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Writer [Nicole Gluckstern](#)

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› culture@sfbg.com

I can kick your ass. Not euphemistically, not theoretically, but literally. If you were to attack me in a dark alley — or anywhere else — I could break free, knock you to the ground, and kick you into unconsciousness. I'm five-foot-five, 135 lbs., and not particularly athletic, and I've been in exactly one fistfight in my life, which I won mostly by default (I was eight). But as a graduate of Impact Bay Area self-defense training, I am confident in my ability to fight for my life — and win.

I'd heard about Impact for years — how students are taught to set and assert boundaries, identify unsafe situations before they escalate, and defend themselves against an attacker — but I only recently decided to try the program myself. I knew advanced courses were offered in defense against attackers with weapons and multiple assailants, but since the majority of assaults are perpetrated unarmed (according to the National Crime Victimization Survey), I decided to start with a basics class — 20 intensive hours of physical training and emotional strengthening in preparation for handling a single unarmed attacker.

TRAINING DAY

Impact training addresses a woman's weaknesses and her strengths: how to minimize the former and capitalize on the latter in the event of an attack. Although developed in the 1980s at Stanford by martial artists, Impact training doesn't much resemble the controlled sparring and structured techniques you'll find at your local dojo. Instead, women are taught to fight primarily using their leg strength and lower center of gravity, often by dropping to the ground (or remaining there if they've been tackled or pinned). Since men are more accustomed to fighting on their feet, any advantage their upper-body strength might afford them decreases exponentially when they're forced into ground fights.

Encouraged to fight by any means possible, women are also trained in the finer points of eye gouging, choke-hold breaking, foot stomping, testicle smashing, and weenie whomping, all while vocalizing vociferously. The intent is to be as uncooperative and squirmy as possible. The point is few attackers expect women to fight back — let alone know how.

But on our first day, my 15 classmates and I started off slowly, our moves painstakingly choreographed by our tag-team instructors: coach Naomi (last name withheld according to the Impact anonymity policy) and the padded assailant I'll call Theo. With the practiced, upbeat demeanor of a summer camp counselor, Naomi first demonstrated the moves we'd use in each fight, then walked each participant through the scenario step by awkward step. She was both guardian and ringleader, facilitating the sometimes emotional minisessions with which we started

each class and goading us in every fight. It was encouraging to note that Naomi is no superathlete. She is short and soft bodied, but her moves were executed with a precision and speed she promised we'd all achieve by graduation. The back of her T-shirt read, "Caution: I kick like a girl."

The unenviable role of attacker was played by Theo, whose average-to-large frame was made to resemble the impossible physique of a cartoon weight lifter by the custom-made body armor he wears. Encased in supersize denim overalls, Theo wore padding constructed of three separate layers of foam and hard plastic, which turned his shoulders and torso into those of an NFL linebacker and extended over his thighs and genitalia. It was the helmet, though, that turned soft-spoken Theo into the unrecognizable alien we referred to as Random Creepy Guy: an enormous dome of foam and duct tape wrapped around a hard hat, with mesh "eyes" larger than the palms of our hands. This outfit ensured the physical safety of the man we were going to learn to kick, bite, gouge, jab, stomp, and generally beat the shit out of with full permission — and full force. By our third day, a second mugger was brought in to split the work, our strikes having become too powerful for one person to withstand for six hours straight.

It's probably time for the obligatory disclaimer: I'm no advocate of violence. And Impact is not a crash course in aggression. We each signed an agreement that includes this emphatic phrase: "I will only use the techniques for self-defense and will not ever intentionally escalate a situation that could lead to an otherwise unavoidable physical confrontation." To this end, we practiced what Naomi called the protective stance: hands up, palms out, elbows at our sides, we placed one foot behind us and one in front, knees slightly bent, ready to strike — but only if necessary. With clear, modulated voices, we then practiced setting boundaries.

"Move away," we firmly told Random Creepy Guy as he hovered nearby. "Back off." Sometimes he moved away. Sometimes he moved closer, too close, reaching out to grab, and that's when the real action began.

