

THE TRUTH ABOUT VITAMIN C

Natural Health

OCTOBER 1998

SPECIAL SECTION

The Ultimate Herb Guide

Natural Viagra

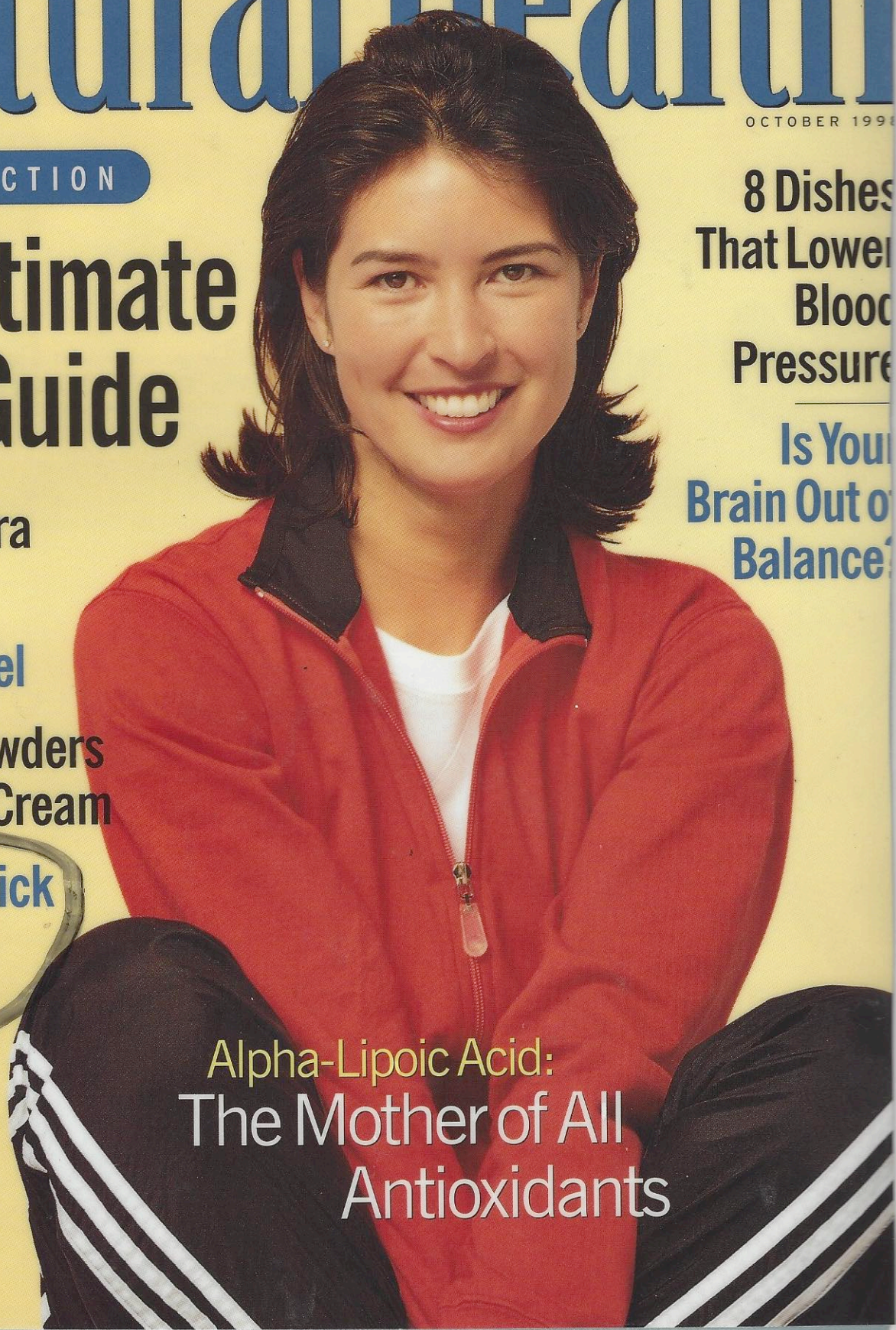
10 Tips for Healthy Travel

