must be paying attention in order to be set-up.



First: Identify the opponent's strengths and plan an appropriate defense. Deny the advantage!

Second: Attack from defensive superiority.

Third: Hit when the opponent is *not* set; when he is in transition is good.

Defense requires long-term planning, while offense requires short-term planning. Establish the defensive strategy first.

For a feint to be effective, you *must* cover distance.

Always “close the door” when clearing, by off-balancing the opponent in some way: hit, shove the shoulder, or scoop both elbows.

Lewis categorizes only six different kicks: 1) Front leg; 2) Rear leg; 3) Straight-line; 4) Circular; 5) Low; and 6) High.

Different approaches to set-ups:

Direct approach

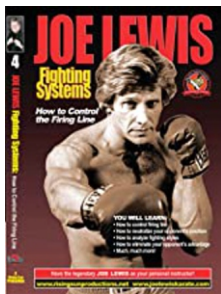
1. Fast lead hand, weapon first.
2. Probes (kicks or steps). “Probes are best kept

just outside critical distance.” Billy Blanks’ probe step is: Drop to a wide *kiba-dachi* twice. On the third execution, keep the rear foot stationary and only drop in the lead foot, covering several inches of advancing without alerting the opponent.

Indirect approach

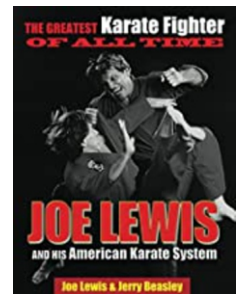
1. Draw step (attack by drawing).
2. Broken rhythm (whether a matter of speed, essence, or direction, at least one must change).
3. Pause-step (for broken rhythm, a stagger-draw; short fighters must usually draw lead foot back a little as they rock to the rear, rather than rely exclusively on the lean to change distancing).
4. Scramble step (head moves differently than the body; the opponent perceives his attacker is switching to both sides of the direct approach line when in fact the attacker is tracking it).

Concluding sentiment from Joe Lewis: “Every war that was ever fought started when a parent struck a child and taught that force is an appropriate and proper means to make someone do what you want.” 🌀



For more on Joe Lewis and his innovative approach to karate competition, there is an extensive reference library available in books and videos, most of which can be purchased at Amazon.com — just search on “Joe Lewis.”

For less serious fare, his martial arts movies are available as well.



Robert Wolfe, chief instructor of Itten Dojo, began martial arts training in 1975 while attending Bucknell University, where he earned a degree in Japanese Studies. Mr. Wolfe has taught since 1985, and founded Itten Dojo in 1992. His articles on martial arts have been featured in publications such as *The Bujin*, *Budo Shinbun*, the *Journal of Asian Martial Arts*, *Bugeisha*, *Aikido Today Magazine*, *Inside Karate*, *Martial Arts Training*, and *Martial Arts Professional*.

