The Toughen Up Guide to Heavy Bag Training

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INTRODUCTION

Why a manual on heavy bag training?

Heavy bag training is one of the most productive, solitary activities you can do to improve your hitting power, combat-related conditioning and even your emotional health.

I’m frequently asked questions about the heavy bag. The questions generally fall into two categories: How to implement a heavy bag training program and how to avoid (or recover from) aches and pains brought about by improper bag work.

These questions come from advanced martial artists, candidates from my self-defense seminars and people new to combative training looking for a fun and functional way to get in shape and build some self-confidence.

The heavy bag has been a staple of my own self-defense training for over 30 years. I’ve invested countless hours pounding away on the heavy bag and have taught thousands of people how to hit.

I won’t lie to you, heavy bag training can be an injury-prone activity. Repeatedly pounding parts of your body into a big, solid object is a risky venture if you don’t know what you’re doing.

However, if you do your research and you’re smart about it, you can enjoy the fighting and fitness benefits of regular heavy bag training without injuries, setbacks or frustration.
I have two objectives in writing this manual...

**Objective #1 - Explain how to implement effective heavy bag training**

To teach you how to train properly on the heavy bag as an effective and enjoyable method that will rapidly improve your fitness level and self-defense skills.

**Objective #2 - Prevent Injuries and Bad Habits**

To identify and help you avoid common mistakes that people make when doing heavy bag training that can lead to injuries and bad habits.

**This Manual Is Structured As Follows:**

- 12 Powerful Benefits of Hitting Things
- 8 Pointers To Proper Pounding
- 3 Key Causes of Heavy Bag Injuries
- 2 Types of Injuries Associated Impact Work
- 4 Heavy Bag Pitfalls To Avoid
- The 8 Best Techniques For Heavy Bag Training
- 5 Design Criteria Of A Self-Defense Workout
- 5 Training Drill Structure Strategies
- Selecting a Heavy Bag & Additional Equipment
SECTION 1: THE BENEFIT OF HITTING THINGS

A Note About “Impact Training.” This manual was written specifically about the Heavy Bag. However, you’ll see me make several references to the term “Impact Training.”

Impact Training is the use of specialized equipment such as focus pads, Thai Pads, or in the case of this manual, the Heavy Bag that involves hitting a physical target in order to develop combative skills.

The benefits that I’ve outline here are specific to not only bag work but impact training in general.

So... what are the benefits of repeatedly beating on a big lump of canvas and cotton suspended from the ceiling? Good question... Here’s a few that come to mind...

Self-Defense & Fitness

The benefits I’m about to share with you can be divided into two broad categories: Benefits that build fighting abilities and benefits that condition your body and improve your health.

Hit Psychology

Obvious hitting the heavy bag is nothing like hitting a person. However, regular bag work can make a positive impact on your “Hit Psychology.” I use that term to represent your emotional comfort level with the idea of hitting and being hit.

Many people who have not experienced combative training (and some who have) are “terrified” with the idea of being hit. This fear can be so profound that it can paralyze you in a threatening situation.
People can be equally intimidated to the idea of hitting someone else. (I don’t know why, I kinda like it ;-) They might be concerned about hurting another person or that they may make “matters worse,” if their strike is weak and ineffective. Maybe it will only enrage the assailant.

The solution is simple. Hit and be hit! Heavy bag training plays a role in de-sensitizing you to the idea of blasting out a powerful strike or kick that can bail you out of a violent situation.

By combining bag work with other forms of “inoculation” training, you can dramatically decrease your fear of hitting or being hit and improve your “Hit Psychology.”

**Develop Knockout/Knockdown Power**

Obviously, the more power you are able to generate, the more capable you’ll be at terminating a violent situation quickly. The power you’ll develop through heavy bag training will have a big impact on your ability to stop an aggressive assailant.

In fact, the harder you hit, the more capable you’ll be able to drop an assailant without seriously injuring him! Yup... you read that right.

Effective energy transfer decreases the potential of injuring an assailant by reducing the need for multiple hits, shortening the duration of an encounter, and by reducing the need to escalate to more injurious techniques.

**Self-Confidence**

Confidence is extremely important in a combative situation. For starters, the more confident you are, the less likely you’ll be overwhelmed by stress and fear in a threatening situation.

Too much stress is a bad thing. It can impair your ability to think and perform. The only “antidote” to being
overwhelmed by stress is the development of self-confidence.

Secondly, people that lack confidence in their skills won’t resort to them in a threatening situation. In other words, if you question your ability to strike effectively, you are more likely not to strike at all in the threatening situation. We have a term for that in self-defense training. It’s called, “Not Good!”

**Victim Selection**

Believe it or not, heavy bag training can reduce the likelihood that you will ever have to defend yourself! Whether they know it or not, human predators select their victims based on body language that indicates that they are weak, frail, uncoordinated and ill prepared to defend themselves.

Assailants don’t pick fights with someone they perceive will kick their ass! That’s exactly the message you’ll be projecting when you develop the athletic and conditioning benefits of regular self-defense training like bag work.

**Combat-specific Conditioning**

Did you know that fitness is “exercise-specific?” In other words, swimming will make you a better swimmer but not a better runner. A elite tennis player will not necessarily perform well in a hockey game. The closer your training mimics the event that you will be performing in the better.

