

Your Martial Art Buddy

First time for everything

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~written by Jill Roth

“The hardest step students will ever perform, is walking through the front door of your martial art studio”, shared our master.

People often tell me that they have always wanted to try a Martial Art, but, seldom do they just walk into a studio and try it on their own. If you have had an interest in the martial arts, but didn't know where to start, here is your chance! I want to be your martial arts buddy! We will chat about: how to find the right martial art and studio for you, and what to expect on your first day.

"Bowling is your way of showing respect to the other students, the instructors and to honor this as a place of learning. It is mostly a moment to honor what you will become in this place."



I firmly believe there is a martial art for everyone. Martial arts can improve your memory, physical fitness, lower your stress level, develop your spirituality and help you make new friends. Finding the right martial art for you is worth the effort. There are an amazing array of martial arts from which to choose.

One way of categorizing different martial arts is into two general types: styles that mainly emphasize punching and kicking (Karate, Kung Fu, Tae Kwon Do), and those that mainly emphasize grappling and throwing (Aikido, Judo, Jujitsu). Many styles include both strategies, but most emphasize one over the other.

Another way to categorize the different styles is by the level of “martial” versus the level of “art”. Two styles that focus more on the “martial”, and less on the “art” are Krav Maga or Mixed Martial Arts (MMA). Krav Maga is known for its focus on real-world situations and extremely efficient in brutal counter-attacks. Mixed Martial Arts (MMA) is a full contact combat sport that allows the use of both striking and grappling techniques, both standing and on the ground, from a variety of other combat sports.

Alternatively, you may be interested in a slower, more meditative martial art such as T'ai Chi or Qi Gong. Both of these styles are considered more internal and focus on energy and flow. Spending some time analyzing your goals will help you choose. Is your main focus: self defense, spiritual development, physical fitness, or perhaps making new friends? These questions will guide you during your search. Now that you have some different styles to check out, you should narrow it down to the right studio in which to practice.

(Fun note: dojo – is the name for the martial arts studio used by Japanese martial artists, and dojang is the name used by the Korean based arts)

You can start the search for your dojo by jumping on the internet. If you enter “martial arts in your town, or state several schools should pop up. A quick look at their website should help you narrow your scope.

1. Do you like the description of the martial art?
2. Do they offer classes that match your schedule?
3. Do you like the “feel” of the website?
4. Does it fit your budget?

Your next step is to go meet the instructor in person. You should call and see if they prefer for you to watch a class first, come in for a private “intro class”, or attend a class that fits your schedule. We will discuss in depth later what to expect, but for now, let’s focus on what you are looking for in a studio. During your visit, your biggest question is do you like the “feel” of the studio? Some people like intense martial arts, for some, a more relaxed atmosphere is the perfect fit. Let’s face it, you have to feel comfortable there or you won’t go back. You want to have a comfortable connection with the instructor. Are there multiple instructors? What is the typical class size? How often would they expect you to work out? Are there testings for belt promotions, if so, what are they like? Is the instructor continuing his/her education? Is there physical contact during sparring with other students? Do you need previous experience? Are there other women? But, most importantly, do you like it there?

Ok, you’re ready for your first class. Take a deep breath, it’s going to be great. They will tell you whether or not they suggest an intro class, private class or for you to jump right in with both feet and try a class. In any case, here are some basics to expect. Plan to wear comfortable clothing. I would suggest long pants and a short sleeved shirt that fit loosely and be prepared to take off your shoes. Bring a bottle of water for later. Be sure to ask them if they have any other suggestions or requirements. There is typically a place that you will bow in the studio. This could be by the front door, as you enter the mat, or some other specific spot. Bowing is your way of showing respect to the other students, the instructors and to honor this as a place of learning. It is mostly a moment to honor what you will become in this place.

Your class may start with the students repeating an oath. This is usually about the conduct and goals of the class. Alternatively, the instructor may make some quick announcements. E.g. introducing you to the class. Typically your workout will start with warming up, and this could range from being quite gentle as in a T’ai Chi class to more vigorous as in a Krav Maga class. Stretching is usually part of your warm-up segment. Next, basic moves will be introduced. These can be a combination of blocks, strikes, rolls, and kicks. From there, you might practice some forms or katas.

These are a preset series of moves that help the student practice fighting techniques without a partner. One step sparring, and practicing pre-arranged moves with a partner, is a good transition into actual sparring. It depends on the school whether or not sparring will be part of every class. Often there will be special times or classes set aside for sparring as it takes a while for the students to put on their protective gear. Classes usually last between 45-60 minutes and are often wrapped up with announcements by the instructor and/or an oath indicating how the student's wish to conduct themselves in life.

After your first class you will want to take time to chat with the instructor about any questions that you still have. Feel free to ask about costs. Often times instructors are fabulous martial artists yet uncomfortable, at best, at selling or communicating the value of what they have to offer. They will probably be relieved if you bring money up first. All schools are different. Some will have short-term contracts 1-3 months and others will sign you up for a year or more. Be sure to stay within your comfort zone and budget.

Remember even Bruce Lee had a first day. Most people were nervous in their first class and will be supportive of you during yours. The martial arts can improve your life in innumerable ways. Improved physical fitness, mental clarity, stress relief, and spiritual development are just some of the gifts you can receive from the martial arts.

Good Luck!

-JR