



## TECHNICAL COLUMN

# BOARD BREAKING

*Article by John Swift*

Confidence, self-esteem, assurance, focus and mental strength are all phrases and synonym traits of a black belt, along with these elements, and many hard years of training, also comes the additional facets of commitment, perseverance, self-control and humility to name but a few.

It is often suggested that as well as the mental benefits martial arts training provide, an individual can increase their personal physical strength and power by as much as 3 ½ to 4 times, this of course done with the correct guidance, methodology and practical application of given skills.

Having said this, to achieve top level performance, like the infamous black belt, goal setting and target achievement is key so how is it possible to measure, gauge or bench mark these unfathomable traits? One method of testing in the martial arts is 'board breaking'

The much debated issue of board breaking has been under scrutiny for many years and I have often been asked on its validity as any untrained person can 'thump' their way through wood or tiles.

I have for a long time been of the opinion that breaking is about confidence, mental focus and the precise delivery of the striking technique. Board breaking can be flexible and incorporate a number of different roles in order to test what is needed so its benefits are unquestionable.

The correct execution of a given technique, pattern or kata, pad drill or sequence takes much rehearsal but once achieved it gives a huge feeling of satisfaction and sense of self fulfilment – board breaking is very similar. The testing of a skill and its application in the martial arts is often difficult to simulate due to nature of what we do but boards are good and the feeling of 'smashing' through the boards can be exhilarating, hence building confidence and esteem.



I remember as a junior grade I kept hounding my instructors for the opportunity to break boards, this motivation possibly born out of the over eager viewing of the Bruce Lee films and television! But as a positive, the drive to be able to test my learnt skills was irrefutable.



Many traditional styles have long established breaking requirements for grading and belt promotions varying from basic side kicks against 1 inch of wood to a jump reverse turning against 3 inches.

The boards used are normally pine or white spruce wood measuring an inch thick by 11 x 12 inches but this may vary between suppliers and personal breaking preferences.

As with all skills, it is important to learn and understand the basics and mechanics prior to execution and by the time you are ready to break boards you will have spent many an hour working

up and down the rows practicing techniques as well as striking pads and bags. However, this said, I will always teach my students the correct method on how to hold or support the boards first.

### Holding the Boards ...

There are a variety of holding or supporting methods including freestanding racks and frames, mounted on the wall or floor and even being hand held – the latter being most common.

Partner or hand held boards can add difficulty to the board break as the performer is reliant on the holder ensuring there is no movement and that they are fixed on a stable base prior to and whilst the break happens.

- The holder should take up a long / extended stance – photo demonstrating a walking stance
- Lock out the arms so that there is no flexion and turn your face away from the boards in case the board splinters or is released.
- Push your palm heels into the edges of the board and tuck your fingers up so that they don't get hit



Additional considerations –

- With multiple board breaks ensure the woods grain runs in the same direction.
- For more powerful breaks have multiple board holders, 2 holding and 1 supporting the shoulders.

As the person attempting the break it is up to you to ensure you are happy with the way the boards are being held as well as the angle and height, if not, make adjustments. Then of course it is essential that you take up an appropriate body position or stance, distance and measure, only when you are happy with all these elements should you execute your technique. More advanced students may be asked during assessment to demonstrate a break with no measure, be confident and apply your skills to the best of your ability.

## *'Practice makes perfect'*

To ensure maximal success rate and minimal injury train on a bag, focus pad or paddle as a precise technique is key.

As with all aspects of your martial arts training don't let failing get you down, analyse your technique, focus your mind and drill again!

Following successful breaks don't forget to set new targets as after an achievement it is important for continued development and improvement to set new goals for example a kick can be done standing to a number of sections, with a jump, with a rotation and with a jump rotation and the same with hand techniques.

Alternative methods of board breaking and practice are to use foam covered boards and thinner gauges of wood for example ½ inch and ¾ inch wood. In addition the precision of striking a focus paddle or kick shield can be of equal challenge but may not prove as motivational in confidence building.



## **Demonstration breaking ...**

The creativity and limits of demonstration breaking can be pretty much endless and often it is the aspect of the martial arts that causes the most curiosity for the on lookers!

Demonstration breaking is a presentation of skills and with so many events and performances the build up and anticipation needs to be ensured – some suggest the 80-20 rule - 80% anticipation 20% participation. Obviously the participation element is the part that most will talk about so ensure 10/10 success rate on breaks. To do this ensure diligent training, proper technique and mental focus as the break must go first time for full effect!



Ideas for alternative board breaks, hopefully showing something other than just the pure brutality of your striking ability, may include –



- Jumping kicks – with or without obstacles
- Spinning kicks – speed and fluidity or power
- Combination breaks – multiple angles or directions
- Air break – holding the target by one end (this is considered more difficult as there is only one fixed point and would need to be hit more efficiently)
- 'Throw-up' breaks – the board is literally thrown up in the air and as it comes down is hit with the attempted braking technique - timing, focus and a lot of practice is needed!
- Blind folded breaks – this is self explanatory and will obviously require large amounts of practice, not to mention trust from the board holder!

Rather than just different techniques, demonstration breaks may include the breaking of alternative materials including smashing roof tiles or breeze blocks. Whether it is wood, re-breakable boards, roof tiles or breeze blocks the techniques delivered must remain precise, rehearsed and consistent.

Another option for breaking demonstrations is the use of 'spacers'. The use of spacers during breaking can have a number of affects including making the break easier but to the 'not so educated' person it may look more impressive as the volume of material looks greater. Due to the gap between boards, the performer is almost having to repetitively break single boards but in quick succession. The challenge in this type of breaking is the maintaining of momentum in order to break all the boards required. I have always preferred not to use spacers but it is your own preference.



The continual impact of breaking training can damage the striking tools i.e. knuckles, it is suggested that it can cause irregular bone development as well as arthritis so caution is advised. If techniques are not delivered correctly bones can be broken and injuries occur.



Age and gender may have an effect on your breaking ability, anatomical development and conditioning differs greatly between children and adults and the wide majority of instructors will not teach the methods and techniques of old in order to develop specific strength – i.e. wrist and knuckle twist press ups.

Whether you are for or against breaking, its ability to develop confidence is unquestionable so practice safely under the guidance of an instructor and persevere.

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