

ISLAND SCENE

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Defense Mechanism

A jujitsu student learns to take a licking and keep on kicking.

By Marlene Nakamoto



Photo by Marlene Nakamoto

The ultimate goal is black belt. The intermediate goal is to advance to the next rank. The short-term goal? Go to class.

The Hawaii Jujitsu Kodenkai (HJK) holds classes three times a week, of which the faithful, studious, dedicated and enthusiastic attend all three. I average two classes a week, and whenever I make it to three, I feel somewhat deserving of sainthood.

Jujitsu is not easy.

Case in point: On one of many nights, I'm working out with Nicky Nolan, who, at 15, is the youngest student at the HJK. I'm old enough to be her mother. We're practicing *ogoshi* ("hip throw"). Facing Nicky, I place my right foot perpendicular to hers, and try to pull her off balance with my left hand as I put my right arm around her back and step behind with my left foot, while making sure my feet aren't too far apart as I bend my knees, stick my hip out to the right and turn to look as far to the left as possible. Nicky is supposed to go over my hip

and land on her back on the mat. Instead, she rolls off my side, still standing.

She tells me to stick my hip out more. I try the *ogoshi* again, and throw her to the mat. I say, you're never too old to learn from someone younger than you -- especially when they're better than you.

Jujitsu is an ancient Japanese martial art from which other martial arts -- such as judo, aikido and some forms of karate -- were founded. Translated, *ju* means "adaptable or flexible" and *jitsu* means "technique." The HJK practices *danzan ryu* jujitsu, a system developed in Hawai'i in the 1920s by Henry S. Okazaki. Okazaki blended various jujitsu styles with other arts such as Okinawan karate, Chinese kung fu and Filipino knife-fighting. He named the system in Chinese to honor one of his teachers, Wo Chung, who referred to the Hawaiian islands as *danzan*. *Ryu* means "style."

I started studying jujitsu because I wanted to learn how to roll. As an intermittent volleyball player, I thought that such a skill could help me follow-through after digging tough spikes. Besides, it looks cool to roll.

So in two years, I've learned to roll. And fall. And escape, throw, takedown, strike and use my *ki* (energy) to help me focus. But there's much more to jujitsu.

What have I gotten myself into?

About 20 people, ages 15 to fiftysomething, are active at the HJK in Nu'uuanu. Sensei Steve McLaughlin, a fourth-degree black belt, presides over the "club," as he calls it, with his wife, Linda, a black belt.

"The club is here to help people," he says. "The lessons learned in jujitsu help you deal with life; it changes how you look at things."

Maybe I'm a little thick or maybe it's too early in my jujitsu career, but I've yet to consciously apply jujitsu principles to my everyday life. Nevertheless, I get a lot from jujitsu now.

For me, jujitsu is more mental exercise than physical. Since the art relies on using your opponent's weight, motion or momentum to your advantage, physical strength isn't needed. While 15-minute drills of rolls and falls offer some cardio benefits, the remaining class time usually doesn't. I get my strength training and cardio workouts elsewhere.

Jujitsu requires memorization, visualization and problem-solving skills -- all brain workouts. We also study anatomy (if you know how it works, then you'll know how to break it), and massage, a "restorative" art (you break it, you fix it).

Classes begin with a warm-up and stretches, which immediately pose a challenge for me: It seems I'm the only one who can't bend down far enough to touch my toes.

When we are warm and supple, we bow to each other, and hit the mat ... literally.

We do a series of rolls from several positions: kneeling, standing, backward and sideways. We also do something called "spear rolls," which, we're told, could be useful when jumping off the back of a moving truck. (Sensei likes to give practical applications to most everything we're taught.)

Then we fall on our front and our back. Sensei teaches us how to do this without breaking any bones, knocking the breath out of our lungs, or getting a concussion. Learning to fall without getting hurt is a skill I can use anywhere.

Included in this workout are "straight-overs." Standing up, we swing our arms and one leg backward, spinning our bodies forward 360-

degrees, landing us flat on our backs. It doesn't hurt. After two years, I'm still amazed at the physics of this move, and never tire of watching my classmates practice it. Yes, I've done it, too, and can be rather smug about it.

The HJK curriculum is organized into different groups of escapes, holds and throws, etc., that are required for each rank. Sometimes we'll work on our rank requirements, other times Sensei will teach a special class on meditation, *ki*, weapons, or variations of one art.

What makes jujitsu so challenging? Like other sports, it requires mind-body coordination. This is harder than most sports I've tried, however, especially when my mind and body just won't connect. It's frustrating and discouraging.

I have an excuse, though: I'm a slow learner. Make that *really* slow. I'll eventually learn the art, just give me some time.

But what if it's more than that? Sometimes I think I don't have what it takes to be really good at this art. Sensei tells us, "Jujitsu doesn't have to be an obsession, but it should be your focus." Focus takes time and energy, things I don't always have ... for jujitsu, anyway.

Still, the rewards I get from jujitsu keep me coming back.

Physically, I don't feel as vulnerable as I used to. Knowing I'm not totally helpless, I now project more self-confidence. This attitude can help deter potential bad guys. When I play the "what would I do if" game in my mind, I think of several options that can help me escape and inflict minor injury. Stand and fight? I'm not at that level yet. But just you wait.

Mentally, I'm constantly challenged by jujitsu; I'm always learning something. And since I'm growing older, brain exercise can help me keep an edge on what I still have.

I also have a new circle of friends in jujitsu -- good people with admirable focus and dedication, people who make class fun and are a joy to be with, outside of class, too.

I started as a white belt, advanced to blue, and now hold a second-degree green. Will I get to black belt? I'm telling myself that I can. I just need to study. And practice. And visualize ... and go to class.

The journey doesn't end at black belt, however. "Black belt is where the learning really begins," Sensei says.

I think I'm in it for the long haul.

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