



# OVERCOMING THE FEAR IN FREE SPARRING

Essay for 3<sup>rd</sup> dan grading – October 2021

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## **Introduction**

This essay is submitted as a Taekwon-Do research topic for the 3<sup>rd</sup> dan grading application. The research topic “Overcoming the fear in free sparring” was specific to the free sparring discipline in Taekwon-Do and was selected because of the author’s personal struggles in free sparring. This challenge led the author onto a discovery journey for this important discipline in Taekwon-Do.

My earliest memory of free sparring was as a white belt at a club training night. While this was a new experience, it was neither positive nor enjoyable. This was followed by an abundance of opportunities in free sparring when progressing through the grades. Often experiencing an intense level of fear during the bout and a strong sense of failure afterwards. The repeat of this cycle led to a self-discovery journey with a logical start to pose the first question on, ‘What is free sparring in Taekwon-Do?’

## **Free sparring in Taekwon-Do**

Taekwon-Do is composed of<sup>1</sup> fundamental movements, patterns, dallyon<sup>2</sup>, sparring, and self-defence techniques. It is impossible to segregate one discipline from another because they are closely linked in nature. As an example, fundamental movements are essential for sparring and patterns while perfecting fundamental movements are vital in sparring and patterns. Notwithstanding these linkages, we will focus on the sparring discipline with specific emphasis on free sparring.

Sparring<sup>3</sup> is a physical application of attack and defence techniques gained from patterns and fundamental exercises against an actual moving opponent or opponents under various situations. It is classified into six categories namely, pre-arranged, semi-free, free, model, foot technique, and prearranged free sparring. Free sparring<sup>4</sup> is an open combat with controlled attacking and prohibition of attacking to certain vital spots. The two participants are free to attack and defend on using all available means with one exception of stopping the attacking tool just before reaching the vital spot. Apart from the physical aspect, free sparring is a very important part of Taekwon-Do to build courage, experience, sense of victory and ability of performance.

## **Psychological and physical aspects**

While the research title is on fear as a psychological challenge in free sparring, it is important to explore psychological as well as physical aspects. This is due to their inter-related nature in free sparring. The author also considered that improvement on any psychological aspect will enhance the physical performance in free sparring and vice versa. For this reason, the author has put similar emphasis on both aspects in this research.

For the interactions of two participants in the actual situation at a free sparring bout, it is essential for oneself to know his or her physical and mental capabilities as expressed in a quote from Sun Tzu’s The Art of War<sup>5</sup> “*Know yourself and know your enemy; in a hundred battles you will never be in peril*”. A useful means to achieve this is through, self-reflection and assessment. To explore this further, a

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<sup>1</sup> Taekwon-Do condensed encyclopaedia, by General Choi Hong Hi, Fifth edition 1999, page 725

<sup>2</sup> Dallyon is a Korea word with the meaning of “equipment maintenance”

<sup>3</sup> Taekwon-Do condensed encyclopaedia, by General Choi Hong Hi, Fifth edition 1999, page 598

<sup>4</sup> Taekwon-Do condensed encyclopaedia, by General Choi Hong Hi, Fifth edition 1999, page 658

<sup>5</sup> Sun Tzu the art of war, translated and with an introduction by Samuel B Griffith, Oxford university press, page 84.

snapshot of self-assessment was made through an online-survey of a group Taekwon-Do practitioners including the author. Findings are discussed below.

### **Free sparring survey and findings**

An online survey<sup>6</sup> on the free-sparring discipline was undertaken with a target group of Taekwon-Do practitioners ranked 6<sup>th</sup> gup or above from the Paul M Papakura club and the Warrior Taekwon-Do club. A total of 35 responses were received. The survey was intended as a self-assessment with seven questions covering the physical and psychological aspects in free sparring. This is to recognise the inter-related linkage of the physical and psychological aspects in free sparring. A snapshot of the survey is provided in Figure 1.

