



36. Speed training for martial artists

There are many types of martial arts: jujitsu, hapkido, kung-fu, muay thai, geomdo (bamboo fencing) and Korea's favorite, taekwondo. All have two things in common: they're combat oriented and physically demanding. Endurance, strength, power and flexibility are heavily incorporated in martial arts. However, speed, agility and coordination are extremely important components of martial arts that you can train outside of the class.

Coordination is the ability to simultaneously control various muscle groups to perform a desired physical movement. Agility is the ability to change direction. The dynamic nature of martial art techniques demands you to move at high speeds, in a coordinated fashion, with the ability to react and be agile.

The faster you can effectively punch, kick, block, throw, choke or lock an opponent's joint, betters your chance of winning the fight. If your opponent is faster, you'll probably lose. Coordination is required to execute techniques perfectly. If you're sloppy performing a technique, an opponent could counter attack and beat you. Martial arts require you to be agile, changing direction constantly and quickly to form an attack, re-direct or react and avoid one. Martial arts recruits every muscle group, therefore, many participants experience strains and sprains, the most common injuries in the combative sport. These injuries can be prevented easily with regular but various forms of training.

Speed is a simple concept; move as fast as possible. Mimicking movements with free weights is one of the best ways of improving your speed. A punch requires you to move your fist from your body to your target. Depending on your physical condition and how conditioned you are, grab relatively light weights, such as 3 to 5 lbs dumbbells and perform punching movements for a period of 5 minutes working up to 20 minutes three times a week. You can use splits such as one-minute punching and one-minute resting. Start off punching slowly, at approximately 40 percent of your fastest speed (use your own judgement). Allow at least a week for your muscles to adapt. After each week of training, increase the speed of the punches by 20 percent until you reach full speed. In the last round of workouts, don't use any extra weight but only your arm weight and go at full speed. You'll notice the difference. Apply this to kicking, blocking and other techniques. Use ankle weights when doing kicking exercises.

You can further increase your speed by overstimulating the nervous system that sends messages to signal your muscles to move. You're training your brain to send the messages faster and the muscles to react faster. For example, running downhill will help you build speed in your legs. You have to "let yourself go."

Allow yourself to almost fall downhill while moving your legs as fast as you can. Don't run in a way that slows yourself down. By taking shorter steps and allowing your speed to increase going down the hill, your muscles need to work faster to continue the running movement, keeping up with gravity's pull on your body

to prevent yourself from falling. This trains the nervous system to work faster to tell the muscles to contract and relax in a coordinated fashion. Start with a small hill and slight slope and increase both gradually.

Coordination is trained in conjunction with speed training. When you start speed training, you move slowly at first, performing the technique perfectly, eventually increasing your speed to its max. The nervous system learns the movements of specific techniques by figuring out how to operate opposing muscle groups together to perform the desired movement. Speed things up and the nervous system re-learns the same moments at higher speeds and gets more efficient and therefore more coordinated, being able to produce smooth, effective techniques to overcome an opponent.

Agility develops with the nature of the dynamic movements applied in martial arts. As the body becomes more flexible and speed increases, muscle tissue adapts, developing more spring-like characteristics and can therefore make many directional changes quicker than before. When you mimic techniques with light resistance when you train for speed, you also increase your agility. Of course there are dangers of injury so start at a slow speed and progress slowly. You're training your system to become more effective by training the nervous system to recruit muscle tissue to contract and relax at high speeds in a coordinated way, producing ballistic movements in various directions.

Training in martial arts has many other physical benefits. Many participants report higher energy levels, a healthier cardiovascular system, an increase in relative body strength, fat loss, better flexibility, a decrease in joint pain and stress release. You could save yourself from being harmed or even your life or someone else's. That's definitely a bonus.

There are many taekwondo academies around Korea. There are only a few places that teach other forms of martial arts. The following list provides contact information on different martial arts in Seoul. Henry Jung, (jujitsu, henry.jung@ub-sw.com) and Seo Sungyeel, (hapkido, at sungyeel@yahoo.com) are all experienced, English speaking instructors. This Korean martial arts Web site has a lot of great information (www.iculturetour.com). It's a great way to keep in shape and your fitness level kicking.