I have trained people who were extremely fit from other sports or activities. Despite being in “great shape,” they tired quickly and performed poorly when introduced to combative training like bag work.

Training on the heavy bag WILL condition your body but just as importantly, that conditioning will be specific to your self-defense abilities.
Health and fitness

Most people who undertake self-defense training do so not only to defend themselves, but also to improve their fitness and health.

Heavy bag training is an excellent form of exercise that can be combined with other activities to improve your health and fitness level. Here are some of the fitness benefits you can expect from heavy bag and impact training.

Bone Density and Tendon Resilience

I’ve been unable to find specific studies about the affect of impact training on bone density and connective tissue resilience. However, parallel research and common sense supports what I’m about to tell you.

Weight bearing and “high-impact” exercise (like running and lifting weights) increases bone density and the strength of our tendons and ligaments.

Aging and inactivity can decrease the strength of our bones and make us more susceptible to strains, sprains and fractures. I believe that “stressing the skeleton” through intelligent impact training will have an adaptive response on the body, in particular bone strength.

If you don’t believe me... go clunk shinbones with a kick boxer who’s been bumping his shins into a heavy bag on a regular basis! Ouch!

Muscle tone

Heavy bag training is a full-body workout. All of your major muscles are activated when hitting and kicking the heavy bag. The arms, shoulders, waist and legs are required to work in unison to deliver the strikes and kicks recommended in this manual.

The explosive contractions of your muscles (plyometrics) combined to contraction on impact (isometrics) on the bag will tone and strengthen your entire body.
Cardio Vascular Development

Heavy bag training is an excellent form of cardio vascular exercise. The drills described in this manual will raise your heart rate and increase your breathing enough to have profound benefits on your cardio vascular system.

There was a time when LSD training (long slow distance) was believed to be the best way to improve your cardio. LSD training is low-intensity activity sustained for long periods of time.

We now know that higher intensity training, for shorter periods, will improve your cardio vascular health faster and more efficiently.

I gotta remind you though, if you’re not sure about the status your health, get a check up before implementing the vigorous drills recommended here or any where else.

Burn Body Fat

A lot of people undertake combative training like boxing, kickboxing and martial arts to lose weight; or more specifically excess body fat. Working out on the heavy bag is perfect for rapid weight loss.

Once again, the idea of low-intensity exercise sustained over a longer period of time has been challenged as the best way to burn body fat. Interval training, which involves higher-intensity bursts of activity for shorter periods, raises your metabolism for several hours after a vigorous workout.

That translates to more calories and fat being burned subsequent to your workout. Low intensity training doesn’t have that “Afterburn Effect.”

This is what makes bag work ideal for fat loss. The sets and rounds described in the workout section of this manual provides you with a form of “interval training” that alternates relatively short bursts of activity with intermittent rest.
periods. Perfect for revving up your metabolism and ridding you of those love handles.

**Stress Management**

Heavy bag training is excellent for stress management. Even though we live in a relatively safe society, we retain the same survival-based nervous system as our cave-dwelling ancestors.

We are still wired to “fight or flee” from a perceived threat. However, most modern-day stressors don’t merit such an oversimplified response.

Day-to-day stressors activate the “sympathetic nervous system” and bring about a variety of physiological and hormonal changes intended to boost our ability to fight or run away.

However, when we do neither, these chemicals and “survival boosters” become toxic and unhealthy. Unless they are flushed out of our system through exercise, the toxins compromise our health and immune system.

People who live a hectic lifestyle or work in high-stress profession should incorporate vigorous exercise to flush the “fight or flight residue” out of their bodies. Hitting the heavy bag satisfies the evolutionary need to “fight” and helps the body return to a healthier state.

**Mental Toughness**

Sport Psychologist Dr. James Loher popularized the concept of “mental toughness.” His specialty was in treating burnt out athletes who became derailed in the prime of their careers due to over-training and poorly managed stress.

At the risk of oversimplifying the contribution of Dr. Loher’s work, I’ll try to summarize some of his findings and relate them to self-defense and combative training.

Stress is crucial to healthy living. By balancing appropriate amounts of physical, mental and emotional stress with
adequate periods of rest and recovery, we become healthier, more resilient and more capable of dealing with higher and higher amounts of stress in our lives.

However, too much stress, too little or insufficient amounts of recovery time erodes our capacity to deal with stress and pressure. Our health, well-being and immune system is compromised.

Dr. Loher found that by “oscillating” physical stress and recovery, both between workouts and within a workout, we become stronger, more resilient and “tougher” on not only a physical but and emotional level as well.

He is an advocate of “interval training,” which involves bursts of higher intensity exercises interspersed with short periods or recovery. Can you see where I’m going with this?

The “stop and start” combative training that I recommend in my Toughen Up training manuals fits the interval-training model to a T. So the bottom line?? Heavy bag training can make you an emotionally tougher person... I’m serial!!

**Hitting Stuff is Fun**

Watch a little kid with a stick, a rock or a plastic guitar. What’s he going to do with it? You’re right. He’s going to find something to hit and he’s going to hit it. Why? Because its fun!

Maybe it’s an evolutionary thing, maybe it isn’t but the bottom line is that hitting things can be enjoyable. People pay big money and invest a lot of time in hitting pucks, golf balls, soccer balls, and baseballs all in the name of entertainment.

