

**THE ART AND SCIENCE OF**

# **STICK FIGHTING**

*A Complete Instructional Guide*

**JOE VARADY**

**9 LEVELS**  
*Easy to  
Expert*

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## Foreword

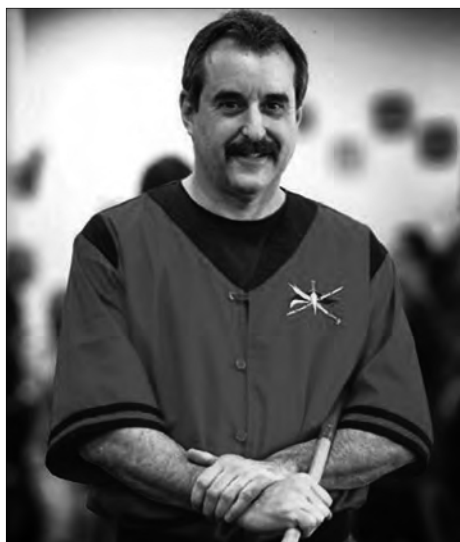
In the *Art and Science of Stick Fighting*, Master Joe Varady delivers exactly what his title suggests: a systematic, organized, and scientific approach to the use of a medium-length weapon in both self-defense and sport applications. The concepts, lessons, and training methods presented will enhance the knowledge of a very broad range of practitioners, from novices and enthusiasts to seasoned instructors.

Master Joe systematically breaks down core competencies of a weapons-based martial discipline, including how to move (stances and footwork), how to attack (grips and striking, both linear and circular), and how to defend (block, parrying, and disarming). He also explains how these skill sets are different for each of the different ranges of combat. After these concepts, extensions to a number of logical variations are presented, including use of the stick against other weapons, dealing with multiple opponents, and empty-hand defense against the stick.

There are also several additional and refreshing aspects to this work that set it apart from the existing body of literature. First, a multicultural history is presented that addresses commonalities between related martial arts systems from around the world, showing that the same realities and limitations of physics and human physiology were discovered by many serious practitioners of martial arts. This is often summarized in the martial arts world as “truth is truth.” Along these same lines, an introduction to muscular anatomy and the nervous system is presented, which helps the reader understand the basis of these truths, as well as explaining the need for specific stretching and strengthening exercises used to facilitate development. Finally, following the presentation of ideas and theories, each level presents sample workouts and training that will reinforce those teachings. It is good to see that the text also acknowledges the importance of striking a heavy bag to develop power, as the bag doesn’t lie, and your full-contact sparring shows everyone how much bag work you’ve done.

Over the past three decades, I have had the pleasure of training with Master Joe and observing his progress along the path from young, enthusiastic martial arts practitioner to veteran instructor. The Japanese term *sensei* is often translated as “teacher,” but it is more correctly translated as “one who has gone before.” Master Joe truly embodies that term. He has spent the long hours training and has extensively read the work of those who have gone before him. Never resting on his laurels, he constantly tests his skills and his ideas honestly, with no prejudice for or against any style. He regularly enters tournaments from different martial art systems (such as eskrima and historical Western combat) and continues to spar in his dojo with his students. Based on what he learns, he refines his approach and then tests it again.

I am honored that Master Joe has chosen to include in this book some of the techniques and concepts that he learned from me, such as speed striking and the associated letter system, programming, and tres-tres. To give credit where it is due, I wish to acknowledge



my teacher, Grandmaster Arnulfo “Dodong” Cuesta, and his teacher, Supreme Grandmaster Dioniso “Diony” Cañete of the Doce Pares Multi-style System of eskrima, for teaching me what I have passed on to Master Joe. The Filipinos are renowned in the martial arts world for the development of short-stick and knife training methods, and I have had the privilege of training under the guidance of these great teachers for over thirty years. One of my early karate teachers, Sensei Miguel Estrada, once told me that the best way for me to repay him for teaching me was to teach ten others. If I can count Master Joe as one of my ten, then I am on my way toward repaying that debt.

Grandmaster Steve Wolk

Doce Pares Multi-style System

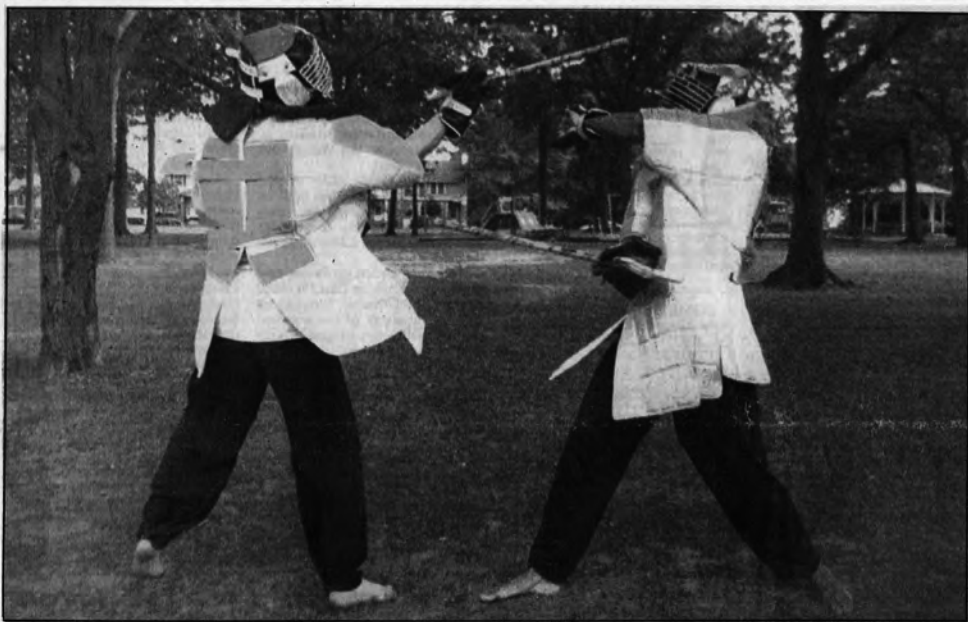
Six-time world stick-fighting champion



## Preface

Over the past three decades, I have trained in Eastern martial arts such as karate, kung fu, tae kwon do, judo, jujitsu, wing chun, and eskrima. I have also studied various Western martial arts such as boxing, fencing, long sword, sword and shield, and various methods of armored fighting. In addition, I like to research and write about martial arts training. I wrote six training manuals for my core style, Cuong Nhu Martial Arts, and I helped write a manual for my main Western martial arts school, Live Steel Fight Academy. My first book, *The Art and Science of Staff Fighting*, was published by YMAA in 2016.

The Phoenix • Phoenixville, Pa. • Friday, July 30, 1993



Staff photo by Barry Taglieber

### Take that!

Despite the temperatures in the mid-90s, Joe Varady (left) and David Lipscomb suited up for practice.

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Banging around with my favorite training partner back in 1993.

Clearly somewhat of a fanatic, I test my martial arts skills continuously. I competed in several eskrima tournaments in the early 1990s, during the time when I studied Doce Pares under the six-time world stick-fighting champion, Guro Steve Wolk.

In the 2000s, I tested my stick-fighting skills at Live Steel Fight Academy in matches against mixed weapons as disparate as the shillelagh and quarterstaff. I attended the

World Eskrima Kali Arnis Federation (WEKAF) National Championships in New York City in 2014, where I qualified for the US team. I then had the privilege of fighting in the World Championships later that year, traveling all the way to Hungary. I took home second place in full-contact staff and fourth place in full-contact double stick.



Team USA at the WEKAF World Championships, Hungary 2014.

The following year, in Jersey City, New Jersey, I took home a gold medal in full-contact single stick at the Doce Pares World Championships. Most recently, in 2018, I won first place in padded stick fighting at the WEKAF Nationals in Baltimore, Maryland.

