

TAEKWONDO FORMS

**Uncovering the Self-Defense Moves
Within Traditional Taekwondo Patterns**



by Scott Shaw

Photo by Rick Husted

In the minds of most martial artists, *taekwondo* equals kicking. Insiders, however, know that there's a lot more to it than just leg techniques. At the heart of the Korean art lies a set of self-defense moves that employ all parts of the body. It was designed that way so practitioners could be confident that they'd emerge victorious from any type of unarmed altercation.

Throughout taekwondo's formative years—starting in the mid-1940s—its self-defense techniques were fine-tuned for effectiveness. During the latter part of the 20th century, however, it began evolving into an Olympic sport. That process brought numerous rules and regulations that altered the art's self-defense slant. Most noticeable was the de-emphasis on hand and arm strikes, techniques that had been deemed essential to the functionality of the system. The sacrifice was made because Olympic rules prohibited punching to the head.

The rise of sport taekwondo prompted many instructors to veer away from teaching the traditional self-defense curriculum. The trend has been controversial, to say the least, because old-time practitioners believed that abandoning face strikes in favor of body punches would leave students at a disadvantage in a fight.

Hidden in the Forms

For proof that taekwondo was once a comprehensive fighting art, one need only look at its *poomsae*, or forms. In them, you'll encounter punches to the head, knifehands to the throat and elbows to the temples. Unfortunately, such moves see little emphasis these days. Students typically perform them only during the *poomsae* segment of class. The result is that the average practitioner, lacking knowledge of the relevant applications, begins to believe that there are secret

elements, known only to the masters, concealed within the forms of taekwondo.

That's not the case, however. The only reason the myth persists is that so few taekwondo instructors still embrace the self-defense applications. To help you round out your understanding of the art, this piece will explain some of the things you've been missing.

Rapid Penetration

The key to being effective with taekwondo hand techniques is the concept of rapid penetration. That means you must adopt an aggressive linear method of advancing and unleashing your offensive and defensive moves. When your forward momentum is combined with the motion of your hand or arm, your technique becomes more powerful and can penetrate your opponent's defenses on its way to the target.

Part of that recipe for success is simplicity. Forget unnecessary and exaggerated movements, which serve only to slow down your onslaught. Your techniques must be rapid and precise, each one executed as though it will be a fight-ender.

Straight Punch

With those tenets in mind, it follows that taekwondo's primary hand technique is the straight punch. It was designed to facilitate contact between the front portion of the fist and the target in the most expedient and powerful way possible. It will be your go-to weapon in most self-defense situations.

Your fist is driven forward along a straight line, with your shoulder and triceps imparting the power. When your knuckles make contact, they can be in a vertical or horizontal position.

The straight punch is ideally delivered while the elbow of your punching arm is slightly bent because such an orientation

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STRAIGHT PUNCH: Scott Shaw (right) faces his opponent (1). Before the man can launch his attack, Shaw advances, locks his foe's lead arm in place to prevent him from punching (2) and delivers a straight left to the face (3). Note how he rotates his torso clockwise for added power.

offers better balance (you don't have to reach) and protects your elbow (you don't hyperextend your arm). It requires you to accurately judge the distance to your opponent, however. If you're off a little and make contact before your arm is properly extended or after it's straightened, it will still work, but power will be sacrificed.

The straight punch has several advantages over the more common roundhouse punch. During the execution of the roundhouse, your arm initially swings outward and then in toward its target. That makes it slower and easier to defend against. In contrast, the straight punch moves along a linear path right up the middle.

Knuckle Fist

To form the knuckle fist, curl your fingers as you would to make a normal fist but extend your knuckles so they can act as the striking surface. To deliver the weapon on target, extend your arm by straightening your bent elbow, which launches your hand from its midbody chamber position. Use the muscles of your shoulder and arms. The technique is most often thrown to the solar plexus or throat.

Palm Strike

Like the straight punch, the palm strike travels a linear path to its target. To form the weapon, bend back your wrist, then open your hand and flex your fingers at the second knuckle to tighten the muscle that runs along the base of your thumb. Chamber the palm at shoulder level, then unleash the technique by snapping it out with your shoulder muscles. It's most effective when used to hit your opponent's nose, temple or jaw.

Backfist

Once an integral part of taekwondo, the backfist has all but disappeared in modern competition. However, it's still an effective and quick strike that can turn the tables in a fight. To cham-



KNIFEHAND/ PALM STRIKE: The enemy attempts to cut Scott Shaw with a training knife (1). Shaw blocks the attack using a defensive knifehand technique to the elbow (2). He then drives a palm strike upward into the base of the man's nose (3).



REAR ELBOW: The opponent tries to punch Scott Shaw in the head, which prompts the taekwondo stylist to nullify the technique with an in-to-out cross-arm block (1-2). He continues in the direction of the movement he started (3), spinning through and delivering a rear elbow to the head (4).

ber it, bend your elbow so your vertical fist is near your chest at shoulder level. Straighten your elbow to snap out your fist, using the back of your hand to make contact with the target, generally your opponent's head.