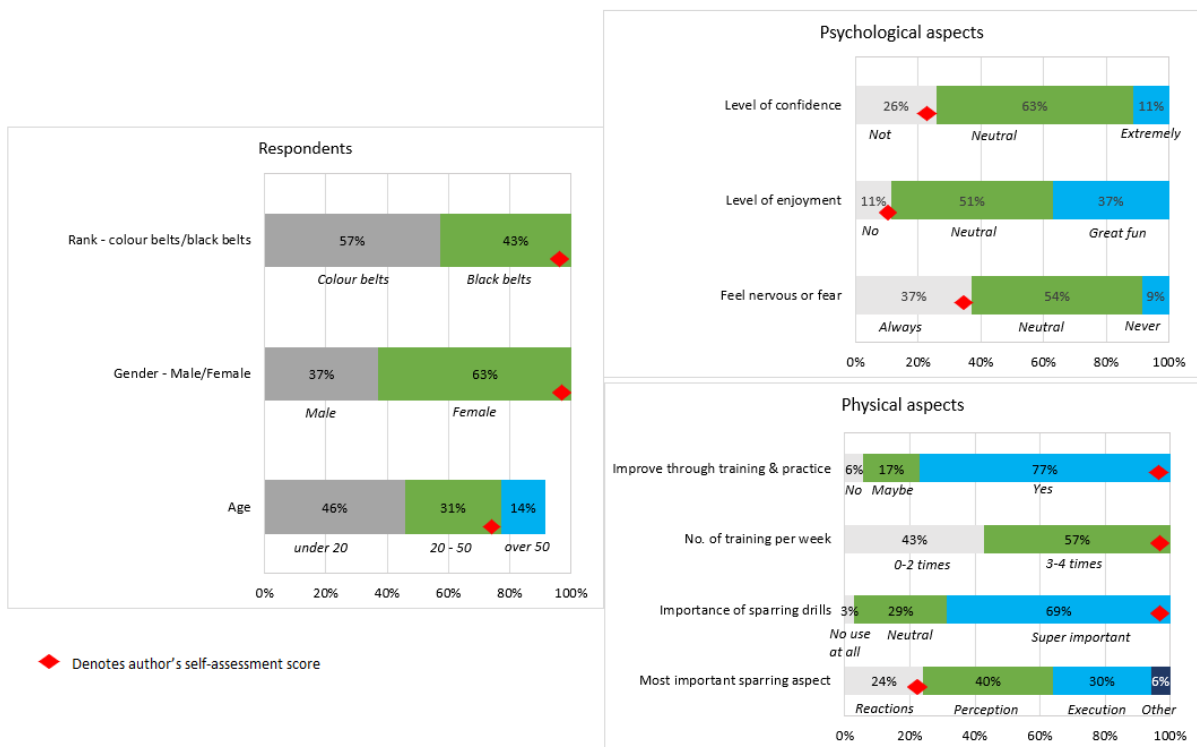


Figure 1 Free sparring online survey result

The survey identified that,

- In psychological aspects, over 30% of the respondents experienced a nervous feelings or fear and there is a direct correlation between the level of confidence and the level of enjoyment.
- In physical aspects, perception and execution are ranked as the top two most important elements and over 70% of respondents agreed that training and practice is required to achieve improvement in free sparring.

Psychological and physical aspects of free sparring are discussed further below covering the key elements and steps to improve free sparring.

<sup>6</sup> Free sparring survey, April 2021, by 35 respondents with rank 6<sup>th</sup> gup or above from Paul M Papakura and Warrior Taekwon-Do clubs.

## **Psychological aspect in free sparring**

Free sparring draws on a lot of mental strength from one-self. Like other combat sports, the psychological aspect is well known but often under-estimated. The way that the “in-the-moment” emotion can trigger a fight or flight response and affect the ability to make quick decisions on appropriate actions is often under-estimated<sup>7</sup>. Emotions like excitement and arousal can enhance performance while fear and anxiety can hinder performance. As the author is not a trained professional in psychology, the fear emotion in the free sparring context is explored further below based on the research undertaken and personal experience on ways to improve by the author.

### ***What is fear?***

Fear is a vital response to physical and emotional danger that has been pivotal throughout human evolution<sup>8</sup>. In ancient times, our ancestors’ ability to protect themselves from legitimate threats in life-or-death situations that they faced regularly. Fear is an emotion that arises from the oldest and most powerful part of your brain at a cellular level<sup>9</sup>. In modern times, fear does not present the same type of immediate or dire consequences faced by our ancestors but rather a fight-flight-or freeze responses to specific situations.

### ***Steps to improve management and overcoming fear***

Fear is a real emotion that can control your mind and body when it comes to free sparring. Feeling overwhelmed because of not having any control, continuing to take hits, or no idea of how to stop the attack in a free sparring bout. Running and hiding are natural reactions and instinct. While this is not a concept that can change overnight, a five-step process<sup>10</sup> from the research intended to provide a more structured approach to improve the management of and overcoming the fear emotion. The five-step process is discussed below.

#### ***Step 1: Identify your fear***

Identify your fear by recognising the reason you feel overwhelming emotions. Some of the common reasons are the fear of not being good enough, fear of getting hurt, fear of performing badly, and fear of other people judging you. Writing down your reflection or talking to someone after a sparring bout may help to identify the key reason applicable to one’s experience.

