

Black Dragon's Den
Martial Arts Academy
Board Breaking

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Board Breaking Tutorial



Black Dragon's Den

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Why Break Boards?

Board breaking is used to bring together several martial arts experiences. The experiences we are talking about are:

Physical

Technical

Mental

Physical

As the student works out and becomes physically fit, strength, speed and endurance are improved. These characteristics are necessary in all aspects of martial arts but especially in board breaking. A student cannot hope to effectively break a board if their physical characteristics are not adequate.

Technical

Even as a white belt, the student learns several basic techniques that are the foundation to the rest of their training experience. These techniques must be performed many times to ensure that the student performs the martial art technique correctly. Through this process, the assurance that a student will strike, kick, block etc. correctly will reduce the likely hood that the student will incur an injury during the performance of the technique.

Mental

The essence of all martial arts is to achieve a level of mental preparedness and concentration. This can be achieved in a number of ways. Through training in the gym, perfecting martial arts techniques, through testing for advanced belt levels and through tournaments. Each of the previous activities promotes mental advancement by subjecting the student to the rigors of demonstrating and performing the techniques learned. With the right mental attitude, that is, the confidence that techniques are performed correctly and that the student has the necessary physical strengths to perform the technique, a student can be assured that their attempt at breaking boards should result in success.

A Special Note on Adrenaline

Adrenaline is the stimulant produced by the body when presented with a situation of excitement or fear. Often you hear of individuals being "high" on adrenaline and able to perform superhuman feats. Adrenaline is useful during board breaking to heighten the senses and strength of a student enabling them to perform a board breaking technique that they might not have been able to do otherwise. However, without the proper technique, even adrenaline may not achieve the desired result.

So why break boards? To demonstrate the skill and focus achieved by a martial arts student as a result of their training. To further enhance the students confidence and self-esteem, to compete against others and to bring together the students Physical, Technical and Mental preparedness.

Board Selection

Most martial arts schools use white pine or plastic re-breakable boards. Re-breakable boards are useful during testing or for demonstration purposes saving on the expense of using wood. We will only discuss wood boards in this tutorial.

Sizes

Boards are cut as follows: 1" x 12" x 12" or 1" x 10" x 12" for adults and 1" x 6" x 12" or 1" x 5" x 12" for kids. The pine boards can either be S3S (good on 3 sides, with some knots) S4S (good on 4 sides, with some knots) or clear (no knots at all or very fine knots). The clear boards are generally not used because of the expense of the board.

Be aware that when you go to a lumberyard to buy wood for board breaking you must keep the following in mind:

- Boards come in standard sizes and lengths. You need to ask the lumberyard what standard lengths they carry. For example, if they carry a 1" x 12" x 10' length you could get (12) 10-inch boards out of it (10' x 12" = 120" total length divided by 10" for each board = 12 boards that measure 10' x 12").
- A 1" board is really only 3/4" thick and 1 1/4" wide. This is an industry standard. In the old days, all wood was actual size, to make more money the industry reduced the size of the lumber but kept the original size in place.
- You need to ask for the type of pine, good 3 sides (S3S), good 4 sides (S4S) or clear.
- If the lumberyard allows you to pick your own board, look for wood that has the least number of knots.

Grain

Grain are the fibers of growth in the wood. Remember the growth rings you learned about in school? They are the circular patterns in the tree that you can see when a tree is cut down.

When our boards are cut you can view this grain pattern on the cut ends of the board. The grain will look something like figure 1.

Break from this Side



Figure 1

Notice that the grain forms a pattern of curves. If possible, you want to break from the side that the curves are rounded toward you or the convex side. We do this because the grains are the weakest when struck and pushed from this direction. If you buy boards that are S3S or good three sides, then the rough side should face the holders regardless of the grain structure. If you buy S4S, good 4 sides, then you need to check the grain to make sure you are breaking with the grain rather than against.

Holding the Board(s)

All boards should have holders positioned as shown in figure 2.