Creamy Chowders Without the Cream

Punch and Kick Your Way to Inner Peace

8 Dishes That Lower Blood Pressure

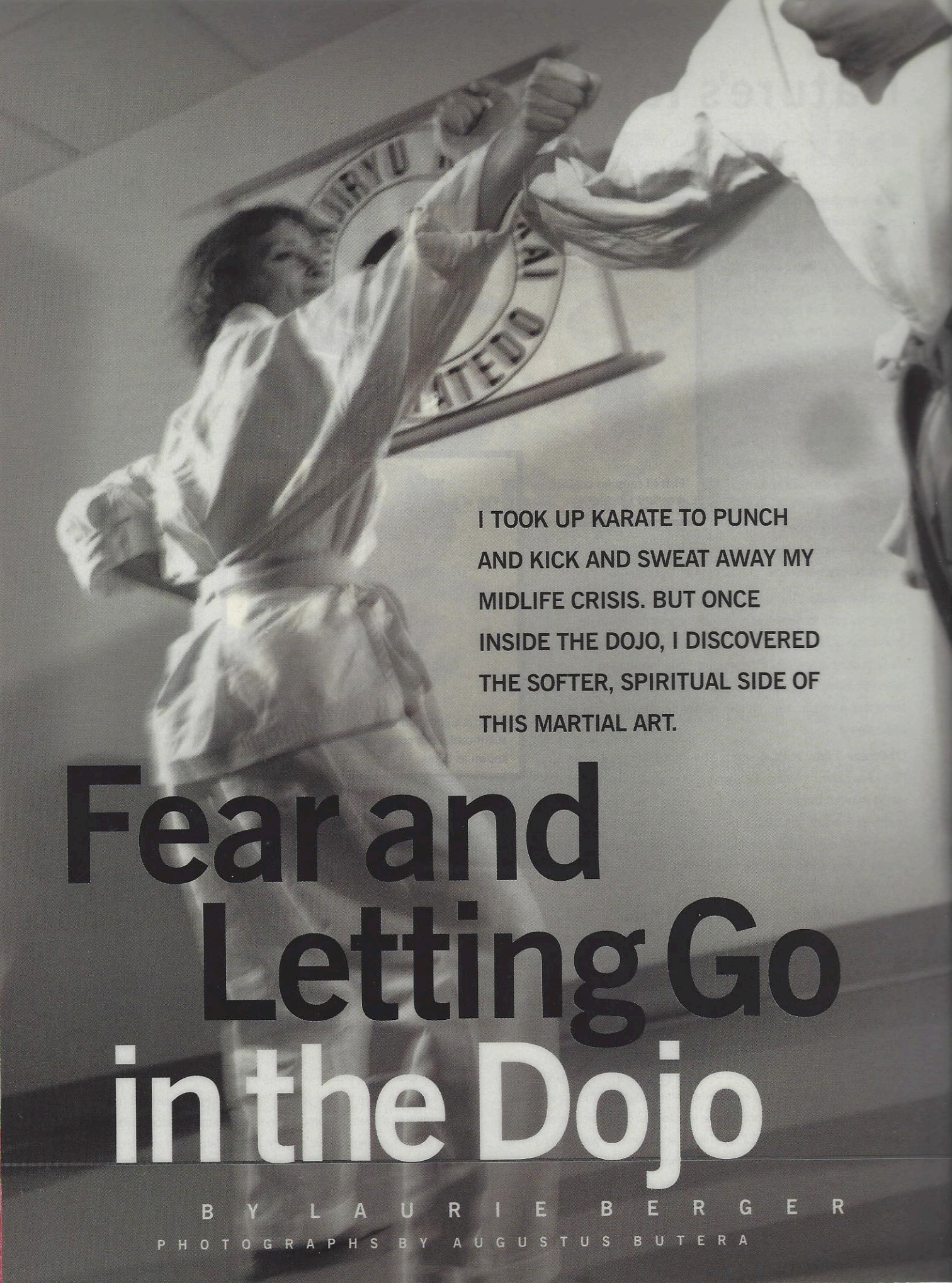
Is Your Brain Out of Balance?



