

## KICKBOXING/MMA FITNESS PROGRAMMING – HOW TO DO IT RIGHT!

Remember the popularity explosion of kickboxing fitness classes back in the 1990's and early 2000's? Tae Bo was one of the most well-known program names. KickFit, Turbo Kick, Martial Fitness and a host of other programs quickly came onto the fitness industry scene. Some fitness certification organizations developed their own kickboxing fitness "instructor certification" programs. Even some martial arts industry organizations, like NAPMA and MAIA, got involved in the creation of their own unique programs. The rush to get these types of classes integrated into fitness and martial arts facility programming was on. Unfortunately, that boom in popularity and the ensuing rush to get instructors in place and classes on the schedule often times was done at the expense of developing quality programs that would grow and sustain in popularity. Many instructors forgot that this was an exercise program and did not apply their exercise science knowledge when structuring their programs and designing their classes. Classes were typically groomed for younger, athletic participants.<sup>1,2</sup> Participant injury became a problem, too. What was the result of all this? There was a quick and steady decline in participation in these types of classes. Back in 2002, a well-known and respected fitness industry publication reported that kickboxing, boxing and martial arts-based fitness classes were showing huge declines in participation, according to a survey of fitness program directors.

Eventually the decline in popularity leveled off. There are still some quality instructor training programs that teach instructors to be trainers, not performers and base their curriculum off of exercise science principles. There are still kickboxing fitness classes offered in many facilities. So, there is evidence that a martial arts-based class can survive the early mistakes. And, now, with the popularity of MMA (via the UFC), will we see another explosion in popularity of these types of programs? Hopefully, the industry has learned from its mistakes! Hopefully, the industry will now understand and address the separation needed between using kickboxing and/or MMA training techniques, methods, drills etc to train participants in **fitness** versus training them to become **competitive fighters**! Fitness programs that recognize this difference have a better chance to survive and thrive than do those who do not.

The following information is intended to provide the tools and knowledge needed to develop a thriving kickboxing/MMA fitness program. This information is coming from over 20 years of running successful kickboxing fitness programming. So, read on and begin your journey to kickboxing/MMA fitness excellence!

### Introduction

Before identifying the components necessary for the development and implementation of a successful and profitable kickboxing fitness program, let's take a quick look at the possible reasons or root causes for the current decline in popularity.

In The Beginning.....

When this new type of fitness workout using martial arts movements first appeared, the demand was so great that every martial arts school owner and fitness facility program director rushed to offer these types of classes in order to take advantage of the enormous popularity and share in the resulting flood of cash. There was not a lot of thought put into program development for long-term success and growth. There was not a lot of thought put into ensuring the safety and effectiveness, based on exercise science, of this exciting new workout. There was not a lot of thought put into the long-term potential benefits of this new type of program – if developed and implemented properly.

The decline in participation of kickboxing fitness classes may be one result of this "rush to riches". Because specific issues were not addressed prior to implementation of classes, kickboxing fitness programs typically experienced short spikes of high-level popularity, soon followed by ever-decreasing

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<sup>1</sup> 1. [J Strength Cond Res](#), 2003 Aug;17(3):580-6. Incidence of injury in kickboxing participation. [Romaine LJ](#), [Davis SE](#), [Casebolt K](#), [Harrison KA](#). Department of Movement Studies and Exercise Science, East Stroudsburg University of Pennsylvania, East Stroudsburg, PA 18301, USA. [blromaine@enter.net](mailto:blromaine@enter.net)

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.ideafit.com/fitness-library/knock-out-kickboxing-injuries>

numbers of class participants. Injuries occurred, class participants became frustrated, untrained instructors led classes, marketing scared some people – these are some of the many reasons being cited for the decline of kickboxing fitness classes. Some of the issues that were not considered during that initial implementation of kickboxing fitness classes include identification of program goals, identification of the target market(s) for the classes, application of the principle of progression, qualified and comprehensive instructor training, and accurate program marketing development. Lack of proper planning and implementation is surely playing a role in the downturn of popularity. But, all that is needed to reverse this trend is to learn from the mistakes. We need to identify the root causes of the problem, develop and implement corrective and preventive action plans, evaluate the results of those plans and then reap the rewards!

### **Determine Program Goals**

School owners should identify the reasons why they would want to implement kickboxing fitness programming. What do they hope to achieve? What benefits should be realized? One obvious answer would be to increase income or create an additional source of income. In the beginning, that happened – short term. Now, school owners need to make sure that programs are developed and implemented so these financial goals are consistently achievable for the long-term. To do this, other, more specific program goals should be identified.

Two potential specific and major goals could be to:

- Generate new students and members, and
- Provide new activities for current students and members.

