

Grappling Strategy for Korean Stylists

“The first rule of fighting on the ground: don’t fight on the ground.”

Disclaimer:

Following is a brief summary of strategies and approaches that I have found in my experience to be effective in grappling situations. This is not a comprehensive guide to ground fighting, nor is it intended as an explanation of any specific grappling techniques. As always, make safety your first priority when engaging in any martial art activities; this means, practicing only under the tutelage of an experienced and knowledgeable instructor.

Introduction:

Since its introduction to the West at the turn of the 20th Century, Judo and Jujitsu have become two of the most popular and widely practiced martial arts in both North and South America. The introduction of Judo as an Olympic sport in 1964 helped to catch the attention of martial artists throughout the world, giving the “soft” arts a firm position in the martial community. Much of the jujitsu’s popularity can be attributed to the Gracie family’s Brazilian Jujitsu (often shortened to BJJ), and in particular Royce Gracie’s famous victory in the first Ultimate Fighting Championship. This being the case, it is quite pertinent for practitioners of other martial systems to become familiar with the grappling arts. However, many martial artists (especially in styles that are exclusively striking-oriented or “hard”) fail to acknowledge the validity of effective submission of an opponent by means of throws, chokes, and joint locks. I will avoid addressing this philosophy in depth here; suffice to say that an open minded martial artist will ultimately acquire a broader and

more effective toolkit of defensive tactics and techniques.

Approaches to Grappling:

Over the past several years, I have had the opportunity on multiple occasions to train with practitioners of various “soft” arts such as judo and jujitsu. While I do not train formally in either of these styles, I am an avid grappler and I often incorporate submission grappling into my training sessions as an effective form of physical conditioning. Additionally, I find that both my students and fellow *jae jah* (martial arts practitioner) are able to draw a better understanding of the locks and pins from the Kuk Sool repertoire by utilizing them in unfamiliar or uncomfortable positions.

As an example: The various forms of Kuk Sool and Hapkido begin teaching defensive methods for dealing with wrist and clothing grabs very early in the curriculum (typically white or yellow belt, 9th or 8th *kyu*). Initially, these techniques are learned from a standing position with the training partners facing each other straight on. Many higher level students who can competently and effectively execute these techniques from this position find themselves unable to do so from a position on the ground, such as the [closed guard position](#). Incorporating these maneuvers while grappling on the ground helps to find “holes” in the approach and execution of any given technique. Even more importantly, it effectively prepares students to defend themselves should a real confrontation end up going to the ground.

What follows are strategies that I have found to be essential to effective grappling, regardless of the style, garb (gi or no gi), or position.

1. Relax.

While there are as many ideas about jujitsu as there are schools, one aspect that is nearly universal is the idea that relaxation (both physical and mental) is paramount. Just as in Kuk Sool students are taught to keep the body supple and loose, flexibility is essential to effective grappling. Unnecessary muscular contraction can cause early exhaustion and can also limit the range of effective motion. Conversely, muscular relaxation allows for a full range of motion and an overall fluidity of movement, requiring less energy and delaying fatigue.

It is equally important to maintain a state of mental relaxation. A mind which is predisposed with executing a single technique will likely miss opportunities that arise for other techniques. Various traditions incorporate different approaches to the relaxation of the mind, the most well-known of which is perhaps the Japanese concept of *mushin* (literally, “no mind”), in which there exists no conscious thought to interrupt the natural flow of unconscious action. Essentially, if a relaxed body allows fluidity of motion, a relaxed mind allows fluidity of thought.

Although it is far too complex to discuss in detail here, it should be noted that the most effective method for maintaining relaxation is the control and regulation of one’s breathing.

2. Leverage triumphs over strength.

One core objective present in nearly all grappling arts is developing the ability to

defend against opponents who are much larger and stronger than yourself. This is generally achieved through the use of angles of positioning, specifically how those angles pertain to the ability to use leverage rather than strength to achieve an advantageous position.

