

~ REAL WORKOUT ~

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Dance Along the Edge

It starts with a handshake and mirroring cartwheels, this centuries-old sport that's increasingly compelling to fitness enthusiasts. Brazilian-born Capoeira, with its relatively non-contact swirl of kicks and anticipated lunges, is now taught in gyms and studios across Southern California – a far cry from its roots as a battle tactic invented by Angolan slaves.

Described as a dance-like fight or a fight-like dance, Capoeira “works out every part of you,” according to the young Master Gui, who teaches classes in Long Beach and Orange County. Outside the Beach Games in Huntington Beach last weekend, two dozen of his students took part in a roda – or wheel, strictly translated – that drew five times as many curious onlookers as participants. Gui's students formed a circle and provided a kind of musical accompaniment when not actively sparring. In some ways these spectator-practitioners guide the action. “Capoeira is the most complete form of fitness,” says the Amazon-trained Gui, who holds classes on Tuesdays, Thursdays, and Saturdays at CSU Long Beach (Room 107, Physical Education Building, Long Beach, 949-521-2402).

According to Brazilian lore, the Angolans would work on their fighting technique in such a way that, if discovered by their masters, it could be explained away as dance. In its contemporary form, Capoeira appears as a rhythmic flurry of roundhouse and windmill kicks and evasions. While the participants go at it, those waiting their turn play a berimbau – a single-stringed bow with a gourd attached – or percussion and chant songs in Portuguese.

Although eluding contact is the basis of this martial art, a foot to the face or an unplanned fall to the ground is inevitable. Players are taught to smile and carry on in good spirits regardless. “What happens in the ring repeats itself in life,” says Gui. (Donnell Alexander)

Butts on the Brink

Tired of dodging the hundreds of concrete blondes at Fourth Street and Adelaide Drive plodding the twin cement and wooden staircases in Santa Monica? Not to worry. Across Santa Monica Canyon lies a shady incline, literally 12 steps higher than the 189 stairs favored by Westside muscle-butts. Under the shade of redwoods, wisteria, and live oak, this public gym ascends from the 400 block of North Mesa Road to Amalfi Drive. Muscle-butts create a circuit by turning right at Amalfi, descending another 125-step staircase to Sumac Lane, jogging 200 yards to another 83-step decline to North Mesa Road. Two hundred fifty yards to the right brings endorphin addicts back to the circuit start. Plenty of free parking along West Channel Road and Amalfi Drive. (Michael Collins)

Karate Kicks

Got an urge to follow through on your deep-seated crouching-tiger, hidden-dragon urges? Universal Core Karate Academy (1761 Hillhurst Ave., Los Feliz, 323-953-8131) is a great place to start. Tim Santos, the school founder and sensei, is a fifth-degree black belt with two decades of martial-arts experience. He teaches a form of karate called kenpo-jitsu ryu, which incorporates the circular motions of kung fu along with the power punches of shotokan and the paralyzing grips and limb-locks of jujitsu. It's a modern style, steeped in tradition.

Classes begin with a warm-up not for the faint of heart – cardio, strength-building, and flexibility training, plus a sometimes astonishing amount of abdominal work. Then comes the kenpo-jitsu instruction, a strenuous yet mesmerizing process of learning, say, the Shaolin physics involved in placing your thumb exactly right to get the precise amount of leverage so you can throw a guy twice your size across the mat.

Sensei Tim exudes the low-key vibe of a guy whose mastery of martial arts means he doesn't have to act like a badass. It sets the tone for an atmosphere blessedly free of the macho-dog posturing afflicting some karate scenes. The facility itself is orderly, but sufficiently unkempt to evoke a sweaty boxing-gym cred, and features weight machines, a treadmill, and hanging bags. Universal Core also offers classes in kickboxing, yoga, and chi gong – that's a kind of slo-mo kung-fu-based martial art – along with kendo, or Japanese fencing. Day and evening kenpo-jitsu classes are available for adults, and Sensei Tim seems to have a special knack for teaching kids, with a good-humored discipline that keeps them enthused and focused. Uckadojo.com. (Bobbi Murray)

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