Figure 2



Figure 2A

Notice that their inside arms are on top and their inside legs are back. The inside arms are on top to keep the boards from kicking up into the holders face (see figure 2A). The inside legs are back to keep the holders from being kicked in the legs. Holders should be tight together with their shoulders together for stability and arms locked straight.

The holders should hold onto the boards by the good edges regardless of whether the boards are S3S or S4S. Hands should be as far to the outer edges as possible, thumbs tucked in so not to get hit (the Black Dragon's Den has hand protectors for board holding). Also, turn your head to avoid any splinters getting into your eyes (this also reduces the possibility that you will flinch when the breaker strikes the board).

Number of Holders

The number and size (or female vs male) holders depends upon the type of break you are going to attempt. The general rule of thumb is to always have 2 holders for each break on single boards. Multiple boards may require additional backup support (see figure 3). If this is not possible then talk to an instructor for more information on when and how many holders you might need.

Kids Boards usually only require one holder. Sometimes a backup may be required and/or the holder's wrists must be reinforced.



Figure 3

Setting up the Boards

Setting up the boards will require the following: *choosing holders; board height; how many boards to break?; board angle; grain orientation; visibility of break.*

Choosing Holders:

During testing or demonstrations, Professor Rodriguez or a Black Belt Instructor will make sure the holders are in place and holding the boards correctly. But during tournaments, it may be necessary for you to make sure you have set up and chosen the correct holders for the techniques you are going to attempt.

General rule of thumb, try to get Black Dragon's Den students as the front holders. For multiple board breaks, get the biggest strongest holders (with big hands) to hold. Others may be chosen to support from the back.

Board Height:

Position the board at the height that you are capable of attaining. Take a couple of practice kicks (without hitting the board) to see if the height is correct. Remember, adrenaline will cause you to kick higher than expected, compensate a little by moving the board up.

How Many Boards Should You Break?

During testing, Professor Rodriguez will tell each student how many boards a student will attempt at one time. Generally, all non-black belt students will break only one board with one technique. During Black Belt testing, students will be required to break multiple boards with different techniques.

At tournaments, you can put together a breaking routine that you believe will impress the judges. Generally this means multiple boards and multiple breaks. The Black Belt Division may also be allowed to break items such as bricks/blocks or other materials. No one should attempt to break more boards or blocks than the highest Black Belt has broken. Consult with Professor Rodriguez before attempting any breaking routine that uses more than 3 boards or 3 blocks in a single break. DO NOT attempt to break more than you have broken before. Tournaments are not the time to experiment. Professor Rodriguez or an Instructor should review all board breaking routines for tournaments.

Board Angle:

Based upon the technique you will be using, the angle of the board is critical. For example, if you will be performing a "Front Kick Middle", then the board should be at a forward or downward slant.

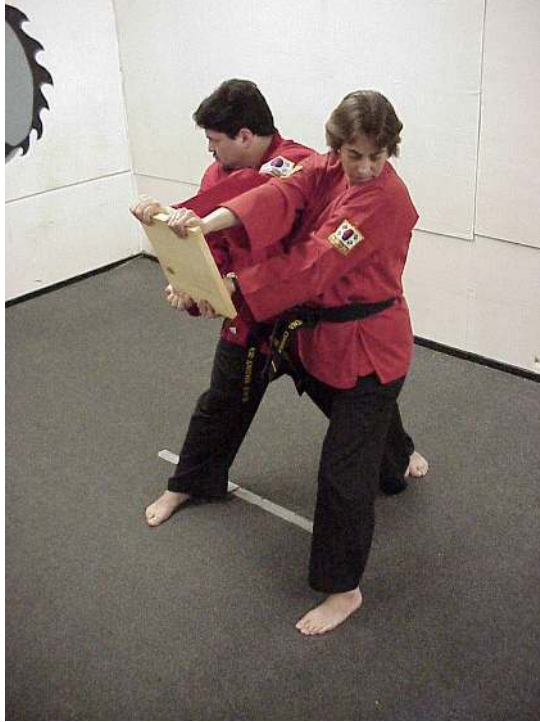


Figure 4



Figure 5

This is done to make sure that your foot does not slide across and up the board resulting in a missed break (see figure 4). A "Side Kick", on the other hand, will require that the board be held straight (refer back to figure 2). Another example is a "Back Knife Hand" where the student must make sure that the board is angled back so the wrist does not hit the board first causing a deflection of the board and a possible missed break (see figure 5). Other breaks require different angles, check with an instructor to help you with your board angles.

