

Sword and Spirit

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— Benefits of Budo —

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

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

These are exactly the benefits membership in an authentic dojo provides.

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Small Victories

At the peak of my training in karate in the early 1990s, with Ralph Lindquist Sensei at the Isshinryu Karate Club, I was the shortest and lightest of the *yudansha* (black-belts) in the dojo. The Isshinryu Club was a fighting dojo, both for semi-contact tournament competition and full-contact, professional kickboxing. The latter category included one fight that was covered by ESPN for which my wife Rosanne and I served as trainers and corner crew. So, even “normal” sparring in class could be fairly intense. Being one of the smallest men in the dojo put me at a considerable disadvantage. Until the point I wised-up, when sparring the other black-belts—who outweighed me by anywhere from 40 to 90 pounds—I would routinely get the living daylight kicked out of me. And that could have been very discouraging.

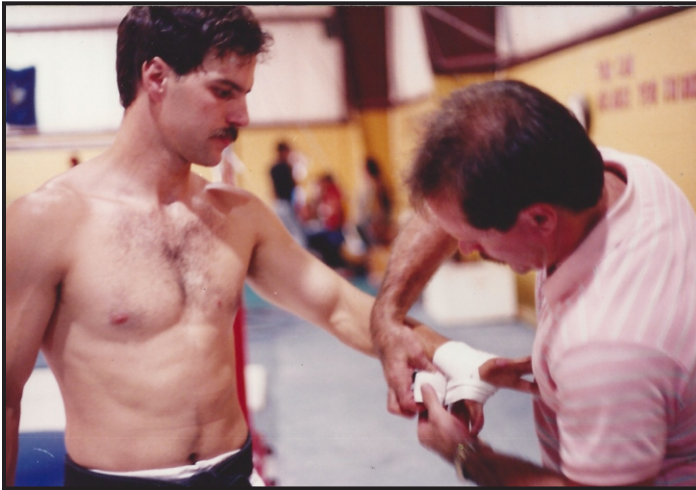
Good example: A couple years ago I needed to have a CAT scan of my torso (all turned out to be fine). When going over the results the doctor mentioned, “Did you know that a section of your spleen is separated from the rest of that organ?” I responded, “No, I did not know that. But I do know exactly when that happened.” It was a *yoko-geri* (side-kick) from Dave Bretz that was one of the two times in the dojo I thought at the moment that I might have been done-in.

Another time sparring with Dave—and he was the one that outweighed me by 90-pounds—we were wearing 16-ounce boxing gloves and making solid contact. In terms of simple physics, it should be obvious that my ability to move a 16-ounce glove was a lot less than was the case for Dave. Nonetheless, I set up a classic left jab, straight right, left hook combination, and the hook landed spang on Dave’s jaw. I put everything I had into that punch, to the extent I tore muscles in my shoulder when it landed. The punch actually shifted Dave about two-inches to his left. And then he knocked me flat with his straight right. A distinctly thorough TKO.

But things started to change for me after I began training in *kenjutsu* (Japanese swordsmanship). Because there are really a relatively limited number of cuts that are practical and effective with a sword, the art is a premier study of *maai* (“interval,” both in physical distance and time), *hyoshi/choshi* (rhythm/timing), and *hasuji* (literally, “blade-line,” the



trajectory and targeting of a cut). Getting used to facing another person who's coming at you with a *bokken* (a wooden sword; what amounts to a big stick)—and some of these other persons were also pretty big, themselves—made lining up across from a big guy whose hands were empty not quite so intimidating. More importantly, my enhanced ability to judge distancing and the trajectory of incoming strikes considerably improved not only my chances of avoiding being hit but substantially improved my chances of landing my own strikes. As my effectiveness increased, and it was obvious to all that my new skills came from kenjutsu rather than from training within the karate dojo, problems arose. But that's another story.



Dave Bretz wraps the hands of Jim Kotzman prior to a kickboxing match.

Psychologically, in order to maintain a positive attitude when sparring the bigger opponents, I began to process the results of individual sparring matches in terms of moments rather than the overall outcomes. I would tell myself that, given the disparity in size and power, if I could avoid being

steamrolled by the bigger guys, I was actually executing at a much higher level of skill than they were. And, as I figured it, any strike that I landed solidly, in that single, momentary engagement, was a “fight” that I could have won. This attitude, whether it was actually a realistic assessment or not, gave me the ability to keep going and striving to get better.

Even if you're not training in a martial art that demands contact fighting, training in any martial art worthy of the name, over any serious length of time, is arduous. And can be discouraging if an optimal attitude and approach to training is not maintained. I recommend focusing on small victories.

Compared to all those that never do the same, just walking through the door of a dojo for the first time is a victory.

For a person just starting training, getting through the acclimation process by consistently showing up for class is a victory.

While it's sometimes okay to go to class with no other intent than to get in a workout and have some fun, a better approach is to set goals for every training session. Not big, grandiose goals, but reasonable objectives that can be addressed in a single practice. Things like a better, more consistent *saya-biki* (pulling the scabbard when drawing the sword) or properly checking “judo time” when entering for a throw. During *mokuso* (brief, active meditation) at the beginning of class, take a moment to set your goal and then, at the end of class, make a quick assessment of your results.

Lindquist Sensei always used to say prior to meditation at the end of practice, “Think about what you did well and let go of whatever did not go well. Until next time.”

Over the long haul, accumulating small victories can add up to decisive wins. 🌀

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 with his senior student Alan Starner founded Itten Dojo in 1992. His articles on martial arts have been featured in numerous publications, including the *Journal of Asian Martial Arts* and *Bugeisha*.

