

THE MARTIALIST: ISSUE 3.10 SUBSCRIBER

Self-Defense and Vision Impairment

By Phil Elmore

Self-defense is not the purview of only those among us who are in competitive athletic condition. Self-defense is the right and the necessity of every human being who is determined not to be a victim. While you should be as fit as you can manage to be, all other things equal, the reality is that many of us have physical deficiencies with which we must cope when we engage in a physical altercation.



Photo by Phil Elmore

If these deficiencies concern you, you can always work to overcome them. An overweight or underweight person can exercise and change his or her diet to compensate. A weak individual can build muscle through strength training. An ignorant or unskilled individual can train diligently to acquire the information and the practice he or she lacks. What can be done, however, if one's deficiencies are incurable?

By definition, *nothing* can be done. Should we then simply accept defeat?

One of the issues about which we can do relatively little, even in contemporary society, is eyesight. If you have poor vision – if you require glasses for near-

or far-vision or if you are simply legally blind – there is very little you can do. Some of us who require glasses can wear contacts, but some of us cannot. Laser eye surgery may be an option, but it can produce harmful side effects and is better avoided at this stage. Those who are blind are not going to receive magical eye transplants any time soon – and those of us who now suffer from vision impairment may one day find ourselves in those shoes, having lost our failing vision completely.

Is the person who wears glasses or who cannot see at all simply relegated to victimhood? Not at all. Those who suffer from partial or complete vision impairment may still train and can still successfully defend themselves. There are certain realities of which such people should be aware, however, and there are certain suggestions for training that I would offer to any who find themselves in... well, my position.

You see, this is a topic with which I am intimately familiar because I have been near-sighted all my life. My prescription is... well, let's just say it's an impressive set of numbers. When I take off my glasses, I have human microscope vision: I can see the pores in my hand, but I can't read the words on this page until my face is only a few inches from the screen. With my glasses off, I can see a person standing six feet away from me, but I can't tell who that person is because I can't make out any of the details of his or her face. I also can't see if that person is holding a weapon of any kind. I can't see the difference between a wireless phone and a gun or a knife; all I see is a black blob, if I'm lucky to be close enough to see that much.

THE MARTIALIST: ISSUE 3.10 SUBSCRIBER

When I put on my glasses, of course, all that changes. I write for a living; I spend all day staring at a computer screen. I couldn't do that if I couldn't see (though I do touch-type well over 100 words a minute; it's been some time since I was last clocked). I got my first pair of glasses in kindergarten, at an age so young that the other children, confused, asked me, "Are you blind?" I remember that I used to come up with any excuse I could not to wear my glasses back then. Today, they are my constant companion and I am completely at ease with them.

I spent years wearing contacts but had to stop wearing them because they were aggravating a chronic dry-eye condition. As a result, I use eye drops throughout the day to keep my eyes moist. Wearing contacts is therefore an option never again open to me; I will wear glasses until I have surgery, until I go blind, or until I die.



Photo by Phil Elmore

A tremendous number of people in the modern world live every day with glasses. This is the primary topic of this article because it is so commonplace. There are certain guidelines you must follow if you are a martialist, a martial artist, or some other manner of self-

defense exponent who regularly wears them.

GUIDELINES FOR MARTIALISTS W/ GLASSES

Having worn glasses virtually all of my life, I've learned to live and train with them. The following is the advice I would give to any martialist who is concerned about the limitations having glasses or other vision impairment (even complete blindness) might impose on his or her training and self-defense strategies:

- **Keep extra pairs of glasses on hand.** If you depend on glasses to see clearly and especially if you need them to drive, you have no excuse not to have at least one extra pair. If your prescription doesn't change too much between frames you could simply keep the previous pair around for emergencies. Keep one pair in your car at all times and carry another with you, if you can. I keep spare spectacles in my glove compartment, in my shoulder bag, and in my dresser.
- **Carry appropriate accessories.** Carry at least one "nerd" eye strap for your glasses in case you have to do something that could dislodge your specs. For example, if I'm going to an amusement park (where I enjoy riding roller coasters) I wear the strap I keep on hand so I don't have to worry about losing my glasses. More commonly, I use the glasses strap if I'm engaging in any brisk training that might cause me to lose my lenses. (If there's any chance I'm going to be getting hit during training, I remove the glasses entirely, but we'll get to that.) You should also keep handy any of the

THE MARTIALIST: ISSUE 3.10 SUBSCRIBER

several small screwdrivers-and-screws kits for eyeglasses that you can buy at drugstores.

