



The CHALLENGE

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Martial Arts

Tough day at the office. I'm tempted to stay home and become one with the couch but I'm sure I'd regret it tomorrow. As I stand there trying to decide, "just do it" pops into my head. Some guy at Nike is a marketing genius. Better hurry. Kickboxing class starts at 7:30. Blood sugar is 180. Good — my snack kicked in. It's a little high, but this class will probably burn it up. Check my gear bag. . . boxing gloves, bag gloves, focus mitts, shinguards, kicking shoes, headgear, mouthpiece, cup, glucose tablets. Glucose meter. Good, I'll need to test quickly before I spar. Sugar, money, keys. It's all there. Ready to go. . .

I was diagnosed with diabetes in 1978, just before my 13th birthday. It came on like the flu. Forty pounds lighter I found out I had something more permanent than a virus and I was invited to stay at the hospital for a month. Thankfully, I haven't been back. A few years later, I made a very important decision which didn't seem so important at the time. I decided to take karate lessons. Now, as a 28 year old lawyer working 50-60 hours a week, testing my blood 6-8 times a day and taking insulin four times a day (reg. before meals and NPH at bed), I can't imagine how unbalanced my life and diabetes would be if I hadn't made that choice.

I was always fascinated by the martial arts, but when I first started studying karate ten years ago. I had no idea it would become so essential to my mental and physical well-being. Growing up in the 70's with the legend

of Bruce Lee and dubbed Chinese kung-fu movies on Saturday afternoon television, I was always curious about self-defense. I'm not exactly small (6' 1" and 205 lbs.), but I liked the concept that skill matters more than size. My biggest inspiration was David Carradine's original "Kung-fu" series. I always admired the lone shaolin priest who travelled the old west each week seeking knowledge, overcoming adversity and fighting only when there were no other alternatives. The philosophy of inner strength, self-reliance, and discipline appealed to me. In hindsight, I realize how this philosophy has helped me with school, work, relationships, and, of course, diabetes.

Park the car. I'll test one more time before I go in. Put the blood on the strip. Twenty seconds. . . I use the time to stretch my neck. . . my Companion-2 reads 193. O.K. 7 p.m. Good, I'll have about a half-hour to stretch before class. . .

There are also other reasons why I decided to learn karate. Ironically, diabetes was not one of them. In 1984, when I was an 18 year old college student at NYU, I became disillusioned with my fraternity. There seemed to be no shortage of alcohol, beer kegs, drugs and partying. Not exactly the healthy lifestyle I was looking for. Maybe that's why I started karate. Or, maybe it was the crime and homelessness I saw on the New York City subway going to school each day. Or, maybe it was simply the memory of a childhood bully I never knew how to handle. Whatever the reason, I decided that my frat dues were better spent on karate lessons. So, I opened the yellow pages and found a school. Funny thing is, I was actually discouraged from trying karate because

I wasn't supposed to exercise barefoot. But since I'd always enjoyed sports, I went ahead anyway.

Say my hellos. Throw my equipment bag on the side. Find a spot to start stretching. Still a little stiff. Be touches. Careful not to bounce. Switch to a horseback stance (just like it sounds). Upper torso twists. Hurdler's stretch for the hamstrings. Butterfly stretch. Calf stretches against the wall. Shadow kickboxing and a warm-up on the heavy bag. . .

I signed up at the Howard Lee Karate Institute near my home in Bayside, Queens. Master Lee taught tae kwon do, a form of Korean karate which emphasizes kicking. I was eager to learn. I got a new white uniform (which all the students called by its Japanese name, a "gi"), and I learned how to tie my white (beginner's) belt. I was ready.

I began to take classes 3-5 times a week in the evenings and on Saturdays. I had more free time back then since I was still in college. Classes were traditional. All students bowed before entering the workout area and bowed to the instructor and each other as a sign of courtesy and respect (with no religious significance). Students lined up in rank order with black belts in front and white belts in the back. The classes were great for diabetes,

pushing me beyond my limits. Every few months I took a promotion test, and, as I advanced I got into semi- and then full-contact sparring. Sometimes an opponent's punch or kick would land and remind me where I took my last insulin shot (just like playing guitar sometimes reminds me which finger I used for my last blood test). Pretty soon though, I was getting stronger and more confident with each class. I can still remember how I set my goal of earning a black belt and getting to the front of that class. Three and a half years later when I did, I realized that getting my black belt was only the beginning of the journey.

I don't think I told Master Lee about my diabetes until after I'd been there a year or two. I wasn't ashamed. He just didn't speak English too well. The language barrier was actually kind of funny. He always called me "Lanins" — he made everyone's name plural. Once he confusingly joked that sugar was "like-a-medicine" to me "just like-a-cocaines." Another time he innocently asked me if diabetes was like being retarded. I still don't know if he was kidding.

All in all, I probably went out of my way not to ask for special treatment, even when I had to contend with low blood sugar during sparring. I didn't want to be perceived as weak or intimidated, but sometimes felt like I had two opponents: my blood sugar and my sparring partner. I learned to

compensate by running a little high before classes and this seemed to be more than offset by the after-effects of each workout. Eventually, I became an instructor.

Class starts. Everyone lines up for jumping jacks, push-ups, sit-ups/crunches, leg lifts. . . stretching. Then we start training. Kicks, punching combinations, stances. We pair off for partner training. I wonder if my sugar is low or if I'm just beat. Should be O.K., I just checked it. . .

A few years ago, when I moved away from my first karate school, I realized that I had become a "lifer." Almost as though some force compelled me to join new schools. And, over the past few years, I've continued studying tae kwon do as well as other martial arts.

Currently, I go to a non-traditional school (more like a boxing gym) that integrates several styles, including full-contact kickboxing, kenpo, jeet kune do, and thai boxing. Every class I go to makes me feel that much better and there is always something to learn. However, the most important thing I may have learned isn't really unique to martial arts, but applies to all exercise. Ultimately, it's a paradox: the more energy you expend, the more you have.