

Apr. 24, 2007  
Copyright © Las Vegas Review-Journal

## TOTAL FITNESS: MIND, BODY, SPIRIT

### A Samurai Workout combines martial arts, fitness, safety

By JOHN PRZYBYS  
REVIEW-JOURNAL

You know about medicine ball workouts and boxing workouts and hip-hop workouts. Now, Laurence Berkley offers a workout that not only keeps your body in shape but your mind and spirit in tune, too.

Berkley, a personal trainer who also teaches martial arts, yoga and tai chi chuan at 24 Hour Fitness, 601 S. Rainbow Blvd., has developed A Samurai Workout, which employs a martial arts mind-set as a means of enhancing balance, strength, flexibility and personal safety.

For Berkley, the workout is the latest step in an evolution that started when he began to study martial arts nearly 45 years ago.

Berkley was first exposed to martial arts while serving with the Army in South Korea from 1959 to 1960. But, he said, "I just saw it and it really didn't catch my interest at the time."

After leaving the Army, he returned to Los Angeles. A friend who knew of Berkley's time in Korea asked him to meet with his karate group.

Berkley agreed. And, he said, "when I tried it, it was like a duck in water."

Berkley eventually earned a black belt in karate -- he currently holds a fourth-degree black belt, as well as a degree in physical education/movement education -- and began to augment his martial arts work with studies in Asian history, music and film. In 1967, he added yoga to his studies and, in 1969, tai chi chuan.

It turned out that one of Berkley's martial arts instructors was "very involved with the jo, a four-foot staff," he said. "And, it tweaked my interest."

Berkley added to his studies kobudo, an Okinawan weapons discipline.

"It intrigued me because, in the modern age, (the weapons) weren't meant to be combat weapons," he said. "They were meant to be implements of fitness and well-being."

During his studies, Berkley developed the notion of using martial arts to develop "personal safety," a phrase he coined that describes a sense of awareness of one's surroundings that goes beyond mere self-defense.

"Personal safety means, to me, the ability to function in everyday life: balance, flexibility, breathing," Berkley said, and it can describe something as simple and as practical as not turning an ankle for lack of awareness that a curb was in one's path.

From 1995 to 1997, while living in Japan, Berkley began to develop a sort of fusion discipline that incorporated personal safety with several martial arts philosophies he had studied to promote "what I felt mind, body, spirit meant in terms of fitness, well-being, energy."

He wanted his new discipline to be functional and suitable for both men and women of all ages. After moving to Las Vegas in 1997, Berkley began formalizing what would become A Samurai Workout.

Berkley began developing a DVD of his new workout in 2003, and a year later began teaching it at 24-Hour Fitness. The DVD, available through Berkley's Web site ([www. asamuraiworkout.com](http://www.asamuraiworkout.com)), has been out for about a year-and-a-half and features original music and scenic California locations.

Berkley said A Samurai Workout differs from other fitness regimens in that the jo, or staff, manipulated in ways that stem from the Samurai sword tradition of Japan, is key.

In fact, Berkley added, the mechanics of manipulating the jo translate well to golf, tennis or other similar sports.

In addition, most martial arts-inspired workouts tend to be high-impact affairs best suited for those in their 20s and 30s, while A Samurai Workout can be done by people of any age.

"Mine is really based in a combination of dance and Asian martial arts with a very mind/body feel," Berkley said. "We move slowly. It has a lot of the yoga feel behind it, because everything is directed. The brain is involved.

"Most of the other studies, you can get caught up in the moves, kicking and punching, and it's not a matter of form and technique."

A Samurai Workout focuses on "technique and placement," Berkley added. "You are moving around with a staff. You are using the jo. You're using a movable object that has to be given energy when you work. It's not just kicking and punching and doing the latest hip-hop moves."

Jerry Gagich, 63, has been studying martial arts with Berkley for about eight years and added A Samurai Workout to his routine about a year-and-a-half ago.

"I started the workout to get myself in better shape," Gagich said, and A Samurai Workout was appealing "because (Berkley) put some martial arts weapons training into the fitness program. That's what pulled me in."

Gagich suspects some may be wary of the workout's "martial arts aspect." But, he said, "it's a great fitness program. Some of the stuff we do, I feel, is more extensive an exercise, especially cardiovascular exercise, than walking on a treadmill.

"Sometimes you do get your heart rate up but, as a general rule, it's sustained movement, it's continuous movement, and it is strenuous."