Both would generate more income, as well as create new sources of income. But, that is not enough. We need to analyze it even more by asking more questions about each of those goals.

### **Generation of New Students and Members**

Who is being targeted as a potential new school member? Is the goal to bring in more kids, adults, females, males, older adults, athletes, etc. The list of potential new members is almost limitless. Anyone who does not currently participate in existing programming can be a target. But this question needs to be addressed because the answer will influence the way the program is structured and classes are designed.

Kickboxing fitness classes can be taught in many different formats. Different formats will appeal to different people. For example, a kickboxing fitness choreography class taught in a manner where the movement and technique combinations are performed to music in 8, 16 or 32 count music phrasing patterns would probably appeal more to those who regularly participate in group fitness classes like STEP aerobics. Another example of a specific class format is a kickboxing fitness circuit interval training class. This class would probably have a greater appeal to those who are intimidated by or prefer to not perform the movements and techniques to a specific musical pattern. Some people may like to use kickboxing training equipment in their workouts – others may be intimidated by the possible use of training equipment in their workouts. What kind of class would teenage girls like to participate in? What music appeals to this age group? What kind of class would teenage boys prefer to participate in? Are pre-teens a market for this workout? What kind of class would appeal to the parents of your existing karate students? Can you design a class that would be a good off-season conditioning (and skill) program for high school or college athletes? The possibilities are numerous!

To properly structure a program and accurately design the classes that makeup the program, school owners need to know who the target audience is and what types of class formats would have the greatest appeal to those particular people.

### **New Activities for Current Students and Members**

Adding a variety of kickboxing fitness classes to programming can provide some huge benefits. Obviously, for the school owner, adding new programs and classes provides a potential new source of income for the school. It is quite normal for additional fees to be charged for participation in such classes.

Another perspective on this is to offer the program and classes at no extra charge to current martial arts students. Adding classes at no extra charge could make the traditional martial arts programming more attractive to potentially new students, as well as possibly improve retention of current students and members.

Another benefit for the school owner is related to martial arts student development. By adding kickboxing fitness specific classes into the program schedule, the traditional martial arts schedule can be focused more on skill instruction and less on conditioning. How many of us try to cram a warm up, conditioning work, skill work, mental & emotional enhancement activities and a cool down into 45 to 90 minutes of class time. How much more effective would each type of instruction (conditioning and skill) become if they could be separated into different class times? A fact of exercise physiology is that fatigue increases directly with the duration and/or intensity of physical activity. Fatigue has a negative affect on physical coordination, as well as mental capacity for learning, both of which are necessary for learning new skills. For this reason, it does not make sense to subject martial arts students, some of who may be less conditioned than others to handle certain levels of physical stress, through a grueling workout and then expect them to proficiently learn and practice skills, especially complex ones. Students learn and retain skills to a higher degree if they are exposed to them and practice them in a state of high physical energy – no fatigue. Another argument for separating skill training from conditioning training is that a student's physical condition can be improved faster and to a higher level if the conditioning training is performed for a longer duration, such as in a separate 45 to 60 minute class. If the conditioning segment of a one hour martial arts class was that long, there would be little time for skill training, which would slow the students progress in skill development. What effect would that have on word-of-mouth marketing? As a student progresses through the belt ranks, their conditioning levels increase quicker and to higher levels. Because of this, the intensity level of the advanced skill classes can be increased accordingly, ultimately leading to well-conditioned, highly skilled black belt students!

### **Principle of Progression**

Once program goals are defined and documented and the target population(s) is(are) identified, the classes should be designed so they appeal to, and create a demand by, the target population. Intimidation by and/or fear of these types of classes must be minimized or eliminated, if possible.

In the beginning ..... It seemed as though kickboxing fitness workouts were marketed and designed for the 20-30 year old athletically inclined individual. The regular, de-conditioned person off the street might not be up to the challenge of this high energy, high intensity, high kicking fitness activity known as kickboxing. Fact - Very few people are willing to venture outside of their comfort zones to experience what they think could be an unsuccessful "journey" into fitness. People don't want to be injured and they are not fond of being embarrassed. Participation in kickboxing fitness can be beneficial to anyone – if it is properly taught. The Principle of Progression should play a major role in program structure and class design.

In the beginning ..... when the kickboxing fitness craze was at its peak, it seemed as if many fitness and martial arts instructors completely forgot about the Principle of Progression when designing and teaching these classes. All that mattered was the desire to lead dynamic, high energy, fast-paced classes that would leave everyone exhausted and drenched. The concepts of safety and adaptation were completely forgotten or just plain ignored in favor of the new excitement created by this workout. Unfortunately, this method of program implementation is probably a big reason for the current downturn in popularity. The only people who could handle the classes were the young athletic type. And now, many of those who braved the exhaustive workouts, have begun to feel the effects of improper training – acute and chronic injuries.

