

Wing Chun Kicking and Footwork Training by Gregory E. LeBlanc

Wing Chun kicking and footwork techniques are a vital compliment to the devastating striking techniques of the crossing hands skills. This article will discuss the Wing Chun footwork training and especially the development of kicking techniques as taught in Sifu Gary Lam's Wing Chun system.

Among the 21st century's most highly rated and esteemed Wing Chun teachers is Sifu Gary Lam (Lam Man Hog). Sifu Lam offers a rare opportunity to study the various aspects of Wing Chun footwork training including strikes, leg breaking and trips. From his wealth of experience and in an effort to make Wing Chun more accessible to the modern student, Sifu Lam has formulated his entire open hand Wing Chun system into 5 separate styles of training; the five styles are as follows:

1. Crossing hand - Striking
2. Closing - Standing grappling
3. Footwork- The subject of this article
4. Pushing - One and two handed projections
5. Pulling - Inside, outside and turning projections

Footwork techniques develop all aspects of using the lower limbs in armed and unarmed combat. Initially the training teaches the new student a variety of specific stepping maneuvers; these are essential for fluid, quick attacking and retreating. Stepping involves not only moving forward and back, or side-to-side; but also why we initiate a particular movement and the proper way of generating the power to do so. Using an almost fencer like step, footwork training teaches us how to move with grace and stability, and above all how to be in the correct position at the right time. Later, at a more advanced stage, the student is taught the main bulk of footwork techniques; this chiefly involves the kicking and leg destruction training as well as a variety other high-level footwork fighting strategies. Footwork is also devoted to mastering techniques that push, trip and throw the opponent. Footwork training provides the foundation for all other aspects of development, it is the key to generating power and of having the ability to move into and occupy the opponents position.

Footwork is perhaps traditionally most evident in the *wooden man* training, with an entire section of the form being devoted to developing footwork. In combat the results of footwork techniques are felt by the enemy but rarely seen, the goal being to attack with the hands and feet simultaneously.

According to Sifu Lam footwork is considered the root of physical power, and is in part why actions like the one-inch punch are possible. Traditionally footwork is considered the key to unlocking the secrets of Wing Chun, and without detailed instruction in it the student would never learn the mysterious source of his/her teacher's strength. In Wing Chun the hands go first and the body moves second, without proper footwork there is no power from the ground to implement striking techniques with.

Wing Chun footwork training chiefly involves developing techniques to kick our opponent; kicks are used to cause impact injuries, disturb the opponent's attention in conjunction with hand techniques, or break the joints and bones of our enemy's legs. Traditionally the leg usage in Wing Chun only accounts for 30% of the actions, with the hand techniques accounting for the other 70%. To Wing Chun practitioners, kicking attacks are used only when the situation warrants it. This is due to the fact that the severity of damage they cause is so high; breaking someone's leg is an all or nothing proposition. To begin to use kicking techniques her/she must embrace a cruel, merciless attitude if they are to be brought effectively into a fight.

In Wing Chun there is a saying " Hands go, legs go, legs go, hands go". This points to the fact that in any confrontation the hands as well as the feet are always used together. Whether it is a step, an attack, or an action only meant to disturb, the hands and feet work together as four enemies for the opponent to defend against.

Wing Chun kicking techniques are often referred too as under the skirt kicking, or gentleman kicking. The traditional clothing worn by gentleman in China was a kind of gown. The reference is to a practitioner of old kicking from under the gentlemen's traditional gown, thus this style of kicking is low and secretive. These types of kicks are in the words of Sifu Lam cruel by nature. They are chiefly focused on striking to the opponent's ankles and knees, with the objective being to break the joints and bones. Wing Chun kicking techniques rarely attack above the waist, and the practitioners feet and legs are usually used to defend against an opponents kick, thus leaving the hands free to attack. Kicking is almost always done in concert with hand techniques; in this case hand techniques are used for balance, control and to set up or to mop up the damage done by the legs. To see this kind of attack is to be at once humbled and horrified, it is the most disturbing aspect of Wing Chun to witness or experience, to see first hand the ease at which a trained fighter can utilize this devastating aspect of Wing Chun hand-to-hand combat. It is part of the tooth and nail of Wing Chun, when it's back is up against a wall.

Kicking is traditionally developed through four main methods

1. Solo practice in the air

2. Two person training (qi gerk)

3. Wooden dummy (Muk Yan Jong)

4. Tri-angle post dummy (Gerk Jong)

The tri-angle post dummy is especially important in developing the correct power and accuracy of the eight styles of kicking, the eight styles are:

1. Toe strike (shin bone)
2. Heel sweep (shin bone)
3. Heel strike low (ankle, knee, shin)
4. Heel strike high (knee, waist)
5. Stepping strike to instep
6. Side kick strike (knee/ankle)
7. Side step scrape/strike (knee/ankle)
8. Double kick to front leg and rear leg

Note: A side-to-side foot deflection is practiced in between each of the above kicks.