Grain Orientation:

As discussed earlier, the grain orientation should be with the grains convex pattern toward you. If using S3S then you only need to face the smooth side of the board toward you, the side you will break.

Visibility of Break:

During testing, Professor Rodriguez or a Black Belt Instructor will attempt to position the break so both Professor Rodriguez and the audience can see it.

At a demonstration, Professor Rodriguez or the stage Black Belt in-charge, will set up breaking so the audience can see the break.

At a tournament, it will be your responsibility to make sure that the judges can see all of your breaks (do not worry about the audience at a tournament).

One other special note about tournaments. The judges will only give you a limited amount of time to set up your breaking routine. This may be as little as 60 seconds, so be prepared. You will most likely be asked to describe the technique that you will be using. This is done for both safety and information reasons.

Board Mix-up

During tournaments your adrenaline is flowing, you may not have help from Black Dragon's Den instructors during board setup, you may not have any Black Dragon's Den students to hold boards. This is when there can be a mix-up in holding of the boards properly.

A technique that has been used successfully is to mark the boards so you can see very quickly if the boards are correct. For illustrative purposes, figure 6 shows the top markings on a multiple board break.



Figure 6

Also notice in figure 6 that lines have been drawn through all 3 boards to help make sure the boards are in the proper order and the grain is oriented properly. Also, an arrow indicates the direction to hold the boards, again to make sure that grain orientation is correct.

Summary

The Black Dragon's Den, under Professor Rodriguez, has gained a reputation as being the best in board breaking. We wish to continue this tradition with on-going training in the successful techniques used by winning members of the Black Dragon's Den, Martial Arts Academy.

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Black Dragon's Den
Breaking Techniques
Reverse Punch

Board Position:

The board should be square to the student who is going to perform the reverse punch technique. The student can stand in a number of stances to perform a reverse punch. It is recommended that beginning students utilize the traditional "Fighting Stance" (see Figure 7).



Figure 7

Notice that the board is held as level and straight as possible. This will allow you to strike the board square and in the center. Also, the board should be held so the middle of the board is right in front of the middle of your own chest. This also ensures that your strike will hit level and with the most power.

Breaking Technique:

Figure 8 below shows the proper hand and arm position just at impact.