#### ***Step 2: Rationalise your fear***

Rationalise your fear through talking yourself through your fear and understanding the root course of it. This also serves as a trigger point to turn fear as a negative energy into a positive energy to get your adrenaline going.

#### ***Step 3: Manage negative self-talk***

Negative self-talk is a habit in your subconscious mind from the fear emotion based on the free sparring experiences in the past. Conscious changes are required to retrain the mind and to break the cycle. A useful tip is to focus on the training and practice (things you can do and control) to cut-off negative thoughts when the negative talk emerges in your mind.

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<sup>7</sup><http://www.glovesworx.com/blog/combat-psychology-and-training-performance/>

<sup>8</sup><http://psychologytoday.com/us/basics/fear>

<sup>9</sup> The art of fear, Kristen Ulmer, HarperCollins publishers, first edition.

<sup>10</sup> <http://livemartialarts.org/blog/197976/how-to-get-over-your-fear-of-taekwondo-sparring>

#### ***Step 4: Define the attitude and mindset***

Setting an attitude or mindset by relating free sparring to a comfortable feeling. This can be through visualisation of someone you want to be like in free sparring to actions or a routine before a sparring bout such as warm up.

#### ***Step 5: Put it into practice***

The above steps 1 to 4 will set the readiness for free sparring psychologically. The last step is to put them into practice. Like any Taekwon-Do discipline, it would be impossible to apply all the techniques at the same time. Multitasking for a busy mind can often cause the brain to run wild and react to anything. A more measured approach requires a focus of the mind's full attention on one skill at a time. When the mind has more control over something, the less it fears about every possibility. The measured approach has three foundation elements before applying any attack or counter-attack physical techniques. Each foundation element is practised through a full bout before adding a new element.

- First element – focus on the breathing and breathing alone;
- Second element – keeping your eyes open to see;
- Third element – keeping your hands up to protect.

Once proficient in the three foundation elements (to breath, to see and to protect), then an attack or block can be added before introducing any combination of techniques. These physical aspects will be discussed further in the next section. Another useful tip from author's experience is to self-reflect or talk to someone after each sparring bout at club training about your performance to refine your practice.

### **Physical aspect in free sparring**

In a free sparring bout, the two participants exchange attack and defence moves in a real situation. The speed<sup>11</sup> of these movements or actions is a critical factor. Speed can further break down into the following four areas,

- Perception speed – the ability to perceive the need to act such as openings and opportunities;
- Reaction – the ability to select the right move in each situation before the window of opportunity expires;
- Execution (Initiation, execution and performance speed) – the ability to start from the right posture with correct mental attitude, and muscle contraction speed to execute the selected move quickly and efficiently;
- Recovery and alteration – the ability to recover to repeat a movement with full force and adaptability to switch direction or tempo.

Depending on the competency level in free sparring, priority order of the four areas will vary from novice to seasoned sparrers. Their importance in free sparring training will also be subject to change as training and development progresses. The free sparring survey identified that perception and execution are ranked as the two most important physical aspects in free sparring.

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<sup>11</sup> <https://kombatarts.com/how-to-increase-your-speed-for-martial-arts/> and [http://www.ataonline.com/train\\_for\\_speed](http://www.ataonline.com/train_for_speed)

## **Steps to improve on physical aspects in free sparring**

There are many ways to improve on physical aspects relating to perception and execution in free sparring. The author has selected elements from the research as the foundation to enable improvement in sparring. While each of the elements are discussed further below, these elements are interlinked for application in free sparring. These elements are,

- Sparring stance – correct posture for effective and efficient execution of techniques;
- Footwork – ability to move with confidence and ease;
- Basic attacks and blocks – efficient and effective attack when an opening or opportunity arises, deflecting or blocking of an attack;

### **Sparring stance**

Sparring stance is to provide the best body posture for favourable execution of sparring techniques<sup>12</sup>. Key points as a general guideline covering positions of head, shoulders, hands and elbows, hips and knees, feet and weight distribution are illustrated in Figure 2.

