

Massimo Fenu

The Martial Arts Instructor's
Pocket Survival Guide

*7 Strategies to Become a
Professional, Skillful, and Valued
Trainer by Changing Your
Approach to Martial Arts Practice
and Teaching.*

Original title: Piccolo manuale strategico per Trainer di Arti
Marziali

Translated by: Francesca Ferrando

Copyright: Massimo Fenu

1st edition December 2016

All rights reserved

This book, in all its parts, is protected by copyright law. No part of this publication may be reproduced, reworked, distributed, or transmitted in any form or by any means, including photocopying, photographing, recording, or other electronic or mechanical methods, without prior written permission, nor may it be stored in any searchable database or copied for public or private use, except in the case of brief quotations, according to the uses permitted by copyright law, embodied in articles published in journals, newspapers, digital interactive media or any current or future media.

*To my students.
I wouldn't be who I am
if it weren't for them.*

*To my wife.
In adversa,
ultra adversa.*

Contents

Before we begin	page 7
Congratulations and welcome to the jungle	page 14
How to use this book	page 20
Strategy #1 - The 3 rules.	page.24
Summing up Chapter 1	page 40
Extra resources for chapter 1	page 42
Strategy # 2 - Choices.	page.43
Summing up Chapter 2	page 60
Extra resources for chapter 2	page 62
Strategy # 3 - Your image.	page.64
Summing up Chapter 3	page 74
Extra resources for chapter 3	page 76
Strategy # 4 - The group.	page 78
Summing up Chapter 4	page 87
Extra resources for chapter 4	page 89

Strategy # 5 - Planning.	page 91
Summing up Chapter 5	page 103
Extra resources for chapter 5	page 105
Strategy #6 - Guides.	page 107
Summing up Chapter 6	page 121
Extra resources for chapter 6	page 125
Strategy #7 - Revolution.	page 127
Summing up Chapter 7	page 141
Extra resources for chapter 7	page 143
What now?	page 145
FAQs on the FuturoTrainer method	page 149
About the author	page 153
Acknowledgements	page 155
Selected bibliography	page 157

Before we begin.

*“Most people
are prisoners of their own brains.”*

R. Bandler

Forewarned is forearmed.

This book could be a wet blanket and undermine many of your strongly held convictions. Whether you're a martial arts practitioner or a coach, you might find plenty of ideas that are different from what you've always believed.

Therein lies the value of what you're reading, even though it might sometimes irk you. This book offers you new solutions and a new perspective.

Please understand that nothing you find written here is meant as a personal attack, either to you or martial arts in general.

What I present in this manual is the result of over 30 years of practice in the field as a student and 20 years as an instructor.

Every single word in this book is the result of a great many hours spent studying, attending seminars and refresher courses, comparing notes with colleagues, and at least four times as many hours of hands-on application.

In short, what I write about has been tested over more than 20 years of coaching, on real-life classes and situations.

Various people who read this book before it was published, people who work with the public or have a business in which

training plays an important role, found the information contained in this handbook very useful, despite their different fields of work.

This is the book I would have liked to have back when I started, because it would have saved me from many mistakes and false starts. Not to speak of all the money spent on useless resources and the amount of time wasted.

The issues involved haven't changed since I first started out. The world of martial arts, despite having undergone a revolution with the arrival of new styles, has remained practically identical in its inner mechanisms.

My colleagues today face the same problems I did twenty years ago:

- Classes that have trouble starting. Groups that break up after an initial period of excitement. Lack of continuity.
- The problem of handling classes in which students who have been there longer feel that newcomers slow them down... and newcomers can't keep up with longtimers.
- Hefty expenses for refresher courses and certificate renewals, which sometimes serve no other purpose than as a way for the federation involved to raise money.
- Trouble in getting assistance at critical times from the organization that trained you and is responsible for your ongoing education.

- A hard time dealing with gyms that demand a lot and pay little. Money that is never enough because you have to purchase the common equipment.
- Often you also need to advance money for clothing bearing your federation's logo, and you are forced to store everything at home. You're lucky if it's just T-shirts we're talking about.
- Let's not even mention having to advance money to buy material that proves defective when it arrives, so you lose that money because you're too embarrassed to sell it. Or when a pupil simply forgets to pay you and disappears.

In the end, the problems are always the same.

So are the solutions.

There's just one thing wrong with them: they don't work.

If this statement bothers you and you're thinking something like *But my Master always did things like this this!*—let me tell you I don't blame you. But I' still need to warn you.

The golden days when all you needed to do was start a martial arts course and you'd have full classes are long gone. Masters at that time could get away with errors that today are extremely costly. Today, when they exist, those classes live on the strength of a name gained at a favorable time.

I'll tell you a story from that era.

