The Point: Boards Do Hit Back

by Bill Handren

"Man is the only varmint who sets his own trap, baits it, then steps on it".....John Steinbeck

Randall J. Strossen holds a PhD. in psychology from Stanford. He has authored several books, is the editor of "Milo" and the head of Ironmind Enterprises, a world renowned strength training equipment manufacturer. He was once asked what the secret was to getting big and strong. His answer: "don't hurt yourself." I found this to be such a profound statement, I made a sign which hangs in my gym with those three words. Maybe I should have put the sign in a more conspicuous place.....
I imagined my wife's words as I was headed face first towards the floor. As my dojo floor was rising up to smack me silly, I was pretty sure she would again say "I can't leave you alone for a minute" when she came home. I would be found hanging upside down, one ankle snared in my latest martial arts invention.

I am always looking for new pieces of training equipment. Something which will give me the "edge." My latest discovery was the boat cushion which I found at a thrift store for a dollar. It seemed like the perfect kicking target. Something that would offer feedback, have a fast return and if it didn't work out I would only be out a dollar. It even came with a hanging strap!

Well, actually two straps. I guess the person drowning is supposed to grab a strap in each hand and hang on as they float. "No need to cut the second strap", I thought. After all, a second strap would be a good backup when the first strap wears through.

So, I screwed a sturdy hook into a rafter, hung the pad on it and had an instant training partner.

The first roundhouse test kicks went well. I was pleased with myself. Some side kicks were in order. Somewhere around the third kick, I realized I should have secured the second strap. I managed to run my foot through the bottom strap and was snared like a giant turkey whose wishbone was about to be snapped. Then, I lost my balance. Another "this is gonna hurt" moment was about to happen as I headed down.

There must a martial arts guardian angel. Although I slammed my head and shoulders onto the floor, my snared foot slipped out. Any endeavor which doesn't break or tear some body part is successful I suppose. A smart man would learn to stop with the inventing, but I tend to see these things as challenges. Surely, I will do better with the next invention.

Uh, not exactly. "Bungee Man", was to be the crowning achievement of several decades of designing. The ultimate poor man's training partner. One who never tires or complains. Always ready for a workout regardless of the hour. He would be the ultimate tool - silent, so as not to wake the neighborhood - have a fast return yet, not wobble - and have that "just right" feel when struck.

I designed and re-designed like an eight year old engineer not quite yet aware of all that needs to be considered. It would be a masterpiece. I cut five strips of three-quarter inch thick plywood on my table saw. The basement smoke alarm went off a few times, but by now my wife had come to regard it as a warning I was using power tools. I really should sharpen the blade. The five plywood strips were about three feet long by six inches wide. I glued them together, one on top of the other and emerged from my smoky workshop with the perfect wooden dummy. I taped a piece of scrap carpet to the boards as a bit of padding. A heavy duty eye hook at each of the four outer corners and I was ready for the bungee cords.

I put two more eye hooks about six feet apart from each other into a rafter and directly below each I screwed an eye hook into the dojo floor. Bungee Man would be suspended from the rafter with two heavy duty bungee cords, and secured at the bottom with two more cords. It resembled a big "X" after I had it all assembled. I couldn't wait to test it.

I threw a light right punch into the center of the boards and to my disappointment, the thing oscillated horribly. I was crushed. Several hours of work down the drain and I was mad. I did what any mature craftsman would do with a not quite perfect project - I smoked a thunderous straight right into the center of Bungee Man.

My project sailed backwards a good four feet. I forgot that all this elastic energy would cause it to return just as hard as it went out. Karateka make the mistake of not pulling the fist back after a punch. My invention smashed my outstretched fist like a crazed Catholic nun and buckled my wrist. I was sort of lucky, it didn't break the wrist. I had sprained my wrist so many times on the heavy bag, I had become sort of an expert on wrist trauma. Despite some difficulty feeding myself for a few days, all was OK.

If you want to excel at a physical activity, nothing will impede progress more than an injury. And sometimes those injuries become permanent training partners. So, I've learned to be ever vigilant when it comes to training. Just because everyone else may be doing something doesn't mean I will. I will not train on a concrete floor. Mouth guard and eye protection are the rule. Staying hydrated is mandatory. Hurting gets old and it sometimes takes a lifetime to learn better.

In a fight, one must expect injuries. But in training, every cut, sprain, break, dislocation, tear and contusion takes you two steps backward for every step forward. There is a huge difference between training as hard as you can and knowing when to back off.

And, sometimes a little forethought is all that stands between you and serious injury.