Our classmates cheered and shouted out the moves. "Eyes!" they'd say as we went for the assailant's eye sockets with fingers pressed in triangular "bird beaks." "Groin!" they'd say, and knees flew up accordingly, hands still raised to protect our space.

Down went the padded assailant. The whistle squealed. "Halt!" And from the sidelines: wild, heartfelt applause. I was elated. I've never struck out at anyone or anything with full force, kneed a denim-clad Martian in the groin, or been applauded by a roomful of women for any reason — let alone for either of the above. I couldn't help but get the warm fuzzies — which was, of course, the point.

I mentally added this experience to my rapidly increasing list of personal firsts and moved on to the second scenario: being grabbed from behind and wrestled to the ground. As instructed, I employed a rapid-fire sequence of biting, elbow strikes, eye jabs, and a powerful sideways thrust kick, a move we would come to use frequently. We practiced the kick in a circle on the mats.

"Strike with the heel," Theo reminded me patiently. Eventually, I discovered that if I point my toe slightly while positioning my legs before the kick, the heel naturally extends forward on its own. "How does that feel?" he asked.

"Weird," I admitted. I imagined having to ask a real-life attacker for do-overs, grinned, and kept practicing rotating my hip.

At the end of the first six-hour day, woozy from adrenaline, one of my classmates broke down crying before her final match. Her fear of being grabbed from behind had only intensified. Naomi soothed her but had her fight anyway. We cheered her on like Romans at the Colosseum as she was tackled, and we whooped as she battled her attacker, through her tears, to a knockout blow.

It was the most important lesson we learned all day: We can fight when we're crying. We can fight when we're exhausted. We can fight when we're afraid. We can fight.

THE METHOD TO THE MADNESS

It's this attention to emotions that sets Impact apart from other full-force defense techniques such as Krav Maga (an Israeli-developed school of hand-to-hand combat). More Impact instructors hail from therapeutic or healing than fitness or martial arts backgrounds, and the emphasis on training the body and mind together helps create a supportive, refreshingly noncompetitive atmosphere in the classroom. Beyond support, though, increased awareness of our mental state helps to minimize the tendency to freeze when abruptly forced into a high-adrenaline situation. By paying attention to our impulses, we are able to snap out of inaction more quickly than sheer instinct might allow, while through repetition and the uninhibited use of our full strength, we are building fight reflexes into our body memory.

I was told that instructors go through an estimated 150 to 200 hours of training in order to be able to tailor the curriculum to each student's needs and capabilities. Students of Impact, at least in the Bay Area, are also given the opportunity to participate in a custom fight — battling the personification of an abstract fear or a real-life trauma. In this way a single classroom can simultaneously empower a victim of past abuse (such as Naomi) to take back space, encourage a nice girl to assert her boundaries firmly, and inspire a perennial klutz like me to drop to the floor of her living room to practice thrust kicks — leading with the heel — over and over until it no longer feels weird at all but just right.

For our public celebration, or graduation, we invited friends and family members to witness our final fights. We took turns being tackled, grabbed, held down, and verbally provoked while we battled back with all the promised speed and finesse that seemed so impossible our first day. Not every move was executed with picture-perfect aplomb, but the audible *thwap thwap* of our connecting strikes was evidence enough of our newfound abilities. If we took nothing else away from our experience, we could be sure of this: each Impact graduate (and there are more than 8,000 in the Bay Area alone) — older or younger, fit or not — has learned to kick like a girl, with strength, with speed, with heart. *

IMPACT BAY AREA

Adults \$465, young adults \$395, teens \$195

146 E. 12th St., Oakl.

(510) 208-0474

www.impactbayarea.org

Join Impact Bay Area for its annual **SHINE fundraiser** at the Women's Building on April 29. After a demonstration of Impact techniques, the public can watch graduates of each training level

fight a padded assailant on the mat. Admission is free; children under 12 are not permitted. All proceeds go to Impact’s scholarship fund, which enables low- and no-income women to take the course. (More than \$17,000 in scholarships were distributed in 2006.)

April 29, 1 p.m., free. Women’s Bldg., 3543 18th St., SF. (415) 431-1180

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