Why Flourishing is Failing for Martial Arts Schools

Having closed my dojo after 41 years of teaching, I promised my kids’ classes I would make a sincere effort to rent a facility so I could teach them for a few years until they joined the adults in much smaller facilities for private and semi-private lessons.

The logical place to rent short periods of time for martial arts is another martial arts school, but I don’t have to tell you the unspoken resistance that crops up when one method of brotherly budo settles in beside another. In cases where the head instructors might be open to having an unfamiliar system rent time from him, often he has already filled the slots with other complementary classes and activities.

I explored gyms and exercise clubs only to find that nearly every one of them already sported part-time martial arts classes.

It was the same with town recreation departments.

Okay, how about gymnastic classes? Most gymnastics classes are frequented by girls. Obviously, a martial arts class that tends to be frequented by boys, might be a perfect fit to fill their schedules. But 50% of the gymnastic classes in my area already had a martial arts class associated with their school.

Not only had my school been competing with eight traditional martial arts schools and three mixed martial arts schools within a 3- or 4-mile radius, it had also been competing with Goldbrick’s Gym, McTurk’s Muscle Palace, Biffle’s Biceps Building Bazaar, Hotdog Gymnastics of Bunnsville, Weir D. Best’s Turnfest- und-Kiddie-Schule, as well as Kicks for Kids, Heroes in the Making, and KempoKwonDo out of the town halls of three neighboring towns.

What does this proliferation of martial arts schools and classes tell us? It tells us (1) that full martial arts schools are not opening anew, but people who want to offer martial arts instruction find a way to open a class somewhere, (2) that existing schools are still pumping out black belts that teach branch classes for the headmaster, thus serving as feeder schools for the central studio, and (3) that every sort of physical education facility and most municipalities are staying afloat partially by renting out their spaces to fledgling martial arts instructors.

Please notice a couple of other implications garnered from the above information: (a) most martial arts schools and classes are for kids, (b) instead of the number of choices getting smaller and more elite during a period of recession (with the highest quality or most established schools surviving), the choices have gotten greater and less elite (with the highest quality and most established schools barely surviving as a shadow of what they once were). Why? Because you get more market share if you send Sherry Shodan out to open a Kick-Krazy Kids’ Karate Klub at the local Cornhusker’s Hall than if you wait for Sherry to earn sandan 5 years later, know something about her art and about teaching, then send her out to rent a full facility. Anyone with a basic knowledge of a martial arts and a love for kids can teach exercises to uninformed, uniformed children. We know it, but parents don’t, so martial arts schools proliferate and get worse at the same time.

Worse yet, martial arts schools for adults that actually teach traditional arts and/or self-defense in the atmosphere of an Asian culture are, if not cackling a final exhalation, already buried. The young men have gone over to Smash-mouth Cage Fighting and the mature adults, what’s left of them, take T’ai Chi in a backroom at The Exercise Palace or join the last bastion of traditional martial arts for adults, Aikido.

True, the kids programs create feeder schools for the future. So let me ask you this: How many kids, having learned basic punching, fun kicking, and meaningless forms all the way to black belt will retain their interest in a martial art long enough to study it in depth? One in ten? One in a hundred? More likely, one in a thousand. And those who do continue won’t be able to find a serious school with adult students, so they’ll start one of their own, passing on their limited knowledge to the next generation who have accepted traditional martial arts not as a way of life or a personal discipline, but as a fun physical activity to do until they are twelve or until they make black belt, whichever comes first, or until they recognize there is more fun in the opposite sex
than in repeating basic punching, fun kicking, and uninterpreted forms in a spiffy uniform held together with a cool colored belt.