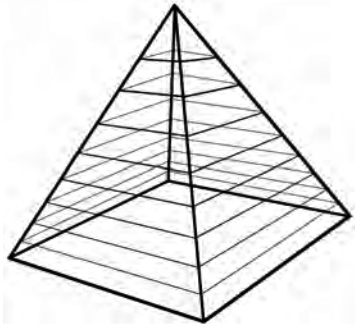
I enjoy reading what others have to teach about the martial arts, and I have a large collection of books in my home library. I was surprised that I could find few books that talked about the actual strategies and tactics needed to become a successful stick fighter. The author Beverly Cleary once said, “If you don’t see the book you want on the shelf, write it.” So the stick was in my court. The next step, naturally, was to write the book that you are reading now, *The Art and Science of Stick Fighting*.

In this book, I present a methodical process for training to fight using the short stick. My book uses a multifaceted, interstylistic approach that is easily incorporated into any foundational martial art. It is designed to be absorbed in small chunks over time. If you keep an open mind, explore often, and train hard with the stick, you will increase your knowledge and develop your abilities to employ the weapon effectively in a fight. The

result will be your own, personal stick-fighting method that is based on sound principles and good techniques.

Lord Aki once said that martial valor is a matter of becoming a fanatic.  
I thought that this was surprisingly in accord with my own resolve,  
and thereafter I became more and more extreme in my fanaticism.  
—Yamamoto Tsunetomo, *Hagakure*





# Introduction

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## The Levels

The *Art and Science of Stick Fighting* is a unique, non-style-specific approach to fighting with the short stick. Its curriculum is streamlined and divided into nine logical stages of training that allow the reader to quickly and methodically learn and develop the skills needed for fighting with the stick.

Whether you are just starting out or have been practicing stick fighting for years, there is something for everyone in this book. Whereas my last book, *The Art and Science of Staff Fighting*, featured an appendix that explained the physics of the staff, in this book I have tried to incorporate the science into the main body of the work, making it more pertinent and accessible to the reader. Like *Staff Fighting*, this book features detailed, systematic workouts and descriptions of how to make and use specific training equipment as you learn and master the art and science of stick fighting.

**Level 1: The Foundation.** Become one with your stick! Learn the basics on which everything else relies: a stable stance, basic footwork, and an effective guard. Once these basics are in place, you learn different types of strikes and how to practice them in a helpful, easy-to-learn striking pattern. The aim is to grow so comfortable wielding a stick that it is as though the stick has become an extension of your body.

**Level 2: Long Range.** Dominate the fight by mastering your outside game! Learn how to effectively apply the basic strikes, both offensively and defensively. Topics include striking, targeting, combinations, double striking, feinting, programming, evasion, and long-range disarming strikes.

**Level 3: Crossing the Gap.** Control the distance and you control the fight! Learn how to safely cross the gap from long range to middle range to keep your opponent guessing, and one step behind.

**Level 4: Middle-Range Offense.** Speed striking will teach you how to execute fast and effective combinations while checking your opponent's strikes at the same time.

**Level 5: Middle-Range Defense.** Learn how to block the opponent's attack and finish the job with a series of simple middle-range disarms that will leave your opponent wondering where his stick went.

**Level 6: Close-Range Infighting.** Things can get ugly on the inside! Learn the game of infighting with the short stick using devastating butt strikes, walloping double-handed striking, and throat-crushing chokes. End the fight with grappling and takedown techniques.

**Level 7: Single-Stick Sparring.** It's time to put your skills to the test by suiting up and bringing on the fight. Learn important guidelines for sparring, from light-contact up to full-contact training, how to construct your own padded weapons, and effective fighting tips that will up your game.

**Level 8: Short Stick versus Other Weapons.** What if your opponent does not have a stick? Learn techniques to counter all sorts of threats, from short-range weapons such as knives to long-range weapons such as staffs, spears, and even guns.

**Level 9: Empty-Hand Defense against the Stick.** Oh no, the worst-case scenario happens: your opponent has a weapon, but you do not! Learn the strategies and tactics that will help you not only survive but even beat the odds and emerge victorious.

Along the way, I'll also include information about special training equipment designed to help you perfect specific skills. Workouts at the end of each level outline the type of exercises and training that will help you achieve your goals.



While attackers may be of either gender, the pronouns *he* and *his* have been used in reference to opponents for the sake of simplicity. Similarly, while participants may be left- or right-handed, techniques have been demonstrated primarily from a right-handed perspective.

Stick fighting is a martial art, and martial arts are, by their very nature, intensely physical activities. Since it is difficult to learn the nuances of the martial arts solely from a book, I recommend seeking out and training with a qualified instructor. It also helps to have a dedicated training partner, or better yet, a group to practice with. However you end up training, always keep an open mind. Continually strive for a deeper understanding and a corresponding higher level of performance.

I admit that this book is by no means a comprehensive text on the topic of stick fighting. I'm not sure any single book could

be. There are many stick-fighting styles and techniques that are worthy of study yet fell outside the scope of this book. However, I am confident that *The Art and Science of Stick Fighting* is a large step in the right direction. There is a lot here, and it will take a while to properly assimilate. The journey will take patience and perseverance on your part, but in the end, I think you will be very proud of your accomplishments. What do you say we get started?

**Vision without action  
is a dream soon forgotten.**

—Dr. Dong Ngo

### **Why Learn Stick Fighting?**

There are many practical reasons to learn how to fight with sticks. Stick fighting is a healthy, competitive activity that has real-world applications. Stick-fighting skills are very practical for self-defense, while stick fighting also serves as a sport, offering both entertainment and fitness. It appeals to all types of people, of all ages and ability levels.

During a self-defense situation, it usually helps to possess more power than your opponent. Greater power can be achieved with greater physical size, muscular strength, and fighting experience. Weapons, such as short sticks, can also act as power multipliers. They increase your speed, force, and range, giving one person the ability to fight off much larger, even multiple, opponents. The odds of having your sticks with you to defend yourself are very low; however, your everyday environment contains many items similar to your sticks that can be used as effective, improvised weapons. Objects such as umbrellas, car antennae, curtain rods, plunger handles, walking sticks, baseball bats, and tennis rackets can be wielded in self-defense like a stick, thereby making it practical to learn how to fight with sticks. Concepts and skills from stick fighting apply to self-defense situations involving knives and weaponless defense as well.



A sample of the improvised weapons available in your everyday environment.

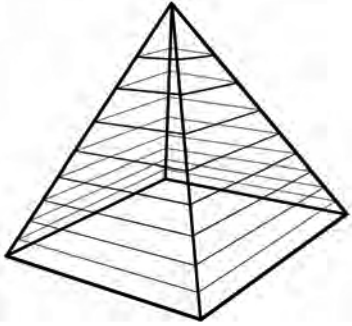
There is an important distinction that needs to be made between self-defense and sport when it comes to stick fighting, and all martial arts for that matter. Sport fighting is meant to be similar to, but certainly not the same as, a self-defense encounter. Sport fighting is governed by clear-cut rules, and the contestants stand and fight in a safe, controlled arena until a winner is declared. On the street, your goal is to fight only as long as is necessary to escape to safety. There are no rules of engagement in self-defense except to do whatever is needed to survive, and the arena is never ideal. A serious, unwavering, and focused mind-set is critical in self-defense. Sport fighting provides the arena and the time for a fighter to focus on developing fighting skill sets that may help in self-defense. It provides the fighter an experience that develops personal discipline and fosters courage through a voluntary exposure to adversity. It is also a fun, safe way to get into shape, to improve your ability to think on the fly, and to test your spirit. It serves many purposes, of which training for self-defense is but one.