Mechanical leverage is a naturally occurring phenomenon, and as such can be measured and calculated using mathematical equations. While the actual physics of leverage can become complex, the principle is simple: generate the maximum amount of force output with the smallest amount of force input. In martial arts, the greater the mechanical advantage you can create against your opponent, the less force you will need to input to generate the desired effect. Mechanical advantage is achieved through proper body and limb positioning as well as the angle in which the force is being applied. To understand this concept, imagine the difficulty of pulling a nail from a board using only your fingers. Incorporating a hammer as a lever will generate a mechanical advantage, making the task exponentially easier.

The specifics of leverage vary widely from technique to technique and from one type of opponent to another. A proper understanding of leverage can only be gained through diligent and patient practice.

3. Defend before you attack.

To quote one of my previous instructors: “The most perfectly executed arm-bar is useless if you get knocked out in the process.”

Although sport-oriented grappling emphasizes aggressive strategies through such practices as awarding points for

executing a successful sweep or achieving a dominant position, the premise of “real-world” grappling is still based in self-defense. One of the founding fathers of Brazilian jujitsu, Helio Gracie, put forth a clear doctrine prioritizing defensive tactics. The mark of an accomplished grappler is the ability to maintain composure and defend against serious attack in an unfavorable situation. Aggressively seeking submissions will have negative mental and physical effects and creates potential opportunities for your opponent to improve their position or to achieve a submission. A far more effective strategy is to simply defend until your opponent makes a mistake or fatigues; once an opponent is mentally and physically exhausted, the likelihood of achieving a successful submission increases dramatically. Even in the case of competitive sport, the results are often in favor of the one who exhausts the least rather than the one who attacks the most.

4. Be like the frog.

For this section, I refer to an episode of Nickelodeon’s 90’s cartoon, *Hey Arnold*. In the course of teaching Arnold martial arts to defend himself against muggers (Season 1, Episode 9a: “Mugged”), Arnold’s Grandma advises him: “Be like the frog in the pond. He does not seek the fly; the fly comes to him.” While there is a plethora of martial philosophy in this statement (some of which is addressed in the episode from which the quote comes), here I will use it as a means of addressing physical strategy.

A frog that leaps from lily pad to lily pad will starve. The flies will see his movements and hear his splashing about; alerted to the danger, the flies will avoid the frog easily. A frog that waits quietly

and patiently, however, will eventually see a fly land, unsuspectingly, within his reach.

In grappling, this can be restated this way: one who over-actively seeks submissions reveals their intentions in their movements, allowing the opponent to more easily evade attacks. One who waits patiently for a submission opportunity to arise, however, will eventually see an opening appear before them.

A friend and fellow training partner of mine had a reputation for submissions that seemingly came from nowhere. His opponents would find themselves defeated at the most unexpected time and from unexpected angles. When I queried as to how he had acquired this ability, he stated simply: “Take the submission that is available to you, leave the one that isn’t.” Since that time I have utilized this strategy with a good deal of success. In most cases of defeat, I find that my opponent did less work in acquiring the submission than I did in creating the opportunity. As with the doctrine of defense over offense, it is generally the more patient grappler, the one who waits for the fly, who will achieve victory.

Conclusion:

The growing popularity of grappling arts cannot be denied. Along with Karate and Aikido, Judo and Jujitsu are among the most popular and widely practiced martial arts in the world. For martial artists in other styles, the grappling arts can take on a variety of useful applications. Grappling is an excellent method of physical conditioning and self-defense; it can also be used to supplement the skill sets of traditional styles as well as contemporary combat sports. An understanding of the basic premise and application of grappling can add a degree of depth to the training

and practice of any style, and in particular those styles which primarily emphasize striking and “hard” techniques. There is no doubt that Judo and Jujitsu (both of which have their roots in ancient styles) will continue to flourish, and it is the obligation of any true martial artist to seek an ever-expanding understanding of these styles, both from a theoretical and practical standpoint.

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