

## **Sparring: Safety vs. Realism**

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In previous columns I've focused primarily on the more cerebral aspects of fighting-visualization, overcoming self-doubt, managing anxiety - issues that take place largely between a fighter's ears. This month, however, I'll venture beyond that domain. We're in the business, after all, of banging people around. And, sometimes gaining a mental edge in competition involves taking a well-thought out approach to the most physical aspect of fight preparation. This month I'll address the issue of hard sparring and how to get the most out of it. A young fighter writes:

How do you train as close to a real fight in training without hurting yourself? Do you have any tips?

The goal of effective sparring is to simulate the conditions of an actual bout to the greatest extent possible while minimizing the risk of injury to you and you sparring partners. Consider the following suggestions when organizing your MMA sparring.

### **1. Break your sparring into two components.**

**Stand-up through the takedown:** It's critical that you practice your stand-up game in situations where takedowns are a factor. Boxing or kickboxing sparring by itself is of limited use when training for MMA. By combining takedowns with striking on the feet you'll familiarize yourself with the stance, movement and counters necessary to avoid being taken down as you throw punches and kicks. Conversely, you'll develop the timing needed to take your opponent to the ground as he attempts to strike.

Most takedowns can be accomplished wearing boxing gloves, so spar with at least 16 ounce gloves (18 or 20 ounce gloves for heavy-handed larger fighters). If you or your sparring partners kick, wear shin pads that extend over the foot. Wear headgear that stays secure during takedown attempts. Of course, wear a mouthpiece and protective cup. (I also recommend wearing a mouthpiece during drills, bag work, even conditioning so that you get accustomed to breathing during intense exertion while wearing it.

**Ground fighting:** Start from various positions on the ground- guard, half-guard, mount, side mount, rear mount, and north-south position. Don't waste time beginning from the knees, as is practiced in many grappling classes. Wear MMA gloves so that you get accustomed to grasping your opponent's limbs or locking your hands while wearing them. Also, you'll need to gain a feel for the possibility that your opponent will use your gloves as an aid to secure your arm. Never throw elbows or hard punches to your partner's face when sparring on the ground. Nothing's gained by injuring your partner and the chance of receiving a cut that may prevent you from competing or might re-open during the fight is too great.

Communication with your sparring partner is the key to getting the most out of striking on the ground. If, while sparring, you see an opening for a strike to the face, throw the

punch lightly or with an open hand. If your position is such that you can throw hard enough to inflict damage, let your partner know during the action that he's in danger. It isn't necessary to stop the action and discuss the matter with your partner. You can just say

“Boom!” when delivering strikes that have the potential to be a lot harder. This will let your partner know he needs to improve his position.

On the other hand, if you're positioned in such a way that you're tied up or lack the leverage to deliver a hard strike, let him know that as well. Work hard, but remain composed enough that you can maintain a dialogue of key phrases with your partner.

**2. Augment sparring with drills that address the compromises made to keep sparring relatively safe.** For example, blocking your opponent's punch when he is wearing MMA gloves requires greater precision than if he is wearing boxing gloves. The MMA glove has much less surface area and therefore can exploit smaller openings in your defense. In order to get accustomed to the difference it's useful to practice controlled drills with your sparring partner wherein you trade specific, pre-determined single punches, then combinations while wearing MMA gloves. In this way you get a sense of the visual and technical differences unique to fighting with the smaller gloves.

If the rules of your upcoming bout allow elbows to the head during ground fighting, straddle a heavy bag on the floor and practice your technique there. Or, better, if you have access to a life-like rubber head and torso used for punching, remove it from its base and lay it on the floor instead of the heavy bag. Throw hard punches and elbows in combinations to the head and body for placement, power and conditioning. Though your target in training is inanimate, you'll naturally make the adjustments in the fight.

Similarly, you and your partners should save your hardest knee strikes for training on the pads, especially as the fight nears. Taking a full-tilt knee to the ribs or face is just too potentially damaging. Emphasize movement, creating openings and placement instead of power while sparring. Again, you'll naturally turn up the dial on your power in the midst of the fight, but while training reserve your heavy knees for pad drills

**3. Make the intensity of certain elements in your sparring exceed the conditions you're likely to meet in a bout.** If you rotate fresh sparring partners every round, or even every half-round, and instruct them to fight with a sense of urgency, you'll be forced to sustain a pace that will exceed what you're likely to face from a single opponent in competition. Also, because multiple partners will presumably possess different styles and strengths, your ability to react, adapt and stay focused in the face of changing conditions will be heightened.

**4. Don't spar hard in the five days before the fight.** In a previous column I outlined the phases of training a fighter goes through as he gears up physically and psychologically for a fight. The final week before your bout you'll transition into what I call the “pre-fight restoration phase”. Here, after weeks of grueling, intense preparation, the goal is to gradually cut back the volume and intensity of training so that your body's energy level is

restored to full-capacity.

Don't lift weights during this stage. Instead allow your muscles to fully recover from the rigorous training and replenish glycogen stores. If you compete on Saturday, your last hard sparring session takes place on the previous Monday. Each day that follows reduce the volume and intensity of your workouts by about 20% (in addition to not lifting weights). Tuesday is a moderate workout (80%), Wednesday is moderate-light (60%), Thursday is a light workout (40%), and Friday is easy- less than 45 minutes of drills and shadowboxing and 30-60 minutes of stretching. Resist the temptation to do more and instead, go for a relaxing walk or watch a movie. On the day of the fight follow a routine that keeps you relaxed without being lethargic. Go for a short, brisk walk or play a game of basketball with friends in the morning, perhaps.

Tapering down training volume and intensity after several weeks of extremely rigorous workouts helps you avoid new injuries before the fight and allows your body to at least partially heal some of the bumps and bruises incurred during training. It also leaves you fully energized and mentally eager to fight- both essential components of a peak performance.

**5. Compete in training.** Technique and conditioning are of limited value without a developed sense of competitiveness. If your training partner's abilities are similar to yours, have someone keep score during your sparring. Always try to out-hustle and outscore each other. Create different scenarios that intensify the sense of competition. If you're fighting a three round fight, for example, assume the fight is even after two rounds you must win the last round. Perhaps, you're behind after two rounds and you must secure a submission or at least two clean four-punch combinations in the final round to secure the victory.

**6. Develop your defensive technique.** Sometimes it's easy to overlook the obvious. If you're prone to getting beat up in training, examine your fighting style and defensive technique. There's a good chance you may be prone to taking unnecessary punishment in competition. And, while there have been some great fighters who've built their reputation on winning battles of attrition, that sort of style generally isn't conducive to a long career.

Learn defensive technique and counters. You'll save wear and tear on your joints and lessen the chance that you'll be talking like you've got a mouthful of marbles in ten years.

**7. Train with sparring partners who understand the purpose of sparring.** Again, the idea in sparring is to achieve a sense of realism without subjecting you and your partners to undue risk of injury. Perhaps the most important component of effective sparring and maintaining that delicate balance is a positive relationship and familiarity with your training partners. Good sparring partners know that even in the midst of a spirited training session they have an underlying responsibility for their partner's safety. Fight like hell to secure the submission hold, but know when your partner's joint is in a precarious position. Score with strikes, but if you stun your partner, don't go in for the kill. Allow him an opportunity to recover, even as you look for opportunities to attack.

Obviously, MMA is a combative sport and, despite your precautions, injuries can happen. However, if you know and care for your partners, and organize your sparring intelligently, you can take the action to the brink and remain pretty safe,

Train smart, fight hard and enjoy yourself.