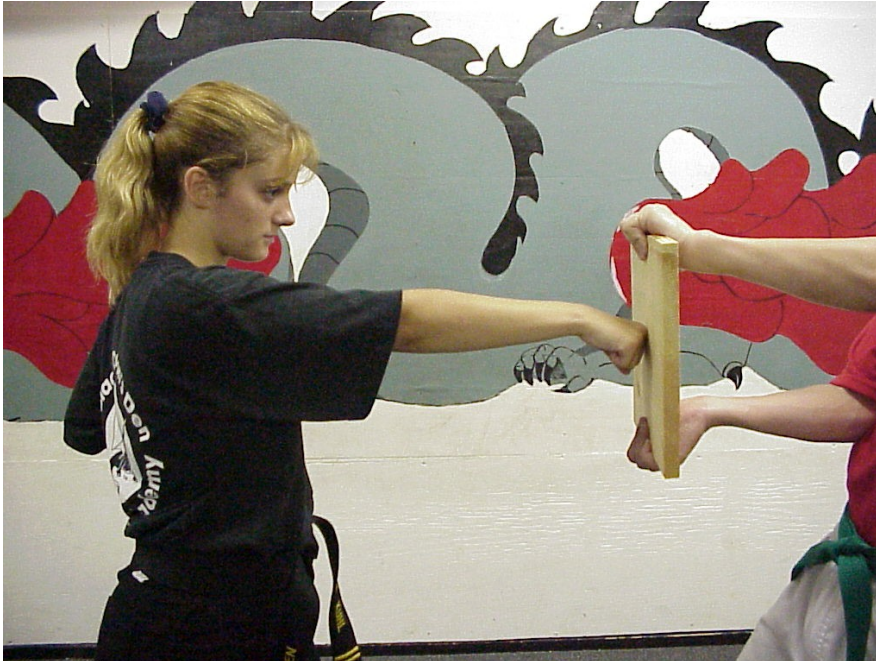


Figure 8

Can you see that the wrist is slightly turned down with the first two knuckles of the hand striking the board. As you perform the reverse punch, think of breaking a board that is 1 inch behind the actual board you are breaking. This will help to keep you from stopping at the face of the board and possibly injuring your hand.

When performing a “Reverse” punch break, strike the board with the first and middle knuckles at the same time. Figure 9 highlights the knuckles that should actually do the breaking.



Figure 9



Figure 10

BAD BREAK---BAD BREAK

Figure 10 above shows a bad setup and break. Notice that the board is tilted and the student is striking downward; a missed break.

More helpful hints:

- Clear your mind and focus just behind the board.
- Go through the board; do not stop at the board.
- Rotate your striking shoulder and hips to deliver as much power as possible.
- Yell (Kia-up), just as you strike the board to focus your energy at the moment of impact.
- Adding boards will require more holders and extreme Physical, Technical and Mental strengths.

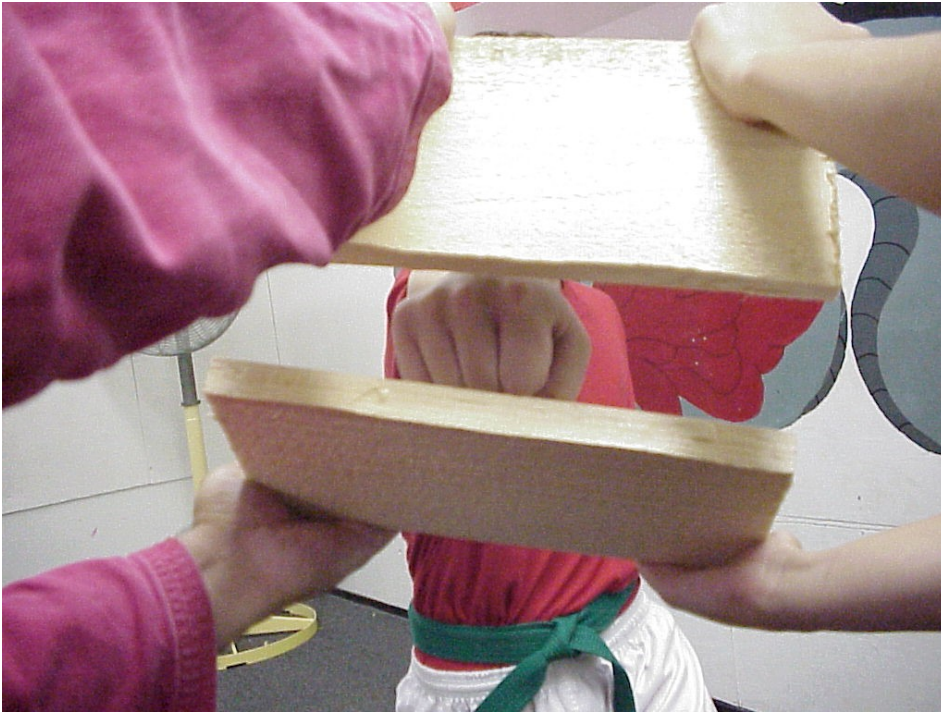


Figure 11

With good Physical strength, Technical correctness and Mental preparedness a clean strike with no injury should be possible.