Alpha-Lipoic Acid:
The Mother of All Antioxidants

USA \$4.00 CANADA \$4.95





I TOOK UP KARATE TO PUNCH
AND KICK AND SWEAT AWAY MY
MIDLIFE CRISIS. BUT ONCE
INSIDE THE DOJO, I DISCOVERED
THE SOFTER, SPIRITUAL SIDE OF
THIS MARTIAL ART.

Fear and Letting Go in the Dojo

B Y L A U R I E B E R G E R

P H O T O G R A P H S B Y A U G U S T U S B U T E R A



TOUGH AND TENDER

Author Laurie Berger (opposite page, far left) and her fellow karate students learn more than how to unleash a mean move. They practice respectful rituals such as bowing and the special-occasion tea ceremony—offering a workout for mind and body.

Mv

first day in the dojo was the tip-off. This wasn't going to be one of those mindless aerobics classes that I tumbled into after work. After a rapid-fire succession of jumping jacks, jumping squats, sit-ups, bicycle kicks, splits, and jogging in place, my karate teacher, or sensei, John P. Mirrione, barked out: "On the floor for one-armed push-ups." Everyone dropped to the mat.

Still breathless, I tried to obey. Lift, I told myself. Nothing happened. Trying to straighten my arm was like attempting to lift a bag of cement with a twig.

Glancing around the dojo—what martial arts types call a training hall—I confirmed I was the only one still collapsed on the floor. Everyone else, with at least a

year of training under their belts, was pumping up and down, albeit amidst grunts and heaves.

I tried again. My puny arm still wouldn't cooperate—and my mind wasn't helping. This is not how I want to spend my evenings or precious workout time, I whined inwardly. At that moment, Sensei John turned in my direction. "Let's see those push-ups, Laurie," he said. "I can't," I cried out, hoping he would cut me a break as a new student and a woman. Instead, he responded with the verbal equivalent of a rap across the knuckles: "'Can't' is not a word we use in this dojo."

A Martial Arts Primer

FOUR AND A HALF MILLION AMERICANS practice some form of martial arts, and 30 percent are women, according to the Amateur Athletic Union, the country's largest nonprofessional sports group. If you want to join these ranks, you'll need to decide which of the martial arts is right for you. Prospective students should choose the style that matches their body type, conditioning, and comfort with physical contact. "Would you rather punch and kick your way to better health or grapple your way there?" asks Jennifer Lawler, author of *Martial Arts for Women* (Turtle Press, 1998).

In her book, Lawler identifies seven basic martial art forms taught in America. Each is classified as either hard (using blocks, kicks, and punches to develop power, muscle tone, and stamina) or soft (tapping internal energies rather than brute force to fend off an opponent and improve balance, strength, and aerobic conditioning).

AIKIDO: This soft style from Japan focuses on mind, body, and moral outlook and uses quick, decisive actions and evasive movements to turn an attacker's force against him. There is no punching or kicking. It's ideal for smaller bodies because it relies on leverage, not strength.

JUDO: Like aikido, this Japanese soft form emphasizes psyching out an opponent and using his force against him. It relies on joint-locking and strangulation techniques. Practitioners strive for flexibility, balance, speed, and mental alertness. It's good for short people, who can use their lower center of gravity to their advantage.

JUJITSU: Another soft style from Japan, jujitsu looks to defeat the enemy in any way possible, with the least amount of force. It employs grappling moves and strikes to vital areas.

KARATE: Drawing on Chinese and Japanese martial arts, this hard and soft style uses kicks, punches, and sweeps to fend off an attacker. Powerful blows, speed of movement, and timing are key. Karate is suited to all body types.

KUNG FU: There are now more than 400 kinds of kung fu, popularized by Bruce Lee. Some resemble karate, others tai chi, making it hard to classify this martial art as either a hard or soft style. Kung fu employs mostly fist and foot attacks.

TAE KWON DO: Emphasizing high and jumping kicks, this hard style was used to train foot soldiers to kick above their heads to attack mounted soldiers. Tae kwon do also employs powerful punches and quick movements. This Korean style is ideal for women, with its focus on lower body movements (where women are usually strongest).

