



THE NEW FIGHT CLUB

Martial arts classes have lately become as ubiquitous on the extracurricular landscape as guitar lessons. Everyone is a karate kid. But there are a handful of exotic fighting arts that you may never have heard of

Mahafreed Irani | TNN

Karate, which literally means empty hand in Japanese, has serious competition from a host of esoteric styles that are gaining popularity among the discerning few. Think Matt Damon-style Filipino stickfighting, ninjastyle bone breaking and Japanese swordsmanship which aims to maim. Not everyone can try them, since both mental prowess and physical agility are essential for besting an opponent.

KYUDO| Not About Bull's Eye

When Ronak Gandhi practises Japanese archery, hitting the target is the last thing on his mind. The third dan black belt in kyudo, an ancient contemplative practice which originated in Japan, has his auditory senses fine-tuned to catch the sound made by his bowstring. It is the quality and pitch of this twang, called the tsurune, that determines the purity of the exercise and the proficiency of the performer.

Kyudo, the way of the bow, descended from the Japanese military practice of combat-style archery called kyujutsu. But today, the art is not practised as a form of self-defence but as a method of spiritual and moral development. "The goal is expression of truth, goodness, and beauty in both archery and life," explains Gandhi. At his long-range dojo (training place) built on a farm in Ahmedabad, Gandhi practises this form of standing meditation wearing a white kimono (a button-less training shirt made of thickly quilted cotton), pleated black hakama (wide-legged pleated trousers) and white tabi (split-toed socks). Unlike an ordinary bow, the yumi (Kyudo bow) that Gandhi holds is asymmetrical and is taller than him (over seven feet). "At the time of release, the objective isn't hitting bull's eye. It is important to maintain a calm state of mind as it is reflected in the attitude, form and the shot itself," he says. One of the world's most prolific authors, Paulo Coelho, also practises Kyudo.

In India, the art is limited due to a paucity of trainers and the exorbitant cost of equipment, but the 36-year-old

master, who has been practising Kyudo for over 12 years, is optimistic about its future in India. He has plans to start a federation in the country soon.

ESCRIMA, KALI, ARNIS | Filipino fighting

The burqa doesn't impede enthusiastic Muslim girls as they learn Escrima, a Filipino street-fighting art, under the expert tutelage of Mumbai-based Radhika Shaikh. Shaikh teaches her students the art of self-defence using rattan sticks (28-inch-long sticks which are resistant to splintering) and daggers. But if push comes to shove, then items you might have on hand like a comb, a pen, a brush, a deodorant can, a purse, a newspaper, a magazine, a foot ruler or even a chappal can become a deadly weapon. "Defang the snake without killing it," she counsels her students, most of whom are women who come from lower-economic backgrounds. "I tell them to hit the limbs of their opponents and decapitate them".

Unlike other Asian martial arts training routines, Escrima students are first taught how to strike, parry or thrust weapons and then emptyhand techniques. Matt Damon learnt the art for the Bourne movies.

Escrima lays emphasis on agility. National-level competitions in India allow students to showcase choreographed moves set to music. A panel of five judges gives points to the participant based on techniques, aesthetic value, synchronisation with music, and how deftly the 10 ft by 10 ft ring is used to perform. It takes two years to be awarded a black belt in the art and around six months to learn the basics.

Radhika, who teaches at the National School of Combat Art in Worli, says Escrima doesn't place too much importance on belts. She recalls her sensei's advice, "Belts are to hold your pants up, not to tie on your head." Her student, 24-year-old Deesha Barot, was first introduced to Escrima in school. "We were taught how to defend and attack with sticks, lathis, nunchakus and knives." It came in handy when she had to fend off the unwanted advances of a college Ro-



NINJUTSU STARTING AGE | 14 years FITNESS

| Ninjutsu exercises stress on natural movement and spontaneity besides sharpening reflexes BRUISE RATING | Zero chances of injury if practised with a certified sensei

meo. Today, Radhika and her fellow teachers train students from 10 Mumbai schools in martial arts like Escrima, Muay Thai (Thai kickboxing) and Pankration (Greek wrestling). Radhika got hooked on to the art through her late husband Arif Shaikh who learnt Escrima 25 years ago. He would write letters to teachers in the Philippines and request them to teach him. He was invited to learn at the reputed Dooe Pares club. Having conducted workshops at various call centres, she guarantees one doesn't have to be Akshay Kumar to

practise this form of martial art. Age isn't a barrier, as Radhika gets students between 6 and 85. Her advice: "Run when you get the chance. Saving yourself is more important than saving your ego."

