

Kick into Gear

Get fit, flexible, and confident through martial arts training

By Jennifer Nelson

IN 2005, HEATHER WRIGHT of Atlanta was diagnosed with a serious thyroid condition that caused her to gain more than 50 pounds, and she ballooned from a size 8 to a 14. Once her medical condition was in check, she joined Atlanta Kick, a karate studio — but she wasn't looking to earn her black belt; Wright wanted to get back in shape. Within months of taking karate training, she had slimmed down to a size 10 and regained muscle tone.

“Now I feel younger and better than I have felt in nearly three years,” says Wright, 34. What's more, she adds, the mental payoff of increased self-confidence and discipline matches the physical benefits.

Wright isn't alone in her pursuit of martial arts as a workout. According to a 2005 poll by the Sporting Goods Manufacturers Association, more than 6 million Americans are studying martial arts. The umbrella term “martial arts” includes styles such as karate, tae kwon do, judo, hapkido, and related sports like kickboxing and capoeira, and these days devotees ranging from soccer moms to CEOs are donning the *gi* (the traditional uniform for martial arts) to get fit and have fun.

It Takes All Kinds

For many participants, part of the appeal of martial arts is the focus on

balance, flexibility, speed, and endurance, in addition to strength and muscle mass. According to D. Andrew Robinson, an exercise physiologist at the Cleveland Clinic, one roadblock that keeps many people from exercising is

50-somethings who participate in *soo bahkdo*, a Korean martial art, have less body fat than those who are sedentary.

Because kinesthetic movement is part of all martial arts, any form can help improve fitness. One popular form is judo, a style created specifically for personal development. Similar to wrestling, judo provides an excellent challenge, with complex moves that require mental agility. If you want a slower pace, Robinson recommends tai chi, a noncombat form that focuses on improving balance and flexibility.

For balance, coordination, flexibility, and strength, Felicia Oh, a 2007 inductee in the

Masters Hall of Fame, swears by her first love: Brazilian jiu-jitsu. An instructor at Big John McCarthy's Ultimate Training Academy in Valencia, Calif., Oh says she's seen overweight students with high blood pressure drop weight and ditch their meds after taking up jiu-jitsu. Brazilian jiu-jitsu is like physical chess — you're actively fighting with a partner who's fighting back. (Students tap if they want to stop.) Calorie burn is significant, posture improves, and confidence soars. Classes run from an hour to 90 minutes and include warm up, technique work,



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that they don't enjoy workouts like the treadmill or stationary bike. A 30-to-45-minute martial arts class can burn as many calories as the same amount of time walking or jogging on the treadmill; a study in the *British Journal of Sports Medicine* reports that 40- and

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and four-to-eight-minute rounds with a partner. “In some ways it makes you feel like a child again as you roll around on the mat,” says Oh.

Fight the Good Fight

Typically, gyms offer fused options that combine martial arts with dance moves in classes called cardio kick, Kwando, or fusion. At a fitness club, there should be more of a focus on keeping you moving throughout the whole class, which ups the calorie expenditure. Joining a studio class will still provide an excellent workout, plus you may take away some self-defense skills.

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But Chris Pizzo, CEO of Close Combat Company, a Ramsey, N.J., business that provides self-defense home study courses, says that fitness, adventure, and challenge are the real reasons to take up martial arts. Pizzo, who holds black belts in five styles and is working on two others, makes a statement that he says drives most instructors crazy: “Martial arts are a method of self-perfection, but they’re not a method of self-protection.”

Pizzo feels that learning a martial art is a lifelong endeavor, in which you get in great physical shape and study a different culture. “It’s really not about learning to fight someone because you’re learning controlled combat; it’s really about learning to conquer yourself — your own fears and insecurities — and boost your confidence over a lifetime of work.”

Jennifer Nelson is a writer based near Fort Lauderdale.



Playful Paths

Reawaken your inner child with a run along Santa Rosa Beach’s hidden footpaths

WHEN YOU’RE AWAY FROM HOME and your normal running route, it’s tempting to hit the hotel treadmill. But that would be a mistake if you’re near Santa Rosa Beach, about a 30-minute drive from **Fort Walton Beach**, on Florida’s panhandle. It’s not the beachfront that’s the draw here, but rather an intricate system of footpaths that wind in and around pine forests, sand dunes, striking vacation properties, and even a rare coastal dune lake.

Located on Santa Rosa Beach is WaterColor, a 499-acre resort and residential community whose developers created three miles of scenic, half-hidden paths that are perfect for running: they’re fairly flat, have a packed-pea-gravel composition that’s easy on the joints, and are largely shaded beneath magnolia, oak, and sand pine trees. The footpaths’ meandering routes also afford intimate views of WaterColor’s picturesque homes and gardens, not to mention the lake.

Begin your run at the corner of Buttercup Street and Highway 30-A, at the west end of the park district. There you’ll see the start of a footpath tucked in between the homes and the road. When the path splits, you can go either way, as it reconnects shortly. When it splits again, take the left fork and you’ll hit the BoatHouse parking lot on Western Lake. Cross the lot, and the path resumes. If you continue on the path until it ends at Western Lake Drive, you’ll have run about 1.6 miles.

From here, you can run a short way back on the path until you see a bridge on your left. That will lead you to the middle of the more extensive Lake District footpath system. Or you can hop onto Western Lake Drive and follow it as it curves in a huge U, eventually leading to the start of the main Lake District Footpath (just before Blue Jack Street). This path is about 1.2 miles long, although there are numerous offshoots where you can add miles if you wish.

If an out-and-back course is more your style, then head west from the WaterColor Inn along the flat, blacktopped path fronting Highway 30-A. The path stretches 18 miles, past Dune Allen Beach to Inlet Beach. Run as long as you’d like, then turn around and head back toward WaterColor, making sure to duck into Grayton Beach State Park, less than a mile from the WaterColor Inn. With its white, sandy beaches and rolling sand dunes smothered with golden sea oats, Grayton Beach is considered one of Florida’s finest state parks. There are four more miles of trails to try here, but you may wish to simply take a break and enjoy the ocean view. By this point, you deserve it.

— *Melanie Radzicki McManus*

Getting There: Continental offers daily nonstop service to Fort Walton Beach from its hub in Houston and from Tampa.