Board Breaking
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Breaking Techniques
Ridge Hand

Board Position:

The board should be held square and the edge facing the student should be slightly tilted back. In Figure 12 below, the student will be breaking with the right hand. Notice that the starting position is in the traditional “Fighting Stance”.



Figure 12

Remember, starting position will change based upon the students physical capabilities (Flexibility, strength, etc) or the style the student wishes to use when breaking (Starting from Bro).

Breaking Technique:

In figure 13 you see the student has brought the right hand back getting ready to strike the board with the inside of the hand. The hand should be tight with the thumb tucked in as tight as possible.



Figure 13

Below in figure 14, the student has swung her right arm, as if doing a baseball swing, striking the board in the center with the inside of the hand.

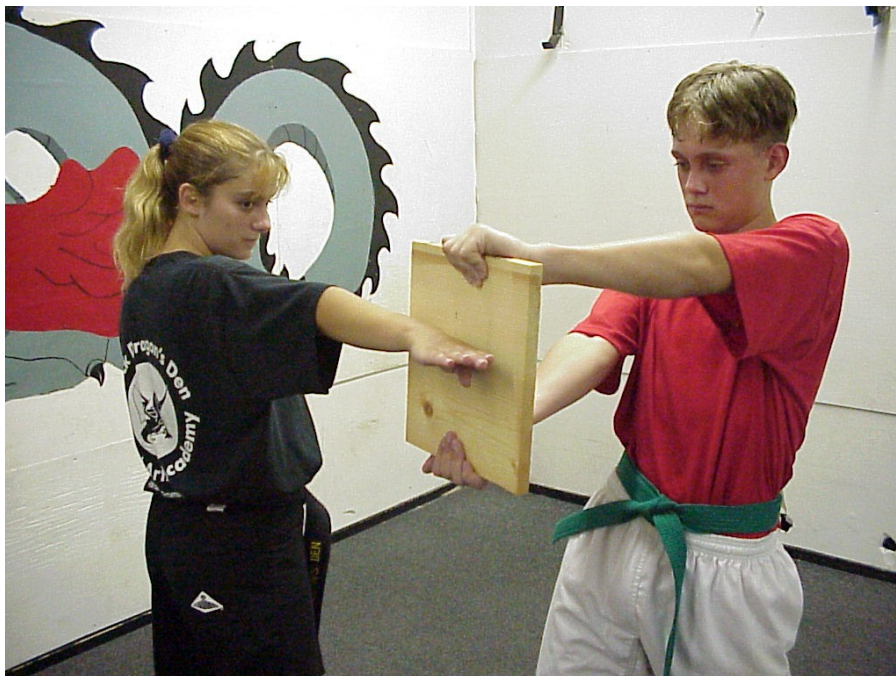


Figure 14

Notice the hand and board position in figure 15 below. The board is slightly tilted so the student does not hit the board with the wrist first and the thumb is tucked under so the muscular portion of the hand absorbs the impact.

