

POWER **VS.** SPEED



Seventh-degree black belt Dominick A. Giacobbe knows a little something about free fighting. The owner and chief instructor of the 30-year-old Tang Soo Karate Academy in Pine Hill, New Jersey, has trained in the Korean art of *tang soo do* for 36 years. During that time, he's educated more than 1,000 black belts and 40-plus masters, all while finding time to further his own training under some of the finest experts in America, Korea and Japan. Among them are the renowned J.C. Shin, who's now based in Philadelphia, and C.S. Kim, who currently operates out of Pittsburgh.

**BY NICKY DEMATTEO
PHOTOGRAPHY BY RICK HUSTEAD**

**THE
EVOLUTION
OF
TANG SOO DO
FIGHTING**





From 1968 to 1978, Giacobbe reigned as a free-fighting champion on the East Coast. Fortunately for modern martial artists, he's still eager to pass on the knowledge and experience that decade of competition gave him. His most recent tang soo do contemplations have involved the evolution of the art's fighting method—from ancient times to the modern era.

The Way It Was Then

The fighting art of tang soo do is believed to have originated 2,000

years ago during Korea's Three Kingdoms period. Silla, the smallest and least populated region of the peninsula, was under constant attack from the larger and more powerful Paekje and Koguryo kingdoms. After a few centuries, the Silla rulers are believed to have allied themselves with a skilled fighting force created by the Tang-dynasty monarchs of China (618-907). It was then that the tang soo warriors were born. For years, this elite group of combatants, trained on the rocky beaches of southern Korea, where they honed themselves into a fierce fighting force.

Their combat system was a combination of a traditional Chinese art known as the "Tang method" and a set of powerful kicks native to Ko-

rea. It was during this time that tang soo—the "hand of Tang"—became respected and feared. The fighters garnered a reputation that was so intimidating that as recently as 30 years ago, Korean parents would discipline their children by threatening, "The tang soo man is going to get you!"

To propagate their morality, the tang soo warriors developed the Sesok Ogye, or Five-Point Code. Its tenets were:

- Show loyalty to one's king or master.
- Be obedient to one's parents and elders.
- Honor friendships.
- Never retreat in battle.
- In killing, choose with sense and honor.

BODY ROTATION:

Dominick Giacobbe (right) faces his opponent (1). When the opponent initiates a roundhouse kick (2), Giacobbe rotates his torso to protect his vulnerable targets and absorb the blow on his arm (3). He continues to turn and locks his sights on the target (4), then unleashes a crescent kick to the head (5).



AGGRESSIVE STRATEGY: Tang soo do expert Dominick Giacobbe (right) sizes up his adversary (1). He then closes the gap, seizes the man's lead hand and delivers a reverse punch (2). Giving the opponent no time to counter, Giacobbe immediately begins to pivot (3) and follows up with a spinning crescent kick (4).



With the Five-Point Code as their philosophy, the warriors went on the offensive and eventually conquered

dynasty (1392-1910). During the unification period, tang soo saw its greatest development.

Don't give the opponent an opportunity to attack.

“The fighting strategy emphasized the fourth line of the Five-Point Code: Never retreat in battle. Quite simply, practitioners were taught to never move backward in combat.”

Silla's neighbors, unifying Korea for the first time. The consolidated dynasty lasted from 668 to 935—cementing Korean solidarity through the Koryo dynasty (935-1392) and Yi

At the time, the art consisted solely of fighting techniques; there were no forms. The traditional style of combat was swift, aggressive and relentless. Its guiding principle was,

The fighting strategy emphasized the fourth line of the Five-Point Code: Never retreat in battle. Quite simply, practitioners were taught to never move backward in combat, Giacobbe says. Instead, they were instructed to charge at their opponent, attacking with a punch and following up with a series of kicks, forcing the other person to retreat. Soon the adversary was rendered unable to defend or counterattack. The tactic was not unlike that of the elite fighting forces of our era: Overpower the enemy and kill him.

After peace was established, the word *do*, or “way,” was appended to tang soo. Tang soo do then came to





refer to the peaceful pursuit of the warrior arts, and it remains that way to this day. To further drive home the transformation, the fifth line of the code saw the word "killing" replaced by "conflict." The new term doesn't refer to only physical confrontations; it also applies to mental, emotional and spiritual battles.

During the Yi dynasty, arts and crafts rose to a high level, and Koreans learned the necessity of protecting their hands and fingers. Consequently, tang soo do evolved into a system that focused 80 percent of its arsenal on leg techniques—especially those that relied on the more powerful and less-likely-to-be-anticipated rear leg.

The Middle Period

Giacobbe's first experience with traditional tang soo do fighting came around 1970 when as a green belt he received his first opportunity to spar with J.C. Shin, his first instructor at

SPEED AND CONTROL: Modern tang soo do competition requires practitioners to excel at techniques such as the front-leg roundhouse. Dominick Giacobbe (right) squares off with his opponent (1). Before the man can move, Giacobbe chambers his lead leg (2) and executes a kick to the face (3).

the Burlington, New Jersey, school. Shin used a series of forward-moving punches and kicks, driving Giacobbe backward and leaving him unable to defend himself.

