

Capoeira proves martial arts not just for men

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CDO Seoul capoeiristas play at the Seoul gym in Jongno-gu. (Munair Simpson)

Watching the capoeiristas of Cordao de Ouro Seoul move together can be a mesmerizing sight.

Watching the group sway in the “ginga” movement in time with each other can sometimes make it seem like it is not a martial art at all.

But CDO’s capoeira — an unusual martial art in Korea — is unusual in its emphasis on music and nonviolence, while its relative novelty attracts a diverse range of people.

“It’s a very collaborative atmosphere and people like the diversity of the group and the cosmopolitan nature of the class,” said Munair Simpson, who runs the CDO school in Seoul.

But another thing that sets it apart is the rate of female participation. Simpson said that 70 percent of his students were women.

“The girls in my class are quite different from most of the girls in Korea because they have a mindset of, ‘Oh capoeira, I have never heard of that. Let me try it!’

“So, one of the hallmarks of our women is that they are more adventurous, they are more open-minded and I think they are intellectually curious people.”

But he added that he thought that one reason he had so many female students was the noncombative nature of the class.

“I think the girls in particular appreciate the noncontact side of the martial art. Also I really think they appreciate the fact that we emphasize nonviolence,” he said.

For Anastasia Yarygina that is definitely one reason.

“I don’t like aggressiveness. I am afraid of aggressive people and I avoid them,” she said. “And Capoeira is so friendly.”

Yarygina said she was always interested in learning capoeira but never found the time at home in Moscow. But aware that she would need something to do and a sense of community when she came to Korea, she sought out CDO online before coming.

After signing up, she became hooked.

She said she found it good for her mood and confidence, but it also helped her mind stay sharp.

“For me, it is very important to stay out of your comfort zone, because once you are in the box you can’t be creative and it is difficult to be open-minded,” she said.

Other students said they joined because it looked like an interesting way to get and stay fit. But the nonviolent philosophy was also a plus.

“Even though it’s not what enticed me to come, that’s what’s kept me here,” said Deon Finlay. “My friend wanted to be more aggressive, but I liked this. ... It’s all about making it look pretty and escaping and things like that.”

The mental challenge was another attractive aspect.

“You have to think in your mind, ‘What did I learn and how can I apply it?’ You want to try something new every time. It can be challenging.”

Other students, such as Kim Min-ji, had more philosophical reasons for joining.

“These days everyone is so stressed out and anxious about all their requirements,” she said. “And when you get caught up with that it becomes ... difficult to feel you have a place in the world and so it is more difficult to take time for self-appreciation and self-love.

“There is pressure to be good but there is no pressure to be perfect. And then everyone around you becomes a colleague.”

She said that she had struggled with some aspects because of a lack of muscle strength, but soon developed enough to do the moves. She said that one positive aspect of the martial art was its openness to different body types.

“It doesn’t matter what kind of body type you have, you just make the most of it,” said Kim.

“And you can just craft the movement into your type.”

Tania Campbell was not especially interested in capoeira before she started, signing up because the schedule suited her and she wanted to do something active, but the combination of Brazilian culture and music and the philosophy has seen her continue it after coming to Korea.

Her commitment took her to Brazil for a month in January.

“It was awesome. I got to experience it in its natural habitat,” she said.

“Salvador was where a lot of the slaves were originally taken to,” she explained. “There is a really rich tradition of capoeira there.”

Simpson has organized a weekend event in May to support his female students.

The event is being led by Mestre Urubu and Contra Mestre Versatil, who have joined CDO Seoul events before, but this time three female teachers will join them.

Simpson is also expecting capoeiristas to visit from Japan, the U.S., Singapore and Malaysia.

Simpson said that previous events had only had one female teacher, so this one would try to remedy that. Simpson said that the example of female experts would help inspire his students.

“We’ve been doing this for about five years now, so really this year it’s geared up toward women because we have so many women in our group,” he said.

“For the women in Seoul to be inspired by that level of training, that level of professionalism, that level of understanding of capoeira, it’s really important for the girls to spend as much time as possible with those female teachers,” he said.

The event will run from May 16-18 in Seoul, with classes in three different levels, as well as mixed-level and social activities.

To find out more information about the group or the Desafio dos Mandingueiros 2014 visit www.cdoseoul.com.

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