



Episode 56 – Martial Arts Conditioning | whistlekickMartialArtsRadio.com

Jeremy Lesniak:

Hey there, everyone its episode 56 of whistlekick Martial Arts Radio, the only place to hear the best conversations about the martial arts, like today's episode all about martial arts conditioning and strength training.

I'm the founder here at whistlekick, but I'm better known as your host, Jeremy Lesniak. whistlekick, in case you don't know, makes the world's best sparring gear and some awesome apparel and accessories for you traditional martial artists. I'd like to welcome our new listeners and thank all of you returning fans.

If you're not familiar with our products, you can learn more about our them at whistlekick.com. All of our past podcast episodes, show notes and a lot more are at whistlekickmartialartsradio.com. Today's episode also has a full transcript with photos, videos and links on the website.

And while you're over there, go ahead and sign up for our newsletter. We offer exclusive content to subscribers and it's the only place to find out about upcoming guests.

Today we're going to talk about martial arts conditioning – physical training. We'll dig into the principles behind your strength and your cardiovascular fitness and how they affect your martial arts training, competition, and overall life.

Now, I'm a huge proponent of getting the world to see martial artists as athletes. There are amazing athletes in the worldwide martial arts community, individuals that push the boundaries of what's physically possible. These individuals, and their influence, can be seen in television and movies, on stage in competitions and elsewhere. They're incredible.

The rest of us, while we may not be as dramatic or publicly visible, can be just as incredible. One of the greatest disconnects, however, and it's come up on this show before, is that martial artists do not tend to train like athletes.

Most of us pursue martial arts as a hobby, and that's okay. One of my favorite sayings is that martial arts can be as much or as little as you want it to be. Martial arts is a physical discipline, yes, but it's ultimately about self-improvement.

For many people, their physical abilities start to get in the way of their self-improvement. Now, this can be a sensitive subject, so I need to choose my words carefully. I want to apologize in advance if anyone is hurt or offended by this episode.

I've seen a number of people gain the confidence to take control of their bodies through martial arts training. I find that to be wonderful. I have also seen, and this is less wonderful, many people who are hindered by their physical body. Now, I'm not talking about someone born with a challenge, or someone



Episode 56 – Martial Arts Conditioning | whistlekickMartialArtsRadio.com

that develops a challenge later in life. I'm talking about the need for increased strength, flexibility or cardiovascular fitness.

I genuinely believe that a structured fitness program benefits everyone. Unless you're lucky enough to do martial arts training 3 or more days per week, and your class dedicates 30 minutes to that manner of training, it's unlikely that you'll receive everything you need from your time in class.

I was working with some students the other day as they prepared for an upcoming rank testing. I was trying to inspire them when I had a realization – I've never known someone to earn a black belt that only trained during class time. In this context, I'm not only referring to techniques and forms, but time spent improving fitness.

I think the benefits are obvious – if you're stronger, faster, and more flexible and can train longer, your martial arts skills improve faster. In fact, I'd argue that some people will reach a point where their physical fitness prohibits them from progressing further. That doesn't mean the self-development aspects of martial arts are stopped, though.

You might think that I'm saying all of this in a very gentle way to avoid being direct and calling out overweight martial artists. That's actually not true. I have known exceptional martial artists that were quite overweight, and not only did some of them hit like a ton of bricks, some of them were exceptionally fast. I think there are a lot of health and fitness reasons that would encourage someone to lose weight, but that decision is their choice.

I'll be a bit more direct here. I'm talking about individuals that can't do 10 pushups, but they've been training for years. Someone who can't complete a form without bending over, winded. These people could be so much better if they made fitness something they worked towards.

But enough about the reasons why. At this point, you likely agree with me or you've turned off the episode.

Let's talk about the different elements to fitness. I'm going to break it down into three components, strength, cardiovascular and flexibility.

Strength is the ability for the muscles to produce force. If you're stronger, you can hit harder, sure. But you can also jump higher or farther. It is muscle that moves your body, so it's more muscle that moves your body faster. If you're familiar with the difference between fast-twitch and slow-twitch muscle fiber you might be ready for me to launch into a discussion about that. I'm not going to, because it's a bit academic for the way we try to operate these episodes. I'm going to make some generalizations here, but it's true that there are different kinds of muscle fibers and some make you punch hard and some make you punch fast.

But in Martial arts we're generally concerned with power more than the raw components, strength and speed. There are times when a techniques strength matters more than the speed, and vice versa but



Episode 56 – Martial Arts Conditioning | whistlekickMartialArtsRadio.com

usually, if we're considering overall time training, we're concerned with putting the two together. Since that is the case, developing either fast or slow twitch muscle helps us.

