



CHINATOWN JKD



**HIGH PERFORMANCE  
SPARRING**

# High Performance Sparring

## Part 1: Coaching The Basics

by Mike Blesch

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[ProSparring.com](http://ProSparring.com)

One of the most frequently recurring topics of discussion within our group centers around sparring. Specifically, the best progression of drills to prepare new students for contact sparring, as well as how and when to step up the intensity. Now, we realize there is a certain segment of the martial arts community that believes light contact sparring, including sparring progressions, drills, and games is a waste of time. Realism is the priority, therefore it's high intensity or nothing all. Some flat out do not believe in "sparring." They tend to be the Combatives and/or Reality-Based Self Defense groups, who sometimes prefer Scenario Training (simulating everyday, real life situations as opposed to "dueling"), and other times simply believe that the only way to prepare for a fight is by fighting, whether for self defense, sport, or anything in between. While the sentiment is understood, we do not wholly agree.



When you find yourself struggling with a technique, or, are having trouble dealing with a technique being used against you, the most simple solution is to break it down to a basic level and work the fundamentals. Repetition is king. The more times an undesirable action is repeated, especially under acute stress, the more ingrained it will become. That can only be resolved by repeating the proper response, over, and over, and over. In our opinion, this is where low intensity sparring, drills, and games become invaluable.

The purpose of this guide is to introduce the training methods and concepts that our group utilizes, and then ask that you, the reader, join in the discussion on our forum [JKDTalk.com](http://JKDTalk.com).



# SKILL ASSESSMENT

When dealing with a new student we look for the following skills and attributes to determine how prepared he or she is for sparring.

- **Defense** – Do they know basic covers, slips, parries, and defensive footwork?
- **Stress Response** – How do they respond to slight increases in pressure from the trainer during drills? Do they have poor natural responses like turning their back to the attacker, leaning away with the head to try and keep from getting hit, thrusting both hands outward to try and block the incoming strikes, etc.?
- **Attitude** – Do they display self-confidence? Have a naturally aggressive or passive personality? Are they critical of themselves when they make a mistake?
- **Attack/Counterattack** – Do they have a basic understanding of distance, striking tools, takedowns, etc.?

## BASIC DRILLS FOR ASSESSMENT

The two drills we use most often during the assessment phase are the “Wall Survival” and “Jab-Catch-Return” drills. These are very basic boxing drills. If you are not an instructor or coach, and need to gauge your own strengths and weaknesses, then an alternative is to record yourself performing the drills with a partner.

### WALL SURVIVAL DRILL

This drill comes to us from the late Bert Poe. It’s used by pro fighters/trainers and has been invaluable to our group. There are several variations of the drill, but for this section we’ll stick to the most basic version.



▶ The student places his back to a wall (ideally padded, but any wall or even the corner of a boxing ring or cage wall will do).

One round should last about 60 seconds for a beginner.

▶ While wearing boxing gloves, the trainer will feed punches to the head and body at random. It is extremely important that the contact level and speed of the punches are kept to a minimum to begin with. Gradually increase the pressure based on the student’s abilities.

▶ The student must keep his back to the wall. He may use only defensive maneuvers at this point.

*Note: More advanced versions of this drill include allowing the student lateral movement and having the trainer feed kicks as well as punches. We will cover those later.*

## JAB-CATCH-RETURN

This is a simple test of the students ability to defend and counterattack. Before getting to the drill, let's define exactly what a "catch" is and how it's used.



Technically a block, the catch can be a useful defense against a surprise hand attack. Ideally, the fighter should be striking simultaneously while catching. If unprepared, this may not be possible, in which case he or she would catch and follow up with a counterstrike. Mechanically, the technique resembles catching a baseball in a glove. The catch provides a bit more subtlety for counter punching than a regular block.

The drill can be done with or without boxing gloves.



▶ The trainer initiates the drill by throwing a jab at the students chin.



▶ The student will catch the incoming punch and return a jab.



▶ The trainer catches the students punch and returns a jab. The drill is performed in sets of 3 jabs.



Either side can initiate the set once a rhythm is established.

Begin with a steady rhythm and as the drill progresses, introduce half beats. This is where bad habits will begin to show themselves, even under light pressure.

# SPARRING SAFETY 101

The staples of creating a safe and productive training/sparring environment include providing your students and/or training partners with the skills needed to prevent themselves from getting knocked out, and to control the power of their punches (by controlling follow through). First and foremost, let's look at what causes knockouts and some general rules for preventing them.