Activities that are enjoyable are more likely to be done on a regular basis. I think heavy bag training is a “hoot.” Crank up some tunes, throw on your bag gloves and imagine the bag is your worst enemy or a problem personified and blast away.
You’ll be amazed how addictive and “therapeutic” training on the heavy bag is and how relaxed and content you’ll feel after your done.
SECTION 2: PROPER POINTERS OF POUNDING

This section deals with the key things to keep in mind when you’re doing bag work.

Use Proper Body Mechanics

Because the heavy bag is large and stationary, you can do just about anything and still land a punch or kick on it somewhere. Its easy to violate proper striking mechanics and STILL make solid contact on the bag. That creates the potential of developing sloppy and incorrect strikes and kicks.

Be very deliberate when working on the heavy bag to always maintain strict and precise body mechanics. If you’re not exactly sure of those mechanics, refresh your memory with the Toughen Up Guide To Power Punching.

Hit With Your Whole Body

It is possible for a very big, strong person to deliver weak and ineffective strikes. Likewise, a person of smaller stature can deliver explosive, knockout power. The difference is the way you use your body.

You don’t hit a heavy bag with your arm or your leg. You hit it with your entire body. Generate striking power from the ground up. A strike starts at the floor, is generated through your legs and hips and is transferred through the limbs.

Especially when you are working on “rapid-fire” strikes, make sure you use your entire body to generate power. Don’t flick, slap or poke at the bag. Hit it with solid, full-body impact.

Hit The Bag, Don’t Push It

There’s a big difference between hitting and pushing. If you are trying to over-penetrate the bag when you hit, you’ll never generate knockout power.
If someone ever tells you that you need to “aim for the back of the bag,” when you’re hitting, kick him in the nuts and leave... (just kidding ;-).

Many people are told to “punch through” the target when they are learning to hit. The idea is to hit solidly and avoid a shallow, superficial impact. However, if this advice is misunderstood it will sabotage your punching power.

Keep in mind that the average heavy bag is 12-14 inches in diameter. If you’re aiming for the “back of the bag” you’re cutting a good foot of extension off your punch. I guarantee that you’re pushing because there’s not opportunity for your fist to accelerate.

When you hit a heavy bag, focus the impact of your strike no more than a couple of inches beyond the surface of the bag. That will give you optimal energy and an a solid hit.

One of the best ways to determine whether you are hitting properly is to listen for the sound of your fist (or foot) hitting the bag. You should hear a good, clean “crack” on impact. Not a dull thud.

Many people believe that a powerful hit should send the bag flying. That’s not true. A powerful punch or kick should “bend or buckle” the bag without causing it swing a lot.

**Work the Dent**

A heavy bag is a pretty big target to aim at. You can develop more precision in your strikes by targeting the dent created by your first couple of punches.

By firing your punches into the dent, you’re hitting a smaller, more specific target and constantly readjusting your position. You’ll develop more precise and realistic hitting skills.

Another trick is to put pieces of duct tape on the bag in places that simulate targets on an opponent. (jaw, ribs, solar plexus, groin etc.) Then aim for the tape rather the entire bag.
Stay Relaxed

When you’re working the bag, you want to stay relaxed. The only time you tense your muscles is at the point of impact when landing a punch or kick. Even then, the tensing of the muscles is more automatic than deliberate.

Excessive tension contracts “antagonistic muscles” that don’t contribute to the delivery of the strike. You end up putting the brakes on the efficient delivery of the blow.

I’m often asked about “karate-style” punches and bag work. Many martial arts systems advocate throwing a straight punch and locking it out in the extended position for a moment before withdrawing it. That type of punch is not conductive to bag work. (or fighting for that matter)

When people try to hit the bag like that they complain about feeling a jolt that travels from the bag, up their arm and into their head! This is NOT the type of punching action you want to be working on the heavy bag.

When you hit the bag, relax your muscles and fire your punches at the bag using your entire body. The only tension in your muscles should be the moment of contact with the bag.

Breath!

Exhale when you hit. A common mistake, especially for people who are new to hitting, is to hold their breath when hitting the bag. This dramatically reduces your endurance by starving your body of oxygen when it needs it most.

Passing out in the middle of your workout is not conducive to rapid skills development and the “cool factor” of your training session is compromised big time! ;-

I’ll talk more about the breath-holding issue in the “pitfalls” section.
Protect Yourself At All Times

To paraphrase the late Bruce Lee, “Bags don’t hit back.” The heavy bag is a big, unresponsive lump. It doesn’t swing much, bounce back at you or try to avoid your punches. That being said, imagine the bag as if it were a living, breathing opponent.

Keep your hands up before, during and after hitting the bag. Move into range, hit the bag and then move out again.

It’s easy to get into the habit of hitting the bag and then immediately dropping your guard. A habit like this will make you much more susceptible to being hit in a combative situation.

Hit With Fluid Shock Wave Principle

Fluid Shock Wave principle is a scientifically validated concept that refers to the maximum transfer of kinetic energy into a target. If you’re training for self-defense or subject control, you want to be able to transfer as much striking energy into your assailant as possible. This maximizes your ability to incapacitate him efficiently with a knock down or knock out strike.