Intimidation and fear of kickboxing fitness can be minimized by designing classes according to the Principle of Progression. To follow the Principle of Progression, two things must be considered: skill and physical conditioning. So, the task of the school owner is to provide a program that offers a safe and effective path of progression – for both skill level and conditioning level. Martial Arts schools already do this for their traditional programs. Black belt forms are not taught to beginners – they do not yet possess the necessary skills. The initial forms learned by beginners are typically shorter in duration and use

simpler techniques than advanced level forms. Complex, high-energy free style self defense techniques are not taught to beginner white belt, either. They won't have the skills, nor the conditioning required to sustain that activity. White belt beginners are not normally subjected to intense sparring sessions against black belt opponents who go full effort. Fighting skills and physical endurance would be lacking in the beginner. And, from the other perspective, advanced level students would not be forced to always train at the lower intensity and skill levels of the beginner students. Neither of these situations would have a very positive effect on student retention rates. Nor would they offer very much incentive for new students to join the program. Why would a fitness-based program be any different? Participants must be allowed to participate and learn in situations that are comfortable for them. Program structure and class design should provide a safe and effective path for progression for any person of any skill level or conditioning level, who wants to participate.

### **Program Development**

Programs that simply offer a few kickboxing or boxing type fitness classes in their schedules could be missing a huge opportunity. There are groups of people who prefer different workout methods, who could potentially become facility members. And, as mentioned earlier, there are different ways to format or structure kickboxing fitness classes, in an attempt to appeal to a wide variety of potential participants. When developing a comprehensive kickboxing fitness program, potential options for program structure and class formats could include any of the following:

- Program Structure - Skill/Conditioning Breakdown (The criteria describing each segment should be defined, but dynamic. Keep in mind that even an advanced person becomes a "beginner" when they learn something brand new). Here are some guidelines:
  - Orientation class – To market effectively, advertised as a "teaching" class, not a workout. This is also an opportune time for beginning instructors to hone their knowledge and skills. Recommend 30-minute duration. Class length and class description should alleviate possible intimidation of potentially new, de-conditioned members.
  - Beginner – for the novice (in skill and/or conditioning levels) participant. Low intensity level, single movements gradually grouped into simple movement combinations. Recommend 30 to 45 minute class duration. Provides a small step up from the orientation and should alleviate possible intimidation of a person who is unsure they can handle a one hour class.
  - Intermediate – the next level, after Beginner, of progression for skill and conditioning. Familiar movements and combinations can be performed at slightly higher and continually progressing intensity levels. As new movement patterns, techniques, drills, etc. are introduced, the intensity level is reduced to accommodate the learning process and then increased as familiarity is achieved. Recommend 45 to 60 minute class duration.
  - Advanced – the level at which familiar techniques, drills, combinations, etc. can be performed with the highest intensity level that is safe for and can achieve the fitness goals of the participant(s). Recommend 60 to 75 minute duration.
- Class Types
  - Circuit Training (with or without equipment)
  - Group Fitness (Choreography to music or Drill type)
  - Interval Training (Circuit or Group Fitness classes)
  - Combination Class (combine Group Choreography or Drill with a Circuit class)
  - Aerobic Cardiovascular Training
  - Anaerobic Cardiovascular Training (for competitive fighting training)
  - Boxing vs. Kickboxing (punching only vs. kicking & punching)

### **Motivation and Retention**

Programs and classes should also be created in a manner that provides motivation and rewards for participants. This is already inherent in most traditional martial arts programs. The martial arts student learns, practices and perfects certain physical techniques and movements (as well as certain mental and emotional skills and knowledge) in order to be promoted to the next belt level, indicating progression in skill level. This is very motivating to the student. Would it be reasonable to use a motivation/reward concept (without awarding colored belts, of course) in a kickboxing fitness program? Absolutely. It would definitely have a positive influence on program success. Creative rewards that appeal to a specific

population group could be very effective as a motivation and retention tool for current students and as a useful marketing instrument to attract potential members.

Creating and using standards for fitness status and skill levels, based on fitness goal criteria, could be effectively used to motivate and retain class participants. Perform assessments (this requires specific training to safely perform) of the various fitness components (flexibility, dynamic strength, and cardiovascular endurance) to help people identify their current conditioning levels. This gives them a benchmark from which to measure their progress in conditioning. Evaluation of skill improvement is easy to assess- they will see that progress in each class they participate in.

It is important to make sure that the assessment program does not de-motivate a participant. They should not be made to feel badly if certain standards are not achieved. Establish criteria that is based on an individual's own starting point. They should only be competing against themselves, not against anyone else. To keep people motivated to strive to improve, there must always be some realistic and achievable goal to work towards.

