

# Step sparring

Thesis by:

Master Ruben D. Suarez

In partial fulfillment of requirement  
for 8th degree in TKD-ITF

INTERNATIONAL TAEKWON-DO FEDERATION

SEPTIEMBRE 2011

## **Introduction**

The Taekwon-do cycle is composed of five items: Dallyon, fundamental movements, patterns, sparring and self-defense. For the successful development of Taekwon-do skills, all of these elements must work together in a balanced and reciprocal way, constantly reinforcing one another, and the system of Taekwon-do as a whole. When most people think of martial arts, the first thing that comes to mind is sparring. Yet, sparring is only one of the five components constituting the physical composition of Taekwon-do; moreover, the category of sparring can be further classified into several different styles, including step sparring, which is considered the foundation for free sparring.

## **Objectives of One-Step Sparring**

Any time we talk about sparring, it is assumed by the common person that we are referring to free sparring, competitive sparring, or street sparring. However, people often forget that with *any* skill we acquire in life there is always a foundation. The foundation of free sparring is rooted in step sparring. Yet, it is this foundation that is often overlooked, even by martial artists themselves.

I firmly believe that establishing a strong foundation is the most important factor in the development of successful competitors and practitioners of Taekwon-do. Always, I compare the foundation of Taekwon-do with that of a sturdy building. If the foundation of a building is compromised in the interest of saving money, the entire structure will be made vulnerable and could collapse at any moment. This same concept can easily be applied to the study of martial arts: If the knowledge of the underlying principles is poor, it will be difficult to understand the application of techniques, and the practice of such applications will therefore be ineffective.

Essentially, step sparring can be practiced in one of two ways: creatively or traditionally. In “traditional” step sparring, we refer to the application of specific, predetermined techniques of attack and defense that are learned with each of the 24 patterns. The “creative” practice of step sparring provides the student with the opportunity to use their imagination and apply any number of Taekwon-do techniques they have learned up to their level.

I believe it is the traditional practice of step sparring that is most important for students in gaining a thorough knowledge of the sequences of techniques for each level, and developing a solid foundation for the subsequent practice of creative sparring. Unfortunately, through my professional experience as a Taekwon-do practitioner, I find that the teaching and practice of step sparring does not receive nearly enough attention. In the *Encyclopedia of Taekwon-do* (1982) and *The Condensed Encyclopedia* (1999) written by our founder, General Choi provides a thorough explanation of the concept of step sparring, and its importance in the application of Taekwon-do techniques. In fact, General Choi specifically refers to the dangers involved in failing to establish a solid foundation in the basic techniques: Although students are often eager from the beginning to engage in free sparring, those who have not attained a thorough knowledge of the basics will inevitably develop bad habits that will be increasingly difficult to correct over time. Nevertheless, too many instructors rush through these fundamentals, focusing instead on patterns and free sparring—a problem I feel can still be improved in my own teaching methods, as well.

I want to remind students, instructors and masters of the importance in studying one-step sparring, and offer a recompilation of the basic principles involved. But first, it is important to provide an explanation of the general concept of sparring.

## **Overview of Sparring (Matsogi)**

### *General Definition*

“Sparring is the physical application of attack and defense techniques gained from pattern and fundamental exercise against actual moving opponent or opponents under various situations. It is,

therefore, not only indispensable to promote the fighting spirit and courage, to train the eyes, to read the opponents tactics as well as maneuvers, to forge, toughen or develop the attacking and blocking tools, to test his own skills and ability, to learn other movements hardly to be gained from pattern or fundamental exercise” (Gen. Choi Hong-Hi, 1999, p. 598).

### *Classification of Sparring Methods*

While the focus of this paper is on step sparring, the practice of sparring in general can be divided into five separate categories, with various sub-categories for each one. The definitions for each form of sparring were taken from *The Condensed Encyclopedia* (General Choi Hong-Hi, 1999).