Many people are taught when striking, to quickly snap their punches off the target as if it were red hot and they didn’t want to burn their hand. The idea behind this is to get the fighter back into an “on guard” position before he or she is hit with a counterpunch.

This might be great in “sport fighting” but it is not the best way to hit in a street fight. You need to “stick” your punch or kick on the back, long enough to transfer your energy into the target... about 30 milliseconds to be exact.

(Note: 30 ms is about the time your hands are together when you are clapping)

When you hit the heavy bag, hit it solidly and don’t be in a rush to snap your hand or leg off the bag.
Consider the analogy of driving a nail with a hammer. You don't hit the nail and snap the hammer back right way. Nor do you hit the nail and push down on the hammer. You drive the nail, let the energy dissipate and then withdraw it.
SECTION 3: HEAVY BAG INJURIES

Pounding on a heavy bag is an excellent form of exercise. If its done right, it offers a host of benefits. However, if done incorrectly or excessively, it can quickly lead to injuries and bad habits. Here are some issues to keep in mind when you’re training.

Heavy Bag Training Stresses The Body

The "Training Effect" of ALL exercise involves stressing your body and then allowing it to recover and adapt. Then you repeat the cycle with a bit more stress and an appropriate amount of recovery time.

Hitting the heavy bag stresses the body. Stress is placed on your muscles, bones, connective tissue and nervous system. If you expose yourself to too much stress by training too intensely or too often you’re going to end up over-training or injuring yourself.

Power Increases Faster Than Resilience

Understand that strength and power increase faster than your connective tissues can adapt. That's why so many people throw themselves into a strength-training program and end up sidelined with muscle tears or joint pain.

Muscle strength increases faster than the tendons and ligaments that support them can adapt.

When you begin heavy bag training, your hitting power will quickly surpass the resilience of your body. That improvement is due to increased motor skills proficiency and increased muscle strength.

The bottom line is that you have to give yourself about 8 – 10 weeks of more moderate impact work before unleashing full-force strikes and kicks into the bag. A little bit of patience can save you a lot of pain and setbacks.
The Myth Of “No Pain, No Gain”

One of the worst things you can do in your training is to ignore aches and pains that may be indicative of an injury. To continue training “through the pain” hoping that it’ll go away, is just plain dumb.

I can’t count the number of people I know (including ME in my younger, dumber years) who have pushed through pain and only made matters worse.

If you are into training for the long haul, which I hope you are, you need to “listen” to your body. You might be training too intensely, too often or improperly.

I’m not talking about training through the “discomfort” of lactic acid burn in your muscles or heavy breathing during a vigorous drill. Both of those are acceptable and desirable during high intensity training.

However, learn to tell the difference between training intensely and training through an injury. If you’re not sure, always err on the side of caution.

There are two type of injuries to be aware of:

Traumatic Injuries

Traumatic Injuries occur from a sudden, sometimes accidental, event that exceeds the structural strength of your body. These are those “snap, crackle, pop!” injuries that happen all-of-a-sudden.

Going over on your ankle or spraining your wrist on a fall are examples.

Sometimes, in the midst of a workout, you might feel a twinge or pop and not give it much thought at the time. It may not be until after the workout that you realize the extent of the damage.
The best thing to do if you suspect you've sustained a traumatic injury is to stop immediately, apply ice and get checked out by a doctor. NEVER apply heat on a freshly injured body part. It can increase swelling and complicate your situation.

**Chronic Injuries**

Chronic injuries are the nagging ailments that tend to creep up on you over time; usually because you are training too intensely or too often.

Hitting the bag despite nagging shoulder pain, kicking with sore knees or working out with pulled muscles are a few examples.

If it hurts... Don’t do it! If something is hurting, it won’t get better by doing more of it! The smartest thing to do is to figure out what's causing the pain and correct it.

You may have to stop training for a while or substitute “the offending exercise” with something less intense. Pain, ignored over time will only make matters worse and could become permanent.

I personally know many martial artists who have had knee surgery, hip replacements, and shoulder surgery because they subscribed to the “NO PAIN, NO GAIN” myth. Oddly enough, the majority of those injuries were sustained from years of punching and kicking thin air as opposed to impact training on equipment!
 SECTION 4: HEAVY BAG PITFALLS

Don’t Kill The Bag

The single biggest mistake made when hitting the heavy bag is trying to hit it too hard. When you “over-try,” you end up tensing up and exaggerating your movement in a counter-productive effort to generate more power. Focusing exclusively on trying to destroy the bag at the expense of proper technique makes you slow, sloppy or more likely to get injured.

When you watch elite athletes in action, they appear to perform effortlessly. They are focused, relaxed and rely on their skill, conditioning and experience to perform at a high level. Do the same in your self-defense training; train smart not hard.

Don’t Hit Hard ALL The Time

You don’t have to hit hard every time you step up to the heavy bag. I’m not talking about “Killing the Bag.” You could be using solid, well-delivered, proper punches and kicks but if you do it all the time, every time something’s got to give.

Don’t get me wrong, there IS a place for full force strikes and kicks on the bag. That is the beauty of the heavy bag; its big, heavy and durable; perfect for “testing” your power. However, full-power hitting all the time, day in and day out will get you injured.

