

Starting Strength

Yinyang: Technique and Strength in the Martial Arts by Dave Longley

You do not have to be strong to do Martial Arts.

There. It has been written. Without a shadow of a doubt, my opening sentence is true, and true in all cases. As you continue reading, you may feel your fury rising at something I have put forward as an opinion. If this happens, you can go back to the first sentence, take a deep breath, read it again, and enjoy being Right.

You. Do. Not. Have. To. Be. Strong. To. Do. Martial. Arts.

But, being strong is pretty fucking useful.

I've been a 174 lb Martial Artist, and I'm now a 231 lb Martial Artist. I know which one I prefer. It might take you a while to come around to the idea, and you'll probably be actively discouraged. Don't get me wrong: I've seen many incredible Martial Artists do incredible things: small guys making mincemeat out of larger guys, weaker people dominating stronger people. It's amazing to witness and one of the most joyous aspects of training in Martial Arts. I've also seen enormous men with no fight training pick up other men and throw them across a room. I'm not exaggerating. What we – the regular folk – need to do is find the balance: the yinyang.

This will take some time to explain, but I think we need to get a few things out the way first, so that those with no interest in being convinced will just do something else with their time. I hate wasting people's time. I would like to point out right here, at the beginning, that I have a bias towards strength training and being strong when it comes to the Martial Arts. My background: I am currently a blue belt in Brazilian Jiu Jitsu with three years of training. Over the last twenty years I've studied many different styles of Martial Arts, but I've only been strong during the time I've been training BJJ.

I am by no means an expert in strength training or Martial Arts. I am not and have never been an athlete. I'm just someone who wants to be able to defend myself should the situation arise. For 10 years I worked in an educational institution that helped violent young people. For six of those

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years I was a staff trainer in the physical restraint techniques, and during my time working there I was involved in hundreds upon hundreds of physical restraint incidents.

I've also fucked up a few motherfuckers in my time. So, with all of that out the way we can continue, and you can make up your own mind about the merits of my argument, or the lack thereof.

Size and Strength

We all know that size and strength matters. *It is in actuality one of the biggest selling points of most Martial Arts* – the selling point being the idea that size and strength can be overcome if you attain enough skill in your chosen fighting discipline. The idea of a smaller person beating up a larger person is incredibly appealing, and when it does happen, it makes for great YouTube viewing.

Where I train in Brazilian Jiu Jitsu, I regularly get my ass handed to me by people much lighter and weaker than I am. They have a great deal of skill, and I learn a lot from them. I'm fairly big and fairly strong (600 lb deadlift, 500 lb squat, 300 lb bench, 200 lb press, 6'3" at a bodyweight of 231 lbs) and I am also definitely the strongest person where I train. As such, I make a conscious effort to not overpower my training partners, as it would impact my skill acquisition. This was a conscious decision I made at the beginning when I sparred a 15-year-old boy: if I overpowered him, all I would learn is that I'm stronger than him, which I already know.

In fact, if being big and strong was all that mattered in terms of self defense and fighting, all I'd do would be to make every effort to get as big and strong as possible. Which brings me to one of the reasons people put forward for not wanting to get stronger: people seem to be concerned that if they get strong, they will use less skill and more strength, even when they don't want to. The problem with this line of reasoning is that you definitely know when you're muscling someone, and you learn quickly that in order to develop your skill independent of your strength, you need to limit this.

On the few (actually many, I hate losing) occasions where I have just overpowered my training partners, it has been something they just couldn't stop. Higher belts (and therefore higher skill levels) manage my strength much more effectively, but these are people with many years of training, competing successfully at the highest level. One of the first things people say to me when we roll is "Golly, you're strong," and that's with me scaling it back. Part of the journey in Brazilian Jiu Jitsu is learning how to lose, and strong people learning that technique matters is a part of it.

Recently at my club, a few big boys have joined who have hardly any skill and who get by on brute force alone. They cause quite a few problems for less-experienced guys who are lighter. It is when they come up against a higher belt or someone stronger that they realize muscling people will only take you so far. But it can certainly take you further than you might think.

It Matters

There's a very popular clip on YouTube involving Pedro Sauer and Lance Bachelor. In 1994 they had a challenge match, for reasons that are disputed. What is beyond dispute is that Bachelor was much, much bigger than Sauer – reportedly as much as 100 lb, but more likely 60 lbs. Sauer at the time was a 2nd degree black belt in Brazilian Jiu Jitsu – a legit badass. Bachelor (it was later revealed) had never been in a physical confrontation before.

