

Aurora Martial Arts
Corvallis, Oregon

Dear Older Me:
Benefits and Drawbacks of Starting Martial Arts
as a Teenager versus as an Adult

Black Belt
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Preface

I love the martial arts. I never expected to, but I do. I was 16 years old in January 1987 when my mom “made” me take a self-defense class. I was only expected to take it for six months, which is how long my mom was willing to pay for classes. When the six months were over I was hooked. So hooked I paid for classes myself.

When I was 19 years old, I left for New York to become a nanny. I’d just completed my second degree brown belt test. I spent the next several years in and out of class and finally earned my first degree black belt in Western Tae Kwon Do at the age of twenty-seven. The major motivating factor for getting my black belt was my husband and I wanted to have a second baby. I felt that if I was going to put in the time and energy to train for this major event, that was the time. I rose to the challenge and am so glad I did. I stayed with that style until about 2010. After three kids and a 30 minute drive each way for class, it was difficult to maintain.

“Quitting” karate was hard, but it was even harder to tell my instructor I was taking my daughter to a different karate school. Sarah was seven years old and the only one of my three kids who was interested in martial arts. I’d taken her to a parks and rec class when she was six years old, to see how it went for her. I was very impressed with the instructor, Lou Donadio (Mr. D.), and how he worked with the kids. His family were all involved in the program, which I also admired. Sarah and I were both interested in the school, but at the time it was out of our price range. It took about another year, before we were finally in a place where we could afford the lessons. So, I enrolled her at Aurora Martial Arts. This began the second phase of my journey in the martial arts. As a parent of a martial arts student.

Sarah stayed with the system through junior black belt, second junior black belt, and up to first degree brown belt in the teen/adult curriculum. When Sarah achieved junior black belt and moved into the teen/adult program, I started classes with her. And like that, my third phase began. I started as a student at Aurora in November 2016. I had opted to wear my black belt and therefore I advanced through the ranks quietly. Western Tae Kwon Do was a mixed martial arts school, combining Tae Kwon Do, American Kenpo, and jiu jitsu. Because I had some background in Advanced Kenpo Training System (AKTS), I was familiar with several of the self defense moves. As a result, I earned a yellow belt rank about two weeks after starting classes. Naturally, my progress slowed down, but for one hot minute I was technically a higher rank than Sarah.

When I was at the rank of advanced green I asked Mr. D. if I could wear the corresponding belt. I wanted to tackle the advanced ranks and testing with the same uniform as my peers. I felt much better about being in class, camps, and testing wearing the belt of my rank. Now, several years later I'm ready to test for black belt. It's been an amazing journey thus far, but it's far from over.

Acknowledgements

There are so many people who have helped me along the path to black belt. My first training partner, Brendan Doiran. Other notable partners: Leela, Scott, and Olivia. The Brotherton family- Trina, Shawn, Kalina, and Kindan. All four are great martial arts, friends, and training partners. Appreciation to Sean and Edward San Ramani for their patience, guidance, and instruction. Of course, the Donadios. They have become more than instructors to me, they truly are family. Mr. Sepulvada who continues to inspire each and every time I have the good fortune of training with him. I should probably thank my kids for their support, even though they didn't have much choice. Finally, I want to thank my mom. If it wasn't for her insisting I take a self-defense class, I might never have become involved in this amazing art.

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Introduction

In his book, The Eight Paradoxes of Great Leadership: Embracing the Conflicting Demands of Today's Workplace Tim Elmore asks, "How long does it take for an average person to earn a black belt in karate?" His answer is that average people don't earn black belts (Dodd, 2021). And here I am, someone who feels quite average, on the verge of earning my second black belt.