There is also an important distinction that needs to be made between a trained stick fighter and a person fighting with a stick. A fighter is called a fighter for a reason, and a trained stick fighter is a breed apart. A trained stick fighter has tremendous speed compared with an untrained stick fighter. Weapons move at a high speed, so training with them improves reaction time. Regular practice with weighted objects like sticks also helps develop overall body strength, coordination, and empty-hand speed. Ask any baseball or tennis coach, and they will tell you that speed is an acquired skill. Rigorous, repetitive training with a stick increases a stick fighter's ability to wield that stick faster and faster because his body becomes so comfortable moving and hitting with the stick that it requires less and less muscle energy. Untrained fighters, on the other hand, even those with greater raw power, will not be able to wield the stick to as great an advantage because their bodies will need to rely on muscle energy, making their strikes slower and weaker.

Just knowing how to swing a stick and to be able to swing it fast are not enough. Targeting and accuracy are just as important as speed and power, since a strike needs to hit a vulnerable target in order to inflict damage. A trained stick fighter not only knows how to hit with a stick but also knows where to hit for maximum effect. This knowledge and precision are developed with proper training and lots of repetitive practice. An untrained fighter lacks both the targeting and the accuracy needed to hit decisively and effectively with the weapon, especially in the heat of the moment, when he is trying to hit with maximum force for maximum effect.

A proper stick fighter's training regime is progressive, frequent, challenging, and physically strenuous. Stick-fighting practice provides cardiovascular exercise and all-around physical fitness. The best stick fighters achieve a level of physical fitness that a nontrained person usually does not have. The training that a stick fighter endures provides him with the stamina to keep fighting long after an untrained fighter has tired out. Perhaps even more importantly, stick fighting often leads to a lifelong path of health and fitness.





# Warming Up and Cooling Down

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## Warming Up and Stretching

There are more than ten million sports injuries every year, but many of them could be avoided by implementing a proper warm-up. This produces a two- to three-degree rise in core body temperature that can last for up to forty-five minutes, preparing your muscles for strenuous activity and helping to prevent injury. A well-designed warm-up routine accompanied by some light stretching can also be extremely beneficial to your overall performance, so long as the activity is suitable to the sport and not performed too vigorously. If you warm up, you will have looser muscles, making you faster, stronger, more agile, and less prone to injury.

Think you can ignore or rush through your warm-up? Well, let me tell you a precautionary tale. It was April 2018, and I was fighting in the World Eskrima Kali Arnis Federation Stick Fighting East Coast Nationals in Baltimore. So far I was having a great day. I was undefeated, having already taken gold medals in staff and padded stick fighting, and was well on my way to adding a third gold medal to that list, this time for knife fighting. I won my first fight and was halfway through my second when I suddenly heard a pop and staggered. I felt as if someone had just nailed me in the calf with a stick, hard. I looked around to see who had hit me, but it was just me and my opponent. I actually asked the ref, “Who hit me?” but he just shrugged and answered, “Nobody.” I finished that fight in extreme pain, but I won. I got some ice on my calf, but by the time my final match came up, I could barely stand on it. I fought that last fight on one leg, and although I gave it my best, I still lost four to six. When I went home, I looked up calf injuries. A class 3 calf sprain was described as being accompanied by an audible pop and feeling as if someone has stabbed you in the calf. That sounded about right.

I don't mind losing to a superior opponent, but I do mind losing to my own stupidity. I had trained hard for that tournament and was well prepared, but all my training came to naught because I had forgotten to do one basic thing: warm up. Sure, I had warmed up when I first arrived at the tournament, but that was over five hours before, and after standing around all day, my legs were getting cold and stiff. I did do some quick stretches before my match, but obviously it was not enough. I missed stretching my calves, and when I needed my body to perform the most, it broke under the strain and cost me a gold medal, not to mention the fact that it took several annoying months to heal.

This is why all good coaches include preworkout techniques specifically designed to increase performance and decrease injuries. Physically, the benefits of warming up include increased flexibility, muscle stability, and range of motion. Warming up also increases your mental alertness and psychological readiness. This is partly because aerobic exercise releases endorphins that can actually put you in a positive mood, making you feel more prepared and ready to perform.

The primary goal of your warm-up activities should be to increase your body temperature a few degrees. The amount of exercise needed to get to this point varies depending on your cardiovascular conditioning level, but it is recommended that you exercise until you observe light to mild sweating in normal ambient conditions.

Research shows that warming up by slightly increasing your body's temperature with physical movement can actually enhance your physical performance. A proper warm-up causes your blood vessels to dilate, reducing their resistance to blood flow and thereby minimizing the strain on your heart. The increased blood flow not only decreases muscular stiffness but also increases oxygen and nutrient delivery, improving muscular endurance and increasing your ability to sustain peak performance for as long as possible. Warming up also helps to prevent overheating by promoting the dissipation of body heat through sweating.

This increase in temperature allows muscles and tendons to become more extensible, making stretching muscles and tendons easier and more effective. The heat also augments the sensitivity of your nerve receptors and increases the transmission speed of your nervous impulses, meaning your muscles can contract with more force and relax more quickly. This results in enhanced speed and strength, making you a better stick fighter. By improving the muscle's elasticity, you also decrease the risk of pulling that muscle. Warming up can further decrease your risk of injury by increasing the range of motion of your joints.

Your first goal should simply be to increase your body temperature. You need to do five to seven minutes of light to moderate activity until you break a light sweat. The activity could be any type of light cardio or plyometric training—jogging, stationary bike, treadmill, shadow boxing, and so on. The best activity for stick fighters, however, is probably skipping rope, since it activates practically all of the same muscles you will use when fighting with the stick. Whatever the activity, you should be looking to increase your heart rate to 55–60 percent of your maximum. To calculate your personal maximum heart rate, subtract your age from 220. This is the upper limit of what your cardiovascular system can safely handle during physical activity. For example, a forty-year-old would have a maximum heart rate of 180. For the same person, the target heart rate for a warm-up would be about 100 to 120 beats per minute.

After your body has been warmed up, you should go through a light stretching routine. When you stretch at the beginning of your workout, you generally want to concentrate on performing dynamic stretching. Dynamic stretching takes each limb gently through its full range of motion, gradually increasing reach and speed. These motions

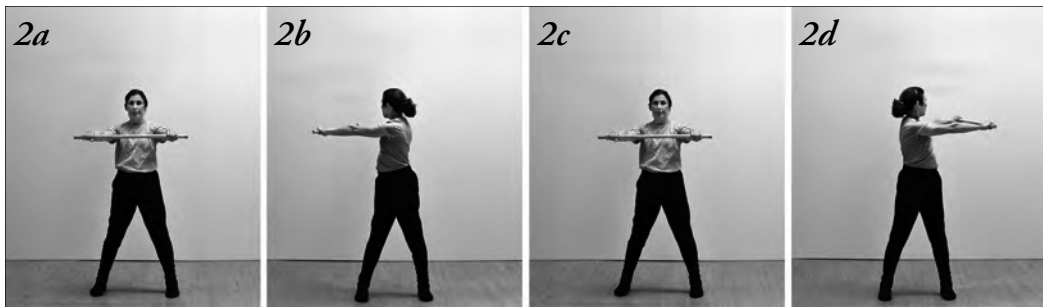
include swings and circles with your arms and legs, as well as gentle twirling and striking with the stick.

You may be surprised to hear that, while light, dynamic stretching does not decrease performance, heavy, static stretching does. Static stretching involves holding a position for extended periods of time. Holding a stretch for longer than thirty seconds can cause a muscle to become less responsive and stay weakened for up to thirty minutes. Therefore, since traditional static stretching is still needed to address or improve certain areas, only hold these stretches for twenty to thirty seconds at the beginning of your workout. A foam roller can be a useful tool to help work out areas of stiffness and immobility. A quick foam-rolling routine can improve range of motion without decreasing muscular activation or force.