When you watch the video, it isn't the walkover that you would expect. Sauer definitely wins, and it is often heralded as a victory of skill and technique over size and strength. But if we step back for a second, we have to accept the fact that in order to be able to beat this big strong guy, the little

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guy had had to dedicate most of his life to developing expertise. In contrast, how long does it take to become big and strong?

Again, this speaks to a truth we all seem to instinctively know: *size and strength really does matter*. Children know it. People with very little knowledge of fighting know it. But what would it take to convince someone who believes the technique dogma of this rather obvious fact? If the separation of the sexes in fighting competition, as well as the divisions by weight class doesn't convince you, what will? Is it not obvious that Manny Pacquiao vs Deontay Wilder would not be a fair fight? That Demetrious Johnson vs Stepe Miodic would not be a fair fight? It takes a lot of buy-in to the current dogma of Martial Arts to think that size and strength doesn't matter.

But we cannot concern ourselves only with elite-level combat athletes. They're generally the worst people to use as examples. A lot of them have been training for a long time, and a lot of them are gifted with great genetics. We also can't concern ourselves with what we mean by the term "Martial Arts" either, as that is a rabbit hole I do not want to go down. If you want to do Tai Chi and pretend you're learning to fight, go for it. You have bigger problems with reality than I can possibly help you with.

I'm more concerned with people like me, and probably people like you. I want to learn to defend myself and my loved ones, should the situation occur where the need for physical violence has become necessary. I want to be as prepared for that situation as I can be, physically and mentally. Mentally, this means preparation and learning about situational awareness. Physically, this means being in a position to effectively carry out the task at hand. I've got a good base of striking and grappling, but why would being bigger, heavier, and stronger be useful?

Fat Bob Taught Me

When I started training in Martial Arts, I was 16 years old at a Judo club. Fat Bob had been instructed to "teach me a lesson," as I'd been a real shit at school and had gotten suspended again. Fat Bob wasn't just Fat – he was a Judo Black Belt and a national champion, weighing in excess of 300 lbs, and he was pretty much impossible to throw by anyone that wasn't his size. Fat Bob put me on my back and sat on me, where all I could do was pray that he didn't want to kill me. People seem to forget that this is what one major aspect of fighting is: when you're defending yourself, you are trying not to die.

Mercifully, Fat Bob just slapped me gently around the face a few times, but that feeling of helplessness has never left me. Being very big is definitely an advantage, especially when you have the skill to back it up. But during my entire time training in the Martial Arts, *nobody* has ever suggested that I get stronger. We'd do push-ups and sit-ups, maybe some cardio, but the idea of a structured program for getting stronger just never came up.

I've been told by a black belt that being big will hinder my progress in BJJ. Meanwhile, a casual look at some of the top players in the world will reveal some rather impressive physiques, not to mention the rampant steroid use that permeates the world of competitive BJJ. I might be wrong, maybe some steroids really do help your technique?

Some guys are just genetically geared to get strong. Two young men where I train have recently had their growth spurt, with Mother Nature smiling kindly on one, and less kindly on the other. As a result, one of them is getting stronger and stronger from grappling, where as the other is still pretty weak. He's been reassured that he will acquire "grappling strength."

Grappling strength is definitely real, I do not deny that. I have experienced it. It comes from a mixture of honed technique and strength acquisition from years and years of grabbing and pulling

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and pushing. Thousands of hours of dedication, to get to the point where you can handle someone with relative ease.

Or you could spend 6 months or so on a strength program and develop a double-bodyweight deadlift. I think this is the most obvious argument for getting stronger in the Martial Arts. Yes, you can get stronger from doing a thousand punches and a thousand push-ups and standing in a horse stance for hours and grappling from the age of 5 years old. Yes, you can do all of that. Or, you can pick up a barbell and get stronger – *now*. Some of my friends have taken this advice, and not one of them has regretted getting stronger and putting on some weight.

Apart from the mental toughness required to run the Starting Strength Linear Progression, there are other benefits. I punch much, much harder. I always did have a decent punch, but the feeling I get now when I hit a bag is so satisfying. I have strength when grappling – although not necessarily the fabled “grappling strength” – but I do have strength.

