

Christopher Broughton

Breaking Down a Sparring Drill

This thesis is to help instructors understand how to teach sparring drills, to effectively break down, implement and progress this into a sparring situation. 'Breaking down a drill' will analyse my way of teaching and learning sparring technique's through drill work. I believe this way of teaching and learning is the most optimal way for an individual to learn as it creates the space for understanding. As it is through understanding that we are able to truly appreciate the technique, ultimately resulting in being able to utilise and adapt the technique within a free sparring situation.

I will focus on five stages starting with the choice of a technique and looking at the different steps for how to break this down. Then moving onto a numbered stage system, how to use it dynamically, limited sparring and finally moving onto free sparring. It is important as an instructor to understand how to break down a sparring drill in order to effectively teach the technique and how to implement it appropriately in sparring.

Breaking down a technique

Look at the full technique, break it down into steps by completing the movement in slow motion and noting what each part of your body is doing when completing the movement (feet/hips/stance, arms, trunk and head). Now write down each part of the sequence into steps. Once you have done this complete each step exactly how you have written it and make any changes needed.

Now that you have broken down your technique choose two verbal cues for each step. These cues need to be approximately two words describing the action, eg. 'Heel up'. The importance of the cue words in conjunction with the sequenced movements is key to creating a self-checklist that the student retains and can regurgitate when needed. This can be a fantastic tool not just for training but also for competition. As a coach you can reinforce and remind the student while they are in the ring, it is short and precis creating a line of communication that both you and your student understand without needing detail.

Count stage system

Now to put into practise the technique you have just broken down. It is important to start the lesson by introducing the technique, demonstrating the full technique and its purpose. From here we start to teach each step of the technique without a partner. Introducing your verbal cues into each step. You can do this in many ways, line work, in the mirror, in a circle etc. Ensure that during this time you correct technique and complete each step at least 10x before adding the next step. This will allow time for your students to understand and practise each step, avoiding them becoming overwhelmed and using incorrect technique.

Eg. Single attacking side kick (Chosen technique broken down into steps)

Position

Stance – side facing stance with bottom facing toward the opponent, back foot is under your centre of mass and turned slightly backward. Feet are approximately one fist apart.

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Hands – front elbow is stuck to your hip, palm facing down. Back hand is covering chin to protect face

Sequence of the movement

- I. Lean backward, Heel lifts with knee facing downward, supporting leg gentle bend
Cue words: “Knee down” Heel Up”
- II. Push off supporting leg to move forward
Cue words: “push forward”
- III. Extend kicking leg outward when pushing off, driving with the heel of your foot
Cue words: “heel leads”
- IV. Complete same activity again with twisting your upper body in the opposite direction
Cue words: “rotate core”
- V. Recovery, after extension bring back to stage one, maintaining weight over supporting leg
Cue words: “knee in” or “retract”

Dynamic without a partner

Now that your students have started developing the technique in a controlled environment it is time to start progressing the use of the technique. We do this initially by decreasing the stages into two steps; “stance and technique” eg. ‘Stance, kick’. It is important to ensure that the student understands how to get their body into a good position before attempting the technique. Without learning to get into the correct position the student will struggle to throw the technique and not understand how to move from a natural sparring stance into the position required for executing the technique. Creating a good base/stance ensures optimal performance and readiness for the execution of the intended technique.

When the student starts to move with ease we need to challenge them through adding their own footwork and movement linking their natural sparring movement and the newly taught technique. Once you believe they are moving well during this make the call only one count, completing the whole stance and technique in one the count. This is where you would start introducing shadow sparring and imagining the application of the technique to further understand and practise moving between ready stance and the technique.

It is vital that we continue to remind students of the verbal cues, or add other ones that are personal to the development of the individual student. It is common that most students will make the same mistakes forgetting a step and rushing the technique. It is up to you the instructor to monitor this and request them to take it slow to build a good foundation.

