

LADY FIGHT LIKE A MAN

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One of the most significant developments in the martial arts during the last ten years has been the increasing enrollment of women. The reason for this flood of enrollment is self-evident and it is not my purpose to discuss that part of the phenomenon. Since women now form a sizable part of the practitioners in the martial arts, they not only encounter difficulty in finding qualified teachers but also encounter the same type of discrimination practiced outside in the business world. It appears that men in the dojo expect women to “look like a woman, but think like a man; and act like a lady, but fight like a man.”

Without question women need a slightly different type of supervision because their needs are different. Their physical differences, their psychological makeup, their lack of a fighting background, all tend to make their instruction a special kind. Over the years, teaching and researching, I have noticed that women are more interested in the quality of the teaching than in the art itself. Also, they are more likely to take criticism personally. They need more reassurance than men and like to be encouraged, but in a sincere manner. Although men deep inside may be just as emotional as women, women display emotion more than men.

The biggest obstacle that women meet in the dojo is that of discrimination. Discrimination is totally pervasive. Although the organization-the dojo-does not discriminate by itself, it is an instrument for accomplishing the act. Most would agree that there is a correlation between discrimination and prejudice. Discrimination is an action, prejudice is a state of mind, and from prejudice springs discrimination. Hence, a woman has two strikes against her when she enters a dojo.

We all have personal preferences of one sort or another and these preferences should be respected; but when any preference becomes a factor in the quality of teaching because of sex, then the question of discrimination arises since learning opportunities for women are affected. Generally, women have a greater urgency to learn good self-defense than men. Although some may be attracted to the sport end of the art, their primary interest is definitely on self-defense. When a woman enters a dojo to learn a martial art, the main hindrance to her learning is not her limitations as a woman, but the attitude of the men themselves. Of the utmost significance is the inability of most men to give her a decent chance and help her to get adjusted.

In a dojo, where traditionally only men have tread, most of them do not feel at ease or know how to respond to a woman. Change of habits are required in a mixed dojo and the use of language has to be tempered. Off-color jokes cannot be told, as when only men are present, and the slightly different type of supervision required for her sometimes brings on an invidious discrimination by the men who feel uncomfortable with her around, especially if she happens to surpass them in the subtleties of the art.

To add to the problem, there is some legitimate basis for this discriminatory practice, which gives the men logical rationalizations to support their case. The majority say that she should know what to expect when she enters a dojo, and while there is a certain grain of truth here, men conveniently forget that her needs are different. And until she can find a truly qualified and sympathetic teacher, she will always encounter the phenomenon that men expect women in a dojo to “look like a woman, think like a man, act like a lady, and fight like a man.”