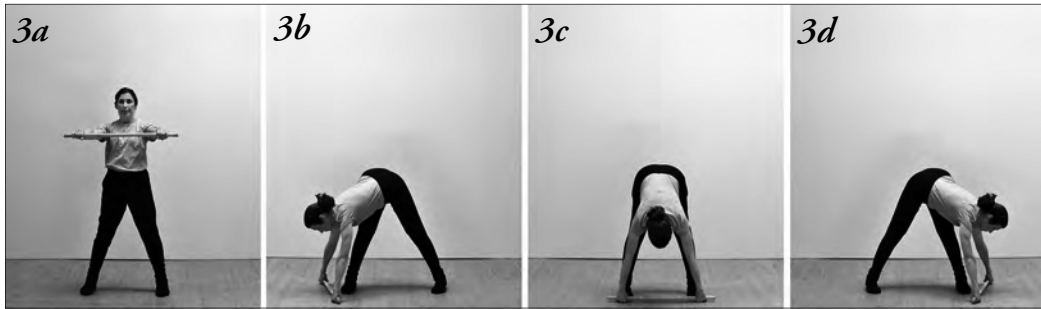
The following warm-up stretching routine is meant to be general and preventative, not individual or prescriptive. Specific limitations can be addressed through precise drills and stretches that are best prescribed by a sports therapist on an individual diagnostic basis.



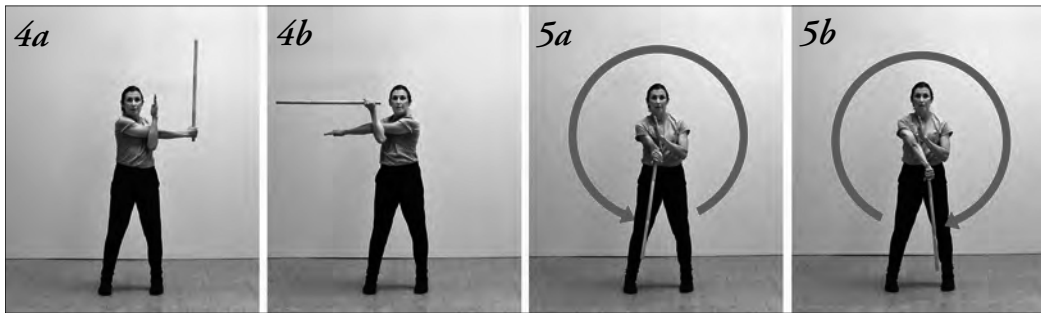
Begin gripping your stick in two hands and holding it high over your head (*1a*). Lean to your right to stretch your lats and obliques (*1b*). Return to the top position and lean backward slightly as you reach high (*1c*). Lean to your left to stretch your other side (*1d*).



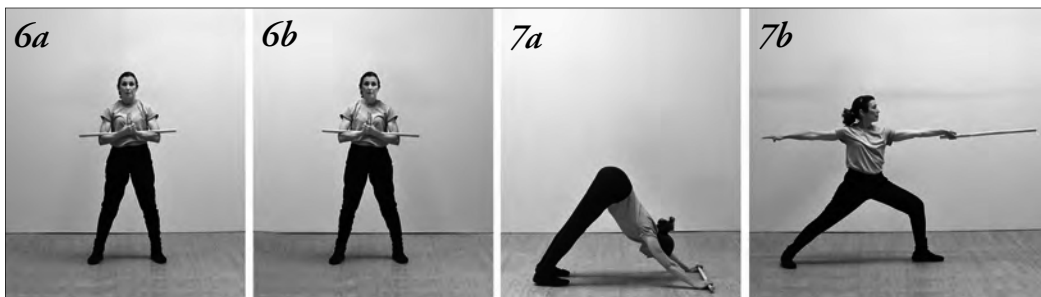
Hold the stick straight out in front of you, reaching forward as far as you can (*2a*). Look over your right shoulder as you turn your upper body to the right for a twisting stretch that extends from your ankle all the way up to your neck (*2b*). Hold the stick straight out in front of you again, reaching forward as far as you can (*2c*). Look over your left shoulder as you turn your upper body to the left (*2d*).



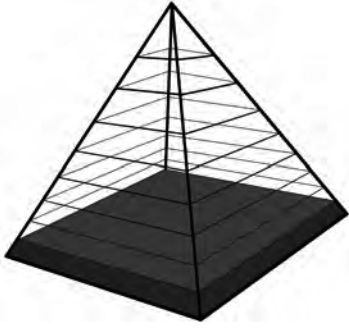
Return to the front-facing position (3a). Turn to your right and bend at the waist, reaching down to your right side (3b). Bend forward at the waist to stretch your back and hamstrings (3c). Turn to your left and bend at the waist, reaching down to your left side (3d).



Reach across your chest with your right hand and hook your right arm with your left from underneath to stretch your triceps and deltoids (4a). Switch sides and stretch the other side (4b). To warm up your wrist and forearm, hold the stick out in front of you with the tip pointing toward the ground. Rotate the stick back and forth through a 360-degree rotation clockwise and then counterclockwise (5a and 5b). Switch hands and repeat.



Rest your stick in the crooks of your elbows as you grasp the back of your left hand with your right so that your fingers are grasping the base of your palm and your right thumb is pressing against the base of your pinky finger. Turn your hand inward, pinky toward your center, to stretch your wrist (6a). Repeat on the other side (6b). The “downward dog” position from yoga stretches your calves (7a), while “warrior two” helps to ready your body for lunging. Keep the heel of your front foot in line with the arch of your rear foot (7b).



## LEVEL 1

# The Foundation

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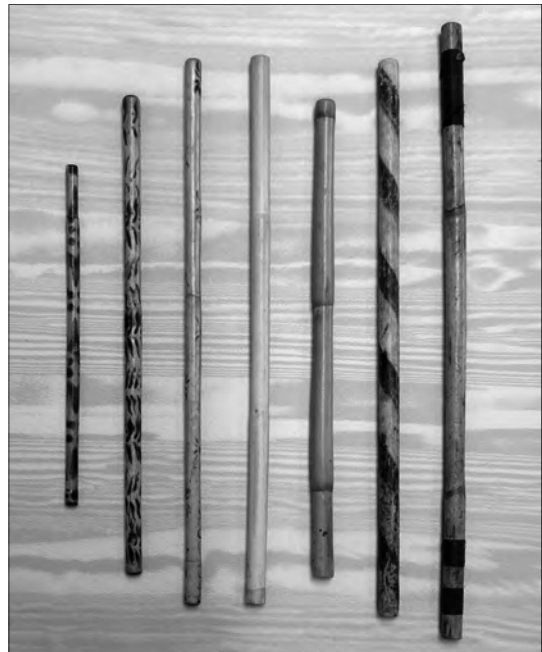
### Choosing a Stick

You have many options when choosing a stick. You could choose hardwood or rattan, long or short, heavy or light.

Although the techniques in this book can be applied to a wide variety of lengths and types of stick, I demonstrate mainly with kali sticks, rattan sticks about twenty-eight inches long. This is a versatile length for the average-size person, long enough for good reach while still short enough to allow for quicker manipulation than a longer, heavier stick (at six foot two, I am a little taller than average, so I can comfortably wield a slightly longer stick and cut my sticks to around thirty-one inches).

A longer stick has an obvious reach advantage, while a shorter stick usually has less weight and, thus, a speed advantage. Heavier sticks hit harder and are better for blocking. However, their mass makes them slower. Heavy sticks are good for developing the muscles used in manipulating sticks. Lighter sticks are faster, generally don't hit as hard, and can break when put under the stress of a hard strike or block. Lighter weapons are usually preferred for forms and free fighting.

The maximum length of the stick depends on your height. When you hold your stick in a natural grip with your arms at your sides, the tip should reach just below your ankle. Anything longer and you start to risk hitting the ground when you twirl or strike. The stick should be about one inch in diameter. You want it to be sturdy, but not so thick that you can't wrap your fingers all the way around it.



Sticks come in many sizes, lengths, and weights.

I recommend practice weapons made from rattan. Rattan looks like bamboo but is actually a vine-like plant that grows in Southeast Asia. Unlike bamboo, it is solid, yet it is not nearly as heavy as wood. This makes rattan easy to train with because it is light and more forgiving when you accidentally hit your training partner (hey, it happens). As the rattan is struck over and over, the fibers begin to separate and eventually the stick



Rattan is fibrous and does not splinter like wood.