There are lots of methods for developing strength, but most of them come back to a very simple principle – ask the muscle to do more than it is used to, and it will adapt. If you do 10 pushups at a time, every day, your body adapts to that. You have the physical capacity to do that. But what if you suddenly do 15 pushups?

You're likely to experience some discomfort, maybe soreness. If you routinely increase your 10 pushups to 15 pushups, your body will adapt. Depending on your body type, diet, and a number of other factors, your muscles may grow in size or only in efficiency. They will grow, however, and you will reap the benefits.

Cardiovascular fitness is the ability of the body to process oxygen and the waste products created by the muscles while they work. When you're out of breath, it's a sign that these processes need to work better. But here's the beautiful part – these are all muscles, too. We can work them, and they can improve. It's still adaptation.

If you also do 60-second sparring rounds, you're likely to get more tired with each passing round. That's natural and expected. The more 60 second rounds you do, the more your body will adapt to that timeframe, the more efficient you'll be.

Flexibility, too, is an issue of adaptation. If you spend your day sitting in a chair, you probably can't kick above your head, at least not without some work. Routinely convincing your body to work, to stretch, rather, to the edges of comfort will create adaptation over time.

That's all a very simple explanation of fitness and that's intentional. I could talk about these subjects for a long time because they're something I'm familiar with and interested in. If you find them interesting, I'd encourage you to learn more. For many of you, though, you just want to know the next part – how to improve.

There's a problem with the way most martial artists handle fitness. It's infrequent, it's inconsistent and it doesn't take into account all of the things we know about the science of the body.

When many schools train cardiovascular fitness, for example, they're training something at a moderate pace. That can be great for weight loss and heart health, but it doesn't do a good job of preparing someone for something as intense as a sparring match. If you want to force the body to adapt to that sort of environment, you have to give the body a similar stimulus.

In other words, if you want to keep from getting gassed during a sparring match, you have to train at that intensity routinely.



Episode 56 – Martial Arts Conditioning | whistlekickMartialArtsRadio.com

I'm going to offer some suggestions on drills and movements that can be used now to improve your fitness. You might be familiar with some of them, others may be completely new. We'll post some photos and videos over on the website, whistlekickmartialartsradio.com for you to check out.

Flexibility is the easiest to talk about. To improve flexibility we push our muscles to the point of discomfort, but we need to do it gently. I'm a huge fan of ballistic stretching – sometimes called dynamic stretching. A lot of martial arts schools get this right – it's the bouncing kind of stretching. High leg rises, for example, are a good ballistic stretch.

The place where most of us fall down with this technique has to do with warming up. Attempting to stretch a cold muscle is a terrible idea. And you've likely heard someone tell you to stretch before you workout – which is true, you should. What you should not do, though, is fail to get your muscles warm before you stretch.

There are a number of movements that you can do that will get your body warm and not risk injury. Unfortunately, it's not the same list for everyone. Jumping jacks, push-ups, sit-ups, squats, plank holds... these are examples of simple, bodyweight movements that will warm you up. I strongly recommend doing those, or any other movement that you know you can safely do even when your muscles are cold. Do enough of them to see the beginning of a sweat build up, and then you should be safe to begin your ballistic stretching.

I'm a fan of sets of 10 repetitions on ballistic stretches. Each repetition should get progressively faster and closer to the boundary of what is a safe stretch for you. Notice that in everything I'm talking about here, you need to know yourself and your body. If any of this doesn't make sense, please do not guess – seek out an expert for advice.

Over time ballistic stretching will create permanent change in the muscle, but it is also the fastest way I have found to increase flexibility on the short term. In other words, ballistic stretching at the beginning of a martial arts class, when done properly, loosens you up well for the rest of class.

Let's talk about strength. In the context of a martial arts class, we only have a few paths our body can travel to create strength. I'm a big fan of pushups, planks, squats and lunges. There are ways to mix them up for variety, too.

Lunging front kicks, where you start from a position with a single knee on the floor, is a great drill. From the start, simply stand up and throw a front kick with the leg that was down, then return the kicking leg to the ground. Don't smash your knee on the ground, that will hurt. 10 on each side is surprisingly challenging for most people. If you can do 25 a side, you're doing great.

One note about lunges, front stances, squats... you want to be very careful about the knee coming too far out over the toes. Ideally, your tibia, your shin bone, should be close to vertical. If it leans too far out over the toes, especially if you're pushing off on that foot, you can cause damage. But enough on that.



Episode 56 – Martial Arts Conditioning | whistlekickMartialArtsRadio.com

Squats and jumping squats are great exercises for developing strength and power. Try adding a jump to the lunging kicks I mentioned.

Pushups are probably the single best exercise for a martial artist, since they work so much of your body. I won't go too deep into pushups here, since there are a ton of great pushup videos out there. We'll find a good one and link to it over on the website.