## PREVENTING KNOCKOUTS



Most of the knockouts that take place during sparring/fighting are caused by a sudden whipping action of the head (rotational force) from strikes. The result is quite literally brain damage (lesions in white matter tracts), due to shearing forces that occur when the head is rapidly accelerated or decelerated. For the most part, these lesions do not heal. A build-up of lesions from repeated blows to the head will actually make you easier to knock out!



The thought of “losing your chin” should make most fighters reconsider the protective measures they take to avoid getting knocked out, not to mention the long term effects of brain injury that may include physical, cognitive, emotional, and behavioral complications.



# HOW TO PROTECT YOURSELF



Our skulls are best suited to protecting the brain from forward impacts. If you are going to take a punch, you need to take it on the forehead if at all possible. This is the reason (along with protecting the chin) for the forward and downward tilt of the head in any good fighting stance.



In addition to tucking the chin and leading with the forehead, it's also important to pull your shoulders up. Not only does this protect your chin and jaw line, it shortens your neck and minimizes rotational force when you do get hit. The shorter you can make your neck the better.

# THE KNOCKOUT DRILL (FOR WORST CASE SCENARIOS)

We all get caught with a big punch from time to time, so it's important to condition yourself to fight through that "daze" if at all possible. The Knockout Drill is a pretty good alternative to taking real punches to the head. This drill only requires 2 people, but is most safely performed with 3.



▶ The student crosses his arms over his chest, and bends at the waist so his upper torso is horizontal and he is staring at the ground.



▶ The trainer gently spins the student around in a circle.



## Number of rotations:

| Beginner: 6-9 | Intermediate: 10-14 | Advanced: 15-20 | Expert: 21+ |



*Note: Perform this drill with caution. If the student does not have good balance, make sure that a 3rd person is there to prevent them from falling. Even a few slow spins can cause some people to lose their balance completely.*

▶ After the chosen number of rotations are completed, either the trainer or a 3rd person will feed focus mitts which the student will punch repeatedly for 20 seconds. The straight blast (straight lead and rear punches in rapid succession) is the simplest to feed, but can be replaced with any punching combination.

# ELIMINATING DANGEROUS STRESS RESPONSES

Next, we need to address the natural responses to danger that most of us have which serve us well in everyday situations, but can cause a lot of problems in a fight. Imagine turning around to see a baseball flying directly at your face. The most natural reactions are to turn your back, lean your head away, or even to throw your hands out to try and stop it from hitting you. They're usually good enough to keep you from getting hurt. The problem with reacting that way when you're attacked by another person is there's almost always more than one punch coming at you. Turning your back may save you from the first shot, but you will end up in a very bad position to deal with further attacks. We need to ingrain, through repetition, safe and effective responses to replace the ineffective natural ones.

## EXAMPLES OF POOR NATURAL RESPONSES



✗ Turning your back.



✗ Closing your eyes.



✗ Leaning away from punches.



✗ Trying to get away by moving straight backward.



✗ Counter punching wilding with no regard for defense.

# PROPER EMERGENCY REACTIONS

Within the curriculum of many combative systems you will find techniques for dealing with what one of my teachers likes to call the "Oh Crap! Moment". You are caught in a vulnerable position and your tools have been spent, are out of play, or for one reason or another cannot be employed effectively. Maybe you're just outgunned. This is where the emergency response comes in to play.

## SALUTE / HIGH COVER-UP



To get a feel for the technique, grab the back of your head with your lead hand so that the point of your elbow is aimed down your partner's centerline. Notice that your jaw, neck, temple, and the area behind your ear is protected. This can be done on either side of the head.

## 3-POINT COVER / SUPPORTED ELBOW FRAME



Similar to the Salute, but now your rear hand will reach over top and grab the lead forearm just above the elbow, creating a "frame." The head is lowered slightly, so that you are looking under your rear forearm. Notice the 3 points created by the elbows along with the top of the head. This technique was popularized by a very good defensive boxing program that has been used in MMA and elsewhere successfully.