### **Instructor Qualification**

Another important component necessary for a successful kickboxing fitness program is the instructor staff. Safe and effective kickboxing fitness training would be difficult without knowledgeable and skilled people to lead the classes and coach the participants.

A combination of exercise science knowledge and a certain level of proficiency in skill performance should comprise part of the qualification criteria for a kickboxing fitness instructor. To train people safely and effectively, kickboxing fitness instructors must know and understand the biomechanical considerations and safety issues that are related to kickboxing fitness training?

To train people effectively (meaning that individuals achieve their own specific goals through the workout program), instructors need to have an understanding of basic exercise physiology (primarily how the body adapts to and improves from physical exercise stress, along with how energy systems of the body work). A basic knowledge of this science will also enhance their stature as a martial arts instructor, especially in this safety-conscious, lawsuit hungry society we live in. Qualified instructors help prevent injuries and promote a strong, positive image for the whole program – traditional martial arts and kickboxing fitness.

A lack of qualified instructors, or worse – the use of unqualified instructors could definitely have a negative effect on class participation in any physical activity – martial arts or fitness. Yet, many instructors are delegated with the responsibility to lead these workouts with minimal, if any, specific skill or knowledge training support. Martial arts instructors typically have a sound base of knowledge about skill execution. But, they are typically lacking in the exercise science department because it is not a normal part of traditional martial arts training curriculum. Kickboxing fitness instructor training in basic exercise science is a key ingredient to a successful kickboxing fitness program.

There are several good training sources available, but there are also those, which are not-so-good. Beware of one-day “certification” programs. Many of these “certifications” end up being nothing more than all day workouts designed to physically exhaust the participant, not educate them? A comprehensive training/certification program should cover basic exercise physiology, technique biomechanics, safety considerations, technique modifications, progression concepts, equipment instruction, program structure, class design, marketing strategies, and more.

Certification – not always what the word projects. The length of time for certification training is not the important guideline for the assessment of its worthiness or value. A certification event can be 2 hours or 2 days – as long as the course content is factual, practical, comprehensive, and covers the information needed by the instructor to safely, effectively, and correctly teach his/her specific program. Is it possible for all aspects (technique biomechanics, safety, equipment use, class formats, class types, marketing, choreography - to name a few) of kickboxing fitness training to be taught to a novice instructor within a short time period, such as one day? The answer to this is “probably not.” Which is why an instructor should look for a training resource that offers progressive and in-depth training in all aspects of kickboxing fitness instruction. A program that consists of a multi-level certification indicates that training and learning

are on-going and progressive – that is a good sign. The term “certification” seems to be used too loosely and has lost some of its credibility. Instructors (and those who hire them) should place less value on certifications and more emphasis on progressive, on-going training. If certification is important, research the available resources. There are credible, comprehensive certification programs available.

### **Marketing the Program**

Marketing and advertisement of the program must draw the intended target market to the program. It should not be intimidating, nor should it project unrealistic expectations (being transformed into a lean, fit, athletic body in just 11 weeks!) to the potential participant.

The use real people in advertisements is very powerful and believable. Project realistic benefits and achievable goals to prospective students and members. Don't perpetuate the fears and build upon the intimidating factors that keep many people from trying kickboxing fitness. For example, for a Beginner level class advertisement, don't use pictures of a black belt doing a flying side kick, of karate students in traditional uniforms, of two people sparring each other, or of an already fit “beautiful” person working out. Those images could be quite intimidating to some people. Use images that the target population could easily identify with and feel comfortable getting involved in.

If a facility has already been offering a kickboxing or boxing fitness program that is currently on the downslide, the marketing efforts have a major hurdle to overcome - Reputation. Marketing must erase the current perception people may have about the program and reverse the trend to a positive direction. Using the right advertising images, along with developing a progressive program and properly training instructors, will be a good start on a new road.

### **Summary**

Kickboxing fitness classes do not have to continue in the downward spiral of popularity and participation. Now that the initial frenzy and excitement has dissipated, it is time to re-evaluate and re-tool the programs to be developed and implemented in a professional, knowledgeable and business-like manner. The actions of planning, assessing, training, and diversifying are critical to long-term success.

Successful kickboxing fitness programming can provide long-term and consistent financial benefits for the martial arts school owner. If it is developed and implemented the right way, the program can be resurrected to new heights! And, you will reap the rewards!

### **Steps to Resurrect**

- Determine Program Goals
- Identify Target Markets
- Develop Program Structure for Target Markets
- Design Classes for Target Markets
- Create Motivation System for Program/Classes
- Train Instructors
- Implement Program
- Market Program Properly
- Enjoy Success!

### **One Life, One Body, .....One Choice!**

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