These various methods of training provide an opportunity to build correct structural power, proper form and timing, as well as conditioning the feet and legs. Perhaps the most important quality developed though is balance. Without good balance the kicks are very risky to use, being that the greatest danger to the practitioner when using kicks is that he/she is momentarily fighting on one leg, and thus of course dangerously less stable than when fighting on two legs.

Footwork is usually taught after the crossing hand and closing styles are mastered; this is done to re-enforce the student's efforts in learning the complete Wing Chun system. If footwork were taught before the crossing hand and closing were sufficiently learned, the student might be tempted to not properly devote him/her self to learning, developing and utilizing these styles in their training. Some students might forgo altogether truly developing the closing style, understanding that it rarely need be used when footwork techniques will usually serve better. Of course ultimately the five styles (i.e. crossing hand, closing, footwork, pushing, pulling) are combined and applied in an unconditioned, natural way. The strengths of the five styles are blended, providing an experienced based background to all of the practitioner's actions. Thus the five styles become twenty-five styles, used separately or in a combined fashion as the situation dictates.

Sifu Lam teaches that all physical power in Wing Chun is linked to two key footwork concepts. The first is what he calls *sitting*, this is akin to the same power generated in a boxing uppercut from a step forward, essentially pushing the punch up from the ground. Only in Wing Chun, the power generated from the ground is usually used for a straight action forward. The second key

concept is *distance* power. This includes any and all power developed from movement. The highest expression of issuing force in Wing Chun is the combination of three separate actions (hand, body and leg) generating a focused, controlled release of power in a single movement. This combination of three actions for power involves using the sitting power, the moving power (i.e. distance power) and placing the root of that power in the part of the body where it is needed (called the *power point*), all done simultaneously. This three-action movement is developed in a special kind of *qi sao* (*sticky hands*), called *pun sao*.

Footwork is also essential for executing the correct timing in applying techniques. An example of this is the fundamental nature of footwork in the Wing Chun double knife fighting (*baat jaam do*). Usually in the Wing Chun open hand fighting the hands lead the movement of the body, but in the eight cut knife fighting (*baat jaam do*) the body movement is maintained ahead of the hands, thus the body stays safely behind the knife actions. This is accomplished through a special type of footwork only used in the Wing Chun knife training called *gote ma*. If the footwork were not correct, the practitioner's timing would be late and he/she could potentially get cut or stabbed by the enemy. Footwork in general brings the practitioner into the proper position for applying the myriad of techniques; in Cantonese this idea is called *ju dong*. The opposite of this is of course bringing the opponent into a good position for the practitioner's action, called *bei dong*. Both *ju dong* and *bei dong* are the two fundamental concepts of position and timing, used to make the enemies position weak and a fighter's position strong. It has been said that Wing Chun is a challenge of speed and timing, without correct footwork for position and movement neither of these concepts are possible.

Footwork training also includes a variety of trips, sweeps and throwing techniques. These techniques are typically used as secondary actions (a.k.a. helping actions) after primary crossing hand strikes are delivered. The styles of *pushing* and *pulling* are most often combined with these aspects of footwork. *Pushing* and *pulling* are typically used to throw an opponent into walls, columns and other surfaces that they can injure themselves on. The *pushing* and *pulling* also function to suddenly bring an opponent off balance, changing their good position to a bad one, ruining their correct posture and balance. This leaves an opponent especially open for a footwork action such as a trip, sweep or throw. These techniques focus on controlling the enemy's center of balance, thus keeping them from initiating any new attacks. The emphasis here is creating and maintaining vulnerability. We make our enemy weaker by exploiting an existing weakness, if no weaknesses exist then we create one; this is where secondary or helping actions really show their full worth.

Footwork training is considered the key to making the unseen, hidden aspects of Wing Chun work, and was the most common aspect of training traditionally held back from outer circle students. In today's climate of martial arts

training, people are no longer dependent on what they learn to survive in combat; we live in the age of technology and especially the gun. Thus privileged instruction in Wing Chun, as well as many formerly secret arts, is largely a thing of the past. Sifu Lam is concerned that if Wing Chun is not openly taught, that it might not continue to develop and grow. His goal is to produce students and succeeding generations that surpass his own skill level and the skill level of past practitioners. This he believes is the only way Wing Chun will survive and thrive in the coming century and beyond. Change is the stabilizing principle in all things living, if Wing Chun is to live on it must adapt and move with the times. Sifu Lam's teacher Wong Shun Leung said that Wing Chun should not control you, that Wing Chun itself is only a name. Thus Wing Chun is not in the end a system of fighting but rather a way to fight. Wing Chun principles themselves have unlimited applications, understanding how, why and when they are applied is at the heart of the system and not imitating its mere form. Sigung Wong and Sifu Lam have over the course of their careers made various changes to the traditional system taught by Yip Man. These changes occurred because the needs of their experience in modern fighting demanded it. Just as a gun from the 18th century is still a gun, it is nothing compared to modern guns, yet they both remain guns. Wing Chun is like this, it may change, expand and be modified, yet it is still fundamentally the hard won Wing Chun of its forefathers.