Limited in a drill with a partner

The next step is to move onto target practice. Initially we start with a static partner and a pad on the desired target. The pad holder will catch the kick and call the verbal cues as above if necessary, reminding the student of the steps to ensure proper technique is maintained. It is important that the pad holder is consistent with their positioning of the pad and makes no attempt to try and disrupt the execution of the kick initially. This can cause a loss of confidence in the kicker, the feedback from the pad will be not satisfying and may even result in injury.

The next step is to start introducing the technique to be executed when initiated by the pad holders body movement instead of a call. Enabling practise for accurate rhythm and timing of the technique. This is an important step that is often missed and results in students not understanding where and when to throw the technique. By adding extra foot work, faking and other techniques we can make the pad work more advanced as we see fit. But be careful to keep it simple in the earlier stages as to not overwhelm the student. It is vital that the student can perform the technique under pressure in this environment as progressing too soon to more free flowing sparring would result in less chance of scoring the technique, a loss of confidence and decreased chance of continuing to practise the technique.

When teaching I always remind my students to “aim small, miss small”, meaning if the focus point of the target is very exact and small the distance in which you are likely to miss is decreased. To help aid this I try to use small pads that are similar size to the target at hand. Another tip is to put small dots on large pads directing students to aim for a very precise target.

As the student starts progressing we then challenge them with more movement and pressure. The pad holder moves like they are sparring with fakes and footwork to confuse the student. A good pad holder will make a student miss a few times to just put enough pressure on for the them to realise they have done something wrong. If the student starts failing more than 50% my suggestion would be to slow down and have less deception. We must always be aware of our student’s ability and advise for them always to be challenge their partners as well as scaffolding them to succeed. It is essential to have this balance so that your students feel like they are achieving while continuing to progress their skill.

Limited sparring

In limited sparring we make the student perform the technique in a more live sparring environment, we remove all choices and focus on single techniques. This way the student knows what they are doing and what their opponent is doing. Removing all unknown factors in which beginners usually are hesitating about. Ultimately taking away the fear from trying the new technique, creating a safe space for learning.

We do this through partner one having the technique that you are teaching, partner two has to try and get his hip on their partners’ hip. They can block and get any body part in the way, basically be really annoying and not strike. This is where we develop appropriate accuracy and timing of the technique. The drill has become more like a game and builds up some competition an important part of the drill and motivation for learning the technique.

The next stage is to have the technique accompanied with one other technique. Limiting the techniques to two allows for creativity with the technique while maintaining a controlled environment. It creates the space for the students to trial other techniques to draw out or open up the place for possible points. It helps to teach how to use a technique in a variety of scenarios and understand its strengths and weaknesses.

Deception is a very big part of this sparring and this is where a student not only learns to throw the technique correctly but starts to develop their ability to read and control their opponent. Various movement and fakes help disguise the true purpose behind the students’ intention. Therefore, being in a limited scenario forces creativity, and a further understanding of the technique and movement.

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Often I will come back to this style of training with my students to encourage further adaptation of their technique.

Free sparring

The final stage is using the technique in free sparring, by now the drill should be somewhat second nature. It is important not too just go and spar naturally, rather have a main focus of landing the technique. E.g. You have to attempt the technique 3 times and 3 times only in a 2 minute round plus spar normally. The student is forced to use the technique plus be cautious as not to waste energy and time chasing and throwing away opportunities. As the drill is being developed you can slowly start adding other techniques and footwork as combinations to compliment the technique. This is slowly moving toward free sparring while still creating a focus on the technique learnt.

Through this the student has to start thinking about strategies and start adapting to what their opponent is doing. As time goes on they will find the best way that suits their own bodies, different situations will require slight variations of the technique and the system is designed to be adapted depending on the situation.

Your student should now have a good understanding of how, where and when to utilise the technique. This will have built a strong foundation of the technique and from here it is now just repetition. Training these drills should be done with various partners, so students learn to utilise the technique against varied styles of sparring.

As an instructor you are only limited by your imagination. Sparring can be a very difficult area of Tae Kwon Do if it is not understood by an individual. It is essential as instructors that we understand how to best support and nurture our students from the fundamentals through drills into free sparring. I believe through understanding, breaking down the different techniques utilised in sparring and giving adequate time to each technique you will build a confident and competent sparrer.