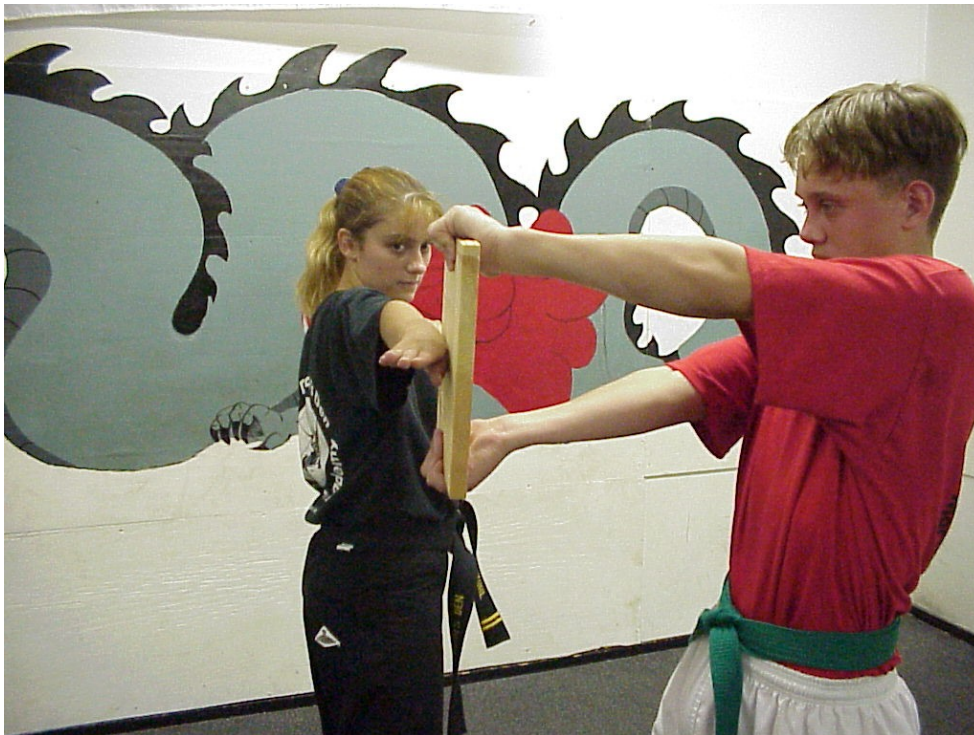


Figure 15



Figure 16

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Breaking Techniques
Hammer Fist – Using a Stand

Board Position:

The board should be placed on a stand of the correct height for the student. The stand height should allow the hand to strike the board correctly (See discussions to follow). With S3 boards (Smooth on 3 sides) then the 2 edges that are smooth should be supported by the stand with the 3rd smooth side up. If possible, orient the grain so the grain curves up or convex as you look down from the top of the board.

Breaking Technique:

The student started in the “Traditional Fighting” position. Below in figure 17 the student has started the technique by bringing the hand and arm back to start the downward swing toward the board.



Figure 17

In figure 18 the student has brought the striking hand overhead, fist tight, eyes focused on the target and is in the last stage of the break. It is a good habit to focus an inch behind or below the board. This will improve your mental view of going through the board, not stopping at the board.

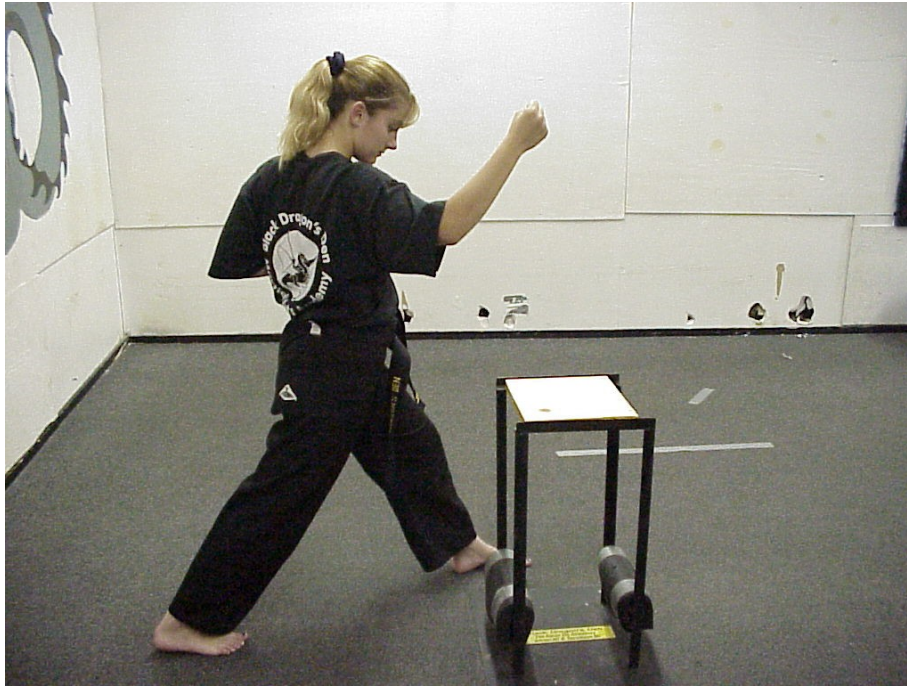


Figure 18

Below in Figure 19 the hand is making contact with the center of the board. Notice that the fist is hitting squarely on the board as the student follows through the board (not stopping at the board).