It was pretty common then to give a demonstration of the effectiveness of one's martial art to pupils who asked. No matter that students had no idea of what they were asking for

and their expectations were often based on what they had seen in movies.

You know those long-drawn fights in movies from the 1980s/1990s in which the worst that could happen after a series of punches was a bloody lip at one corner of the mouth?

Well, something along those lines.

So when a pupil asked me if he could try a session of serious combat I was so dumb that I put on my gloves without thinking it over twice. He was really appreciative of the exchange, and, though half his face was a mask of bruises, he thanked me profusely. I thought I had done the right thing—after all, I had given him what he had asked me for. Can you believe how stupid I was.

Of course, I never saw him again. Neither him, nor the friends he came to train with.

I sensed I had probably made a mistake. I know, it wasn't that hard to figure out, but as I young man I was inclined to think about stuff afterwards instead of thinking things out before. After that episode I quickly came to grasp the idea that people go to a training hall to learn how not to get hit, and not to get hit regularly and with particularly stylish “moves.

That mistake cost me the loss of a pupil and his circle of friends. But a mistake like that went by unnoticed at that time, given the boom martial arts were enjoying.

As a matter of fact, many schools survived and grew even despite these mistakes—and others we'll discuss later. Some are still open on the strength of their old reputation.

But there are not a lot of them. You can't plan on following the same path because you won't be able to benefit from the same tolerance for errors.

Today the world of training halls is one of heavy competition, where you are dealing with loads of “Mc Dojos” managed by amateurish coaches (some in good faith, some less so).

if you hope it's just a matter of time before “*people*” understand how good you are you'd better be prepared to wait a long, long time.

... and I'll give you some news: it's not going to happen.

So if you want your training and education to be fruitful, if you believe your passion for your martial art of choice deserves efforts that will truly increase the possibility of its diffusion...

... well, perhaps you'd better get a move on.

Even though what you read here will contrast with what you have always done and believed.

Even though when reading the 7 Strategies you realize you have made some mistakes and you get the strong urge to reject everything and leave things as they are (and, believe me, it will happen)...

...relax.

Keep calm and carry on.

First of all: it's not a contest

Second: we all make mistakes.

If worse comes to worst, even if you made all the mistakes you find listed in this book, that just means you're missing the right tools.

You have a lot of margin to work on to give your pupils an even better experience of your style.

Read the book to the end.

Try things out.

Put it into practice.

Make it become a habit.

This book is NOT a yardstick against which to measure your work.

I'm just offering you a view of how the world of martial arts works and what lines of action are available for you to turn it to your advantage.

If you don't really try things out you'll never know whether they work or not.

Fasten your seatbelt.

The journey begins on the next page.

Congratulations and welcome to the jungle.

*“I listen and I forget.
I see and I remember.
I do and I understand.”*

Chinese proverb

... and so, eventually, after working really hard you have become a coach, a master, a sensei (or whatever term you use in your style).

The first thing I would like to say is: “Congratulations!”

I say it with all my heart.

Nobody is ever truly ready to take on the role of an instructor in a martial arts class. Anyone who says different, is either lying or doesn't really realize what they're up against.

You need courage.

Courage and a true desire to place yourself at the service of your athletes' journey of improvement.

The second thing I would like to tell you is:

“Welcome to the jungle”.

You have trained. You have studied. You have saved. All to reach your goal.

I know how difficult it has been.

Mostly those who follow this path are the type of person who leaves evening events early to get a decent number of hours of sleep. Because the next day you need to study, train, and often work a regular job, as well.

Not to speak of diet. We are the kind of people who order a tuna salad and a half-pint of beer (if we're really trying not to be antisocial) at tables where giant pizzas and 1-liter mugs are the rule.

Throw in the fact that laid-back weekends are a rarity. Small concessions snatched away from a flood of courses, workshops, or training for competitions.

A social life? Thanks, just the bare essentials. I'd love to have a social life, but I don't have enough time. Nor, sometimes, enough energy.

But who cares?

It was worth it, right?

After so much hard work, you made it: you have a splendid Instructor's or Master's certificate in your martial art!

This is the key that will finally allow you to do what you have always dreamed of: teach the martial art you love so much, be a guide, help others along the same path you have taken and continue on.

... and so you take your first steps in the jungle of martial arts training halls and courses.

So you look for a gym that will host a course of yours, and you get the first damper: "Do you have a group?"

Most gyms don't care much about your CV. Diplomas usually count little for whoever has to decide whether to entrust a training hall to you. Whether you have considerable experience as a practitioner, have won championships, hold a diploma from a prestigious school... it's all very relative.

I'm not saying it's not useful, of course. But it's not what makes the scales tip in your favor.