## THE MODIFIED DIVE

This is the most aggressive emergency response and therefore has to be modified for use in sparring. In a self defense situation, the intention is to slam your fingers into the attacker's face. In sparring, we'll use our palms to strike the opponent's forehead rather than his face. The technique involves thrusting both hands outward and lowering your head, similar to diving into a pool



# PROPER DEFENSIVE MANEUVERS

*Note: As a Jeet Kune Do group, we very rarely, if ever, use any defensive move without striking at the same time (or before if possible - think hit first, then defend). Keep that in mind while reading this section.*

## FOOTWORK

Without a doubt, the most important element of defense in sparring is footwork. Let's look at a few of the maneuvers we consider to be crucial to a proper defensive game.

### CURVE STEP

Curving and striking can be a very effective counter to a straight punch. It's especially useful against an opponent in an unmatched stance (orthodox vs southpaw, or vice versa). The curved punch is initiated with the hand, followed by a lead step and ending with a rear step (all in one fluid motion) so that you are now aligned at a 45 degree angle to the opponent. Exercise caution when using the technique against a fighter in a matched lead as you will be moving towards his rear hand. Like many footwork methods, this must be executed with explosive energy.



### SIDE STEP (LATERAL PUSH STEP)



Against an unmatched lead.

A side step in Jeet Kune Do is usually thought of as 2 movements, a step with the outside foot and then with the inside foot to recover back to your stance. We try to make every footwork maneuver as explosive or "crisp" as possible, regardless of the distance we want to move. Our version of the side step is essentially a lateral push step (a.k.a. push shuffle). It involves pushing off the foot opposite the direction you want to move, while lifting the other foot off the ground just enough to allow yourself to move freely. If you want to move to your right, you will push off your left foot. To move left, simply push off your right foot.



Against a matched lead.

## STEP OUT



A simple technique whereby the fighter will take a one step in any direction to evade or counter the opponent. This can be done with either the lead or rear foot. When stepping out to the rear hand side, the fighter will step with his rear foot. Common strikes would be a straight punch to the head or a kick to the leg/body while stepping. When moving to the lead hand side, the fighter will step with his lead foot and typically launch a straight rear punch or cross at his opponents chin.



- Keep in mind protecting the groin (just in case).
- Practice springiness in returning to the "On Guard" position.

## REAR STEP

As the name suggests, this is a simple step back with the rear foot. We prefer to step back at a slight angle rather than straight backward. In an orthodox stance we would step to 5 o'clock with the right foot. A southpaw would step to 7 o'clock with his left foot. We call the combination of a rear step and a straight lead punch the "Dempsey punch," as it's essentially a backward falling step punch. Others may refer to it as a "defensive jab."



## HEAD & UPPER BODY MOVEMENT

Secondary to footwork is head and upper body movement.

### SLIP

A slip is an evasive movement that will allow you to place your head and upper body to the outside or inside of an incoming straight punch. Typically, you will take a small step forward and to the side with the front foot (outside or inside depending on the direction of the slip). This will provide enough space to evade the punch without having to lean too much with your upper body.



### DUCK

The duck is a useful defense against both straight punches and hooks. Drop into your legs by bending at the knees and letting your body fall into a half-squat position. Keep your eyes focused on the opponent's sternum. Do not look down. As always, to protect yourself, pull your shoulders up to shorten your neck.



## BOB & WEAVE

The Bob & Weave as we teach it is basically an angular ducking movement used against hooking punches.



▶ You would evade a left hook by ducking slightly forward and to your left (to the 11 o'clock position - away from the opponent's left hand) and then "bobbing" under the punch and back up to the 1 o'clock position (now outside the opponent's left hand, as it has passed over your head).



▶ For a right hook you would duck at 1 o'clock and come back up at 11 o'clock. The key is always initiating the movement by going away from the incoming punch.



## CRUNCH



The first defense against body shots that we teach is the Crunch. You defend the side of your body being attacked by bending to the side slightly from your waist to drop the point of your elbow into the area just above your hip bone. **DO NOT** bring your guard down by taking your hand away from your head. Your hand will be able to maintain contact with your head around the temple area. The trick is to shorten one side of your torso by bending in that direction.



## HAND DEFENSES

Lastly, we'll deal with hand defenses. These are usually the lowest percentage defensive maneuvers, and are rarely used without some type of head movement.

### CATCH

Technically a block, the catch can be a useful defense against a surprise hand attack. Ideally, the fighter should be striking simultaneously while catching. If unprepared, this may not be possible, in which case he would catch and follow up with a counterstrike. Mechanically, the technique resembles catching a baseball in a glove. The catch provides a bit more subtlety for counter punching than a regular block.