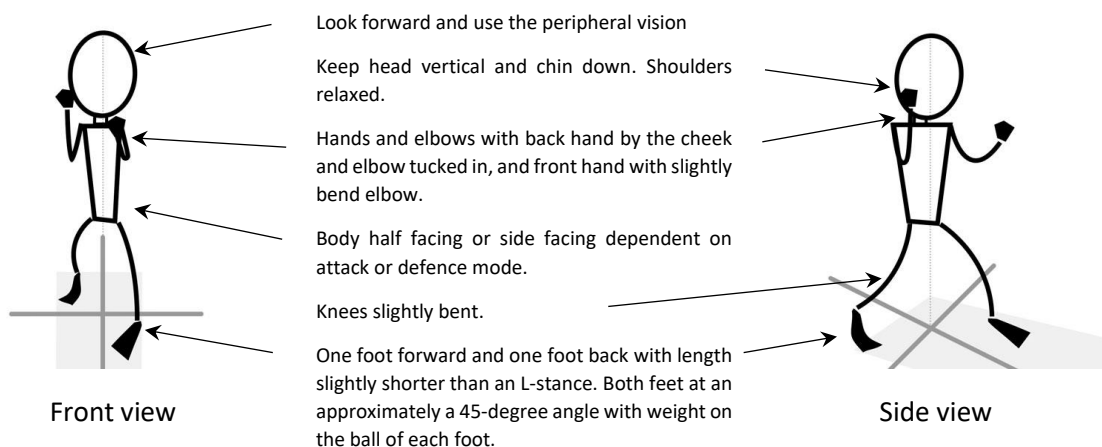


Figure 2 Sparring stance

### **Footwork**

Footwork is important in sport performance<sup>13</sup>. Having good footwork allows the control of gravity and balance through a range of motions. Free sparring in Taekwon-Do is no exception. Able to move with confidence and with ease is paramount. Footwork drills that the author found to be useful training steps<sup>14 15</sup> are,

- Stepping forward or backward in a step and drag motion as illustrated in Figures 3a and 3b. To move forward, lifting the front foot off the floor and pushing off the back foot to move forward at the same time;
- Split stepping to the right or left, as illustrated in Figure 4 for stepping to the right. To move to the right, taking a split side-step with the left foot and stepping forward to the right with the right foot at the same time;

<sup>12</sup> <http://freemmatrainingworkouts.com/basic-positioning>

<sup>13</sup> <http://www.pregamefitness.com/single-post/2018/02/23/the-importance-of-footwork-in-sports-performance>

<sup>14</sup> <http://freemmatrainingworkouts.com/basic-footwork>

<sup>15</sup> [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=g3vB\\_gN6aR0](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=g3vB_gN6aR0)

- Switching feet while keeping both feet close to the ground, as illustrated in Figure 5. Not a jumping motion but a quick switching motion with both feet;
- Quarter turn with back leg clockwise and anti-clockwise, as illustrated in Figures 6 for the clockwise direction.