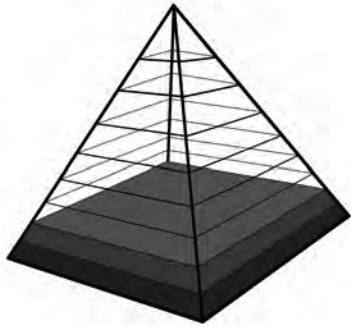
might lose its rigidity, but it will not shatter or splinter, leaving a sharp end, as regular woods have a tendency to do. This makes it preferable to wood in many ways.

Wood makes an ideal material for a heavy stick. Heavy sticks are good for developing strength and hitting hard. When selecting a wooden weapon, you want it to be durable and resist breaking. Therefore, one of the

most important factors to consider is hardness. Most people know that there are two distinct kinds of wood: hardwood and softwood. However, these designations don't refer to the actual hardness or softness of the wood. Hardwoods come from deciduous trees (the kind that drop their leaves each fall), while softwoods typically come from evergreen trees (those that have needles and keep them year-round).

The actual hardness of a particular kind of wood is determined by the Janka hardness test, in which scientists see how much weight is needed to drive a small steel ball into a sample of wood. This test still does not necessarily predict how well suited a wood is for impact, but it is a starting place. The Janka ratings go from five hundred to five thousand pounds of force. The species that are optimal for martial arts have a Janka hardness in excess of two thousand pounds of force. These include exotic woods like purpleheart and Brazilian cherry. North American woods that rank high on the scale include black locust, persimmon, sycamore, and dogwood. Hickory and ash are not recommended because they have low Janka ratings, making them more prone to shattering. White waxwood also has a low Janka rating, but it resists breaking because it has a high modulus of elasticity (how much a stick can bend and still bounce back into its original shape). Tigerwood is a good overall choice, as it not only is hard and has a high elasticity but also has an interwoven wood grain for good shock absorption. All of these types of wood and many more are available online.

As of the time of this writing, Lowe's and Home Depot stock four-foot-long solid laminated bamboo paint-roller extensions for about seven dollars each. With a diameter of seven-eighths of an inch, they are lightweight and extremely durable and break clean



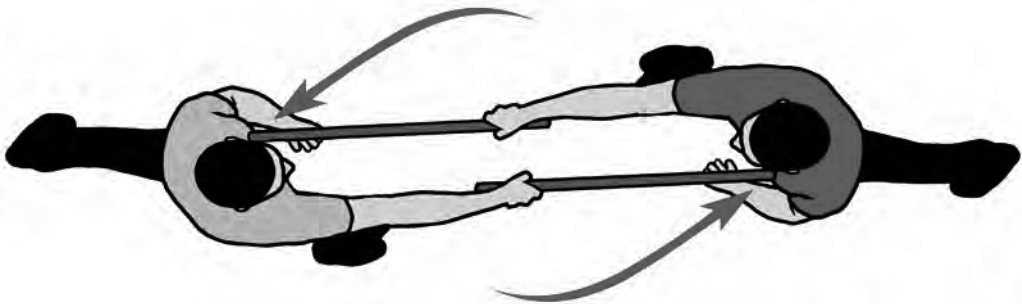
## LEVEL 2

# Long Range

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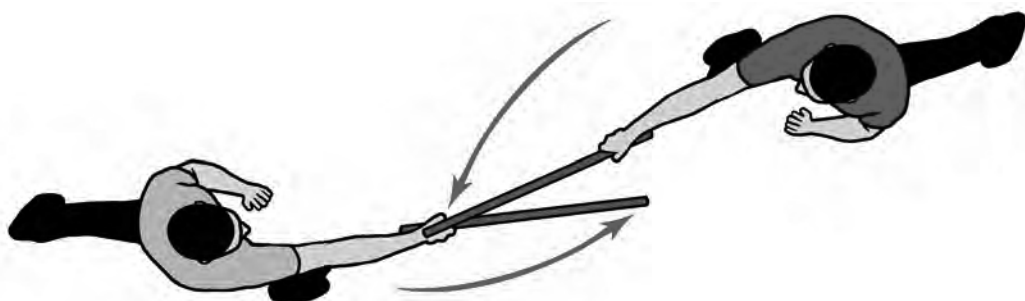
### The Outside Game

The fundamental long-range strategy, or “outside game,” is to stay outside your opponent’s effective striking range while targeting his outermost extremities. The most basic strategy with the stick is to simply attempt to strike your attacker without him striking you—that is, to “beat your opponent to the punch.” However, if you and your opponent are similar in size, you will also have similar ranges (assuming you have matched weapons, of course). This means that if you can strike your attacker, chances are he can hit you as well. If you are similar in skill level, you can probably expect to win about 50 percent of the time. These are not good odds, whether you are fighting a match in a ring or against a hoodlum on the street.



If you both target the head, neither has a tactical advantage.

However, when playing the outside game, you adapt your strategy slightly in order to increase your odds of hitting while not getting hit. Assuming that the attacker is targeting your head and body, you can effectively increase your own striking range by attacking the outermost targets on his body. The closest target will usually be his leading hand, followed by the knee of his leading leg. As you attack these primary targets (the ones that should be targeted first), your opponent will be forced to change positions, exposing secondary targets such as his elbows, body, and head.



While your opponent targets your head, you target his hand.

There are two variations on this strategy. Defensively, you passively wait for the opponent to attack, then move just out of range and counterattack, usually targeting the weapon hand. Offensively, you can control the fight by striking preemptively. When properly employed, these two strategies can allow you to control most aspects of the long-range fight.

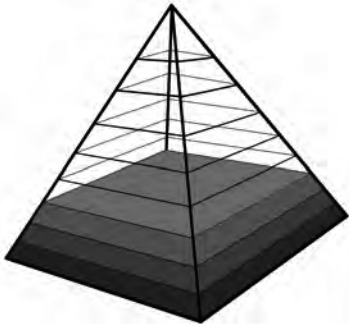
In chess, you often hear of masters planning several moves ahead in order to set an opponent up for a finishing move. This is possible in stick fighting as well. So how do you start thinking three or four moves ahead? First, you must control the fight by controlling the distance. Second, employ a series of logical, effective combinations that will allow you to predict not only how your opponent is likely to respond but also how to follow up effectively.

By developing effective strategies and tactics beforehand, you will be better equipped to deal with an opponent because you have a battle plan, just like the chess master. Your moves are no longer random techniques thrown haphazardly at the opponent. Instead, you are a tactician who employs a logical, systematic battle plan to control the fight and overcome the opponent.

### **Controlling the Distance**

The long-range strategy is sometimes referred to as guarding by distance. Attacking from long range while staying outside your opponent's effective striking range requires that you control the distance; in this way, you can control the fight. Moving forward and backward is the obvious way of maintaining distance. Your opponent moves forward, you move back. Your opponent moves back, you move forward. Remember, while effective, moving straight backward can be dangerous because your opponent can charge forward faster than you can retreat. Circling to the left or right, on the other hand, puts you into a strategically more advantageous position than moving straight back and forth does. This is because, as you circle, you are not only controlling the distance but also controlling the line of combat.





## LEVEL 3

# Crossing the Gap

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### Entering Offensively

Even though you may prefer to fight from long range, there will be times when you will want, or need, to go to middle range, where you can use your free hand to check your opponent's weapon hand. Perhaps you are not winning at the outside game, or maybe your primary strategy is to skip over long range altogether to engage the opponent at middle range. Perhaps it is a self-defense situation in which you need to disarm and neutralize the attacker quickly and do not have time for an extended long-range confrontation, in which case you could transition directly to close range. Whatever the reason, you will still have to move through the opponent's long-range zone before you can engage your opponent at a closer range. This is called entering or crossing the gap.