NINJUTSU | No Holds Barred

In a nondescript bylane of Mahim, you may perchance stumble upon a shop called Ninja Outdoor Survival, which deals in deadly merchandise. The display proudly boasts of over a 100 different weapons from the shuriken (metallic throwing stars that ninjas conceal under their sleeves) to different kinds of knives, sticks, blades, swords and nunchakus. The man behind the counter is 9th degree blackbelt holder Cyrus Rustomji, India's ninja grandmaster, who is well-versed in ninjutsu, the martial art of stealth, invisibility and espionage.

"The golden rule of ninjutsu is that there are no rules," he says. Legend has it that the rich

Samurai landlords were tackled by poor peasants using various martial art techniques, which have now been combined to form the ninjutsu method. At his Bandra dojo, Rustomji imparts lethal training in stick arts, blades, chains and projectiles. His students choose from a huge bag filled with weapons like the katana (samurai sword), manriki gusari (chain weapon), jungle stick (3-foot stick), an old man's stick (walking stick curved at the end) and the tonfa (side-handle baton). "I've studied boxing and kickboxing but got bored of the same thing," says Shaikh, who prefers ninjutsu because it lets him master an endless number of weapons. It takes around seven years of training in ninjutsu to earn a black belt.

At the end of it, students are trained in lethal striking and throwing techniques, locks, chokes, nerve and pressure point attacks and bone breaking,



IAIDO STARTING AGE | 16 years FITNESS | Iaido training develops mental endurance and precision of thought. It also increases self-control and stamina BRUISE RATING | Soreness in the back, arms, thighs after practice

Disguise and impersonation are taught too. But couldn't some students misuse these techniques? "I can tell if a student comes to me with bad intentions," says Rustomji, a retired merchant navy officer who collected and learnt the use of exotic martial arts weapons during his trips to countries like Burma, the Philippines, Japan and China. This art can come in handy for stuntmen, police officers, commandos and guards who have to tackle dangerous situations. Around 100 Mumbai police personnel have also learnt how to wield their threefoot lathis for defence, the ninja way.

IAIDO, KEN JUTSU | Drawing Swords

Vile Parle's Mehul Vora carefully selects students for his Iaido (pronounced ee-eye-doe) class from the various contenders that approach him. "It's for serious practitioners," he says. "My duty as the 16th generation swordsman of the style I practise is to choose only the right people." The sacred art Vora teaches is obscure and this master prefers to choose students who have no martial arts background to train in the art of the sword. "The most useful space in a bowl is its emptiness," he says.

Iaido is a contemporary Japanese art of quickdrawing a katana (single-edged sword), slashing an imaginary opponent, then flicking off the imaginary blood from the blade before returning the sword in the scabbard.

While Iaido or moving meditation is a martial art known to improve concentration, Vora also teaches battlefield killing and maiming using the sword. This combative form is called ken jutsu.

Pics: Bhadresh Gajjar, Prasad Luke



KYUDO STARTING AGE | 15 years FITNESS

| This contemplative practice helps improve concentration and reduce stress. Modern Kyudo is practiced for mental and spiritual development. BRUISE RATING | If practiced right, there is no chance of any injury. Initially, practitioners who hold the bow too tightly, get bruises on the left palm. If the practitioner practices with a very heavy bow, there are chances of muscle pulls

Iaido is not for the weak as it involves using your forearms and biceps to swish a sword over a thousand times to perfect just one cut. There are over a 1,000 cuts and every Iaido style has its own secret cut, which is only passed on from master to student. Prearranged sets of steps and cuts called wazas are taught. So there's a waza to chop off the opponent's neck and a waza to chop off an arm. At three, Mehul was sent to karate class because his mother thought he was a sickly child. Vora's Iaido classes are held eight times a month at a fee of Rs 1,000 in Mumbai. It takes around 15-20 years to master the art. There is no system of coloured belts to represent rank attained in Iaido. Etiquette is given importance in order to prevent damage to the sword, injury to the practitioner using the sword, and injury to others in the room.

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