What on earth was I thinking? At 46 years old, I was starting a new martial arts system. Unlike when I started at 16, though, I had every intention of earning a black belt. But would I make it? I had so many doubts and fears. Concerns about injuries, decreased flexibility, and the fact that I was so much older than most of the students in class. Even my training partners throughout the ranks were typically about 30 years younger than myself. The differences between starting as a teenager compared to as a middle aged adult had a strong impact on my performance, both mentally and physically. American Kenpo Training System's founder, Ed Parker, designed the system to be individualized, so that each person training would reap the most benefits from the System.

Benefits for Teens

When I started martial arts, I had little background in sports or other athletic activities. I'd taken ballet when I was quite young, done a touch of gymnastics, and played softball, but that was about it. I'm also not naturally gifted in flexibility, agility, or coordination. I had youth on my side and that was about it. It turns out youth is a huge benefit. According to Amy Morin of Very Well Family, martial arts offer the advantages of improved balance, self-awareness, motivation and work ethic, physical fitness and muscle strength, flexibility, self-esteem, improved cognitive function, patience, self-respect, and a sense of community (2022, para.15). I can attest to the benefits of all of these characteristics. To be fair, though, people of any age would likely reap these benefits.

For myself, the benefits I felt I most experienced were self-esteem and physical fitness. I am naturally an introvert. I'm okay with being more reserved now, but as a teenager I saw this as a disadvantage. By the time I graduated from high school, however, I felt a sense of pride that I was the only person in my high school class who participated in martial arts. By that time I was close to a brown belt and feeling pretty good about my skills. I was even highlighted in my senior yearbook because of it.

Besides the boost in self-esteem, I was benefitting physically as well. Flexibility has always been a disadvantage for me, but with regular stretching in class I was able to do a front kick to my head level. I could do side and round kicks above my belt. Besides static stretching, we also did a lot of partner stretching from which I greatly benefited. I was also stronger and had better cardiovascular endurance. This was put to the test at my black belt test.

I was 27 years old when I tested for black belt. I had a toddler at that point and had been able to lose all of the baby weight. Like at Aurora Martial Arts, the last part of the test is sparring. Unlike at Aurora, the test involved only one candidate. Me. So by the time I got to sparring, I'd already completed all of my forms, combinations, self-defense, and whatever else the panel had decided to throw at me, all alone. There weren't any rest periods during the first part of the test. Now it was time for sparring. One and a half minutes of three on one, with an additional 30 minutes of one on one. There was a new opponent every five minutes. I made it through that sparring because of my training, youth, and sheer will. To be honest, I can't imagine going through it again.

Disadvantages for Teens

With so many advantages to martial arts, it's hard to imagine there are any disadvantages. Some of the concerns regarding teens taking martial arts involve the risk of injury, the conception that martial arts promotes violence, and concerns regarding media portrayal of martial arts (Morin, 2022, paras 18-30). I'm not sure my mom had any of these concerns when she signed me up for lessons. Injuries are part of any sport, but certainly are inherent to a contact sport such as martial arts. I was naturally a non-violent child, so this was also not an area of concern. I became interested in martial arts movies after I began classes. By then I had no delusion of being the next Bruce Lee or Jackie Chan. I did enjoy watching movies with classmates and it was a fun way to bond at my instructor's house.

Other potential risks for teens include: burnout, lack of motivation, and lack of discipline (Pride, Martial Arts for Teens, 2024). These are areas that definitely had an influence on me as a young adult. If it hadn't been for a natural drive to keep learning and growing, I'm not sure if I would have continued. I also have a strong aversion to quitting or giving up on things, which also probably helped. I remember being an older teenager and grumbling with a classmate about how much was expected of black belt testing. At this point we were both third degree brown belts. He quit. I kept at it. I saw this again with my own daughter when she quit at first degree brown belt

Benefits for Middle Aged Adults

One study (Miller et al., 2022) focused on five areas of physical fitness: strength, mobility, aerobic endurance, flexibility, and balance and coordination. Not surprising, all five areas were improved in adults taking martial arts. As was noted earlier, people of all ages are likely to see improvement in these areas. The difference is that middle aged adults tend to naturally decline in all five physical areas, whereas teens are still piquing in their physical abilities. Martial arts is a way to either maintain or improve these attributes.

