

Staten Island Dojo Wars

Marc Edward DiPaolo (August 17, 2008)



As a new black-belt, I faced opposition from fellow students who remembered me "when." But how does one defeat insubordination?

Master Park stood at the head of the Dojo with her hands clasped behind her back, facing a class of thirty. Her long, raven-colored hair was tied up as it always was when she exercised, and her young, beautiful face was set in a serious but sympathetic expression. Satisfied that the students were standing at respectful attention, she bowed low, never taking her eyes off her charges. Since I was the only black belt in the class, it was my responsibility to return the bow first. I did so, and all the students standing behind me matched my action.

Then Master Park straightened and assumed a more casual pose. "Good afternoon,



everyone.”

“Good afternoon, sir!” we chorused in booming voices. Some of the new white belts murmured the word “sir” under their breath, still unconvinced that they were really expected to refer to a woman by a masculine title. I had never had much difficulty adapting to the custom; Master Park was so casual about everything that her nonchalance was contagious. Naturally, she pushed the class hard to keep in good physical condition and know all the moves, but she was excellent at relating to the students on a friendship level. This was easily accomplished since she was around our age – barely older than twenty and only six years older than me.

“How was everyone’s weekend?” she asked.

A smattering of humble “Good, sir’s” came forth from the class. She beamed radiantly at us, and I once again found myself wondering how big an age difference six years was in the great scheme of things.

Well, I thought, in this case, it means a car, a job, a college diploma, and a black belt two degrees higher than mine.

“I’m going to go tinker in my office for a bit while you guys warm up.” Master Park announced offhandedly. “When I come back, we’ll prepare for the tournament and do some sparring.” Her eyes went directly to mine. “Marc will lead you all in the exercises.”

“Thank you, sir,” I nodded. Master Park and I bowed respectfully to one another, and she stepped aside to allow me to take the front of the class. As I passed by her, I heard her congratulate me on my new rank. Then she walked confidently across the wooden floor, out of the Dojo.

Her gesture of faith gave me the confidence I needed to dive into the lesson. It was the first session I had the opportunity to lead since I became a black belt, and before then it was something I had only done a handful of times. Following the same formula of exercises used in every lesson, I began by doing fifty jumping jacks in time with the class, all of us shouting off Korean numbers through the strain. I felt adrenaline surging through me as I shot through exercise after exercise, keeping the class going with sit-ups, push-ups, and stretching. When I noticed that the students were beginning to feel the strain, I ordered them to stop and take a break. Many of them turned around to adjust their uniforms, while the others practiced breathing and shaking their arms out. I needed a moment’s break as well, and turned, red and sweaty, to look at my reflection in the Dojo mirror. What I saw surprised me.

I stood firm and rigid, in my charcoal-black martial arts clothes. My black belt, still new and stiff, was tied taut, its ends sticking out to the sides. Very few times had I ever imagined power in my own form, but this was one moment when I saw a young man where a high school student once stood. It was amazing what a uniform could do for a lanky brown-haired kid.

“Okay,” I breathed. “Get ready for squat thrusts.” It was a minor deviation from the normal warm-up procedures, but little changes were often implemented by Master Park for some variety and I felt perfectly justified in ordering the exercise. I had no idea it would provoke the reaction it did. Only the three white belts in the back obeyed the command. From all the veterans of the class I got blank, confused stares instead of compliance.

“Squat thrusts,” I repeated, with more of an edge.

A voice to my left said with far more nerve than it should have, “You mean stretching, don’t you?” The voice came from the Green Belt, Tony Mancini, who had proven to be the most ambitious, irritating member of the class from the beginning. It was no accident that he did not add the word “sir” to the end of his question.

“No,” I repeated, “I mean squat thrusts. We will stretch again in a minute.” But nobody was listening. Having assumed I misspoke myself, they were all too busy dropping to the floor and stretching to realize that I was speaking. I was about to open my mouth and command them back on



their feet, but stopped myself. Rather than order the whole class up again, I sighed and began stretching with them. Mancini showed no visible signs of it on his face, but I knew he was enjoying his minor victory. His attempt to undermine the authority of a black belt who didn't deserve to be a black belt was successful and he was intent on searching out any future signs of weakness on my part. I had never expected his grudge against me to manifest itself in this way and I knew it would become a big problem if not addressed soon.

Six months ago, when I was still a brown belt, Mancini and I had both participated in a class sparring tournament. At the time I was not only the highest belt in the class but the guy who was winning the tournament. He had practically begged Master Park to fight me. Though she was uncertain about his attitude, she had agreed hesitantly, and sent us both to the center of the red sparring mat.

The fight had lasted all but thirty seconds. Just as he charged at me, I whipped my leg straight up and down in an "axe kick" and accidentally brushed the side of his face. Mancini stepped back, howled in pain, and a little baby tooth popped out of his mouth. His lips were covered with blood and he had to scamper off to the bathroom to wash out his mouth. I had won the round by default.