The human body is an amazing creation, but it does have its limits. I suggest that you intersperse maximum-power workouts, with sessions built around lighter, faster, more precise hitting. That’ll give your bones, joints and muscles time recover.

As a general rule, I recommend one day a week for maximum power hitting. But listen to your body, even that might be a bit much.
Don’t Hold Your Breath

I mentioned this earlier but it deserves further mention. Before I was talking about “performance.” Now I’m talking about avoiding an injury. By holding your breath while exerting yourself, you increase thoracic pressure and can injure yourself.

Exhale when you hit, much like you would do when lifting a heavy weight. This prevents you from holding your breath and will increase power by contracting the muscles of your waste and midsection.

Don’t Get Sloppy

The heavy bag is an excellent piece of training equipment. However, its also one of the easiest to train “wrong” on. The heavy bag is a big, unresponsive mass. Sloppy bag work ingrains bad habits and unrealistic hitting skills that aren’t applicable to fighting or sparring.

Also, when you hit the bag with wild, sloppy techniques, your bones and joints are exposed to more stress and strain because they end up in unnatural and biomechanically weak positions and the point of impact. That dramatically increases the potential for injury.

Well... If I haven’t scared you off with all of this talk about injuries, lets take a look at the ingredients of a good heavy bag training program.
SECTION 5: HEAVY BAG COMPATIBLE TECHNIQUES

If you need to brush up on the fundamentals of hitting, I recommend that you review my “Power Punching Guide."

You don’t need a lot of different striking and kicking techniques for bag work or for a self-defense system for that matter. In fact, learning and practicing too many techniques is counter productive and will actually “impair” your ability to defend yourself.

First of all, the more techniques you have to choose from in a critical situation the longer it will take you to select one and apply it. “Hick’s Law” is a well-known concept in survival training. It stipulates that increasing your response options slows your reaction time.

Secondly, the punches and kicks applicable to heavy bag training are the same ones applicable to fighting. They are basic, simple and powerful movements that are classified as “gross motor skills.”

Gross motor skills will not deteriorate under the stress of combat like fine and complex motor skills do. In fact, the adrenaline that you will experience in a self-defense situation will increase their effectiveness.

There is no room for flicky, fancy or flowery movements in a heavy bag workout. Nor would it be wise to rely on such things in a fight.

The intent of this section is not to teach you how to do these techniques. I provide you with “bag-specific” advice for each technique that you need to keep in mind when working on the heavy bag.

Bag-Compatible Techniques List

The 8 “bag-compatible techniques” I recommend include:

- Straight Punch
- Hook Punch
- Uppercut
- Forearm Strike
- Front Kick
- Roundhouse Kick
- Knee Strike
- Back Kick

**Straight Punch**

Deliver your straight punches into the bag in a straight line like a piston. Your fist travels straight out and straight back along the same line.

Keep your elbows down and your forearm aligned directly behind your fist. If you chose to rotate your fist as you punch, make sure that doing so doesn't cause your elbow to flare out to the side.

At the point of impact, you should be able to draw a line from your rear foot, through your leg and hips, up through the body to your punching arm and finally to your fist. Remember that striking is a full-body technique.

**Hook Punch**

When throwing a hook punch at the bag with either hand, I prefer to keep my fist vertical with the palm turned in toward me (the pinky side of the fist is down toward the ground).

This allows you to throw the hook from various ranges and still land squarely with your knuckles without straining your wrist.

With the palm facing the ground, you increase the potential of jamming your wrist or hitting the bag with the top, thumb side of your fist instead of your knuckles.

Another thing to consider is that the average heavy bag is about 14” thick. If you line yourself up with the center of the bag, your fist will contact the bag about 7” from center. This is a less stable position for the shoulder joint.
Optimally, your fist should contact the bag directly in line with your nose.

You can protect your shoulder joint from strain by shuffling sideways slightly so that the center of your body is lined up with the side of the bag that you’ll be hitting with your hook punch. Make sense?

**Uppercut**

The uppercut is probably the most injury-prone punch in heavy bag training. Because the heavy bag doesn’t have a striking surface that simulates coming up under the jaw of an opponent it’s difficult to practice a head-level uppercut. There are a couple of ways to work the uppercut on the heavy bag.

If you chose to strike the bag with your uppercuts, move in very close and ensure that your fist and forearm travel “into” the bag on a line parallel with the floor. Be sure to keep your wrist straight.

Another variation is to fire the uppercut up in front of the heavy bag without making contact. What you’d be doing is hitting the bag solidly with your other punches but when you throw the uppercut, just fire it up in front of you parallel to the surface of the bag.

**Forearm Strike**

Forearm strikes are an excellent self-defense technique and great for bag work. The forearm strike that I advocate is not the same as an elbow strike that makes contact with the bony point of the elbow.

Unless your elbows are highly conditioned, hitting the heavy bag with the point of your elbow can result in bone chips or bursitis (irritating the bursa sacs located there).

The forearm strike I recommend is a powerful “forearm smash” that makes contact with the meaty part of your forearm just below the elbow.
Front Kick

The front kick can be used in a thrusting fashion by raising the knee of the kicking leg and driving forward with the heel or ball of the foot.