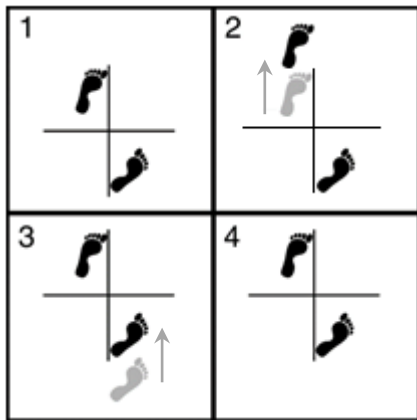


Figure 3a Foot diagram – stepping forward

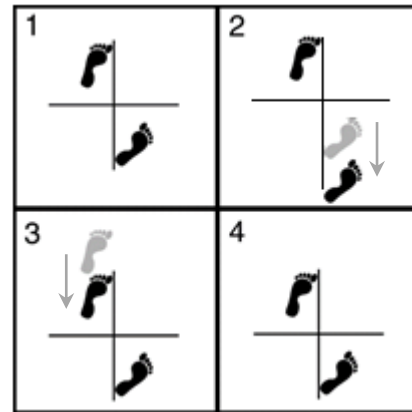


Figure 3b Foot diagram – stepping backward

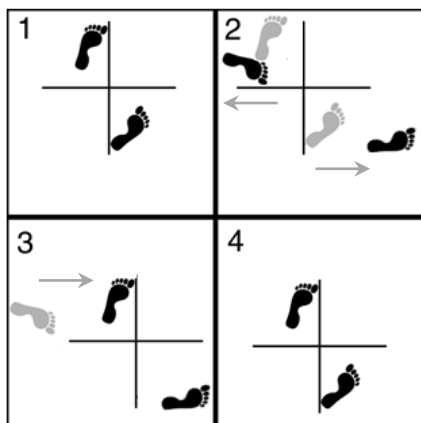


Figure 4 Foot diagram – split stepping to the right

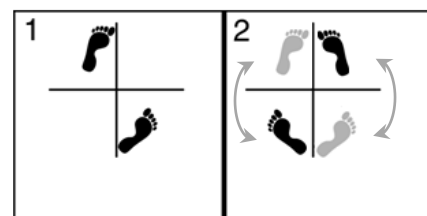


Figure 5 Foot diagram – switching feet

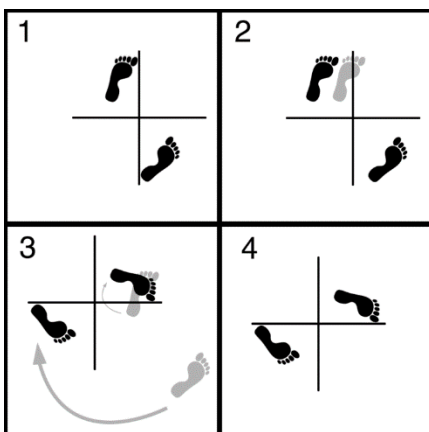


Figure 6 Foot diagram – quarter turn clockwise

### **Basic attacks and blocks**

Basic attacks and blocks are Taekwon-do techniques adapted for application in free sparring. Basic blocks are used to deflect or block appropriate to an attack. Basic attacks are used in efficient and effective execution when an opening arises. Examples of basic blocks<sup>16</sup> and attacks<sup>17</sup> to highlight from the research are,

- Basic attacks (or counter attacks):
  - Direct punch or reverse punch, as illustrated in Figures 7a and 7b;
  - Direct side kick, as illustrated in Figure 7c;
  - Front turning kick with instep, as illustrated in Figure 7d;
  - Back kick, as illustrated in Figure 7e.
- Basic blocks:
  - forearm guarding block with back hand by the cheek and front hand to deflect high attack;
  - downward block with front hand to deflect kick to the front;
  - inward block with back hand to knock a kick to the front while switching legs.



Figure 7a Basic attack – direct front punch<sup>18</sup>



Figure 7b Basic attack – reverse front punch



<sup>16</sup> [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=g3vB\\_gN6aR0](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=g3vB_gN6aR0)

<sup>17</sup> <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rpYNQXZNLoo> , <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=L6xdK-T4Ne> , [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RDSkrH9PbCU&list=PLIPuA-z-pb8dW50PpgDFk2Y\\_QOY50vs-k&index=15](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RDSkrH9PbCU&list=PLIPuA-z-pb8dW50PpgDFk2Y_QOY50vs-k&index=15) , <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kGJTTVukanU>

<sup>18</sup> [http://www.youtub.com/watch?v=eB-RRZU3NuU&list=PLIPuA-z-pb8dW50PpgDFk2Y\\_QOY50vs-k&index=10](http://www.youtub.com/watch?v=eB-RRZU3NuU&list=PLIPuA-z-pb8dW50PpgDFk2Y_QOY50vs-k&index=10)





Figure 7c Basic attack – direct side kick<sup>19</sup>



Figure 7d Basic attack – turning kick (in-step)<sup>20</sup>



Figure 7e Basic attack – back kick<sup>21</sup>

These basic attacks and basic blocks are combined with body position and footwork discussed earlier for application in free sparring. Practice drills are useful training tools to gain familiarity with their applications as well as to determine those techniques most suited to your strength.

<sup>19</sup> [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=L6xdK-T4NeU&list=PLIPuA-z-pd8dW50PpgDFk2Y\\_QOY50vs-k&index=1](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=L6xdK-T4NeU&list=PLIPuA-z-pd8dW50PpgDFk2Y_QOY50vs-k&index=1)

<sup>20</sup> [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RDSkrH9PbcU&list=PLIPuA-z-pb8dW50PpgDFk2Y\\_QOY50vs-k&index=15](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RDSkrH9PbcU&list=PLIPuA-z-pb8dW50PpgDFk2Y_QOY50vs-k&index=15)

<sup>21</sup> [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kGJTTvukqU&list=PLIPuA-z-pd8dW50PpgDFk2Y\\_QOY50vs-k&index=9](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kGJTTvukqU&list=PLIPuA-z-pd8dW50PpgDFk2Y_QOY50vs-k&index=9)

## **Conclusion**

The research topic of “overcoming the fear in sparring” took the author through a journey of discovery. This was a rewarding experience in acquiring more knowledge and ways to improve on both psychological and physical aspects of this important discipline in Taekwon-Do. Insights identified and derived from the research material are summarised and presented in a structured and logical way are intended to be helpful for anyone who has experienced fear in the sparring discipline. There is a quote from the research, *“Energy is never lost, it is only transferred”*. I do hope this essay would provide some help and improvement tips to turn fear into a positive experience.

Tae-kwon