When moving to middle range, you are most vulnerable to attack while crossing the gap. Your goal is to cross safely into the middle-range striking zone without getting hit in the process. There are several ways to accomplish this. Although these are not the only ways, and they are by no means foolproof, the following methods do have a high rate of success across a variety of situations.

If you are already actively engaged in the long-range game, entering offensively is only a matter of proper timing, as you must wait until your opponent is in a poor position to strike you. The opponent can inadvertently put himself in a bad position by overcommitting to a strike that ends up missing its target, leaving him temporarily unable to counter. The opening will be very brief, so you must be ready to spring inside as soon as his strike goes by.

You can increase your odds of success by controlling the action. Use the technique of baiting and drawing to entice your opponent into making a big swing. Leave an opening that your opponent cannot resist. When he takes the bait, move his intended target just out of the way. Provided that your opponent was sufficiently committed to his strike, his momentum should carry his weapon past the target. Immediately enter through the resulting gap in your opponent's defense.

### Flower Transition

You can enter offensively, using rapid-fire strikes to cover your approach. Use the flower twirl to attack the opponent's lead hand, getting progressively closer until you end up at middle range.



**1**  
**Entering with the Flower:** Begin your attack at long range, targeting the opponent's weapon hand. As expected, the opponent withdraws his hand to avoid your first strike.



**2**  
 Use a double strike to loop back deeper with a second attack, which he attempts to avoid by retreating yet again.



**3**  
 He is now out of position and unable to launch a substantial attack, giving you an opportunity to transition to middle range as you strike a third time with a backhand strike.



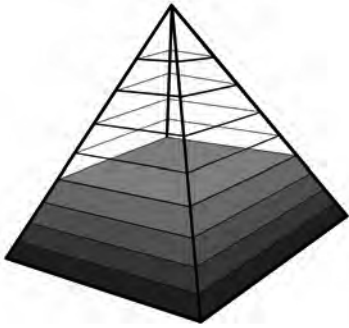
**4**  
 Twirl to the outside into a fourth strike as your free hand moves to check his weapon hand.



**5**  
 Stop your downward momentum and reverse your motion into a fifth strike vertically upward under the chin.



**6**  
 Loop around one last time to catch your opponent with a sixth strike upward into the groin.



## LEVEL 4

# Middle-Range Offense

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### Understanding Middle Range

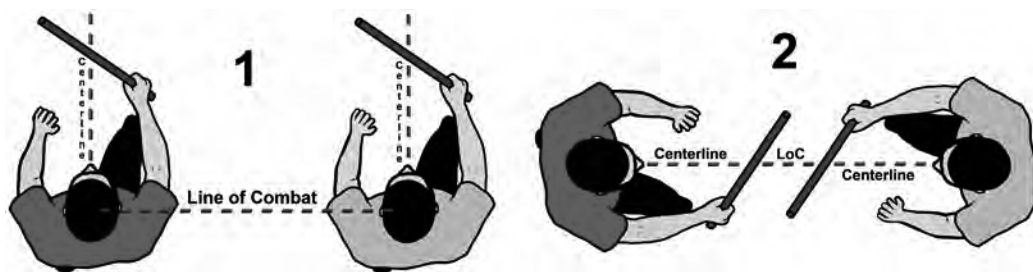
The middle range can be defined as the distance at which you can touch any part of the opponent's body with your free hand. Once you can touch your opponent, you can begin to check his weapon. Furthermore, you can use your tactile senses to monitor his general body movements and even read his intentions. This especially applies to touching your opponent's weapon hand.

Like stick fighting at long range, fighting at middle range has its own unique set of strategies and tactics. While strikes at long range are usually delivered in short bursts every few seconds, at middle range you can deliver strikes to the target at a much faster rate. For a trained stick fighter, delivering five hits a second is not uncommon.

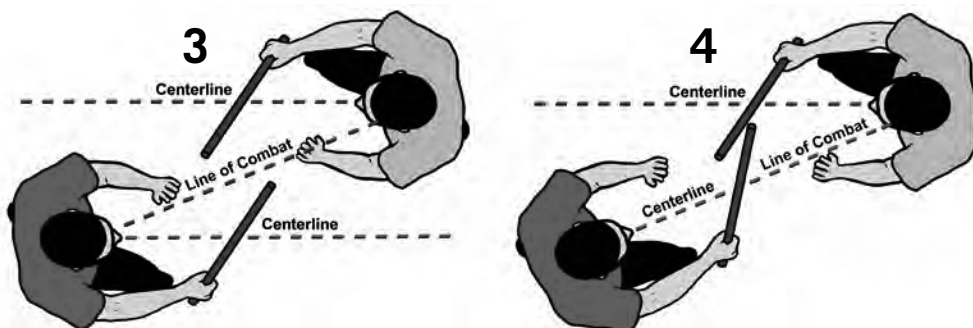
Because you are close enough to actually make body-to-body contact, at middle range you can use your off hand to check the opponent's weapon. This can effectively neutralize his attack, allowing you to attack him with impunity.

### Center, Centerline, and the Line of Combat

In order to grasp the subtle dynamics of stick fighting, it is necessary to understand the concepts of center, centerline, and the line of combat. For the sake of this discussion, let's consider the spine as the body's *center*. Your *centerline* is an imaginary line that runs bilaterally straight down the center of your body and extends in a vertical plane in front of you. The *line of combat* is an imaginary line that connects your center with your opponent's center. It represents the most direct path of attack (illustration 1 in the accompanying figure). You can attack most effectively when your centerline is aligned with the line of combat because your opponent is right in front of you, allowing you to maximize the effective use of both your weapon and your free hand. Therefore, it is usually best to keep your centerline turned directly toward your opponent. However, if you are standing directly in front of each other, then neither of you holds a tactical advantage (illustration 2).



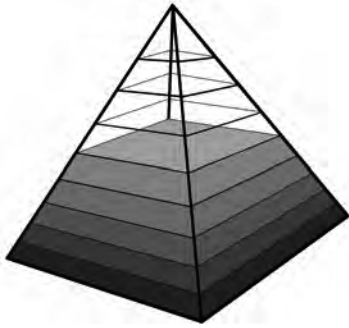
Therefore, try to stay off your opponent's centerline. A quick shuffle step counter-clockwise to the opponent's left (your right) places you in his deceleration zone, taking away his ability to strike you with maximum force (illustration 3). Immediately realign your centerline to the line of combat to place your opponent in the middle of your strike zone (illustration 4).



Likewise, circling clockwise to the opponent's right (your left) places you in his acceleration zone, which should have the effect of jamming his attack.

### Targeting at Middle Range

Although each strike is generally performed along a prescribed line, your targets will vary, and they will not always be in the same positions. Therefore, you need to understand that each basic strike is also capable of attacking at slightly different angles. For example, a downward diagonal strike can target the temple, the pocket of the neck, the point of the shoulder, the elbow, or the hand. Upward diagonal strikes can attack the knee, the sciatic nerve, the hip, the ribs, or the elbow. Downward vertical strikes can be used to attack the crown of the head, the face, the clavicle, the point of the shoulders, or the hand. Upward vertical strikes can strike the groin, the hand, or up under the chin.



## LEVEL 5

# Middle-Range Defense

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## Checking

An important part of middle-range fighting is to monitor and manipulate the opponent's weapon hand with your free hand. This is done at the same time that your other hand is striking. Checking is very similar to chi sao, or "sticky hand," exercises common to some kung fu styles such as wing chun. The idea is to stick to the opponent's weapon hand in order to weaken or even neutralize his attacks. This is accomplished through a variety of movements that include checks, parries, holds, taps, locks, scoops, pushes, presses, pulls, and sweeps. Regardless of which action you choose to employ, they all require that you maintain some sort of cohesion with the opponent's weapon arm.



Some of the different positions encountered when practicing the sticky hand checking drill.