Many people prefer to throw a more “stiff-legged” version of the front kick similar to the way Thai boxers do. During this kick, the leg doesn’t flex much from the knee. The foot travels in a straight line from the floor to the bag. The intent is to interrupt an opponent’s attack or to push your opponent back and off balance.

Roundhouse Kick

I also prefer to use a Thai boxing-style roundhouse kick on the heavy bag. It has much more power than a roundhouse that snaps the lower leg out and back from the knee joint.

In this variation, there is little flex from the knee. The power is generated by the hips and your footwork. Your impact surface should be the shinbone, not the foot.

If you are not used to taking impact on your shin, you might find the area quite sensitive. You may have to start slow and condition your shins with light “bumping drills” on the bag until they toughen up a bit. The good news is that your shins will be conditioned quickly and you’ll soon be able to blast full-force kicks into the heavy bag.

Knee Strike

When you’re working your knee strikes on the bag, reach out... grab the bag and pull yourself into the strike. That’s the way most knee strike applications are applied in a fight.

Make sure that your knee travels INWARD toward the bag not upward. I use the analogy of imagining a “SPIKE” protruding from the knee, just above he kneecap. When you deliver the knee strike imagine driving that imaginary spike straight into the target.
Be careful not to make contact with the kneecap itself. The kneecap “floats” on top of the knee joint. It can be dislocated if it is used as a striking surface. The contact area is directly on the knee but above the kneecap.

**Back Kick**

I like adding the back kick and spinning back kick into my training to add variety. Of all of these techniques, the back kick is the most difficult to deliver effectively into the bag.

Make sure to thrust your heel in a straight line toward the target. Strive to make clean impact and not to push the bag away from you. Again an audible “crack” will tell you that you’re hitting and not pushing.

After impact, make sure to withdraw your leg and place it back into a solid stance, as opposed to hitting the bag and then falling forward afterward.

**Open-Handed Variations For Self-Defense**

If you want to include a self-defense-specific element to your heavy bag workouts you may want to incorporate empty hand striking variations into your routine. The straight punches and hooks can easily be modified making contact with the heel of the open hand.

The draw back with open-handed strikes is straining the wrist on impact. If you don’t have a lot of wrist flexibility you will probably find it stressful on the wrist when delivering straight thrusts into the bag. You can experiment by rotating your fingers outward slightly and maintaining more of a bend at your elbow, when you deliver straight thrusts into the bag.

If you are going to deliver an open handed variation of the uppercut, you’ll have to get in very close to the bag and deliver it as a slap to the groin.
SECTION 6: DESIGNING A HEAVY BAG WORKOUT

In the Power Punching Guide, I gave you a few ideas about how to build your own punching combinations and a few workout out strategies. In this section, I’ll delve a bit deeper into the criteria of a workout program.

Workout Design Criteria

Structure

The structure of your workout is simply the exercises, drills and activities that you build into it. You may chose to stick to a heavy-bag-only workout or incorporate other activities like focus pad work, partner training, weight lifting or cardio work. If you do, you should have an idea about how to “sequence” those activities for best results.

Sequence

Sequencing is the order you place the various parts of your workout in. Some of this will be based on personal preference, at other times the sequence needs to be more deliberate and strategic.

For example, I’m a strong advocate of resistance training. Lifting weights and body-weight combat conditioning exercises can make a significant impact on your hitting power and the resilience of your body.

However, if you’re going to combine impact work and strength training in the same workout, make sure NOT to do your lifting before your hitting. If you hit the heavy bag after fatiguing your muscles you increase the potential of an injury. Save your lifting for AFTER your bag work.

As a general rule, try to do activities requiring the most precision, coordination and concentration near the beginning of your workout, then progress toward more conditioning-oriented activities.
Here's a sequencing suggestion to consider.

- Warm Up
- Learning new drills and techniques
- Partner Training Drills
- Focus Pad Training
- Heavy Bag Training
- Cardio exercises
- Strength training
- Cool down

Obviously you don’t have to incorporate ALL of these activities into every workout. Many of your sessions may only include one or two of them. However, if you are going to put them together, the suggested sequence will provide you with a sound game plan to follow.

**Intensity**

In heavy bag training there are two categories of intensity to consider. How hard you train and how hard you hit.

The intensity of your workout can be measured best by your heart rate. You may want to wear a heart rate monitor or just take your pulse at different points in your workout. If you do this often enough, you’ll get pretty good a “guess-timating” where your heart rate is, even without measuring it.

You want to keep your heart rate below your “MAXIMUM HEART RATE.” The MHR is determined by subtracting your age from 220. If your heart rate exceeds your MHR, you are training too intensely. Slow down!

The second form of intensity to consider is how hard you’re hitting the bag. Unfortunately this isn’t as easy to measure.

You don’t have to hit the heavy bag all out, as hard as you can to improve your skills, your conditioning or even your striking power. This all-or-nothing training is the equivalent of stamping your feet during a run!
Its OK to blast the bag all out every once in a while to “test” your power, not to develop it. It's also important to allow your body to toughen up gradually by less forceful impact sessions. Remember, you're slamming your body parts repeatedly into a large, heavy object. You have to be smart about it.

I suggest you alternate “heavy-hitting” sessions with lighter intensity bag work or activities that are not as stressful on your body, such as focus pad training, shadow boxing or partner drills.