It's not so strange. Put yourself in the shoes of a person who needs to pay rent, expenses, and try to earn a living from a gym. When you appear at their door, whatever your titles, several though balloons pop up in their head:

“Will this person help me pay expenses? Will this person keep a slot filled all year, or will I be ditched at the first hardship? Is this person really qualified, or will my clients be damaged and will my gym get a bad rap?”

Unfortunately, often enough none of these questions have any relation to your qualifications.

So if you already have a group, let's say 10 people, it counts more than having 10 titles. Don't get upset about it. Considering how easily weekend diplomas are handed out, it's obvious certificates are not relied on much.

Often then you're forced to accept difficult—or even absurd—time slots, out-of-the-way gyms and meager percentages.

You daringly start your course, uttering the fateful words of newcomers the world over:

“Well, why not... just to get a foot in the door.”

After a few verve-filled months, the next damper sets in. The Jungle has no mercy and won't let beginners in. You discover nobody ever explained a ton of essential stuff to you:

- HOW to teach, in general and specifically the techniques of your style;
- HOW to plan lessons and manage classes of different levels;
- HOW to get into the grapevine to attract people interested in your martial art;
- HOW to motivate your students and keep their number constant.²

Unfortunately, at least in my experience, only extremely well-structured, professional federations with a widespread training system are able to provide support at these times.

It's no wonder if you find yourself making mistakes every day and you can't figure out what caused them. Students come and go. There are months where you think you hit the right formula and others when, even though you feel you're giving fantastic lessons, you find yourself training just three people.

The opposite happens, too! Sometimes you have success and you don't know how to replicate it. A few months later you find yourself back at the same spot.

It's not surprising.

Exactly as for the technical aspect of your martial art, even teaching methods, motivation, and team coaching need to be studied, practiced.

and trained, at least as much as a competing athlete trains competition techniques. There's no getting out of this. Ever.

Otherwise—well, you need to be very determined and very lucky. Those who survive, learn. Perhaps they just learn to stay afloat, perhaps a little more. The others, though deserving, give up.

Many explanations are given: work, family, time, ailments.

Bullshit. The truth is, in most cases, the deal is not worth it for a very simple reason: **they don't know the rules of the game.**

It's truly a huge waste.

But hey—if you've gotten this far you have plenty of energy, dedication, and willpower, whether you're just starting out, or even more if you've been resisting for a while. Throwing in the towel would be a tremendous waste.

Will and passion are not enough without the right tools.

I fully realized how important it was to have the right tools is when, after a Mental Coaching course, I noticed a clear change in the attitude my pupils had toward me. It didn't matter that the course was very far from the world of martial arts and even physical training.

After that long learning journey as a Mental Coach I noticed right away that the qualities I had developed during my

training and subsequent apprenticeship allowed me to use my teacher's "work tools" with a different perspective.

However, I didn't feel as if I had made any significant changes in the way I taught. Yet I noticed my class seemed to respond better. At the start I dismissed the matter as a figment of my imagination, until one of my students, chatting after training, said to me: "Great lesson. You're the kind of instructor who could even teach embroidery and make it fun."

I remember I said something like: "Thanks, but let's not go that far!"

When I started holding courses twenty years ago I was full of will and energy. Maybe I was more resilient than others, but if I hadn't been lucky enough to meet the right people (in completely different fields, I must say), I would never have seen the other side of the coin and how having the correct tools makes a difference.

With the right information, you can develop your own teaching style right away and improve qualitatively within a short time.

So, thanks to these first tools I began to study and channel my energy in the right direction.

Despite this, it was a harrowing learning process.

Honestly?

I don't regret any of the issues I dealt with, nor the loads of mistakes I made. It all helped to bring me to where I am now.

Of course, if I had known just a tenth of what I know now, the journey would have been shorter and less tangled.

That's how I came to think of writing this handbook.

Seven strategies to make an important change of direction and start building on your achievements.

I also consider this book as a true antidote against a recurring epidemic: McDojo scammers and one-weekend instructor courses.

Too often these unscrupulous people land on virgin soil and, just like locusts, prey on the ground, throwing discredit on those who work seriously and professionally.

Obviously, this is not acceptable. But complaining serves no purpose, to change things one needs to act—by demonstrating a professional way of teaching.

How to use this book.

This book is designed as an extremely practical tool. It's a handbook, not a textbook.

Personally, I love big fat volumes the size of a dictionary, where a topic is examined in minute detail. Teaching is a topic that could well fill up hundreds of pages.

But in this case it would be useless to you.

Because to sensibly improve your results as a martial arts instructor (and practitioner, too) you don't need a lot of theory.

You need lots of practice.

Theory is useful in three different ways, none of which has a role if separate from practice.

