

The Ageing Martial Artist – How to Age with Tang Soo Do

(By Simon Joy – 2nd Dan candidate) – 3374 words

Martial Arts are best suited for those in their teens or twenties. They are derived from a world of violence where life expectancy was no more than 40 years – adapted from Old Steel

Am I already too old to train in the martial arts like they should be trained and taught? At 47 it is taking me longer and longer to recover from each session. With ageing and following a significant period of ill-health (COVID) and ongoing recovery, the impact of training is so significant on me that I must either evolve my approach or retire. I have written this essay to describe and plot out my own personal journey, weaving in the tenets of Tang Soo Do where appropriate, in the hope that some of these thoughts will help those that follow. I have not referenced the sources in an academic format; however, I have listed those sources at the end of the essay to credit the inspirations. I conclude that I can very well with martial arts but I have to adapt to endure!

Motivations - Why train if the impact is so significant? I love martial arts and I love the people I train with, a wider family who mutually support each other and like-minded souls with similar hopes and ambitions. I love learning new things and new ways of interpreting and applying the techniques. I love sharing my experience with others, especially with both of my sons for which there is no better feeling of training with and passing on my experience. I am very proud of my achievements, proud of the clubs I have trained with and prouder of those I have (even just slightly) influenced. Tang Soo Do provides a supportive framework and helps me in being a better person.

My mind is attuned with my motivations but balanced against my body

Internal Conflict - Mind Vs Body – What the mind tells me I should do? As I took to the mat again in my early 40s' and after a break of over 15 years since my last batch of serious Taekwondo training I felt euphoric and excited about the ability to train again and to regain so much that was important to me that had been feared lost. I used to love the feelings that flowed from training: being unbeatable in sparring, unbreakable during training and having the odd myth of immortality brought on by watching too many martial arts movies in the 1980s/90s.

Surely, my jump spinning hook kicks were as good as they were when I was 16. Clearly, I could still run, jump, and leap over 3 people and break 2 wooden boards with a flying side kick. Maybe it was always a dream at best, but I must surely still have the stamina to fight 4 x 3 round bouts of full contact sparring and take the gold medal? With maturity and supposed wisdom, my mind will always tell me that my martial arts skills have only got better since my first Shotokan Karate grading in 1987, my 1st Dan in Taekwondo in 1992 and in the 9 years I have studied Tang Soo Do.

External Conflict - Body vs Mind – What the body reminds me I am capable of? With a shock first awakening, there I was in my first participation in a Tang Soo Do grading and completing a spectacular axe kick. Surely my right hamstring is not supposed to spasm like that. Best I lie down like the physio (off duty but a parent and good friend) says. With nods of 'Oh, Simon's injured himself again' we laughed it away. Seriously now, every time I have sprinted ever since, I feel that part of my muscle as if it's about to spasm again. If I can't even kick without injuring myself, I'm not unbeatable.

Another session and time for some Kung Fu grips. It's the last few minutes of the session so what could possibly happen? Wait, he hasn't let go of my fingers... SNAP... Everyone heard it and noticed that my knuckle is now recessed. Let's try and put it back, as it can only be dislocated? No, the x-ray says it's broken. I need a metal plate in my hand and emergency surgery under general anaesthetic. I've never broken a bone before and now I have definitive proof that I'm not immortal.

It's the 3-mile run on my Black Belt grading. This is a great day that I've been working towards for years and I'm going to sprint in the last 50m. Damn, I've hit a divot and gone over on my ankle. Wait, that's the same ankle I injured at Cranwell 23 years before and which has never properly healed. I've got to keep training and complete the grading. How I laughed and maybe cried a little afterwards at the elevated foot in an ankle support with the benefits of painkillers. I'm not unbreakable.