The consequences of those thirty seconds were more lasting than I could have ever expected. Not only would Mancini never be able to forget his humiliation, but after that, I would never again be able to spar with any skill or confidence. My fear of hurting my opponent became so strong that I rarely ever won another match. I also wound up appearing remarkably inept when I fought in front of an auditorium of spectators (which included my parents and uncle from New Jersey) as part of the black belt ceremony. I can't believe Master Park thought I was worthy of the rank after that stunning performance.

After twenty minutes of exercising, during which I had secretly been doing all this thinking, I noticed that Master Park had returned from her office. I finished counting to ten in Korean and stopped doing the stomach crunches. "Everyone, stand up!" I shouted.

"Yes, sir!" they cried as they jumped to their feet.

Bowing to Master Park, I returned control of the class to her. She gestured towards the red sparring mat which rested against the left wall. "Miss Gibson and Mr. Mancini, spread that out in the middle of the floor. Everyone else, sit on the left."

There was a flurry of activity as the sparring arena was prepared and the class settled in its new position on the floor. I sat with my legs crossed in the middle of the crowd and said hello to one of my friends who happened to be a red belt, Garth Kelly.

"Sorry about before," Garth said to me. "That was irritating. I was in the mood for squat thrusts, too."

I waved dismissively. "Nah. It was just an awkward moment. They happen sometimes."

"I suppose." Garth looked from the unfolding red sparring mat back to me. "Let's just hope Master Park doesn't make you fight a girl again."

I grunted in disgusted agreement. My match against Nan Gibson had not been one of my better experiences. "That whole tournament was goo."

It had been the final match of that same tournament six months ago. Nan Gibson and I were sparring for possession of a quaint trophy with a little brass kicking karate dude mounted on it. During the competition she had proven to be a tremendous fighter, and even though she was a full year behind me, the consensus was that we were evenly matched.

Her strength and reputation made no difference to me. I had been put up against her not more than five minutes after I knocked Mancini's tooth into the stratosphere, and I was still shaken



by the sight of his bleeding mouth. Between her lower rank, my newfound fear of hurting people, and my innate dislike of striking women, there was simply no way I could fight properly. She sensed I was holding back and a look of blind fury crossed her face. When she saw an opening for the winning move, she hammered me across the face with her foot.

The blow was so quick and sharp that it dropped me straight to the ground. As I lay sprawled out on the floor holding my face, I decided it it's one thing I can't stand it's a girl who takes chivalry as an insult.

I found out later than Master Park had privately criticized Nan for using excessive force in the kick and forced her to do twenty-five push-ups before claiming the trophy. It was yet another karate-related piece of emotional baggage I had been carrying around the past few months. Oddly enough, Master Park's opinion of me appeared to remain high.

I broke out of my reflections on the woes of a passive black belt when Mancini chose to sit down next to me. He had finished spreading out the mat while Garth and I had been talking and sat down in time to catch the tail-end of our exchange.

"You guys talking about the tournament?"

"Yes," I said.

Garth chose to ignore Mancini.

"Interesting time," Mancini remarked casually.

"Yes," I agreed, and the Chinese curse "May you live in interesting times," leaped, unbidden, to mind. It was one of many, similar mental associations I made every day, for no good reason.

We fell silent as two combatants stepped out onto the sparring mat. Master Park dropped her hand down between them and shouted, "Light contact sparring...begin!"

Mancini looked wistfully out into space, clearly not focusing on the battle. "That was a lousy time for my tooth to come out, wasn't it?"
I smiled thinly. "It sure surprised me."

"It's too bad, really." He sighed at the same time one of the fighters scored a point.

"Sorry about that."

"I guess it all boils down to luck. You had it and I didn't."

I pursed my lips and nodded. "I see."

"Oh?" Mancini turned around and searched my face with his gaze. "I don't think you do. I should have won the tournament."

"Good God, man. It was just a little brass trophy." It was getting awkward because more of the students around us were hearing what we were saying.

"That's not the point," he growled. "It's the principle of the thing." A look of mock sympathy came into his expression and his voice quieted to a whisper. "Although, I must say I was surprised when an almost-black belt let a girl smack him around. I mean, I'll admit some of them are built like tanks, but she didn't even look that strong."

"Mancini, what's your problem, anyway? Were you born an asshole, or did hard luck in life turn you into one?"

Once again, the lesson proved a distraction to conversation as the second sparring match ended. Master Park glanced over in my direction and beckoned me to the center of the ring. "Your turn, Marc."

Still irritated by Mancini's words, I stood up and approached the mat. When I got there,



Master Park walked up to me and began talking to me with her head down and voice low. I was the only one who could hear what she was saying. "I've been noticing a bit of a problem between you and Mr. Mancini. What's the story?"

I wasn't prepared for the question, so it took me several seconds to reply. "I guess it's hard to look at a fellow classmate as a black belt," I offered.

"That's too bad for him," she said. "You're a higher rank than him and he has to respect that."