- **Train with your glasses both on and off.** If you can see at all without your glasses, train with them off as often as you train with them on. While things are very blurry when I remove my glasses – and I mean very blurry – I can see well enough to strike someone and to block an incoming blow. (I *can't* see well enough to know if an incoming limb bears a blade or another weapon, however, which has real ramifications for how I must train. I must assume that a weapon could be present even if I don't see it and I must react accordingly.) Training with your glasses off will accustom you to the differences in sensory input you'll receive when fighting without your spectacles, which *will* happen if you wear glasses daily. With practice, you will adapt to working without being able to see clearly – though be careful. One of the first times I successfully sparred my friend and teacher David while not wearing my glasses, I punched him square in the groin because I could not see well enough to prevent making full-force contact. This would be a good thing if not for the fact that we were intentionally limiting our contact so I could get used to the idea of training with my visual senses impaired.
- **Know when to discard your spectacles.** If you're wearing glasses and someone punches you in the face, your glasses can be broken. More dangerously, however, those glasses can become

a weapon that increases the injury done to your face – and especially your eyes. You'll have to learn to judge for yourself, based on the situation, if you can do without your glasses when trouble is brewing. In some combative situations I know I would rip my glasses from my face rather than go hand-to-hand with someone who could plant my lenses in my eyeballs.

- **Seek technological solutions.** If you must, invest in a pair of prescription safety glasses, a pair of prescription sunglasses, and a set of sport lenses. There is considerable expense involved, but you'll be glad you have the right equipment for the job. There are technological solutions to visual impairments of all kinds, for that matter, though I would warn against laser surgery unless it's absolutely necessary. Surgery is never minor and eye surgery can have very real and very harmful side-effects that are not reversible.
- **Develop touch reflexes.** One of the reasons I was first attracted to Wing Chun Kung Fu is the concept of touch reflexes – the attributes developed through *chi sao* (“sticky hands”) and through *hubud* training in the Filipino Martial Arts. Touch reflexes allow the self-defense exponent to react instinctively when he or she comes into contact with any part of an opponent's body – legs, arms, hands, whatever. Developing touch reflexes helps the practitioner learn to react, without thinking, to the kinetic energy of the opponent's movements. It's an invaluable skill to a sighted person and is even more important to

THE MARTIALIST: ISSUE 3.10 SUBSCRIBER

someone who cannot see. I've sparred teachers *who did not look at me* the entire time they were fighting me – specifically because they were using touch reflexes and preferred to do this over “thinking about” what their next moves should be. It is those touch reflexes that will enable me to defend myself physically if I ever lose my sight completely.

- **Weapons complicate things.** If you carry a firearm, you have an advantage in self-defense. What happens, however, if you lose the ability to see clearly? A shooter who wears glasses goes from an effective combatant to an impaired liability (legally as well as physically) when he can no longer see. Without your sight, or if your sight picture is suddenly much shorter range and much more blurry, you cannot effectively identify targets or verify what is beyond them (cardinal rules of firearms safety). I would recommend training at the range with a pair of non-prescription safety glasses, under appropriate supervision, to see what you can and cannot see (and how far away you can effectively identify targets) without your prescription lenses. You will have to accept the fact that you cannot engage targets as far out as you can with your glasses on. If you're extremely impaired without glasses, your firearm may have to become a practical contact weapon, with a range no greater than that of a knife, for you to identify your opponent positively. There are safety and legal concerns here that lie outside the scope of this article; you'll have to give this some serious

thought and practice diligently to learn your limits.

- **Learn your limitations and respect them.** That brings me to the reality of training, self-defense, and vision impairment or blindness. Being unable to see well means you are not able to do certain things as well as can people with 20/20 vision. That's a fact. Accept it and learn to work with it in order to protect yourself to the best of your ability.

By following these guidelines you can train with any of several vision impairments and you can, in almost all cases, compensate for them. There is no substitute for naturally perfect vision, but reality is what it is. You don't get to choose and you have to work with what you've got. Even blind, you *can* defend yourself. It *is* possible.

Good luck. Keep your lenses clean. ♠



Photo by Phil Elmore

Somebody who only reads newspapers and at best books of contemporary authors looks to me like an extremely near-sighted person who scorns eyeglasses. He is completely dependent on the prejudices and fashions of his times, since he never gets to see or hear anything else. And what a person thinks on his own without being stimulated by the thoughts and experiences of other people is even in the best case rather paltry and monotonous.

- Einstein