Physical Limits - Facing Realities and Implementing Change (Self-Control). As I've aged, I've faced some significant challenges. Work commitments prevent me training as much as I would like but without training, I run the risk of other problems. I have long been an advocate of training being used to counter potential mental health issues brought on by high workload, stress, travel, and absence from my family. I have generally maintained a better level of fitness in my late 30s/40s than I did in the 10 years after I stopped training in Taekwondo. A sedentary office-based work regime drove me to counter the effects with running and circuit training. Maintaining an active lifestyle is so important for your health! However, successive knee, hip and back injuries led to physiotherapy and the determination that I suffered from pronation (flat-footedness) which undiagnosed had led to those injuries and rather painful shin-splints. You have to seek medical advice when you recognise something has changed for the worse! As a result, running in martial arts shoes and bare foot drives a pain like no other but I now go no more than 6 months without changing my training shoes and orthotic insoles, with an ache in my right knee hitting me like a 'buy-now' action in the Amazon basket for my next pair of Brooks. Invest in the right kit!

Circuit training and ShaunT 'Insanity' sessions drove me to love High Intensity Impact Training (HIIT) – short intervals, big results. Weight was lost and maintained but wear was increased. Good trainers helped with the power-jumps; however, the shock hit my knees and my back - so thank goodness for the foam roller and a decent stretch session. You have to warm-up, stretch and recover! HIIT also introduced new 'aches' and 'clicks' in the knees that forced me to moderate my techniques. I must maintain Self-Control, resisting the behaviours and temptations that will lead to me exceeding my physical abilities and potential. You don't have to hit full power to get the best results!

Barriers - And then there was COVID (Perseverance). These challenges have recently been brought to a focus by my COVID diagnosis in Jul 21. Even double-jabbed the disease knocked me down, preventing even the most basic exercise for almost 3 months and bringing debilitating muscle and joint pain, fatigue, cognitive and sensory issues. 7 months later and having suffered a stress related relapse, I approach my 2nd Dan grading having barely passed my RAF fitness test and just capable of running 5k. A general improvement, with set-backs due to heightened responses to stressful scenarios, has made me re-assess my approach to fitness. The best advice from my consultant was to be kinder to yourself and do not harshly judge when expectations are not met, on what has been a significantly challenging physical, emotional and cognitive marathon. I must use this Perseverance to maintain progress through difficulties and in spite of obstacles.

'It is often said that a sports star will die twice, the first time at retirement'

Mental Health - Tackling the Fear of Ageing (Humility). There are some pretty serious implications faced by professional sports stars once their careers come to an end. Loss of identity, status, the routine that supports their training, the loss of camaraderie and interaction with teammates and the positive recognition and adulation from crowds. Similarly for the practicing martial artist and instructor, we risk mental health issues should we not plan to address the potential loss of self-esteem and pride once the moment actually does arrive that we have to stop training – the day when we might no longer be 'special' or 'cool'. One of the most challenging tenets of Tang Soo Do is humility, from probably the greatest battle in martial arts is with one's own ego, importance, self-esteem and self-worth. Identifying the triggers for such stresses and preparing for them is critical.

Some thoughts of my own triggers and how I might respond:

Example of Trigger	Example Response
'The day doing nothing hurts more than doing something'	If I want to keep training, I will need to modify and evolve my approach to extend my participation
'The day I gain that serious injury and I can no longer call myself a practicing martial artist'	Practice accepting, letting go and moving forward. Educate, nurture and support rather than train and teach
'The day that I embarrass myself by being unable to perform the technique'	Take care, learn your body and know your limits. Rely on senior students more
'The day I am laughed at for my inability, not just for another injury'	Teach as you can, practice honesty and being open. Laugh with errors and celebrate success
The day that I become bitter or say something mean through jealousy or frustration because I can no longer do what I love	Resist any embarrassment about what we have become, as we cannot do anything about it. Leave as many good memories as possible

This is all pretty serious, which is why it becomes even more important to honestly reflect and seek support from friends, family or across peers. The support framework within the club becomes especially important in managing these stresses, as does the need for being humble and modest when considering one's ability against others.

