

Cutting Class

Bringing out the samurai warrior in you. BY LIZ NEPORENT



WHEN I WAS 8 and my brother Mark was 10, we got into a massive battle with hockey sticks. It ended in an impressive head wound for me, along with no TV privileges for a week. As usual, Mark escaped unscathed and unpunished.

This was my one and only experience with martial arts, but I never forgot it. So it was vindication that piqued my interest in a hot new fitness trend: samurai sword fighting. I saw a flyer for private lessons at the gym and decided that vengeance could be mine for only fifty bucks.

I arranged to meet my instruc-

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tor, Master Hun, at an exercise studio in New York City where he rents space. Based on the polite, formal emails we exchanged to set up my session, I pictured him as a wise old Japanese warrior draped in robes, part Jackie Chan, part Yoda. So it took me by surprise when Hun turned out to be a stocky twenty something Korean dude with a Brooklyn accent wearing baggy Gap sweatpants. He quickly informed

me that “Master” is just his stage name.

Hun says he’s hoping the recent Tom Cruise movie *The Last Samurai* will do for sword aerobics what *Cool Runnings* did for Jamaican bobsledding. He says that sword-fighting appeals to all sorts of exercisers, but women in particular gravitate to it because wielding a sword can be a great equalizer. Packing muscle isn’t as important as using your sword wisely. The movie *Kill Bill* has already filled his classes with Lucy Liu and Uma Thurman wannabes.

Hun starts by having me hold a wooden replica of a sword out in front of me with both hands. Then he places a golf ball at the base of each of my thumbs and tells me to walk. I doubt the ancient samurai masters trained with golf balls, but this actually turns out to be a pretty revealing exercise. The balls keep rolling off my hands and bouncing to the floor until I learn to how to move steadily and to balance the weight of the sword evenly.

Next we move on to the cuts. There are five of them, each based on the part of your opponent’s body that you hope to eviscerate: the head, neck, belly, thigh and ankle. Some of the cuts are tricky. To lop open your opponent’s jugular, you have to raise the sword up over your head, swing it around in a U-shaped pattern and then follow through like you’re slugging a baseball over the backfield fence. The sword is heavy, and even after I learn the pattern to the right side, I simply cannot translate it to the left.

After about 30 minutes of drilling cuts and stances, Hun wants me to experience making contact with my opponent, so he gives me a long foam bat that looks like a safety-minded barbecue tool. I’m frustrated by my lack of skill, so I take a whack

at Hun with the bat when I think he’s not looking. He laughs and lets it go, but I realize this is a bit like poking at a good-natured circus bear; he’ll tolerate it for a while but when he’s ready, he’s got the reflexes to kill you in about seven seconds.

After a few quick technique pointers, Hun gives me the official green light to start batting away at him while he just stands there. I find this very satisfying, even though I’m not very good at it. According to Hun, I do many more cuts than necessary and far too little strategic thinking. I leave plenty of openings for my enemy to skewer me. If these had been real swords, or even hockey sticks, I’d be toast.

When the foam bat exercise is over, that’s the end of the lesson. We bow to each other and Hun presents me with a white sash that wraps around my waist to hold in my “chi,” or energy. It makes me feel like an authentic Samurai warrior. And it makes me look thinner, too.

Samurai conditioning, at least as taught by Master Hun, is more “thinky” than “sweaty.” I can’t vouch for how many calories I burned, but I did get a decent upper-body workout waving the sword-like devices around. And I definitely felt that if I took a few more sessions, I could fine-tune my coordination, agility and balance. It was a terrific way to relieve stress by imagining that I really could kill Bill — my older brother Mark — and get in shape while doing it. ■

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CHANGE ME: A new look at an old aerobics standard.