TAI CHI CHUAN: This soft style from China consists of slow, connected movements that focus breathing, clear the mind, and help direct the flow of qi (vital life force) to subdue the enemy. Tai chi has the strongest spiritual component of all the martial arts, and it is ideal for the elderly, the infirm, or those suffering from injuries.

To find out more about martial arts on the Internet, go to the newsgroup that offers *The Newbie Guide to Martial Arts Training* by Jeff Pipkins and answers frequently asked questions (www.cis.ohio-state.edu/hypertext/faq/usenet/martial-arts).

A Peaceful Way

That was one year ago, when I'd first signed up for karate classes at a local gym. It was just days after my 44th birthday, and I had a bad case of midlife jitters. I was hit with fears . . . scared of brittle bones . . . leery of marital commitment after a divorce . . . worried about investing for the future. I began hatching schemes for staying young and erasing my fears. But unlike my friends, who were jumping out of planes, getting eyelifts, or having beat-the-biological-clock babies, I wanted something less risky. Karate, a centuries-old Japanese art of self-defense, seemed to fit. It's active, intense, and ongoing. I was ready to trade fluorescent spandex and Stairmasters for a boxy unisex outfit, an unforgiving mat, and a chance at rejuvenation and enlightenment. I set out to reinvent myself—even though that's an awful lot to ask of an exercise class.



I knew little about martial arts when I began to look for a school. My first stop was a local academy of tae kwon do, a Korean martial arts form that emphasizes kicking—something I can easily do after years of dance training. After observing a class, though, I felt empty. This particular

school lacked spirit, and its owners seemed more interested in signing me to a high-priced contract than understanding my reasons for enrolling.

I decided to check out the karate class at my gym, Reebok Sports Club New York in Manhattan. Shorinjiryu, the form of karate taught at the club, instantly appealed to me because of its holistic approach, which focuses on philosophy, fitness, and meditation—not

continued on page 166

SCENES FROM A CLASS Above: Students and teacher clink ceremonial cups, forming a so-called "circle of life."

Opposite page, clockwise from top left: Laurie Berger pushes past her fear of failure during practice. Classmate Gregory Soto uncurls a kick. The master of the class, Sensei John P. Mirrione, strikes a pose.

violence. When I met Sensei John, I knew he was different.

"I want to take karate," I told him. "Why?" he asked, with eyes that seemed to stare right through me. I was tongue-tied—I didn't expect to be quizzed on my motives.

"I'm tired of exercise classes," I muttered. He seemed pleased with my reply. Before I could pull out my checkbook, though, Sensei threw another curveball: I would be on probation for the first month. For some, that caveat may have been the deal breaker, but I found it encouraging. Sensei didn't just want my money—he wanted a commitment of body and mind. He wouldn't let any student advance if he didn't see a good attitude and an understanding of the teachings.

The first classes took some adjustment. Because of karate's obsession with respect, we are always bowing—to the shomen (the front of the dojo), the sensei, and each other. We must count out our warm-up repetitions in Japanese, refrain from running to the water cooler—even when our throats feel like a desert—and preface all our comments with "onegai shimasu" (a term of respect that doubles as "excuse me"). In the heat of those early practices, I often forgot this preface, blurting out a question. Invariably, Sensei or a classmate would reprimand me, making me feel like a child.

After about an hour of sweating and heavy breathing, each class ends with an interpretation of a quote, scrawled on a message board near the dojo entrance. "What's the Philosophy of the Week?" Sensei John barks. Inevitably there is a long, foot-shuffling pause. Those of us who forgot to look at the board frantically squint to read it from 30 feet away. Others reach into the pits of their stomachs for an explanation.

During one class, a brave soul spoke up. "Never be humorous at the expense of others." Quickly, Sensei returned, "What does that mean?" "Don't make fun of someone to benefit yourself," the student replied.