And no, it hasn't affected their cardio. Again, this seems to be another unusual worry when it comes to gaining strength. I'd argue that by using less energy to maintain a hold (because of your extra strength) you'd be able to grapple for longer, and would therefore have a bigger gas tank. That being said, if you are struggling with your conditioning, maybe you could just do some conditioning? As has been said many, many times, Starting Strength isn't about turning people into powerlifters, it's about making *you* stronger.

And I've Taught a Few Myself

So far, I've mostly avoided mentioning gender (ladies, get as strong as you possibly can) as well as trying my best to avoid talking about actual competitive athletes. I've also tried hard to steer clear of anecdotes, but us regular folk do sometimes like to test ourselves, and sometimes an anecdote is useful.

I recently entered a competition, finding myself in the final against the (I later found out) UK number 2 at Blue Belt level. He'd not had a point scored against him in 17 matches. The last time he'd been taken down was by me, and here I was again, matched against him. He's a big boy, 6'4" and 240 lbs, very skillful, recently competing as a Purple Belt because he likes a challenge.

Anyway, as we started the match, I secured a grip with my left hand on his lapel, stepped in and dropped to my knees as I pulled him down onto me into a fireman's carry position, then I put my right arm under his crotch and flipped him over my back. His legs went flying, and he landed flat on his back. The rest of the match didn't go my way, and he ended up choking me, but what he said to me afterwards was very enlightening. He told me that he just doesn't get taken down, and that when I initiated the takedown he felt like he couldn't stop me. He said that as I pulled him down, he sprawled out as hard and low as he could, but I just threw him through the air. Which is exactly what I did. I was able to throw a 240 lb man that really didn't want to be thrown, and I did it because I'm much stronger than him.

My technique is okay, but his technique is better. Or maybe it was my technique and I'm doing myself a disservice. But let me point out something I wrote at the beginning: being strong is pretty fucking useful.

So, Defend Yourself

Returning to the original point of the Martial Arts – that being self defense – what do you suppose I'd be able to do to someone that had no idea what I was about to do to them? Someone who didn't have

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the necessary skill to try and defend it? How much more useful would *your* technique be if you were say, 10% stronger?

It's an ongoing debate in Martial Arts circles, especially as MMA is now increasing in popularity and we are seeing people getting caught using steroids. Remember, there are no steroids that improve technique. Cutting weight is also an obvious sign that coaches and athletes understand that size and strength matters. Cutting weight to a lighter class in wrestling has always pointed towards an acknowledgment of size and strength being important, and in the big boys division – where weight cutting isn't particularly necessary – we have [Aleksandr Karelin](#) as the number one argument for getting a good deadlift.

Cutting weight and steroids in all combat sports points towards a tacit understanding of the importance of size and strength, but somehow it is exceedingly rare to be advised to get bigger, stronger, and crucially, to put on some weight. It's also rare that you will be encouraged to move up a weight class. You might be encouraged to cut less weight in order to compete in a heavier weight class, but that's very different from actually gaining weight.

Some people just don't want to fight bigger and stronger people. That might be you, in which case you're a great big giant pussy.

Once again, I've seen highly trained Martial Artists – small guys who are not very strong – destroy larger and stronger guys. I've also seen big strong men with *no* fight training pick up other men *with* fight training and throw them across a room. I'm not exaggerating. The balance is the yinyang.

I've written “yinyang” deliberately. People separate yinyang because compartmentalization is easier on the brain. The human brain prefers things in boxes, which causes us to say Yin and Yang. What we need to do is *not* separate them. We need to add Yin to our Yang, and Yang to our Yin. Even experienced Martial Artists fail to understand this concept, as people tend to be more about the carrot and the stick. We either hit people with a stick, or we feed them a tasty carrot. Yinyang is more about a very tasty stick, or a massive carrot you can hit people with.

Strength *or* technique is the false dichotomy that is presented to us in the Martial Arts. The reality is that they're interdependent. When someone muscles out of your technique, it wasn't necessarily that your technique wasn't good enough, it might just be that they're stronger than you, and that's all there is to it. It's a bitter pill to swallow. You don't have to be strong to do Martial Arts – this is as true now as it was at the start of this overly long article – but in reality, we all know the truth: when skill is equal, the bigger and stronger person will win.

Technique is your Yin. Do yourself a favor and add some Yang to your Yin.

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