

Leg locks in the real world - are they a practical self-defence strategy?

Leg and ankle locks

Leg and ankle locks are the latest 'trend' in martial arts. The phenomenon has been inspired by the successful use of submissions in no-holds-barred tournaments in Europe, Japan and the USA. These techniques are now gaining popularity among strike-based martial artists whose style does not teach these fascinating techniques.

But not all strike-based martial artists have been keen to embrace the practice of leg and ankle locks. Many practitioners of Tae Kwon Do, Karate and Muay Thai see these techniques as falling within the 'exclusive' domain of the grapple-based martial arts such as Hapkido and Ju Jitsu. More importantly, many of these practitioners dismiss leg and ankle locks as being impractical fighting skills that are ineffective outside of a one-to-one contest in a tournament where rules reward the use of 'submission' techniques.

After 48 years in the martial arts, Grandmaster Terence Walsh, a 7th Dan Black Belt in Tae Kwon Do and Hapkido, believes that this thinking is wrong and out of date. He says that leg and ankle locks are one of the best methods of controlling an irate attacker and should properly fall within the training curriculum of every traditional strike-based martial art, including his own speciality – Tae Kwon Do.

"In self-defence, a trained martial artist must be able to subdue a crazed attacker. But, at the same time, we have a responsibility as trained martial artists to resolve conflict with a minimal use of force. The big problem with using striking techniques in self-defence is that it can be hard to control the level of damage inflicted on an opponent. This presents legal issues for many defenders", says Grandmaster Walsh.

"Submission techniques, especially leg and ankle lock techniques, are one of the best means of controlling an attacker because they inflict a tremendous amount of pain instantly but not permanently and without 'visible' damage. Also, unlike striking techniques, the level of harm inflicted on an attacker can be more easily regulated in the heat of conflict."

As a result, the Grandmaster believes that submission techniques, including leg and ankle locks, are not only highly effective in self-defence, but also embrace the humanitarian aspect of the practise of martial arts. It is a novel way of looking at leg and ankle locks, especially considering that submission holds have gained their popularity from their use on the bloody mat of no-holds-barred, full contact martial arts tournaments.

Learning leg and ankle locks

Leg and ankle locks can be made a part of any martial artist's self-defence arsenal. But, new-comers to the art of joint-locking should be disciplined in their approach and would be well-advised to learn one or two core techniques only.

"Gaining proficiency in one or two joint-locks is more important than having a vague idea of the whole range of techniques available. Even then, it takes much time and practice to develop the skills necessary to control a strong, uncompliant attacker," says Grandmaster Walsh.

"Unless you are willing to devote the necessary time and effort towards learning an Art that teaches leg and ankle locking properly, stick to your core skills in a self-defence situation and apply joint-locks only if the opportunity plainly presents itself," says Grandmaster Walsh.

The Grandmaster also notes that many people misunderstand the real purpose of leg and ankle locks. He says that the aim of a leg or ankle lock is to inflict temporary pain on an attacker by executing the technique at or near the 'breaking point' of the joint, bone, tendon or ligament.

"In that way, you achieve the aim of controlling the attacker's movements. If the opponent does not comply, they will actually dislocate their own joints or break their own bones under the force of their own struggle. My experience over the past 50 years has been that the stronger the opponent, the greater the tendency for them to self-inflict an injury through uncontrolled struggle," says Grandmaster Walsh.

Dangers of leg and ankle locks

Executing leg and ankle locks can be a risky business, even for the experienced practitioner. Like many martial arts techniques, they are not fool-proof and suffer from a number of inherent frailties. In particular, they involve a far more complicated set of skills than do ordinary striking techniques making mistakes during execution all the more costly.

"The biggest problem with executing a submission technique is that it often leaves you exposed to an attack from your opponent's friends and other 'good Samaritans' who might mistake you as the wrong-doer. Also, to execute most submissions effectively, you have to totally focus your energy and concentration on one opponent only – at least for a brief period of time," says the Grandmaster.

"The other danger is that many submissions involve you taking the opponent to the ground, rendering you far less able to defend against attack from a person who is standing on his feet," he warns.

But, the biggest problem with executing leg or ankle lock techniques comes *after* the technique has been successfully executed. Unlike a choke or strangulation, the opponent is never rendered unconscious, unless you apply the technique at its breaking point and the person passes out of their own volition. So, at the end of the day, a martial artist must be prepared to let a conscious (and very agitated) opponent go free.

"I find it interesting that grappling articles never deal with the eventuality of letting an opponent go. Obviously, you can choose to follow through with the joint lock and break the attacker's leg or ankle with the hold, but that is not likely to be considered 'reasonable force' in a court of law," says Grandmaster Walsh.

"Every martial artist has a responsibility before the law and to the moral teachings of the martial arts. Once the threat of an imminent attack is gone – that is, after you have the attacker under your control – it is not always reasonable to break the attacker's leg when there is no longer an imminent threat of harm."

Grandmaster Walsh recommends executing a leg or ankle lock sharply at the beginning of the action, inflicting as much pain as possible without actually breaking the leg or ankle. From this position, the pressure of the technique can be slowly released over time. He also recommends talking to the opponent calmly during the hold to ease the attacker's level of hostility. The use of simple but direct terms is recommended – telling the opponent what will happen to their joint if they keep struggling often does the trick.

"If the person is clearly berserk and not responding to your reasonable demands, you are still in a position to take more extreme measures," says the veteran master.

"Breaking the joint or tearing the ligament should always be the last resort."

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About the author: Andrew Walsh is a 4th Dan Black Belt in Tae Kwon Do and Hapkido. He began his martial arts training at the age of five under the instruction of his father, Australian Tae Kwon Do pioneer, Grandmaster Terence Walsh. Currently, Mr Walsh is the Head Instructor of Sydney for Walsh Tae Kwon Do Australia.