

# Women Gaining Strength in Capoeira

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Contra Costa Times

Posted: 04/15/2010 01:00:00 AM PDT

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ITS UNUSUAL movement — part dance and theater, part martial arts display — first attracted Oakland's Mary Schindler to the Afro-Brazilian art form capoeira.

She wanted to learn how to dance and came across a poster advertising capoeira instruction. Curious, she checked out a class and was hooked. Twelve years later — with a one-year residence in Brazil learning the art — Schindler credits capoeira for her community of friends.

"I love the movement, I love the music and it's kind of a vehicle for self-growth," she says.

Capoeira requires practitioners to kick high, squat low and bend and stretch in ways that test the bones and muscles. In live capoeira performances, participants form a circle. Each will have the opportunity to spar, sing and play Brazilian music. As the music starts, two dancers spar in the middle of the ring. The dancers rotate inside the circle, each kicking and swinging in a slow-motion but forceful practice reminiscent of a dominance fight between male lions or bucks. Many sparring partners train together for years.

The music and songs that accompany capoeira are intense and set the tone of the performance. It includes stringed and percussive instruments, Brazilian songs such as traditional ladainhas, or litanies, and songs that tell stories about legendary capoeira practitioners.

Schindler says that doing the capoeira moves, without injuring a capoeira mate, is difficult and requires training.

"It's a really rich martial art," she says. "I've always found out that what goes on in my personal life comes out when I am sparring, like anger, sadness or frustration. Times that I've felt angry, I've been more combative. If I feel happy I am more playful. The expression on your face can telegraph what you're intentions are. And the person that you're playing with can tell by what your expressions are."

According to several sources, capoeira — which likely came from words used to describe chicken sparring — began in 19th century Brazil as a way for African slaves to express themselves through dance and covertly practice martial arts. Its fighting nature made it illegal to

practice capoeira there until the 1930s. Schindler says women were not only excluded after it became legal because of the masculine nature of the society, but were discouraged from participating, even physically beaten if they tried. Certainly, Schindler says, when the few Brazilian practitioners came to teach capoeira to Americans, they were all male.

When Schindler started practicing capoeira, her classes had plenty of women in them, but there were few female instructors. Today, there are four female capoeira masters, or "mestras," in the Bay Area and a growing number of female professionals across the country. A "mestra" has practiced capoeira for more than 20 years and often teaches.

The practice of capoeira is not only learning moves but it is also a discipline where learners look up to their instructors as mentors.

"I know women who do capoeira are really serious about it, and they look to those high-level women as role models not just for recreation, but as life role models too," says Schindler, an instructor but not yet a "mestra." "Having strong leaders is really important and having female representation in the top of capoeira is important, like having women in top positions in business is important."

At Capoeira Mandinga Academy in North Oakland, everybody wears white with colored cords indicating their mastery in the practice, much like the belt system in karate. Although the colors are not standardized, the cords can mean the person is a new student to the art or a master. They can represent the colors of the Brazilian flag or they can be a sign of the student's "awakening" and movement through different levels of learning.

And during class and performances, everyone has a chance to sweat it out executing kicks, arm sweeps and acrobatic moves. Capoeira, some say, was the precursor to break dancing.

Marin County's Karlon Kepcke's introduction to capoeira was more than 25 years ago. She saw an ad for the art in Oakland's Laney College newspaper and went to a class. She says she was never a dancer, but she's always been athletic.

Capoeira hadn't been "out of Brazil" very long, she says, when she took her first class at the college.

"All these men were desperate for students because nobody had ever heard of it at the time," she says. There were women in her first classes, but there were no female teachers.

In the more than two decades she has been practicing the art, Kepcke has become one of the four highest-level "mestras" in the Bay Area who teach classes to new and returning students.

Because capoeira is not an easily compartmentalized discipline — it's not just dance, theater, song or martial arts — it can help a student learn all four ways of communicating.

"It enhances confidence," Kepcke says, "and you know yourself better through doing something like this."

In other words, you can't just fake your way through, say, standing on your head and performing kicks or executing a cartwheel-like move.

At the start of a class at Capoeira Mandinga, Schindler gets a kiss on the cheek from another student as she walks in the door. The mood is friendly and energetic as the dancers take off their shoes to start a session on the wooden floor of the studio.

Schindler is so passionate about bringing more women into the master level of the art that she organized an event last month centered on women in capoeira. More than 150 people showed up for the live festival exhibition and all classes offered throughout the weekend were full.

"For women, it's a really empowering experience," Schindler says. At-risk girls, she says, may be able to learn the joy and strength of capoeira, a strength that has kept Schindler and other female practitioners fit and healthy. "It's also a way to bring joy, self-expression and happiness to people's lives."

For Schindler, capoeira is also a place for women to display their strengths in a discipline not always open to women.

"Women have a lot of opportunity to demonstrate their abilities even with men who are much bigger and much stronger," she says. "It's a physical confrontation but it's always very playful and artistic."

### Learn Capoeira

- Capoeira Mandinga, 4137 Piedmont Ave., Oakland. \$16 per class with discounts for multiple classes. 510-655-8207. [www.mandinga.org](http://www.mandinga.org).
- Omulu Capoeira Group Hayward, Bally's Total Fitness (you do not have to be a member of Bally's to take capoeira classes), 771 Jackson St., Hayward. \$8 to \$10 per class with discounts for multiple classes. 510-921-2532, [www.haywardcapoeira.com](http://www.haywardcapoeira.com).
- United Capoeira Association, 1901 San Pablo Ave., Berkeley. Call for class rates. 510-666-1255, [www.capoeira.bz](http://www.capoeira.bz).