The backfist is difficult to defend against because it's so fast. Making defense even tougher, the fist is retracted just as rapidly. That reduces the likelihood that your opponent will grab it and preps your hand for a follow-up attack.

Bottom Fist

To form this taekwondo tool, make a conventional fist but envision hitting with the base of your hand, which runs from the wrist to the start of the little finger. It's delivered with a downward motion, ideally to the top of your foe's head or the bridge of his nose. When you're desperate, however, you can use it to hammer virtually any part of his body without inflicting injury to yourself.

Knifehand

This technique uses a hand orientation that has your fingers extended and the muscles in your hand and wrist tight. Don't relax the tension before or during the strike, or you'll risk breaking your own bones.

Make contact with the base of your hand between the wrist and little finger. This area, which is slightly toward the arched side, is where the hand can withstand the most force. The extension of the arm and the snapping of the elbow power the blow. Your arm should remain slightly bent when the impact is made.

The knifehand isn't a technique that can be used to randomly attack targets. For maximum effectiveness, it should home in on a specific location such as the neck, nose, temple or ribs.

Inside Knifehand

The inside knifehand is formed much the same way as the traditional



KNIFEHAND: The attacker grabs Scott Shaw's arm and prepares to punch (1). Shaw steps through (2), breaks the man's grip on his wrist while chambering his retaliatory strike (3) and delivers a knifehand to the throat (4).



KNIFEHAND/ELBOW: *The aggressor attempts to choke Scott Shaw (1). The taekwondo master disengages by stepping to the side (2) before slamming a knifehand down onto the man's arms while pivoting away from him (3). Shaw finishes him off by reversing his rotation and executing an elbow strike to the head (4).*

knifehand in that the muscles of the extended fingers and the hand are tensed. However, contact is made with the thumb side of the appendage. To that end, you must pull your thumb in tight so it lies against your palm, thereby exposing the inner ridge of the hand.

If the technique is used improperly, it's easy to hurt yourself. Conse-

quently, the inside knifehand is considered an advanced technique. Once it's mastered, though, it can be effective against the neck, the throat and the bridge of the nose because those body parts don't require a lot of force to damage.

Elbow Strike

A frequently seen component of taekwondo forms, the elbow strike can be used offensively or defensively. To execute the forward elbow, bend your arm and strike horizontally with the tip of bone on the forearm side. Turn at the waist for added power, and couple that rotational energy with a forward step for maximum effectiveness. The technique is perfect for attacking the head.

The speed with which the forward elbow can be thrown makes it ideal for infighting. If your opponent has grabbed you, smash him in the temple or face until he lets go.

The rear elbow works when your adversary has grabbed you from behind. Simply raise your bent arm to shoulder height and turn to the left or right, depending on which elbow you're using. Make contact with the part of the elbow that's formed by your upper arm. It's most often used to hit the head or face, but any part of the attacker's body will do.

Entire Art

Obviously, taekwondo includes more than just kicks. In fact, a large part of its self-defense arsenal is composed of techniques that don't involve the legs at all. The art teaches you how to turn your hands and arms into lethal weapons using methods that were refined over decades. It would be a shame if they were forgotten in the rush to embrace the sport version of what to some is still a fierce fighting art. ✘

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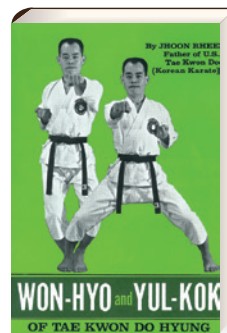


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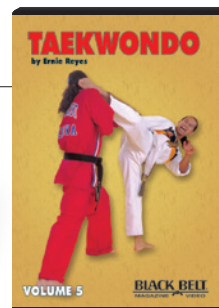
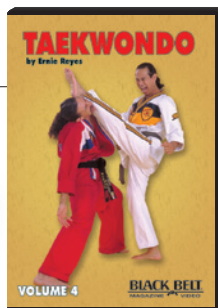
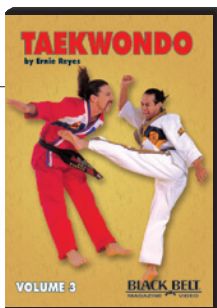
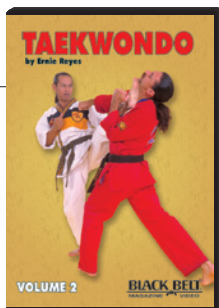
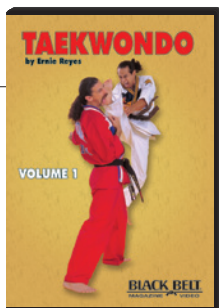
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