1. *Prearranged sparring*. “It is practiced as the name denotes under prearranged modes with various assumption. For example, the number of the steps to be taken, the target to be attacked and the attacking tool to be used are agreed upon beforehand between the players” (p. 599). Prearranged step sparring can be practiced in a number of ways, including three-step (alone or with partner), two-step, and one-step.
  - a. Three-step sparring: this is the most important type of sparring in terms of establishing a strong foundation. In three-step sparring, the student learns how to adjust the distance depending on the stance, technique, and height of their opponent. In this type of sparring we mainly use the hands against the middle and high sections, and the feet against low targets, while stepping forward and backward. There are two methods of practice: *one-way*, in which the attack is only executed while stepping forward and the defense while stepping backward; or *two-way*, when both the attack and defense are executed while stepping either forward or backward.
  - b. Two-step sparring: the main purpose of this method is to utilize a mixture of hand and foot techniques.
  - c. One-step sparring: this method is considered the most important from the perspective that the ultimate goal of Taekwon-do is to defeat the opponent in one single blow.
2. *Semi-free sparring*. “The distance between players, method of attack and defense used, attacking and blocking tools used and number of steps taken are completely optional. Only one series of attack and defense motion is exchanged, however, and then for a brief duration. Semi-free sparring is the last stage before the students enters into a free sparring, though it can be exercised at all levels as well” (p. 653).
3. *Free sparring*. “...Essentially an open combat with controlled attacking and prohibition of attacking to certain vital spots” (p. 658). In free sparring the main goal is the use of attack and defense techniques, exercised with control so as not to cause injury to the players.
4. *Foot sparring*. “This is a symbolized form of sparring developed from the ancient Korean art of ‘Tea Kyon’ and ‘Soo Bak Gi,’ which mainly relied on the feet [to defend or attack the opponent]. The significance of this sparring is to promote [the development of] the kicking techniques required in Taekwon-do” (p. 663).
5. *Model sparring*. “The primary propose of this sparring is to show the spectators the agility and skill of the demonstrator and the physical application of every single movement. This is normally accomplished with the repetition of the same movement in slow motion” (p. 670).
6. *Prearranged free sparring*: “This is simulated free sparring. That is, the participants follow a prepared scenario that enables them to skillfully exhibit a wide variety of techniques without fear or injury” (p. 677).

### *General Information* \*

---

\* Reproduced from *The Condensed Encyclopedia* (Gen. Choi Hong-Hi, 1999).

1. The sparring is started from a stance on the line AB [with the players facing each other].
2. Blocking is begun with the left hand or left foot, while attacking with the right hand or foot. There are only few exceptions to the above. A student should familiarize himself equally with both sides.
3. All kicks...are considered to be executed with the ball of the foot for front snap kick, side front snap kick, turning kick and twisting kick, while the back heel is used for reverse turning kick and pick-shape kick, unless special instructions are given.

#### *Basic Principles\**

1. Both players (X and Y) stand at full-length distance apart of the stance to be taken for attack, from the front half of the opponent's foot, facing each other.
2. Bow to each other before and after each exercise.
3. Gaze at the opponent's eyes at all times.
4. Attack and defense are conducted alternately between X and Y in most cases.
5. Block should be executed just before the attacking tool reaches the vital spot, and with an appropriate blocking tool.
6. Dodge must be made to such a distance as to enable the counter-attack to be conducted easily in one motion.
7. Counter-attack should be executed immediately after the last defense
8. Apply only those techniques learned from either patterns or fundamental exercises.
9. Exercise right (attack and defense) and left (attack and defense) equally.
10. Counter-attack should be limited to one-time only.

#### *Relative Distances*

1. When executing a middle punch or middle block, the attacker's foot has to overlap the front half of the defender's foot.
2. When executing a high punch or high side block, the attacker's foot should be aligned with the defender's foot.
3. When utilizing an L-stance middle punch or L-stance middle block, the attacker's foot overlaps the front half of the defender's foot.
4. When executing a low front kick or low block, the attacker's foot completely overlaps the full length of the defender's foot.
5. When executing a high punch or rising block, the attacker's foot completely overlaps the full length of the defender's foot.
6. When in three-step sparring both players execute a walking stance, the attacker's foot is alternatively placed on the outside, inside, and outside of the defender's foot.
7. When in three-step sparring both players execute an L-stance, the attacker's foot is alternatively placed on the inside, outside, and inside of the defender's foot.
8. When in three-step sparring one player executes an L-stance and the other a walking stance, the walking stance foot remains to the inside the defender's foot.
9. When the difference in height between the players is too large, the techniques have to be practiced alone.

#### **Step Sparring**

In step sparring, the execution of each technique has to be tested in order to know if it works. This is the only way to understand and utilize the real application of the each Taekwon-do technique. The **progression** of step sparring follows a sequence of the techniques learned in each new pattern,

from Chon-Ji to Choong-Moo. Below are several examples of one-step sparring containing the **new movements found in Chon-Ji and Dan-Gun**. This exercise can be practiced to probe if the blocking tool is working properly. We found the following examples:

#### **New Techniques found in Saju-Jurigi; Saju Makgi and Chon-ji**

1.    **X**<sup>1</sup>:    Walking stance obverse middle punch  
      **Y**:    Step back forming L-stance middle block  
          Middle punch to the face or armpit forming sitting stance
  
2.    **X**:    Low front snap kick  
      **Y**:    Walking stance low knife hand block  
          Front snap kick with front leg

#### **New Techniques found in Dan-Gun tul**

1.    **X**:    L-stance knife hand strike  
      **Y**:    L-stance knife hand block  
          Turning kick to middle
  
2.    **X**:    High turning kick  
      **Y**:    L-stance twin forearm block  
          Side piercing kick front leg
  
3.    **X**:    Walking stance high punch  
      **Y**:    Walking stance rising block  
          Middle punch in the same stance

#### **New Techniques found in Do-San Tul**

1.    **X**:    Walking stance high punch  
      **Y**:    Walking stance high side block  
          Middle punch in the same stance
  
2.    **X**:    Walking stance straight fingertip thrust  
      **Y**:    Walking stance straight fingertip thrust at the same time
  