The sticky hand checking drill is used to practice using your off hand effectively. Square up across from a partner and lightly touch his weapon hand. As your opponent slowly moves to strike you, maintain that contact and gently but firmly check or redirect his strike. Focus on controlling your partner's weapon hand as opposed to his wrist or forearm, as this usually provides the greatest degree of control, although there will be times when you will check or manipulate farther up the arm.

## **Blocking and Parrying**

While avoiding the opponent's strike is the best way of not getting hit by your opponent's weapon, this is not always a viable option. Blocking is a defensive maneuver that impedes or stops the forward momentum of your opponent's weapon. On the other hand, parrying is the action of redirecting the momentum of the opponent's stick in such a way that it does not hit you without bringing the opponent's weapon to a stop.

Blocking and parrying are skills that must be learned and practiced if you are ever to employ them effectively during a fight. The following progression—static blocking, jamming, and dynamic blocking—is designed to help you become comfortable with and competent in blocking the opponent's weapon.

### **Static Blocking**

Static blocking occurs in the opponent's strike zone. When someone swings a stick at you, your body's natural reaction is to move to defend yourself. The ability to stay calm in a stick fight begins with learning to control this instinctive flinch response. While moving is usually preferable, static blocking teaches you to stand your ground and "take the shot" using minimal footwork and staying in your partner's strike zone. The idea is to become so confident in your blocking that you no longer panic when an opponent swings at you. This allows you the calmness of mind to read the opponent's intentions and respond appropriately.

Practice static blocking until you can calmly observe your opponent while he is swinging at you. Watch for telegraphing movements that first tell you what side he will be striking from, and then at what level. If the opponent starts from a closed position, you know he is chambered for a backhand strike, whereas an opponent with his arm held so that his body is open is in a position to deliver a forehand strike. Other clues, such as the level of the weapon and where the opponent's eyes are directed, can tell you what level he is intending to attack. Use this information to set up a block before he can get to the target. After you block, you can practice adding a counterattack, but always make sure the blocking maneuver takes priority.

When you can stand still and block without flinching, it is time to add proper footwork. If the attacker chambers for a forehand strike, circle into his left side with your right foot. If the opponent is chambered for a backhand strike, angle into your left with

your left foot. As you angle into the opponent, keep your centerline aligned with the line of combat. This allows you to use both your weapon and your free hand to neutralize the attack. If possible, use your free hand to turn your opponent's center away from you so he won't be able to strike you again.



High-level block against a number 1 high downward diagonal forehand strike.



High-level block against a number 2 high backhand strike.



Middle-level block against a number 3 middle-level forehand strike.



Middle-level block against a number 4 middle-level backhand strike.



Low-level block against a low-level forehand strike.





## LEVEL 6

# Close Range

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### Infighting

Long range is the distance at which you can touch your opponent with the tip of your weapon. Middle range is the distance at which you can touch the opponent's hand with your free hand. Close range is the distance at which you can touch the opponent's body with the butt end of your weapon. There are specific tactics that should be employed when you are within arm's reach of your opponent that differ from those used at other ranges.

### Punching

Perhaps the most often overlooked technique at close quarters is punching with the clenched fist. Do not become preoccupied with employing your stick when you have better tools available. If you have training in any striking arts, now is the time to employ it. Momentarily disregard the weapon in your hand and punch. Close-quarters weapons also include your elbows, knees, feet, and even head.



**1**  
**Pass and Punch:** Your opponent is checking your weapon hand.



**2**  
Hook the butt of your stick inside his wrist.



Pull his hand down and back to clear the line of combat.



Punch forward with a punch such as a boxing cross or karate reverse punch.

### Butt Strikes

Butt strikes are delivered with the short end of your stick and are ideal for close-range infighting, especially when the weapon is being held in only one hand. Striking with the butt of the stick is a natural motion, like hitting with a hammer but with your forearm as the handle. The result is a powerful strike that is further amplified by being concentrated into the very small striking surface on the end of the stick.





## LEVEL 7

# Single-Stick Sparring

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### The Moment of Truth: En Garde!

Hopefully you've trained hard and learned well the lessons from levels 1–6, because now it is time to see how well your knowledge fares against an actual opponent. Level 7 focuses on putting together everything you've learned in order to develop your own personal stick-fighting method and test it against a noncompliant opponent.

It is not unusual for sparring with the stick to feel awkward at first. After all, there is a big difference between doing training drills with a partner and experiencing the chaos of fighting against an opponent who is trying his best not only to avoid getting hit but also to hit you in return. Stick with it (no pun intended). Your techniques may not seem to work well at first. You will get hit. You may get hit often. Sometimes it will hurt. Deal with it. Open yourself to the thrill that comes with training in fighting arts, the satisfaction of overcoming hardships, and the confidence that comes with knowing that your techniques will actually work for you should you need them.

When sparring, you should use special equipment, including specially padded sticks and protective gear. All the same, keep in mind that this is just *mock* combat, and that no amount of padding or protective gear can make up for a good temperament, good technique, and good control. The fact is that injuries can occur whenever you are engaging in activities that involve physical contact, so remember that you are not out to actually hurt your partner (at least I should hope you are not!). Discuss how hard of a hit you are each comfortable with, as well as other rules such as “no kicking” or “only controlled takedowns.” Once you are comfortable with the ground rules, start out fighting slowly and with little power. Such fighting is good as both a mental and physical warm-up and an opportunity to feel out your opponent. After a few moments you can gradually step it up a little, until you are fighting at an intensity level that is agreeable to both combatants.

When sparring, always keep your head and never lose your cool. It is common to talk a good game, thinking you'll do one thing, only to find that you respond differently when under pressure. Stick to your game plan. Do some deep, full-cycle breaths, breathing in through your nose, filling your lungs, and exhaling through your mouth. This will help you stay calm and focused. Training with such a mind-set will improve your weapons skills much more quickly than a simple “hit them more than they hit me” attitude.

Although it can be fun, take sparring seriously, always keeping in mind that if these were real weapons, a single blow, even just a shot to the hand, could decide everything. Remember that a good defense is essential. Try to anticipate where your opponent will strike you, and then block or move out of range, but remember that defense alone will not win a fight. As for specific fighting tactics, remember to stay flexible and continually adapt to the ever-changing circumstances of the fight. Most importantly, train hard, but train safe and have fun!

**Attack when your partner changes position or is retracting his weapon.**

—Bruce Lee, *Tao of Jeet Kune Do*

### **Safety Equipment**

There are several different methods by which you can safely hone your weapons skills against an actual opponent without holding back very much, if at all. The secret lies in the proper combination of two key components: good protective gear and properly padded weapons. Over the past decades, I have created and experimented with many different types of armor and weapons, testing them all in hours of full-contact sparring. Some work better than others. I will go over padded weapons first, since they are safest and require a minimal amount of equipment. Then we will take a look at the best available armor, so you can eventually work up to full-contact sparring with unpadded rattan sticks.





## LEVEL 8

# Short Stick versus Other Weapons

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### Mismatched weapons

Should you ever find yourself in a self-defense situation in which you have a stick, it is unlikely that your opponent will be similarly armed. What if the opponent has a short weapon like a screwdriver or a sharp knife? What if he has a long weapon like a staff or a shovel? The biggest difference between weapons is usually their effective range, and there are certain strategies that can help you to cope effectively when faced with a shorter- or longer-range weapon.

### Stick versus Knife

An opponent with a blade should never be underestimated. Any encounter with a knife-wielding attacker is about as serious and life threatening as a self-defense situation gets. Since the knife is a potentially lethal weapon, any situation involving a knife-wielding opponent should be avoided whenever possible.

### Defang the Snake

A snake without fangs is not as dangerous. The same can be said of a knife-wielding attacker. If you did have to defend yourself against a knife, a stick could provide a very effective defense. Use long-range skills, targeting the opponent's weapon hand with precise strikes using the tip of your stick at maximum range.



**1**  
**Defang from Above:** Maintain distance and wait for the opponent to enter your range, but stay out of his circle of death.