**Duration**

How long your heavy bag sessions last depends on your present level of conditioning, the resilience of your body and what else you are doing in your workouts. Your goal is to focus on quality not quantity.

The body “wears out” when pushed too hard, too often or for too long. There is a point of “diminishing returns” when a workout session is carried on too long.

Your goal should be to produce the greatest possible results in the LEAST amount of time. In essence you should not strive to workout longer and longer but smarter and smarter. The higher the intensity of the workout, the shorter it should be.

Most people don’t realize how little it takes to improve your skills and stay in shape. I suggest that your heavy bag training should be limited to 15 to 30 minutes and your entire workout should be limited to 45 to 60 minutes.

**Frequency**

Keep in mind that progress is made BETWEEN your workouts, not during them. Training efforts must be balanced with adequate periods of rest and recovery. I recommend that you limit your heavy bag training to two or three times per week. Training more that that will likely result in over-training or injuries.
Sidebar: In 1999 I set a training goal for myself. I decided to workout every day for a year. I trained 365 days without fail... Big deal right?

You know how I felt at the end of it? Like shit!

For the most part, I was tired, achy and miserable. I was frequently plagued by flu symptoms, colds and felt pretty crappy for the most part. I knew I was over training, but a goal is a goal right? I’ll NEVER do that again.

I’ve been in far better shape when I trained far less frequently. The lesson? Train as infrequently as you can to produce the results you want. Take time off to recover and you’ll enjoy your training a lot more and make much better progress.
Workout Structure Options

Sidebar: Plan your workouts in advance and keep a training log. “If you can’t measure it, you can’t manage it.”

I’m not a big fan of composing a workout out on-the-fly by slapping together whatever random activities you might be in the mood to do that day. I’ve seen people do this over the years and they never produce good results from their training.

Remember that the training effect involves going from where you are to where you want to be. Planning and tracking your workouts is the best way to ensure gradual and steady improvement.

I strongly recommend that you plan each workout in advance and track your progress in a training journal. If not, how will you know if you’re improving?

Warm Up and Cool Down

Warming up at the beginning of a workout and cooling down at the end improves your performance, reduces injuries and decreases post-exercise muscle soreness.

Your warm up should consist of some light cardio exercises like jumping rope, or jogging in place, some light limbering exercises, and some light activity that simulates as close as possible... the type of training that you’ll be doing in your workout session, shadowboxing for example.

Don’t do extensive static stretches during your warm up. Too much stretching lengthens your muscles and can compromise the stability of your joints. That increases the chance of an injury.

A 10 or 15 minute warm up should be plenty. Warm up to the point where you begin to sweat.
Cooling down at the end of your workout is the smartest and safest way to bring your breathing, heart rate and body temperature back down to a resting state.

Don't finish a vigorous workout and just plunk yourself down on the couch. The cool down also lets you reduce the levels of lactic acid in your muscles which can cause post-exercise muscle soreness. This is also a great time to do your vigorous stretching; while your muscles are warm and pliable.

**Sets and Reps**

The set and rep model is one of the simplest ways to structure your workout. Decide what you want to work on and decide how many sets and repetitions you are going to do of each technique or combination.

For example, do two sets of 20 straight punches, with a one minute rest in between them. Do three sets of 10 roundhouse kicks with each leg. You get the idea. Rest long enough between sets to catch your breath and then move on to the next set.

**Time-Based**

A time based structure, or “round work” is a popular method of structuring a combative workout session. Once again, decide in advance what strikes, kicks, combinations or activities you want to do and then perform them for a pre-determined period of time.

Most boxer's and kick boxers train for two to three minute rounds with a one- minute rest period. However, experiment with your own time frames to see what works best for you.

For example, some fighters try to “over train” themselves with longer rounds and shorter rest periods. If they compete with three minute rounds with one minute rest periods, they might train with four minute rounds with 30 second rest periods. In theory they should be able to cruise through the shorter rounds without problems.
What CAN occur though is that they end up training less intensely in order to “survive” the round and perform less effectively in competition.

The bottom line is that the more intensely you train, the shorter your rounds have to be and the longer your rest periods. Like I said, play with it and come up with your own variations.

**Circuit Training**

If you are already in good shape or want to get a good workout in the shortest time possible, circuit training is a good structure to consider. Circuit training strings a set of activities or exercises into a sequence with little or no rest. You move on from the first activity to the second then to the third and so on.

You may chose to complete the entire circuit and then start over again from the beginning.

A simple example for heavy bag training is to hit the bag for 5 minutes, then move onto 5 minutes of skipping rope, then go back to the bag and so forth.

**Build Ups**

I wrote about build ups in the *Power Punching Guide*. Take a combination that you want to train and then build it up, one technique at a time until you are throwing the full combination at the bag.

For example, throw 10 lead punches. Then add a straight cross and throw 10 “one-two combinations.” Then add a hook punch and throw 10 “one-two-three” combinations. Then add an uppercut and do 10 more reps of a four-punch combination.

If you are working a six technique combination, you’ll have performed 210 punches or kicks by the time you finish the drill.
Blitz Training

Blitz training is a hardcore conditioning and training drill. Don’t try blitz training unless you are already in very good shape and have a rock solid foundation of striking skills.

A blitz is an intense, rapid-fire barrage of strikes and or kicks that continues for a pre-determined period of time or number of repetitions.