'Now I am older, I understand we have to accept who we are' – Jackie Chan

The Benefits of Training into Old Age (Indomitable Spirit). It's fair to say that I'm not the warrior I once was and that my future training will be shortened if it's all about punching, kicking and blocking, as I will simply just wear out. However, without training I would almost certainly be in a worse position than I currently am, so why stick with it?

Enjoyment. We train because we love it and for all the benefits described in my motivations. As a senior grade, working behind the scenes on club procedures, policies and insurance has proven challenging but really rewarding. I have gained further instructor, first aid and safeguarding qualifications. I have been instrumental in maintaining a safe and regular training session at Waddington that has seen the club thrive since the return from lockdown.

Feeling Better. We could let our bodies diminish or we could choose to make it healthier and stronger for longer. Whilst the older I get and the more aches I feel, the benefits are so much better. It just makes it more important that you recognise that the chance of injury is greater and that it is harder to heal. The impact of not training would be so much worse.

Memories. Through my 35 years of training, I have made amazing friends and have amazing memories across multiple clubs and styles that endure to this day. Bringing those memories and experiences into the current family-orientated club environment and creating a positive learning and supporting culture around life-long friendships is fantastically rewarding. We are making more of those memories that will live with our students for the rest of their lives.

Education. Passing on our knowledge to others is amongst the greatest reward. Watching students grow in confidence, ability and in self-esteem. Sharing in the reward of successful gradings and the achievements gained through learning more demanding techniques. Growing new generations of instructors to either follow their own paths or even succeed you in your own position.

There are so many mental and physical benefits, even if getting on the mat on a Friday is one of the most difficult things to do. Even if the commitment is challenged by work and family obligations, the advantages of the Indomitable Spirit outweigh the detrimental impacts. Reward comes to those that endure.

'It is important that karate can be practiced by the young and old, men and women alike'
- **Gichin Funakoshi**

How to Train into Old Age. Considering that in the Far East you see hundreds of people of all ages in the parks practising Tai Chi, there is no doubt that martial arts can help combat the ageing process. Whilst any attempt to prevent ageing or turn back the clock might ultimately be futile there are definitely strategies that can be used to mitigate the change that time brings. I could cover nutrition, sleep and meditation but these are non-negotiables for my training – as is the recognition that Yoga will play a huge part in this. What I will cover is how I will apply the combination of the following 6 considerations to keep me training for years to come:

Strength. It's said that between the age of 30 and 80 you'll experience a 30% decline in physical strength due to muscle atrophy, caused by the loss and shrinkage of muscle fibres. Boosting strength is possible through exercise. Rather than just seeking the benefits but slightly debilitating effects on the joints of HIIT, I would seek to build a more balanced training regime, focussing more on weight training across chest, back, legs, shoulders and arms to improve strength, build and maintain muscle and strengthen bone density. I would also incorporate an element of weight training through my Tang Soo Do by practicing basics, forms and through contact pad work. The intensity of such workouts will also release endorphins and boost the benefits to mental health. During lockdown and with outdoor exercise limited, I used the regular routine of the online Lift4 (Beachbody) regime combined with online Tang Soo Do classes to significant benefit – weight loss, strength gain and positive mental health followed, albeit I had to turn the dining room into a weight room and this can be equipment intensive and expensive.

Flexibility. The loss of collagen with age reduces overall elasticity within the body. Flexibility reduces as a result as the muscles, joints, tendons, cartilage and ligaments become stiffer. I feel the effects of age in how frequently and high I can kick right now. As the easiest of workouts to complete on your own and with the added benefit brought by relaxation, a regime of stretching through martial arts should help combat the effects of ageing. Stretching regimes must begin with general loosening – neck, shoulder, arm, body, hip and arm rotations, basic leg, chest and side stretches. For more than the basic stretch, this should be supported by a cardiovascular warm-up and lead into the variety of groin, hamstring and quadriceps stretches. Paying attention to weak areas, such as knees this should be tailored around ability, moving from easy to more vigorous techniques and involving even breathing throughout. There is only one way that I will be able to maintain my high side kicks and that will be through stretching. Pronation of my feet and years of kicking require me to focus heavily on hip stretches. Every training session must start and finish with stretching, in order to combat those aches and pains that follow a class. My target is to be able to enter and exit splits again by the time I am 50 and without serious injury.