Martial arts conditioning proper pushup. There are two things I want to mention about pushups, though. Some of you may know that we spent 18 months running a 60-second pushup challenge, so I got to learn a lot about pushups and the mistakes people make with them. The first mistake to watch is your elbows coming too far out to the side. A lot of people do this because it recruits more of the large muscles in your back, so it makes them easier if your chest and triceps aren't strong. The problem with that position is that your body isn't designed to do it. Don't believe me? Ask someone to help push a stationary object while standing – a car out of the mud, for example. No one flares their elbows out to the side. Over time this position will wreck your rotator cuff, and I've seen it happen, even in young children. One of the easiest ways to think about pushups to prevent this is to keep your index finger pointed straight forward while you do pushups. You can't do that and keep your elbows too far out to the side.

pushups on fingersThe second piece on pushups is more of a style item. I see a lot of people used to doing pushups that go only a few inches – which is a shame, because there's no other exercise that better generates strength and power for punching. No, I strongly urge that all pushups be the full range of motion, chest to the ground. Yes, they're harder... but, are you trying to count pushups or are you trying to get stronger? That's what I thought.

Of course, there are lots of variations on these strength drills and others. For those that are advanced with their pushups, doing handstand pushups against a wall with a mat under your head and someone to spot you can be a great way to increase the strength in your shoulders. I bet you can think of half a dozen exercises, at least, that I didn't mention. Be creative, be safe, but mix it up.

Lastly, cardiovascular fitness. We talked a lot about the concept earlier – forced adaptation of the systems responsible for moving oxygen and waste products. To make it simpler – it's about intensity. If you constantly train at a slow, or even moderate pace, you're not going to progress. Your body requires constantly varied and increasingly difficult challenges.

That's why I'm not a fan of expecting the same number of repetitions of a movement from everyone in the class. If you have veteran black belts, that are (in theory, anyway) in good shape working side by side with novice students, they shouldn't be doing the same conditioning or strength exercises. We don't expect them to do anything else in class the same. No, there are levels. That's why we have belts.

I'm not saying that different belts need different, structured fitness requirements though I do know schools that do that. And it can be successful. Even breaking it up into three groups – name them



Episode 56 – Martial Arts Conditioning | whistlekickMartialArtsRadio.com

however you want – group 1, do 10 pushups, group 2 do 20, group 3 do 30. Everyone is challenged, everyone continues to progress. When everyone is given the same work to perform, either the higher-end participants aren't getting what they need or the lower end are being asked to do far too much, and risking injury. At the very least, frustration.

Some of my favorite drills to condition cardiovascular fitness involve performing kicks in a certain amount of time. How many front kicks can you do in a minute? Try and beat the score. Years ago I used to track that very score for my students, and the motivation it gave them to improve was tremendous. Though we rarely do it, writing down information like this can be very valuable in a martial arts setting. To know what you did last week, last month, last year can not only help motivate you for constant improvement but also inspire by showing you how far you've come.

Other cardiovascular drills. Burpees are probably the single best drill for martial arts. If you're unfamiliar, it's sort of a pushup with a stand up and jump in between. Again, videos on the website. The best cardiovascular improvement comes from exercises where it's not your muscular endurance giving out – like when you're doing pushups – but, rather, when you lose your breath. Jumping movements, like jump kicks, often fatigue someone's lungs before it fatigues their legs.

And, since we talked a bit about it earlier, let's talk about using sparring to build cardiovascular endurance. One of the easiest ways to focus on the conditioning aspects of a match is to make someone the attacker and the other the defender. That way people can worry a bit less about what to do, and spend more time doing it. Try going fast for 30 seconds, then swap attackers. A few minutes of this and people will be ready for a break, I'm sure.

How about you? What are your favorite drills for building strength and endurance or increasing flexibility? Leave them over on the website, whistlekickmartialartsradio.com – this is episode 56. You can also find show notes including a transcript from today's episode as well as photos and videos of the drills we talked about.

If you want to give us a shout on social media we're on Facebook, Twitter, Pinterest & Instagram – all with the username [whistlekick](#).

If you want to be a guest on the show or you know someone that has some good stories, please fill out the form on the website. And don't forget to subscribe to our newsletter so you can stay up on everything we do. You can learn more about our products at whistlekick.com – our winter hats are finally available online.

Since you've already listened this far, I know you like the show...so please subscribe or download one of the apps so you never miss out in the future. We bring these shows to you twice a week, and while we'd love the support of your business, the main thing we ask for is a review. If you're an iPhone user, please leave us a review in iTunes, and if you're listening in some other way, please leave us a review or comment wherever feels appropriate. Thank you in advance.



Episode 56 – Martial Arts Conditioning | whistlekickMartialArtsRadio.com

So, until next time, Train hard, smile and have a great day.