

Effective Sparring

Jonathan Wallace, 5rd Dan

Types of Fighter

There are a number of styles of sparring, each one takes a different style of combat. To become a good martial artist you'll need to learn how to handle each kind of combat.

Kickboxer - This is the kind of fighter that tends to rely on their legs to score points and can be thrown off guard if you get in too close to throw good kicks. Keep your hands down low until you can get in, most kicks go to the mid-section.

Front Leg Fighter - It is difficult to get inside of these fighters because they are light on their feet and are often found in a back stance so that their leg can come up at any time. It is easiest to bait them by moving in on them and catching their leg. They'll panic and back up, trying to get into kicking range again, you can use this panic to get a few punches in.

Rear Leg Fighter - These are slower fighters, but more powerful. It may take two arm blocks to a kick, but they are less balanced. Using a sweep you can get them off balance and their arms will flail, making their heads easy targets.

Jumpers - Very light on their feet and usually athletic, these fighters can score points from the air and jump in and out of range quickly. Try staying in one spot, lots of their kicks will fall out of range. Try scoring points before they while they're in the air.

Boxer - Staying rooted to the ground and using their hands to score points, these fighters like staying in close and are more easily scored upon by kicking. However, their hands can cause trouble if they rush you so keep your hands up near your face, they won't kick you very much so you can afford to make holes down low.

Grappler - Usually formerly wrestlers these fighters like to be in close and utilize pushes and sweeps to control you. Staying in a low stance will make it more difficult to push you around. If you are light on your feet you can side step their advances and use side kicks to score points.

Dealing with your handicaps and exploiting theirs

No two fighters are the same and you will have certain advantages over your opponent and they will have advantages over you. A skilled fighter knows how to turn his or her opponent's advantages against them. This is how.

If they're bigger than you - Bigger (most of the time) means slower. Circle around them, making them constantly move and stay out of the way of their hands, they can push you off balance easier than you can with them. Utilize front leg kicks and quick jabs. Get in, score a few points, then get back out to a safe distance.

If they're smaller than you - Stay in one place and let them come to you.

Smaller fighters tend to use their speed as an advantage, by staying stationary, you eliminate some of the movement of the fight and make things easier to manage. Push forwards and move them backwards, this gives the illusion to the judges and your opponent, that you are in control.

If they're slower than you - Stay in front of them and only circle around when they rush you. You can spend a lot of unnecessary trying to circle around to someone's weak side. Shoot in a score a few points, then go right back out of range. Stick and go.

If they're faster than you - Faster fighters tend to believe that they can hit holes that you can't see at any time. By creating a hole on purpose you can bait a faster fighter into a trap. Create a hole and block the incoming strike and counter it. Don't chase them around, pushing forwards is good, but chasing shows lack of control so stay put and let them come to you if they start running around.

If they're left handed - This is a big advantage. You're not used to his backwards stance so stay back, out of range and watch how they move. Swatting at their lead hand may open up their head and allow you to score punches up high. Front leg kicks don't work in this situation unless they are reverse kicks (reverse roundhouse, hook kick.) Crescent kicks are also useful in close. Coming up from behind your opponent, they can't see it until it's already scored, very useful.

If they're tricky - These fighters will throw lots of techniques that are not on target, simply to get you to remove your hands from scoring targets. If you find that your opponent is doing this (throwing wide punches, kicking your calf) then it is wise to not move your blocks as much. Keep your arms in like a boxer and absorb the strikes with your arms instead of reaching out to block them. If they hit your arm, the point doesn't count.

Bad Situations

There are situations in sparring matches that allow an opponent to score a flurry of points in a short amount of time. Here I show you how to create those situations and how to get out of them.

Corner Traps - Tae Kwon Do (and most other) rings are square. The corners are perfect places to make someone uncomfortable.

Creating the Trap - To get someone in that situation you have to be the aggressor. Move right in and out of their comfort zone, they will instinctively back up, or circle. If they circle, cut them off and push them into the corner, from there you go score tones of really quick punches, staying close and don't kick.

Escaping the Trap - Getting out of this situation is hard. In some competitions, simply stepping out of the ring will cause a break in combat and you will be brought back to centre. If that's not the case then (upper ranks) can throw a quick jab to the solar plexus. It will make them stutter and give you a change to sneak out and maybe even reverse the fortunes. If contact is strictly forbidden then you can resort to a sumo wrestling style push. There are no rules that say pushing is not allowed, use it.

Constant Sweeps - Getting a sweep is the best show of dominance that you can do. A kick or punch is impressive, but it can't be seen from all four corners of the ring, a sweep is definite from wherever the judge is.

Creating the Opportunity - Sweeps are hit or miss so don't miss a golden opportunity. If your opponent is in a deep front stance, all of his weight is on that front leg. Pull it sideways. Rushing your opponent pushes them backwards quickly. As you go in do a reverse hook kick behind his knees, this will trip them up and down they go. In a clinch a circular throw will work as well.

Blocking the Sweep - Staying in a back stance against a sweeper will nullify most of his attempts, but if they get in close you need to go to a more rooted stance (horse stance.) If you feel off balance, as if they are sweeping you, grab their gi. You'll either stay up or take him down with you. If you get swept and don't get a hold of him, don't think, just throw out a kick. If you score on him on your way down, it nullifies the point and if it lands they'll think twice about sweeping you again. Pop right back up, the judges will be just as impressed with a good breakfall and rollup and reward you for it.

