Secrets of Staff Fighting

Part 1: Double Striking

by Joe Varady

Introduction

The staff has been a common weapon among the many cultures of Earth since ancient times. Over the ages, humans have used this basic weapon for self-defense and for contest. Fighting with the quarterstaff was once so popular that it was included in the Boy Scout Handbook, but it has since fallen out of fashion among combat martial arts. While the eskrimadors of the Philippines have done much in the last several decades to promote combat arts with the short stick world wide, little has been done to preserve and progress the art of fighting with the long stick, or staff. This change of fashion may be due in large part to modernization and our shift from a mainly agricultural society to an increasingly more prevalent urban environment.
Today, “top practitioners” of the staff are often veterans of the karate tournament circuit, performing incredible twirls with foil covered balsa wood staves, throwing in flips and full splits for dramatic effect. While I appreciate these practitioners for their tremendous physical prowess and dazzling artistry, these performances are more art than martial.

Tracing these contemporary staff forms back in time, we find their roots in much less extravagant, more traditional Asian staff forms. In fact, solo staff forms evolved originally from prearranged drills undoubtedly performed with a partner. When no partner was available, it was beneficial to practice the moves alone. Eventually, various combinations of techniques were linked together, creating longer forms, or kata. Somewhere along the line (in Asia, at least), the partner work seems to have become lost in favor of the solo performance, the vestiges being practiced as secondary “bunkai” or applications. These were eventually stylized into prearranged practice sets that usually lack the realism of actual combat.

The western martial arts, however, never developed long solo forms, concentrating instead on combat drills and free fighting. This is not to say that Eastern forms are without merit. Quite the contrary, I have found that, like the yin and yang, training in one compliments training in the other.

In my book, The Art and Science of Staff Fighting, I present the best of Eastern and Western traditions (along with a few in between), unified seamlessly to create a modern, logical, progressive, compact, and culturally diverse system of staff fighting that is easy to learn and applicable to any practitioner from any style.

If we want to learn how to actually fight with the staff, we would do well to spend our time studying the roots of the tree rather than smelling its flowers.

**Double Striking**

While most staff instruction stops at learning a set of basic strikes, few styles include more sophisticated combat applications such as double striking. The concept of double striking allows you to hit the opponent twice with only one swing of your staff.
To double strike, you will hold the staff in a common middle grip. Use a full chambering motion and strike with the load-up end of the weapon first, followed by a full strike with the opposite end of the staff. Keep in mind that these are not two separate moves, but rather two moves executed as part of a single swing. Your first strike can also be used to hook one end of your opponent’s weapon, pulling it out of the way to clear a path for the second part of the strike. Don’t overly commit to your first attack as it may have a tendency to get caught up. You must be ready to switch techniques immediately if your first strike gets stuck, allowing you to flow smoothly into the next best available strike.

**The Basic Double Strike:** Shuffle forward, right foot followed closely by the left, as you swing the heel of the staff low across the centerline (1). Once across, hook back, striking with the heel of the staff across the face (2). Complete the swing with a right to left downward diagonal strike to the pocket of the neck (3).

**Training Equipment: Target Sticks**

Target sticks are important training tools for developing accurate strikes in much the same way that strikers use focus mitts to practice punching or kicking. However, when working with weapons, a hand-held pad can be too dangerous for the holder due to their close proximity to the weapon. For safety’s sake, target sticks extend the holder’s reach. While not intended for developing hard strikes, target sticks can provide easily movable targets that will help you develop accurate distancing and precise aim.
To make a target stick, start with a handle (a good use for a broken or old, beat-up staff). Long sticks are better, at least 2 feet, as you want to keep your hands well out of range of your partner’s strikes, especially early on in their training. Wrap the top half of the stick with some sort of padding. An old piece of carpet will work, but tends to be heavy. Foam rubber, especially in the form of foam pipe insulation, is a light, convenient, and durable material to use. Whatever padding you use, make the end relatively thick so it will not be too hard to hit. Wrap it in several layers of duct or athletic tape for durability and you are ready to practice.

Target sticks are training tools for developing accurate strikes. They are also important tools for developing your double striking skills. How many times can you hit with a single strike? The obvious answer is one swing, one hit. Then we learned double striking, bringing the answer up to two hits per swing. However, we can do even better. You are about to learn how to hit four times (or more) to multiple targets in less than one second with just one swing of the staff...introducing “Machine Gun Striking!”

**Machine Gun Striking:** Have a partner hold the target sticks at about the distance her hands would be on a staff. Start with the sticks on a vertical line, one above the other (as shown in the picture above). Begin by striking downward, hitting the top target with the heel of your staff (1). Continue through, striking the bottom target (2). Continuing your swing, strike the top target with the tip of your staff (3) before following-through and hitting the bottom target an instant later (4).