Sensei nodded with a poker face and gestured to the next. "If you use someone to advance your own goals, you'll only get hurt," offered another. After listening to each new twist, Sensei gave his own interpretation: "Do not use humor in a destructive manner. Instead, use humor to turn tears to joy." Indeed, discussing goodness and honesty after an hour of sparring seemed silly at first, but I later discovered it's essential to karate training. "At the end of an hour workout, people's minds are

clear and they're more receptive to these concepts," Sensei explains. "They can leave in a positive mental state."

New students are taught katas, choreographed training exercises, by other students, not the master. Each time I was paired with someone, the instruction would contradict the previous teacher's. I soon became confused and frustrated. Would I ever get it right? Sensei tapped my fear of making a mistake the night he asked me to perform a kata in front of the class. A

"Karate is like lifting weights and running at the same time," says Michael Proctor, the martial arts pro at the Fitness Center of the Cooper Aerobics Center in Dallas, Texas.

lowly white belt in a room filled with stripes of black, purple, and green, I nervously started the motions of this "dance," trying to execute each movement perfectly. Suddenly I blanked out. I couldn't remember what came next. Each time I tried to continue, I became more confused. My humiliation grew and I fought back tears.

Then the dam burst. I felt foolish, ashamed, like a 3-year-old. I braced myself for a punishing lecture. Instead, Sensei gave me a hug and proclaimed, "Now you're ready to do karate."

A Test of Will

In the early months, I'd drag myself to the dojo two to three evenings a week to sweat inside a stiff, oversized uniform—when I'd rather be riding my bike in Central Park or vegging out with a video. With each new challenge came more sweat and tears, and I vowed to quit after every class. But I always felt compelled to return—even if not right away. I skipped classes on nights when I just couldn't muster the physical and mental energy, and I didn't practice as frequently as Sensei wanted.

After an absence, I'd often get a phone call. "Where are you?" he'd ask. "I've got deadlines," I'd respond, launching into a rant. "In the time you explained that to me, you could have been doing kata or push-ups," he'd say, "even if it's just for five minutes." Part instructor, part coach, part spiritual counselor, Sensei, I have learned, has a good heart and looks out for misfits like me.

But could I stick with karate? I knew

the benefits if I could. Karate provides an excellent combination of aerobic and resistance training—great for people like me who don't have a lot of time to exercise. "Karate is like lifting weights and running at the same time," says Michael Proctor, the martial arts pro at the Fitness Center of the Cooper Aerobics Center in Dallas, Texas.

A full-body workout, karate lowers blood pressure, increases muscle tone, and burns body fat. According to Adrian Ellis, executive director of martial arts for the Amateur Athletic Union, the largest nonprofessional sports group in America, someone training two to three times per week will gain an improved feeling of well-being—or better results—in four to six weeks. In my own class, I watched one woman shed 60 stubborn pounds in six months and one man stay in shape after knee surgery, simply by doing upper body punches while seated in a chair.

Karate also packs powerful mental and emotional benefits. Consistent, mindful practice helps students break old patterns that affect self-esteem and, ultimately, health. In one survey of 174 school-aged karate students in Toronto, Canada, parents reported that since beginning karate, their children's self-esteem and self-confidence had increased dramatically and absenteeism and doctor visits had decreased. The benefits became more pronounced with advances in belt ranking. The findings, published in a 1995 issue of the *Journal of Asian Martial Arts*, led the researchers to speculate that karate may level the gender playing field, "compensating for a lack of self-confidence in girls and the lack of sensitivity often perceived among boys." They pointed to other studies that theorize that karate "liberated the woman in every man and the man in every woman." Was I about to get in touch with my masculine side?

Fighting Fear

During one class, I witnessed an advanced student fall on her back with a blood-curdling scream during a fight. My greatest fear—getting hurt—was playing out before my eyes, and Sensei knew it. So I could confront my fear head-on, Sensei immediately commanded me to fight with Matt, a black belt, the highest belt. My heart dropped. I was reminded of the time I fell off a horse, got back on for a short time, and, after that, never rode again.

I put on the head gear and bogu (chest protector). Matt started throwing punches at me, but I couldn't move. "Hit me," Matt

continued on page 187