### CUFF

A cuff is essentially an upward catch. By moving the opponent's extended punching arm upward, a gap is created that can be used to get to close range. It was traditionally used to set up body shots but it can also be used to setup a takedown or clinch.



# PARRY

A parry is a simple hand maneuver used to deflect an incoming strike. Parries are NOT a primary means of defense in Jeet Kune Do. Viewed as a safety measure, parries are almost always used in conjunction with a strike. As a last resort a parry may be used with some type of defensive footwork or body motion. Here we'll focus on the two types of parries we use most often:

## ▶ High Outside



## ▶ High Inside



*Note: We've intentionally left out a few techniques such as the Shoulder Roll, Sliding Roll, and Snap Back, simply because of the skill and timing required to make them work consistently. Doing them incorrectly can leave you in a worse position than not having done them at all. If you would like to learn those techniques, check out [JKDLessons.com](http://JKDLessons.com).*

# PRESERVE YOUR PARTNER!

You must be able to control the damage done by your strikes without having to alter the mechanics. This is done by controlling the penetration or follow through of the strike.



## 1-TO-5 DRILL

This drill comes from a gentleman named Dan Lee. He was a student of Bruce Lee in the 1960s. What makes this drill so great is that it teaches you to punch with full speed and power without harming your partner. There are 5 levels of follow through.

1. Surface punching. Little to no follow through. This is referred to as “cracking the egg.”
2. Punch  $\frac{1}{2}$  an inch through the target.
3. 1 Inch of follow through.
4. 1  $\frac{1}{2}$  Inches of follow through.
5. Punch 2 inches or more into the target.

Run the drill on hard focus mitts. They provide the best feedback.

1. The trainer calls out a number between 1 and 5 then flashes a mitt (any punch).
2. The student must hit with the appropriate amount of follow through and recover as fast as possible.

The deeper the follow through, the longer it takes to recover. The trainer can run the same drill with combinations. For example, he can call out “1 - 3” and then feed a jab/cross combination. The drill works for kicks, elbows, and knees as well.

# INGRAINING PROPER RESPONSES

Here is an example of how we utilize the 1-to-5 progression of power and resistance within simple drills to ingrain proper defensive responses.

## SLIPPING PROGRESSION

1. Slip a single straight punch (outside or inside)
2. Slip two straight punches (outside then inside or vice versa)
3. Hitting to slipping (student throws 4 straights, trainer returns 2 straights)

## BOB & WEAVE PROGRESSION

1. B/w a single hook
2. B/w two hooks
3. B/w two hooks with broken rhythm
4. Hitting to b/w (student throws 4 straights or hooks, trainer returns 2 hooks)

## BOXING SURVIVAL DRILL

1. Use all head and upper body movement plus hand defenses (stay in the pocket - student defends only)

## KICK DEFENSE PROGRESSION

1. Low line kicks
2. Mid line kicks
3. High line kicks

▶ To get our take on kick defense, sign up at [JKDLessons.com](http://JKDLessons.com)

## KICKBOXING SURVIVAL DRILL

1. Use all footwork, head and upper body movement, plus hand defenses (student defends only)

## WALL SURVIVAL DRILL PROGRESSION

1. No movement (hand defense and crunch only)
2. Evasive movement only (hand defense and upper body movement only)
3. Allow lateral movement against the wall plus hand/upper body defense (trainer adds kicks)
4. Move away from wall – Circling/angling footwork only – No retreating (all other defenses)

## FIGHT SURVIVAL DRILL

1. Add takedown defense to previous drills (trainer shoots, punches, and kicks)

As the trainer, you must steadily increase the pressure. Use the 1-to-5 progression. If the student fails to defend the majority of attacks, take a step back to a lesser level of resistance and power. The ability to defend 80% of the incoming attacks should be your cue to move up to the next level.

# SPARRING GAMES

Attitude is 80% of the battle in sparring (and fighting for that matter). We never want a student to feel that they cannot defend themselves. Sparring games come after acquiring at least a basic level of defensive skill.

With small class sizes it becomes difficult to match up students based on skill level. One of the major advantages of sparring games is that students of varying skill levels can work together, without forcing the more skilled students to have to fight down to their partners level. By terming these drills “games,” it lowers stress levels right off the bat. Emphasis is on “play” rather than competition. Here are a few examples.