Think “heel, heel, tip, tip.”
There is an adage that says, “Know one thing, know a thousand things.” Once you know how to strike two targets at once, what could those targets be? Your opponent needs two hands to use his staff, so if he or she were to square up on you, you could immediately target both hands, striking each one twice in less than a second, increasing your odds of landing a solid blow. Or perhaps, the targets that present themselves are the head and the lead hand. Or maybe a hand and an over extended lead leg. It is up to you to learn how to recognize the possibilities, first in static, controlled practice with a partner before incrementally advancing to dynamic freestyle drills using padded staves and proper protective gear.

Once you master Machine Gun Striking, you can use the quick barrage of strikes to quickly overcome an opponent.

**Hooking Disarms**

Hooking disarms are double strikes that focus on the hands. Hooking disarms consist of striking one of the opponent’s hands with one end of your staff as you follow through and strike their body with the other end. Because it is not an obvious attack, the first move is often not perceived as a serious threat by your opponent until it is too late. When you hook the opponent’s hand, you should think of striking it, otherwise, it may not be immediately stripped from the weapon. However, if you keep up a steady pressure, potential energy will build in your strike, which can be released into the target when their hand finally slips off. For this reason, be careful when practicing with your partner! Partners should hold firmly, but with the knowledge that the harder they hold on, the harder the counterstrike may be. In addition, a full speed/full power hooking disarm would likely strike the opponent’s hand with a degree of force not safely replicated in controlled practice.
Hooking Disarm #1: Shuffle forward and slip the heel of the staff around the opponent's weapon, hooking inside the lead hand (1). Strip the hand and continue through with the motion, as you deliver a right to left downward diagonal strike to the pocket of the neck (2).

Hooking Disarm #2: Shuffle forward and drop the tip of your staff, slipping the tip between the opponent's rear hand and his weapon (1). Strip his hand with a strong, sharp motion (2). Follow through with a left to right downward diagonal strike to the pocket of the neck with the heel of your staff (3).

This same type of maneuver can be applied to most basic strikes. There are several ways to hook an opponent's hands. You can hook the lead hand or the rear hand, the top of the hand (thumb side) or the bottom, over the top of the staff or under it, and with the tip or heel of your staff. That is a lot of variables, so instead of learning every combination as a separate technique, approach the matter by learning the principles of the hooking disarm and how to apply them in a variety of situations. Perform the hooking disarm drill stationary at first, then advancing, retreating, and finally, freestyle.
Although a single successful hook can be all you need to render the opponent’s weapon useless (by removing one hand from the weapon), two successive hooks will often result in a complete disarming of the opponent.

**The Full Disarm:** By combining the previous two hooking disarms into a single series, you can completely disarm an opponent. Shuffle forward to close the gap and slip the heel of your staff around the opponent’s weapon, hooking inside the lead hand (1). Strip the hand and continue through with the motion, delivering a right to left downward diagonal strike to the pocket of the neck (2). Drop the tip of your staff, slipping the tip between the opponent’s rear hand and his weapon (3). Strip his remaining hand with a strong strike (4). Follow through with a left to right downward diagonal strike to the pocket of the neck (5).

**The Push-Pull Energy Drill**

This is an exercise for developing strong double strikes and understanding how to effectively apply hooking disarms. Begin by hooking your partner’s staff with one end of yours. Press
perpendicularly into the center section of your partner’s weapon as he provides you with resistance. Keep your elbows down and push and pull hard, but be careful, because the potential energy that builds up between your staves can be dangerous to your partner should they slip. Next, slowly make a minor change of angle with your staff, feeling how your staff wants to slide into your partner’s hand. Repeat the drill using several different ways of hooking to develop a tacit understanding of the technique.

If you feel checked, like your opponent is just too strong to overcome in a one direction, then switch and go the other way. Work together to develop the ability to smoothly hook the hand and pull your partner off balance in a single, fluid movement. Keep in mind that, when necessary, the hook can be a strike, attacking the hand at the base of the thumb or heel of the hand. This initial strike will add force and momentum to your technique, making your hooking technique far more effective. After practicing this drill, you will know how to disarm quickly and efficiently, and how to quickly recover should you feel your hook become entangled. Use this drill to fine-tune each of your hooking disarms.

The Energy Drill: First, press straight down. It should be relatively easy for your partner to resist you (1). Next, slide your staff to the left until it gently makes contact with your partner’s right hand. Pull down and to your left to extend your partner’s arm and break his structure (2). Do the same thing to his left hand, sliding until you contact the hand, then pulling down and to your right to extend his left arm and break his structure (3).