



IS YOUR MARTIAL ART A PLACEBO?

By Paul Cale

When speaking recently to a combat sports interest group at the American College of Sports Medicine, I was asked a question that I probably would have answered differently if it had been asked of me one year earlier. As I finished telling a story in which I related a hand-to-hand combat experience to an ongoing combat sports study we are undertaking at the AIS Combat Centre, I was asked, “Which martial art do you think is the best for dealing with a real combat encounter?” It made me pause for a moment... but before I tell you the answer I gave to the group, I want to share with you the information that helped inform my reply. I have learned a lot over the decades of being involved in the martial arts and have come to understand even more since my years as a soldier in war.

One thing that I know as an absolute is that there are no absolutes.

Every ten years or so we are introduced to the ‘real truth’ in the martial arts, the answer to all our self-defence doubts... until the next ‘real truth’ comes along, that is. Are we just being sucked in by the latest placebo? Let’s see what two of my friends at the AIS have to say on the matter. Dr Shona Halson and Dr David Martin wrote a paper, which was published in the International Journal of Sports Physiology and Performance, called *‘Lying to Win – Placebos and Sports Science’*. Here are some key passages from it: “The early history of placebos reveals how lies have been used by credentialed professionals to achieve desired outcomes, introduced by an intriguing

Thomas Jefferson quote from 1807 addressing ‘pious fraud’: ‘One of the most successful physicians I have ever known has assured me that he used more bread pills, drops of coloured water, and powders of hickory ashes, than of all other medicines put together.

If research is correct and belief effects are indeed powerful, should lying to an athlete in the hope of improving performance be

“When it comes to winning at the highest levels of sport, it may be the case that many ‘sport scientists’ have either stretched the truth or simply blatantly lied to an elite athlete in hopes of improving sporting performance.”

considered an acceptable practice? What should we think of sport science ‘gurus’ who confidently administer dubious ergogenic aids they barely understand, if the outcome is a victorious athlete? “As suggested by Thomas Jefferson, history reveals that physicians have been prescribing placebos for more than 200 years in an attempt to make patients feel better.

For the uninitiated, it is easy to overlook how powerful a belief effect can be and thus the importance of this topic. But consider for a moment the insightful paper published in 1954 by Professor Walter B. Cannon from the Harvard Medical School, titled ‘Voodoo Death’. Professor Cannon writes, ‘When subjected to spells or sorcery or the use of ‘black magic’, men may be brought to death.’ A series of examples from Africa, Australia, New

Zealand and South America were reviewed by Cannon, supporting the hypothesis that when belief is strong, a voodoo curse can lead to lethal consequences, even in healthy individuals... “For scientists who investigate the performance-enhancing effects of different interventions (training, recovery, altitude, heat, supplements), there is a strong likelihood that researching participants’ beliefs and expectations noticeably shape their performance.

As discussed in the early 1940s, if belief effects can make sick patients feel better and in some cases actually cause death, it makes sense that belief can also be a powerful modulator of exercise performance.” So, it’s clear that a belief in something can have incredible results, as we see in the martial



arts all the time – but for these placebos to work, we must believe in them. If we know something is false or a placebo, not only will it not work but your performance may actually be negatively effected. The paper speaks more on this:

“Placebos have traditionally been considered a means of

determining whether the effect of a medical intervention is due to a patient's imagination rather than its medicinal virtues.”

For this reason, placebos are often thought of as inactive and thus an essential component for comparison in any randomised, controlled

trial. However, the role of the placebo is much more complicated than originally suspected. Evidence now supports the concept that improved outcomes in patients and enhanced performance in athletes have neurobiological basis.” My answer, why do people fall over without even being touched? Because they believe their master’s ki or chi will have an effect on them. BJJ had people thinking for years that you should never kick high in MAA, until someone believed they could. If voodoo magic has shown us anything, it is that just believing in an expert can be a powerful influence.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Paul Cale has been involved with the Australian Army for thirty years either as a soldier or currently as a preferred contractor with the majority of that time being a member of Australian Special Forces (SF). Paul’s company draws its specialist contractors from the two pinnacle SF regiments being the 2nd Commando (2 CDO) and Special Air Service (SAS). Paul himself is a founding member of 2 CDO and drove new capability forward by rewriting the SF Close Quarter Fighting (CQF) course and co-founding the 2 CDO Integrated Combat Centre (ICC). Paul deployed five times as a Commando to Afghanistan and Iraq with his personal hand to hand combat experience and that of his Commando Regiment guiding the core development of Kinetic

Fighting. Paul also created the Infantry Integrated Combat (IIC) Course now being used by the entire Australian Infantry Corps.

Recently, Paul was appointed Head Coach of the Australian Defence Force Martial Arts Association (ADFMAA) and is continuing his work enabling soldiers to develop their unarmed combat skills

Paul is also a Specialist Consultant to the Australian Institute of Sport (AIS) and co-founder of the AIS Combat Centre. Paul currently maintains a position on the Combat Centre’s leadership team.

Paul has been involved in combat sports and martial arts since the beginning of the eighties and holds a total of eight black belts being Brazilian Jiu Jitsu, Kudo Daido Juku, Kyokushin Karate, Yoshinkan, Tomiki and Gyokushin Ryu Aikido as well as the Olympic combat sports of Judo and Tae Kwon do. Paul was the first Australian to earn a Kudo black belt and heads the International Kudo Federation Australia (IKFA) as Branch Chief.