**2**  
Use keen footwork to keep the opponent at that range and do not let him close the gap between you.



**3**  
You should be able to effect a disarm with a single solid strike, but keep your strikes short and hold your centerline in the event that you miss your initial target, allowing you to quickly strike again



**1**  
**Defang from Below:** The attacker approaches while you are holding your stick low.



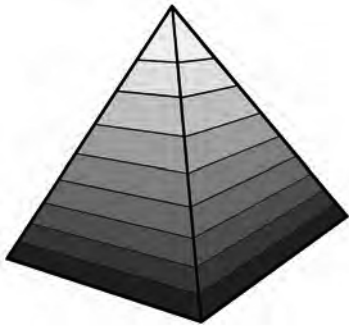
**2**  
Initiate your retreating step by pressing off the ball of your front foot.



**3**  
Take a full step backward as you bring your stick up.



**4**  
Strike the opponent's hand from underneath.



## LEVEL 9

# Empty-Hand Defense against the Stick

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### Unarmed Defense

In December 2017 I received this message from one of my black-belt students, Sensei Nick Lolli, who had moved away from Pennsylvania several years earlier:

Dear Master Joe,

I'd just like to tell you about a situation when everything came together. I was walking home from some bars in Greenville, SC, tonight when I saw a man aggressively swinging a belt at two other men in the middle of the street. These two cab drivers had their hands up and clearly wanted no part of the altercation, so I decided to distract the man with the belt by engaging him and talking him down. I told him that he'd won the fight and that it was all over, and after a few minutes he walked over to me on the sidewalk and shook my hand. Despite this, all of a sudden he swung his belt at my head. I suppose it's due to years of being swung at by you and everyone else, but I was able to duck the belt and quickly close the gap to take him down with an osoto gari. I was able to pin him down, despite his kicks and punches, with the help of my friend who jumped on his legs after I took him down. I held him down until the police came. I'd like to thank you for not only making sure that I didn't get hit tonight, but also that I had the courage to help the two men who were clearly frightened by the man who was very obviously violent and drunk.

When confronted by any opponent with a weapon, your first course of action should be to flee the scene. However, sometimes circumstances may force you to confront an armed adversary, so it is important that you know how to defend against a weapon with your bare hands. While you mostly train with a stick, keep in mind that the stick can represent a variety of single-handed blunt trauma weapons such as a piece of wood, a pipe, a tire iron, a hammer, a baseball bat, or the belt mentioned in the foregoing story.

Let me be very clear: disarming any armed assailant is a difficult and dangerous task. Therefore, in order to be successful, any technique will require perfect timing, precise technique, and perhaps a little bit of luck. Even then, there is a good chance the opponent will get a swing in on you as you cross the gap, so you'll need to cover your advance.

Naturally, you'll want to avoid getting hit at all. However, if you can't avoid getting hit, avoid getting hit hard. If can't avoid getting hit hard, at least avoid getting hit hard in the head. With this goal in mind, here are some strategies and tactics that will help you try to make the best of a bad situation.

You learned in Level 2 that a strike can be dissected into three main parts: the initial phase, when the swing is gaining momentum, called the *acceleration zone*; the area of focused concentration, called the *strike zone*; and the *deceleration zone*, when the stick starts slowing down. Needless to say, you do not want to get caught in the impact zone! This basically leaves you with two options: enter early, before the opponent's strike has gained sufficient power, or avoid the strike and enter later, after the strike has passed by. Either way, you'll have to close the gap to close range in order to neutralize the attacker.

Practice a wide range of techniques so you will be versatile and able to respond effectively, taking full advantage of every opportunity that presents itself.

### **Crossing the Gap**

In this scenario, because your opponent is armed and you are not, he has the obvious advantage. Therefore, to maximize your chances of success, you'll need to gain control of the fight as early as possible. To accomplish this, hover just outside the opponent's effective striking range, taking care to monitor his position and stay ready to back or circle away if he tries to close in on you.

The attacker's weakness lies in his strategy, which is usually to incapacitate you with a few hard hits. Read his movements and be prepared to act the moment you see him move to chamber for a strike. Better yet, draw a strike by feinting a quick motion as though you were moving to enter, but suddenly pause to see his reaction. Watch for the moment that the opponent begins to chamber for a strike. When he does, you'll need to either quickly charge directly in or lean just out of range to avoid the strike before suddenly entering.

The opponent's reaction to your feint may be that he begins to strike but quickly senses that you do not actually intend to enter and checks his attack. This will often be followed by a very brief moment of relaxation, which is a good time to quickly cross the gap. You must move quickly on a 1–1.2 count, exploding forward while the opponent is still in the process of mentally and physically resetting. This is difficult and therefore requires much practice, but once you have mastered it, your opponent will have a difficult time striking you, at least hard enough to stop you from moving to close quarters.

When you do enter, there are two positions that will protect you from the number 1 strike: the arrow and the wall.





The arrow and the wall as seen from the attacker's point of view.



**The Arrow:** The arrow is a technique in which you shoot yourself quickly across the gap. Stand just out of range, baiting the opponent with your head.



The opponent takes the bait and steps through to close the gap and strike you. At the same time, extend your arms in front of you as you duck your head and rush forward.



Angle slightly into his weapon arm, usually to your eleven o'clock position, ahead and slightly to your left. Your left forearm strikes his arm and checks the weapon as you drive your right forearm into the side of his neck.



Maintain pressure on the neck as you snake your rear hand around the opponent's weapon arm.



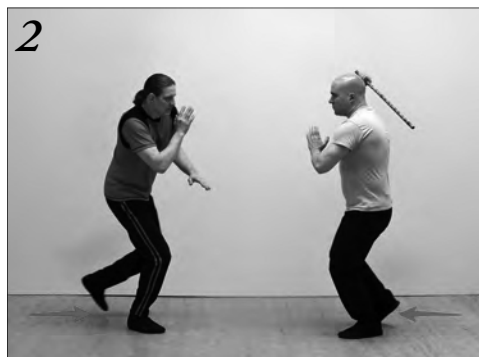
Maintain pressure on the neck as you complete the snake and dislodge the weapon from his grasp.



You now have the opponent's weapon.



**The Wall:** Stand just out of range, baiting the opponent with your head.



The opponent takes the bait and steps through to close the gap and strike you. At the same time, raise your right hand over your left shoulder, palm away, to protect the left side of your head. Raise your left shoulder and tuck your head into it to protect your chin.

## About the Author

Master Joe Varady has over thirty years' experience in the martial arts. He began Cuong Nhu Martial Arts in 1987 and currently holds a sixth-degree black belt. Over the past three decades, he has cross-trained in Eastern martial arts, including karate, taekwon do, judo, wing chun, and eskrima (to name a few), and various Western martial arts, such as boxing, fencing, long sword, and sword and shield.



Joe is currently the head instructor of two programs: traditional martial arts through Satori Dojo and eclectic weapons systems through Modern Gladiatorial Arts, both located in Phoenixville, Pennsylvania. He has served as president and is currently an active member of the Universal Systems of Martial Arts Organization, a fellowship of instructors from different styles of martial arts who share techniques and principles. Joe was inducted into the Philadelphia Historic Martial Arts Hall of Fame in 2016.

Joe holds a master's degree in elementary education and has written and illustrated four Cuong Nhu training manuals for adults, as well as two full-color volumes for kids. YMAA Publication Center released the precursor to this book, *The Art and Science of Staff Fighting*, in October 2016.

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- Construction plans for building your own training tools



**Joe Varady** is the award-winning author of *The Art and Science of Staff Fighting*, and a sixth-degree black belt with over thirty years of experience in martial arts. He has trained in numerous Eastern and Western disciplines, including karate, judo, eskrima, boxing, fencing, and long sword. He has won numerous awards competing in full-contact weapons tournaments around the world. Joe holds a master’s degree in elementary education. He is the head instructor at Satori Dojo and Modern Gladiatorial Arts. Joe Varady resides in Phoenixville, Pennsylvania.

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