

THE MARTIALIST VOL. TWO NO. SEVEN

The Dreaded Pak Sao Circle

By Phil Elmore

"Nothing," I once told Sifu Anthony Iglesias of the Syracuse Wing Chun Academy, "is worse than Pak Sao circle. You can't scare me with numeric punches in the air. You can't scare me with stance training. You can't scare me with bag drills. Nothing is worse."

The Pak Sao, or "slapping hand," is a slapping block used for defense, for offense, and as an entry technique. Done properly, it not only "takes the opponent's center," but it inflicts pain. A Pak Sao is not strictly a "block," but an attack that also removes obstructions.

There are some instructors whose Pak Saos will quite literally take the hair off your forearm. After a single, properly executed technique, your forearm should be bright red and it should sting; this is how your opponent knows he did it with sufficient power. In my early days at the Syracuse Wing Chun Academy, Sifu used to tease us about this.

"I'm the smallest guy here," he would say, "and I see a lot of red arms, but not mine. Why aren't you hitting my arm hard enough?"

Practicing Pak Sao drills from cross-arm position.



Photo by Phil Elmore

Executing Pak Sao as an entry technique.



Photo by Phil Elmore

The Pak Sao is a foundation technique of Wing Chun Kung Fu. It is taught early and often and has many uses. Pak Sao should not be done too much (meaning you should not "over-block" the opponent's limb or you will open yourself up to counters). I find it most useful as an entry technique, jarring the opponent while moving his limb(s) aside to permit striking to a vital area.

The Pak Sao circle is a drill to which I was introduced when Sigung Crescione visited the Syracuse Wing Chun Academy in the Spring of 2004. Sigung is Sifu Anthony Iglesias' instructor; the term "Sigung" means "Kung Fu Grandfather," depending on whom you ask.

Much to my chagrin, Sifu Iglesias immediately adopted the Pak Sao circle and remains fond of its use to this day. In the photo that follows, for example, students prepare for the drill. An inner circle of students faces an equal outer circle of students. If they look like they're saying something in the photo, they are – it is, "Phil, put the camera down and get in the Pak Sao circle."

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Photo by Phil Elmore

The next to photos are of the same drill done more recently at the Syracuse Wing Chun Academy. Under the watchful eye of Sifu Anthony, who times the rounds, one circle punches repeatedly down the centerline (Wing Chun chain punches reciprocate over and under each other).



Photo by Phil Elmore

The student facing a puncher delivers slapping block after slapping block, striking the forearms to move the punches off center. If you are the person punching, this hurts like living Hell when done right. If your forearms are not pulsing red after a round or two, your fellow student is not delivering the Pak Sao with sufficient force.

When a round is over, Sifu calls "time" and the students rotate over by one student. Eventually, the circle that was punching switches to Pak Saos and vice versa.



Photo by Phil Elmore

It looks deceptively easy. It isn't. There have been times when I felt like the skin was being flayed off my arms. More importantly, however, the repetition of the technique in a rapid-fire manner helps you identify where and how your technique is going *wrong*. If you're not taking the center, you'll get hit; if you're not striking properly, you'll miss; if you're not moving with sufficient speed and coordination, you and your partner will fumble around trying to perform the drill and failing. If you're using Pak Sao "wrongly," you'll start to feel pain from stress on your fingers and the tendons attached to them, starting with the pinky and working upward.

Little worth doing is easy. The Pak Sao circle is a great example of this. It's a boring, repetitive, painful drill that teaches foundation technique and identifies flaws as it teaches. I'd be worried about anyone who claimed to enjoy it. I know I don't. It is, however, very useful. ♠