3.    **X**:    Walking stance, grab with hands to the head  
      **Y**:    Walking stance wedging block  
          Front kick with front leg
  
4.    **X**:    Sitting stance knife hand strike  
      **Y**:    Step back and crescent kick  
          Side piercing kick. Consecutive motion
  
5.    **X**:    Walking stance high side back fist  
      **Y**:    L-stance twin forearm block  
          Reverse back piercing kick

---

<sup>1</sup> X: denotes attacker; Y: denotes defender

### **New Techniques found in Whon-Hyo Tul**

1.    **X:**    L-stance knife hand inward strike  
      **Y:**    L-stance twin forearm block  
            Inward strike in the same stance
  
2.    **X:**    Side piercing kick  
      **Y:**    Move to 45o. forming bending ready stance guarding block  
            Side piercing kick
  
3.    **X:**    Fixed stance punch  
      **Y:**    Front rising kick  
            Jump front snap kick
  
4.    **X:**    Low front snap kick  
      **Y:**    Walking stance circular block  
            Fixed stance punch
  
5.    **X:**    Middle turning kick  
      **Y:**    L stance guarding block with forearm  
            Hook kick front leg

### **New Techniques found in Yul-Gok Tul**

1.    **X:**    Walking stance middle observe punch  
      **Y:**    Walking stance palm obverse outside hooking block  
            Middle side piercing kick front foot
  
2.    **X:**    High turning kick  
      **Y:**    Walking stance high block with double forearm  
            X-stance high side back fist
  
3.    **X:**    X-stance jump high side back fist  
      **Y:**    Dodging twin knife hand block  
            Mid-air side piercing kick
  
4.    **X:**    Walking middle reverse punch  
      **Y:**    L-stance knife hand middle guarding block  
            Walking stance front elbow strike
  
5.    **X:**    Side piercing kick  
      **Y:**    Crescent kick  
            Mid-air reverse hook kick

### **New Techniques found in Joong-Gun Tul:**

1.    **X:**    Fixed stance middle punch  
      **Y:**    L-stance middle block with reverse knife hand  
            Low front snap kick

2. X: Side piercing kick  
Y: Rear stance upward palm block  
Reverse back kick
3. X: Walking stance middle front punch  
Y: L-stance middle guarding block with knife hand  
Walking stance upper elbow strike
4. X: Walking stance downward knife hand strike  
Y: Walking stance x-rising block with fist  
Twin vertical punch. Same position
5. X: High reverse turning kick  
Y: Walking stance high block with double forearm  
Low twisting kick

**New Techniques found in Toi-Gye Tul:**

1. X: Walking stance middle punch  
Y: L-stance outer forearm block  
Walking stance low upset finger trust
2. X: Low front snap kick  
Y: Walking stance pressing block  
Walking stance twin vertical punch
3. X: High reverse turning kick  
Y: W-shape block with forearm  
High Twisting kick
4. X: Flying front kick  
Y: Jump Pressing block  
Vertical Kick
5. X: High turning kick  
High block with double forearm  
L-stance side back fist

**New Techniques found in Hwa-Rang Tul:**

1. X: Walking Stance middle punch  
Y: Sitting stance palm pushing block  
Middle turning kick
2. X: High turning kick  
Y: L-stance Twin forearm block  
L-stance upward punch stepping forward with back leg

3. X: Walking stance knife hand strike  
Y: Close stance forearm side front block  
Vertical stance downward knife hand strike
4. X: Low front kick  
Y: Walking stance pressing block  
L-stance back elbow thrust sliding the front foot
5. X: Side-piercing kick  
Y: Jump back with L-stance forearm guarding block  
Fixed stance middle punch-sliding motion

#### **New Techniques found in Choom-Moo Tul:**

1. X: Walking stance downward knife hand  
Y: Stepping forward walking stance rising block and the same time inward knife hand strike
2. X: Walking stance punch  
Y: L-stance knife hand block  
Walking stance flat fingertip thrust.
3. X: Low front kick  
Y: L-stance forearm low block  
Grab head with the hands, pulling and front kick with the knee
4. X: Walking stance middle punch  
Y: L-stance knife hand checking block  
Grab the hand and pulling the hand and attack the body with middle turning kick with the knee
5. X: Walking stance middle punch  
Y: Sitting stance front block  
L-stance back fist

---

#### **Conclusion**

I would like to repeat the importance of learning and practicing the fundamental techniques learned in Taekwon-do. Specifically, I want to emphasize the attention that must be given to step sparring. Not only is step sparring the means of developing a strong foundation for free sparring skills, but it is also a component of Taekwon-do that, nowadays, is often forgotten in our training. If the foundations of our art are not addressed today, they will be further weakened over time. Only the individual who possesses a thorough knowledge of *all* components of Taekwon-do can be successful in the application of its techniques and properly pass this knowledge on to the next generation. Only then can we preserve the principles of Taekwon-do as they were originally given to us by General Choi Hong-Hi.