Figure 19

The portion of the hand that should hit the board is shown below (Figure 19A):



Figure 19A

Below in Figure 20 is an example of the **incorrect hand position at the time of impact**. The board is not being hit in the center, and the hand is not square with the board. This will not only result in a missed break, but could injure the student's hand.



Figure 20

Board Breaking
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Black Dragon's Den
Breaking Techniques
Palm Strike – Using a Stand

Board Position:

The board should be placed on a stand of the correct height for the student. The stand height should allow the hand to strike the board correctly (See discussions to follow). With S3 boards (Smooth on 3 sides) then the 2 edges that are smooth should be supported by the stand with the 3rd smooth side up. If possible, orient the grain so the grain curves up or convex as you look down from the top of the board.

Breaking Technique:

The student can start in the “Traditional Fighting” position. Below in Figure 21 the student has started the technique by bringing the hand and up to start the downward movement toward the board. What is important is the arm and hand position just as you strike the board. All weight should be over the board with the arm extending straight down.



Figure 21

Note in Figure 22 the part of the hand that strikes the board is the meaty part directly in-line with the wrist and arm.



Figure 22

Below in Figure 23 is the **WRONG** way to strike during a palm strike using a stand.



Figure 23

Board Breaking
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Breaking Techniques
Round House Kick

Board Position:

The board must be angled so that the ball of the foot strikes the board. The students' position prior to breaking is also very important. Below, in figure 24 thru 26, you see the correct position of the board to the ball of the foot.



Figure 24

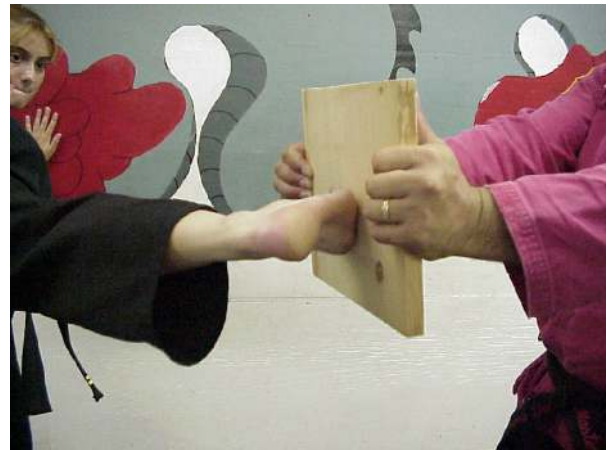


Figure 25



Figure 26

Board Technique:

Similar to a sidekick, the hip is aimed at the board with the knee also pointing at the board. Rather than pulling the knee back, chambering the knee, the lower portion of the striking leg snaps out toward the target (the face of the board) hitting with the ball of the foot. This will require that you position your body at an angle to the face of the board (depending upon your physical abilities this angle will be different for most everyone).

Figure 27 below shows the WRONG angle resulting in the student striking the board with their toes. This will really hurt!



Figure 27

About the Author:

Mr. Rick Coscarelli is a 4th Degree Master Black Belt at the Black Dragon's Den, Adrian, Michigan. He trained first in Judo while in college and it was not until 1995 that he resumed martial arts training under Professor Dennis Rodriguez.

Rick holds many titles and awards and has authored a number of martial arts articles which have been published by WorldBlackBelt.

Rick is also a Nationally Certified Instructor in Tai Chi, Chi Gong.