This training is excellent for “lactic threshold training,” to build stamina. It’s also an excellent psychological drill to develop mental tenacity and a “never-give-up” mindset. That’s a crucial quality in a self-defense encounter.

Note about Ambidextrous Training

I am a strong advocate of training both sides of the body equally. You should not have a “weak side” and a “strong side.” If you’re conducting bag work primarily for conditioning, consider doing your drills with both sides forward and reverse your strikes and combinations. Everything you did with your right side, do with your left and vice versa.

This not only conditions your body more evenly but makes you more versatile in a combative situation. (you can’t always pick the side you might be attacked from). You’ll be surprised too how quickly you can develop your “weak or non-dominant side” skills and coordination.
SECTION 7: HEAVY BAG EQUIPMENT ISSUES

I’m not going to overcomplicate something that is not complicated. For the most part, heavy training involves getting a heavy bag, hanging it up and hitting it.

However, since I DO get a lot of questions about the “best bag” to buy. I’ll throw a few opinions at you.

Heavy Bag Selection Issues

There are basically two styles of heavy bags. Bags that hang from the ceiling and bags that stand on the floor. Although there are a variety of sizes, shapes and materials, that’s pretty much it. The one you chose will be up to your personal preference and training environment.

The bag you chose should be heavy enough to provide you with solid resistance to your punches and kicks but not so hard that you’ll hurt your hands and feet on it.

The “bag” itself is usually made of canvas, leather or vinyl-type material.

They are usually filled with cotton filler of some kind. Some newer models have a water-filled bladder covered in foam rubber.

Some of the free-standing models are filled with sand or water for weight with foam rubber padding.

Stay away from sand or grain filled heavy bags... they weigh a ton and the contents settle to the bottom and become as hard as a rock.

For what its worth, I prefer a suspended heavy bag myself. When I wrote this manual, and when I think of heavy bag training I tend to visualize the suspended from the ceiling style although most of what I have written is applicable to a free-standing bag.
Size & Weight

Heavy bags range from around 30 to 100 lbs. The “average” or most common heavy bag is 4 ft long, 14 inches in diameter and weighs about 60 pounds. That’s a good general purpose heavy bag and a great place to start.

MY personal favorite is a 6 footer that weighs 100 lbs. I find that the weight gives me excellent resistance for my strikes and kicks and the extra length allows me to incorporate low-level kicks and knee strikes.

I don’t agree with some of the advice floating around that the size and weight of your heavy bag is determined by your physical stature. Some “authorities” suggest that big people need large, heavy bags and smaller people need smaller, lighter heavy bags. I call bullshit!

That’s like saying the big people will be attacked by big assailant and smaller people should limit their exposure to wee, little, mini-muggers! That’s not the way the world works boys and girls!

The size and weight of heavy bag you chose is more likely to be determined by where and how you intend to hang it. If you have a solid bracket or main beam in your basement go for a bigger bag.

If a heavy model will shake the pictures off your walls and cave your ceiling in, then you’re going to have to make due with a lighter bag or a free standing model.

It’s A Matter Of Personal Preference

The best advice I can give you about the best bag to buy is to try out as many different sizes, weight and styles as you can and pick one that you like.

How Much Can You Afford

As with most things in life, you usually get what you pay for. This holds true for sporting equipment like a heavy bag. A
A decent quality heavy bag will cost you around 100 to 200 dollars.

**Bag Gloves**

A quality set of bag gloves is essential. If you are going to try and save a few bucks, bag gloves are NOT the place to do it. Buy the best you can afford. I compare cheap bag gloves to jogging in flimsy running shoes. It’s not worth saving a few bucks and screwing up your hands.

Look for a pair of bag gloves with about an inch of firm padding. Test them by putting one on and making a fist. With the thumb of your opposite hand, press in on the knuckles of your clenched fist. You should feel some cushion as opposed to hard, bony contact.

**Hand Wraps**

Many people wrap their hands with cotton wraps when they do heavy bag training. The wraps support the wrists and small bones of the hand. I train both with and without wraps and are neither for nor against them.

More frequently I don’t wrap. I find that when I wrap my hands, I feel a lot more direct impact on my knuckles. Keep in mind too though that I don’t always pound on the heavy bag as hard as I can.

Once again, it’s a matter of personal preference. Wraps are inexpensive and easy to find. I suggest you try hitting the bag with and without wraps and decide for yourself.

**Boxing Gloves**

If you are new to heavy bag training, or do a lot of it, you might find that even with a good pair of bag gloves you still experience hand pain. Some people switch to boxing gloves for additional hand protection. The extra padding acts as a better shock absorber and reduces the impact energy that reaches your knuckles.
CONCLUSION

There you have it, the nuts and bolts of heavy bag training. Over the past 30 years, I’ve taught a lot of people how to hit the heavy bag. Most of the problems that they encountered and questions that they raised have been addressed in this manual.

Between this manual, and the others in the “TOUGHEN UP SERIES,” you should have all you need to get off to a safe and productive start to some of the best training sessions you’ve ever had.

If you have any questions or comments about this manual, or would like to let me know how you’re training is going, please feel to send me an email at Randy@ToughenUp.com.

Take care, train smart and stay safe

Randy LaHaie
Protection Strategies

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