In the interim between martial arts systems, I did indeed experience a decline in some of these areas. Mostly in flexibility, aerobic endurance, and strength. I still felt coordinated, but that was about it. In watching some of my classmates of comparable age, it's fairly easy to tell which students have a background in martial arts, gymnastics, dance, or similar activity. They tend to be more coordinated and pick up self-defense moves and forms more easily.

The benefits to middle aged adults goes beyond just physical. There are a number of emotional and mental advantages to starting martial arts as a middle aged adult. The mental and emotional benefits might carry more weight for middle aged adults than for teens. Better memory, increased brain capacity, and mind-body connection are mental benefits of training as an older adult (Mitoma, 2024). These are not necessarily aspects that occur to teenagers. To be honest, they didn't occur to me as a middle-aged woman. "Martial arts training requires concentration, focus, and the memorization of techniques and forms. This mental stimulation helps to strengthen memory pathways and enhance overall cognitive function", according to Finn Mitoma of The Combative. I would agree with this statement. It takes a huge amount of memory to learn 124 self-defense techniques, 15 forms, 13 combinations, plus various other moves. This can be mentally exhausting, but so worth it.

Disadvantages for Middle Aged Adults

The good news is that there are very few disadvantages to starting martial arts in middle age, or any age for that matter. The one pitfall to aging and martial arts is the amount of time it takes to recover from injury or illness (Davies, 2024). I have been fortunate enough not to have sustained very many injuries during all of my years of training. The worst injuries were a sprained ankle and at another point I damaged my achilles tendon. Of course it was on the same ankle. Both happened when I was right around 50 years

old and kept me off the mat longer than I would have preferred. This ended up having more mental effects than physical. For a long time I was overly cautious when doing body work. I was just too afraid of getting more injuries that would prevent me from training. I wasn't nearly this cautious as a teenager.

Discussion

Personally, I feel the biggest differences I've found between training in my teens and twenties versus training in my forties and fifties have been the mental challenges. It's been difficult to not develop the same flexibility I had in my twenties. It's also hard trying to keep up with my younger classmates. This has been a mindset I've worked hard to shift. It has taken several rounds of hearing Mr. Sepulveda and Mr. D. saying the system was designed to be individualized, for me to semi-transfer that line of thinking into my movements. Mr. Sepulveda routinely tells us "older" testing candidates we don't need to keep up with the younger students. This can be especially difficult for me because I've seen how much I've "lost" in my physical performance. I have never moved like some of the younger students, so not only do I compare myself to them, I compare myself to the younger me.

One well-known kenpo saying within the Ed Parker-John Sepulveda lineage that I'll paraphrase is, "focus on what you can do, not on what you can't do." I first heard this after my good friend, Trina Brotherton, earned her first degree black belt in the AKTS. Like me, she is also in her fifties. She is inspirational to me for many reasons, particularly because when she started training in her forties it was without any prior experience in the martial arts. I had the prior background which has helped me both physically and mentally. I can't, however, stop the effects of aging and need to focus on what I can do, not what I no longer can do. If I can't be as physically flexible as I was in my youth, I can at least be as mentally flexible. And as I'm finding out, I need to be even more flexible as I get older.

Conclusion

The mental and physical effects of martial arts training can be both challenging and beneficial. Advanced Kenpo Training System is beautiful in that it is meant to be tailored to the person. This was Mr. Parker's vision and this philosophy has been continued through the lineage. It makes the art accessible to anyone no matter what age they start or with what background they might have.

I have no idea how long I'll continue doing martial arts. I had one classmate who was in his eighties when he finally stopped training. I have several classmates who are older than me. I do know this, though. Twenty-six years, nearly to the day, after I earned my first black belt I will be earning my second one. This is not the feat of the average person. In fact, it's quite extraordinary.

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