"I understand."

"But he doesn't. I want you to explain it to him." Master Park threw an annoyed glance at the class, which was becoming increasingly talkative during her exchange with me. Then she gestured towards Mancini. "Okay, Mancini. It's your show."

Mancini demonstrated surprising restraint considering this was his dream rematch come true. He strode confidently to the edge of the mat and stood at attention, facing me.

Before leaving my side, Master Park gave me a dark look. "And no holding back this time or you'll have to answer to me."

"Yes, sir."

She stepped off the mat and watched the two of us face-off. "Fighting stance!" she shouted.

At the sound of the command, I snapped into my stance and bellowed a deep "Ki-Hap!" I balled my hands into fists and stared dead into Mancini's eyes. This was one fight I intended to win and to hell with worrying about him getting hurt. Mancini was a full second slower getting into position, sliding his right leg back and lifting his fists in a casual, careless manner. There was a profound arrogance in his refusal to remain on guard, as if I couldn't possibly pose any threat to him whatsoever. He wouldn't have been so confident if he had any recollection of my ability before my fight with Gibson.

"Full contact sparring...begin!"

The two of us circled each other like two animals assessing each other's worth. My jaw was set hard. I was showing no weakness.

True to form, Mancini broke out of his circling and charged at me with a stepping side kick. Moving quickly, I sidestepped the kick and whipped my arm out to block it. He sent another kick flying at me, this time with his right leg. My right arm shot upwards and blocked it. I followed up the block with a short jab to his chest. As I hit him, I roared, "Ki-Hap!"

He stepped back, surprised by the contact, as Master Park awarded me a point.

She said to the class, "One more point and Marc wins," and then to us, "Continue."

The moment the word was given, I jumped into action, attacking Mancini with a combination of kicks and punches, keeping him reeling under the pressure. He sensed he was being forced out of the ring and ducked under my last kick, running around me towards the center of the mat. As he passed by me, he aimed a sharp shot at my ribs, but I twisted just in time and he only grazed my side with his fist. There was a brief pause as we were both uncertain if the shot counted as a point.

"Almost, Mancini, almost," Master Park praised.

Out of the corner of my eye, I caught sight of Gibson in the crowd, and I could see in her face that her anger towards me had inflamed anew. I was fighting Mancini with much more passion and energy than I had given her, and her trophy seemed emptier than ever before. I felt a pang of guilt that grew a lot stronger when Mancini's leg smacked hard against my stomach.

"Point!" Master Park shouted. "Tie. Next point wins the match."



I walked in a small circle outside the ring, cursing myself for being so easily distracted. Piecing my confidence back together as I returned to the ring took some effort. My job wasn't made any easier when Master Park advised me to "Wake up, Marc. You should have caught that one."

Mancini and I bowed to each other for the third and final time, and slid back into fighting stance. Seeing Master Park drop her arm, we walked with sideways steps around the edge of the ring, looking for weaknesses. Testing him, I threw a roundhouse kick, which he blocked easily. Then he tried to get in a left-hand jab, but I stepped out of its path. When this didn't work, he pulled back and resumed circling me.

I knew he was going to attack again, but I didn't know when. He was trying to unnerve me by keeping me in suspense. I had a sense that the other students were almost as tense as me, but I couldn't chance taking my eyes off Mancini again.

Then, just as I suspected, he lunged at me. Screaming a Korean battle cry, Mancini closed in, raised his leg to his chest, and started to lash out with another roundhouse kick. I was faster.

My right leg whipped straight up, slicing the air right in front of his face. He was so caught off-guard by the axe-kick that he was unable to complete his kick and stumbled backward. As he stepped back, his hands dropped to his sides to help him regain his balance, leaving his chest unprotected. Seeing my chance, I fired off a front snap kick. My foot slammed against Mancini's chest, pushing him over backwards and toppling him to the ground. He hit the padded mat with a loud slap and lay there several moments without getting up. He was so shocked by his defeat that he couldn't move a muscle.

"Point two for Marc," Master Park said.

My classmates started applauding loudly for my victory, and I managed to smile and bow in thanks to them.

"Now, Marc," Master Park continued, checking to make sure that Mancini had climbed to his feet, "you and Mr. Mancini shake hands. It was a good match."

I was satisfied with my win, so I had no trouble stretching out my hand to Mancini. He stared dumbly at it for a moment, but then offered his hand in return. His handshake was loose and he looked away as he did it. I took no pleasure in his discomfort because I had been in his place so many times before. I only hoped that, if he didn't like me personally, at least he would learn to give me respect in front of the class. On the other hand, I decided, if he did keep giving me trouble, I would take great pleasure in reminding him of this moment.

Looking down at my uniform, I noticed that my belt had loosened during the fight and was hanging limp to the floor. I turned around to face the back of the Dojo as a sign of respect and adjusted my uniform, smoothing out its creases, and pulling the belt taught. I then left the sparring mat and took my place on the floor with the other students.

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