Injuries - I'm not going to say how to injure someone because it's immoral and I dislike those who fight to hurt someone. If you get injured though, don't let your opponent know it. I always feel badly for hurting someone, but if they show it, I'll take advantage of it. Fight with your injury in the back. If it's your left leg, put your left leg back, there is less chance of them capitalizing on your pain and you will put up a better fight.

Uneven Matches - It is possible to beat a fighter that is more skilled than you. By playing defense and acting weak your opponent may get cocky and throw some flashier techniques. By slowly racking up counter strikes his confidence will get diminished and will start throwing more desperate moves. A psychological attack is a powerful tool against someone who is physically superior to you.

Aggressive Opponent - Whoever controls the general direction of the fight, is controlling the fight. Backing up is a sign of weakness, but you can't let them rush you. A side kick or a reverse side kick to the hip will stop even the largest opponent in their tracks, it's their centre of gravity so applying a force there will physically make it impossible to move forwards.

Counter-striking

Most of the points that are scored in tournaments (especially at higher ranks,) are from counter-strikes, not attacks. For each technique that is throw there is an appropriate counter-strike that will almost certainly score if done quickly enough. Here's a list of the main ones.

High Punch - **1)** High blocking this technique and throwing a quick, lead leg front kick will score on their mid-section. **2)** Throwing an arm block to the outside and then backfisting the head will also score almost invariably.

Middle Punch - An arm block to the inside and using the same arm to chop the neck or temple will score, but beware of his another hand, you expose your kidneys to them in this counter.

Front Kick - A low block or a leg block will knock that out of the way and a punch to the midsection with the other hand will score. Bring your blocking hand immediately up to your head though since both hands have to go down to do this counter.

Roundhouse Kick - Doing an elbow block (boxer block) as you lean back and do a hook kick over top of it will score about half of the time. Their hands are there, knocking their leg in a strange way will cause his hands to spread to keep their balance.

Hook Kick - Down an double knife hand block will stop the hook from reaching you and your bottom hand is in prime position for spear hand their abdomen as they become upright again. They can't back away until they are centered again. That instant that they aren't is pouncing time.

Crescent Kick - Ducking or backstepping is the best defense against these kicks. Get ready to pounce back in though. From the time that their foot has passed it's target until it gets back on the ground, he's not balances properly and can't retreat or drastically move his hands. Fixate on an opening and move into it.

Side Kick - An easy kick to grab, so use that. Use a scooping block (like in Pyahn 2) to move it aside and get ahold of it. Yank the leg towards you and throw a short punch to their side as they fall into you.

Jumping Kicks - If they are close enough to score then rush into them. This will make them uncomfortable and force them to try and back up. They will be rushing backwards as they land, an excellent candidate for a sweep.

Spinning Kicks - Step into them, you will end up on their back, too close to them for the kick to score. You can use a hooking punch or a ridgehand to score on their midsection.

Reverse Roundhouse Kick - This is a move that I use extensively because it's difficult to defend against. A low block will offset it, but a shin block is more effective. Low blocks don't work well because no matter how strong your low block is, the larger leg delivers more power, and most of the time it will push right through your block. Only by using your leg can you effectively stop it, from there you can throw a punch. Your opponent (unlike almost every other kick) leans forwards to do this, so they are within punching distance.

Drills

There are a number of drills that one can do to to become a better fighter. Some improve coordination, others improve reaction time, others imbed techniques into your muscle memory, all increase your skill.

Hanging Lemons - Called this because in Okinawa it was done with lemons, you can use a tennis ball. Hang it from the ceiling from a string and hit it. When it comes at your head, block it. Avoid getting into rhythms, rhythms don't help reaction time. If you feel up to it, hang two from hooks only a few inches apart.

Hit them and block them while preventing them from tangling. Make sure that your blocks are technically good.

Instance Sparring - Also called Flash Sparring you go back and forth with a partner, throwing one attack at a time. The defender blocks and counters. This is useful for determining which counters work and practicing them. It also trains you to recognize which type of technique is coming much quicker.

Forms, Forms, Forms - Forms are specifically designed to embed technique into your muscle memory. This makes them more technical when you fight, and that makes them more effective.

Lucid Dream Fighting - In sparring, contact is not allowed, but in lucid dreams you can hit as hard as you'd like as well as dilate time to see how techniques work in slow motion. Your subconscious will recreate them as you have seen experts do them. Avoid unrealistic (Matrix-style) techniques like high jumping and flying. Don't try new techniques since dream balance is flawless and it may not work the way you planned in real life.

Meditation - Specifically for before tournaments, deep breathing and clearing your mind will help you cope with nerves from fighting new opponents in front of more people.

Punching Bag - Throwing new combinations of techniques might get you hit in practice so a good idea is to practice them on a bag first or in the air first. A combination might seem like a sure way to get a point, but in practice lots of theoretically good combinations will take you off-balance.

Fight - If you don't practice, you won't get better. Fight people that are better than you, watching what they do will make you mimic the moves that work. When it comes to recognizing the coming technique and thinking four or five moves ahead, you just can't do it without practicing.

Golf / Bowling - Both sports use the hip, which is where all of your martial arts technique come from. Your strokes / bowls will go in strange directions if you use too little or too much hip rotation. It's less obvious in martial arts unless you looked at power and the arthritis of older masters who did it just slightly wrong.

Football - (Soccer) This increases eye-foot coordination. Juggling a football around once a week or so will dramatically improve the accuracy as well as speed of your kicks.

The Bouncing Ball - Bouncing a ball off of a wall and catching it improves coordination and hand-eye coordination as well as your forearm muscles. You can also bounce it off of the ground. The harder you throw the ball and close that you are to the wall means the faster your reflexes have to be to catch it.