## ISOLATION SPARRING

Isolation drills are great for honing individual tools and can also help “level the playing field” when students of different skill levels are matched up. Both tools and targets can be restricted.

A	vs	B
Hands	vs	Feet
Jab	vs	Jab
Hook	vs	Jab
Rear hand only	vs	Front hand only
Kicks	vs	Takedowns
Elbows	vs	Kicks
Bodyshots only	vs	Headshots only

An endless number of combinations can be created to challenge students. For advanced students that have no trouble with simple restrictions, try making them spar on one leg (for example: stand on right leg and jab with right hand).

## STYLES GAME

An interesting variation for advanced students is to assign each a specific “style”. For example, make one student a counter-puncher and the other a pressure fighter.





## DEFENSE & EVASION GAME

This can be a very frustrating drill but the results will speak for themselves. The trainer will play the attacker while the student defends.

### SEQUENCE 1

- The student may use only his rear hand to parry, catch, or cuff. No head movement is allowed.
- The trainer will feed only straight punches. Use of combinations and broken rhythm is encouraged.
- To make the drill more difficult the trainer will randomly call out “switch” and the student must switch leads in his stance. The trainer may switch leads at any time without warning.

*Note: Do not get caught up in playing the parrying/blocking game. The key component here is footwork! Make use of angled steps. Try to avoid moving straight backward.*

### SEQUENCE 2

- The student may use only head movement, slipping, ducking, and the bob and weave. He may not defend with either hand.
- The trainer will feed both straight and curving punches.
- To make the drill more difficult the trainer will randomly call out “switch” and the student must switch leads in his stance. The trainer may switch leads at any time without warning.

▶ Footwork is again critical in surviving this drill without taking a beating.

### SEQUENCE 3

- The student may use all defensive maneuvers but cannot move his feet. He must remain stationary for the duration of the drill.
- The trainer will feed both straight and curving punches but will not circle the student or force the student to move his feet in any way.

▶ The covers discussed earlier are the only means of succeeding at this drill.

## TRAINER'S CHOICE GAME

Not only is this drill good for the student, it's also helps the trainer practice seeing openings quickly. It's best that a student plays the role of trainer for this game before switching out and performing the drill himself.

1. Two students square off.
2. The trainer stands behind one of the students and calls out openings in the opponents defense as he sees them.
3. The student may only attack the target designated by the trainer (example: left leg, right body, or chin)

Start with only punches. When a basic level of proficiency is achieved add kicks. The student decides which tool to use to attack the chosen target. Finally, add takedowns.



## INFIGHTING GAME

Two students stand toe to toe and duke it out at close range. Use of full face headgear is recommended for this drill as well as chest and rib protection. The starting distance should be inside of punching range but not quite clinch. Once the drill starts either student can use over/under-hooks to set up strikes. No knees, short kicks, throws, sweeps, or takedowns.

# OPEN THE GUARD GAME

This drill is based on infighting tactics we learned from Dennis Blue. It begins from close range in what's called the "high outside reference point" in JKD terminology. The student will attempt to open his partners guard and score with a shovel hook, uppercut, or any close range strike.

## SEQUENCE 1



▶ Starting position.



▶ The student strikes his partners arm near the elbow with a hook to open up his defense. The force of the hook turns his partner enough create an opening to the body.



▶ The student launches a shovel hook into the opening.

▶ (Optional) He follows up by hooking to his partners head. This forces his partner to practice the Salute/High Cover-Up.

## SEQUENCE 2



▶ Starting position.



▶ The student pushes up on his partners arm (forearm to forearm, at a 45 degree angle).



▶ The student launches a shovel hook into the opening.



▶ He follows up with an uppercut to the head.

*Note: Shovel hooks and uppercuts can be replaced with forearm strikes, quarter swings, or any other close range technique.*

# CONCLUSION



Sparring obviously does lack realism, and that is exactly what makes it a valuable training tool. It doesn't make much sense to intensely pressure test a technique you don't "own". There must be some progression from learning a tactic, honing the skills required to make the tactic successful, testing it in scenarios, and ultimately using it in combat. We, as martial artists, view sparring as a means of exposing and eliminating weaknesses in our skill set.

To be continued in Part 2...

Join our mailing list at [ProSparring.com](http://ProSparring.com) to stay up to date.

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