When C.S. Kim came from Korea

Top 3 Foot Techniques for Sparring

There's no doubt that *tang soo do* has some awesome kicks. Dominick A. Giacobbe, *Black Belt's* 2000 Man of the Year, says the following three techniques are guaranteed to help you prevail in the ring:

- **Front-leg round kick** It's the most effective technique for sparring, he claims. In addition to being very quick, it enables you to get close to your opponent. It's also the easiest way to score a point. "Judges can see it [make contact]," Giacobbe says. "Some kicks aren't so obvious."
- **Crescent kick** After you land the front-leg round kick, you have the option of faking another round kick and then using the same leg to follow up with a crescent kick, Giacobbe says. "[You'll be] coming around from the other direction, on his blind side. It's very effective."
- **Spinning hook kick** If somebody launches a round kick at you, block it and counter with the spinning hook kick, he recommends. "Most of the time when people throw a kick, they're vulnerable to the spinning hook."
—Sara Fogan

Top Hand Techniques for Sparring

The lead-hand backfist just may be the most effective hand technique for use in tournaments, says Dominick A. Giacobbe. Unfortunately, the organizers of many Korean-style competitions won't allow you to use it.

In that case, look to the reverse punch. Over the years, it's scored plenty of points in sparring matches.

"A good set-up for the reverse punch is a fake backfist," Giacobbe claims. "Fake it with one hand, then throw a reverse punch with your opposite hand. The combination is very effective."
—Sara Fogan

in 1972 to assist Shin, Giacobbe experienced the traditional fighting method to an even greater degree. A sparring champ in Korea and Japan, Kim displayed an ultra-aggressive style that brought to life the true combat roots of the ancient art.

From 1972 to 1978, Giacobbe had the opportunity to welcome numerous Korean masters brought to the United States by Shin. Upon arrival, they would first spend time with Shin to learn the language and the

NO RETREAT:

Standing at medium range (1), the opponent (left) opts to close the distance with a rear-leg front kick, which Dominick Giacobbe stops with an X-block (2). The tang soo do master grabs the kicking leg and pulls (3), bringing the opponent into range for a body punch (4). He follows up with a crescent kick to the head (5).



business of teaching. Then they would be sent to various locations across the United States to establish their own schools. But while they were in Burlington working out at Shin's studio, Giacobbe would take advantage of every opportunity to

spar with them and pick their brains for fighting secrets.

Shortly thereafter, Shin advised Giacobbe to spend some time in Korea so he could learn more about the art and its traditions. In Korea, the American was immediately im-



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pressed with the way the locals blocked attacks without using their hands. Instead, they used body rotation and spins to negate kicks. That facilitated a quicker counter-attack because the defender didn't have to waste any time with hand techniques. Giacobbe also noted that the Koreans favored an aggressive free-sparring style very similar to Kim's, but of course he was quite

used to dealing with it by then.

The Way It Is Now

Because of the popularity of tournaments, modern tang soo do fighting is a "point-conscious" method of sparring. It usually involves standing upright with the hands held in front of the body for blocking purposes. Some 80 percent of the leg tech-

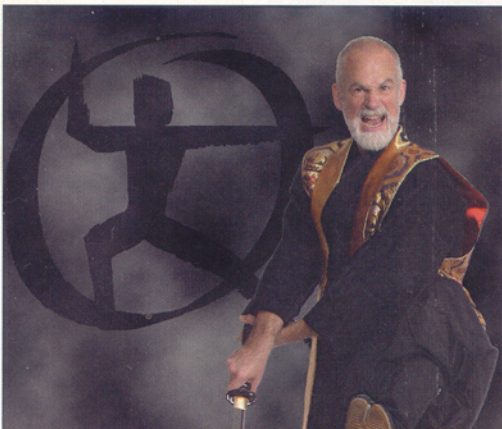
niques used in competition are executed with the front leg because of its speed and control advantages. The extra speed, generated at the expense of power, makes it easier to score. And since tournaments require maximum control—light contact or none at all, in most cases—sacrificing power is not a problem. Furthermore, with front-leg kicks there's less chance of being disqualified for excessive contact.

Tang soo do in the modern era also emphasizes defending and countering. No longer is the traditional attack-only methodology the be-all and end-all of fighting.

But that doesn't mean tang soo do is no longer relevant for fighting. Giacobbe maintains the old style is more effective for self-defense, partly because of the adage that holds that the best defense is a great offense. Seek out an instructor who teaches it if your primary interest is street defense. But if you're into competition, or if you're an instructor who teaches women, children and professionals, you'll probably want to reduce the risk of injury in class by sticking with the modern method.

The old style of tang soo do served an elite class of warriors who made up an extremely small percentage of the populace. Today, they might be compared with the Navy SEALs or Army Rangers. The majority of Americans don't want to engage in the type of training the tang soo warriors underwent in preparation for war, and that's fine because tang soo do is comprehensive enough to offer spiritual, mental and physical health in addition to self-defense suited for the average person. ✕

About the author: Nicky DeMatteo is a sixth-degree master who has trained under Dominick Giacobbe for 26 years. For more information about tang soo do, call (856) 627-2323 or visit <http://www.tangsookarate.com>.



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