Posture. I work at a computer every day. I look at the keyboard when I type one-fingered. I struggle to get up when sat on a hard chair. Poor posture can lead to tension and pain within the lower/upper back, neck and shoulders, plus the potential for spinal issues. It can create poor circulation, digestive and breathing capacity issues. Practicing martial arts encourages good posture and proper body mechanics. The execution of forms and techniques demands good posture. Ensuring that I introduce the good postural habits of forms into my daily life will help combat the negative effects and counter the sedentary lifestyle created by my daily work regime. My target is to pay closer attention to poor posture in my daily life. I have inadvertently done this for a number of years by using a yoga ball for home working to keep my back straight at the desk. Correct posture during stretching will also be critical, with a flat back essential to ensure correct rotation of the pelvis and from developing a sore back. My target is to introduce some of the traits of Tang Soo Do posture into my daily activity, sitting more upright, fighting the tendency to slouch and finally learning to touch-type so that I'm not hunched over the computer.

Balance. One of the most basic principles we teach beginners – balance - is one of the first things to go with age, linked to muscle tightening and weakening and making it even harder to sit down or stand or correct imbalances. Practicing stances, footwork, shifting the body weight and breaking down kicking into the constituent parts will all help maintain and develop balance. I will be ensuring that I include balance in the warm-ups (knee stretch), holding the kicks within chambers during line work, drilling the stances and transitions.

Endurance. Despite the natural decline in stamina and endurance due to the ageing process, increased heart rate and strength training can help fight the decline. Maintaining regular exercise to raise the heart rate, maybe 30 mins per day and up to 5 days a week, and the introduction of strength training will enable longer exercise through boosted stamina and endurance. For the reasons of COVID mentioned earlier I have used the NHS Couch to 5k system twice to build and maintain my endurance. I have had to balance my expectations several times whilst struggling through bouts of fatigue and the impacts of over-exercise (including elevated Creatine Kinase enzyme in my blood due to excessive strength training and excess fatigue as a result of long-COVID). I will keep up the routine of martial arts training, strength training, limited HIIT, light jogging and dog walking.

Concentration. As you age the mind begins to subtly decline. In tackling this, martial arts will maintain and improve performance across attention, self-control, reduced aggression, greater stress management, enhanced emotional well-being and memory. As I approach my 2nd Dan having suffered significant cognitive issues related to long-COVID brain fog, there have been times when I have struggled to remember the routine of the martial arts class, to maintain focus on multiple activities and to feel safe in supervising students. With the support of the other instructors and students and with the structure and discipline created by preparing for 2 grading cycles, my recovery is now almost complete and ample demonstration of how Tang Soo Do can boost the brain.

Conclusion. I love martial arts, learning new things and sharing my experience with others. I am proud part of the supportive framework within Tang Soo Do that brings the best out of people. I recognise that I was never unbeatable, unbreakable or immortal but that I need to maintain an active lifestyle for my health and to seek medical advice when I recognise something is wrong. It's important that I invest in the right kit, warm-up, stretch and recover every session, to help avoid injury. I need to maintain self-control and be kinder to myself when my expectations are not met. There so many benefits of training into old age but to age successfully with martial arts, my training needs to adapt and include facets dedicated to strength, flexibility, posture, balance, endurance and concentration. Rewards come to those that endure. Tang Soo!

'Youth is the gift of nature, but age is a work of art' – Stanislaw Jerzy Lec

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