- 1) Initially, a very basic amount of theory is essential to orient practice, else practice tends to be disorganized and produce results only after a very long time.
- 2) Within the process of practice, theory acts as support, anticipating issues when possible, and solving them when they do come up.
- 3) At crucial points of the process of growth, theoretical knowledge, this time much more structured and in-depth, enables one to make qualitative leaps forward and gain access to a new level of awareness.

Only then, once this new level has been reached, does a different path begin.

In an ideal process, the amount of theory is reduced to the bare essential at the beginning and grows as one goes on.

The mistake many make when approaching a new topic is to start off, instead, focusing right away on a large theoretical structure³.

No wonder they get stuck.

That's why this book is designed as a hands-on manual. Something you can read a bit at a time, with individual sessions that are easily identified so that you can go over them again when needed.

The topics follow a logical thread that supports practical use, providing tools that can yield immediate results.

At the end of each chapter you will find a summary and a link to the www.futurotrainer.it website, on which you will find a specific exercise to practice on.

My advice, therefore, is to read the chapters in order, learning about one strategy at a time. If you want to read the book all in one go, that's fine. However, once you've read it, I suggest you go back to the first strategy, read it again, and put it into practice, with the extra suggestions provided by the exercise.

Try it out, check the results, and repeat the procedure going on to the next strategy.

It is possible, as you go on, that each strategy may take a little longer than the one before. If it happens, please be assured that it is absolutely normal. Don't rush.

Refrain from trying to apply everything together. That's seldom an effective approach.

It's a bit like when you explain a punch-kick combination to a beginner, who rushes into it and tries to throw both at the same time.

Hold the panic. One thing at a time.

Consider that if you put into practice really well even just the first strategy, you will already be on a higher plane than the average instructor.

The path is long and it's not a dash, it's more like a marathon.

Again, before I leave you to the actual material, I urge you to try and really put into practice what you read here.

One of the greatest misconceptions about teaching is that teaching is something theoretical.

Teaching is a live, extremely practical matter, exactly like the martial art or combat system you teach.

You can't get good only in theory.

Read. Try things out. Assess.

See you on the other side of the mirror.

P.S.

Wait! I almost forgot!

If you're a “McDojo” instructor and you think you can use this book to add a couple more tricks up your conning sleeve, this book will be worthless to you.

Nothing can replace good old hard work.

I hope you haven't bought the book yet...

... if you have... sorry, no refunds.

Strategy #1 - The 3 rules.

The 3 rules you need to work on right away if you don't want to destroy your professional image.

*“You have to learn the rules of the game...
... and then you have to play better than anyone else”*

A. Einstein

You can't be a professional without behaving professionally.

I know, it's pretty obvious, but you'd be surprised how many instructors, in total good faith, think they behave professionally while making glaring mistakes.

It's a shame. Many instructors do have professional training, but they aren't perceived as professional simply because their approach is wrong.

Unfortunately, one can't afford this type of carelessness today.

The times when you could be an amateur instructor on a market with no particular demands are not in their dying days -they're dead and gone.

There's an ever-widening gap between instructors people see as professionals and those who are seen as “moonlighting” trainers. Very soon finding oneself at the vague borderline between the two will mean getting dragged toward the bottom.

For those who are at the bottom, the choice will be between turning their job into a mere hobby to keep up until they have time for it and enjoy it, or to give in to a price war in the jumble of McDojo masters.

Don't be surprised if people won't be able to tell the difference. Nor if a promising pupil of yours leaves you for one of the latter, because the other course is less expensive or their gym is closer.

Following rules of behavior that immediately show you are a professional is not an option any more. Today people are always in a rush, so it would take your athletes about 6 months of practice to notice how professional and competent you are in your field. Ok, maybe not that long, but close.

Rest assured that unless your students have fallen in love with your martial art or instinctively established a good feeling with your teaching approach, you will see them moving elsewhere. Add to this that there is less money around than ten years ago and today people are very demanding when they invest their time and money.

Ok, enough scaremongering. Let's get on to practical things.

I take for granted that you already have professional training. However, there are three aspects of professional behavior and perception that unfortunately tend to get neglected precisely by people with professional training.

These are not the only aspects involved, but they're the ones that leap out to the average student and can immediately jeopardize the way they see you.

That's why my advice is to read and apply these three basic rules:

- I. The first impression rule.
- II. The time management rule.
- III. The consistency rule.

I. The first impression rule.

First impressions count and there's no way to make a second “good first impression”.

You know, like something you might see in a movie: “We started off wrong, let's start all over again.”

Yeah. It wouldn't work.

Once you've been labeled, getting people to decide to remove that label and replace it with a completely different one is quite a challenge.

So it's much quicker to make the most of the first few seconds and make a good first impression. And yes, I do mean seconds.

in the first 3-7 seconds the person you have before you will already have developed a “skin-deep” reaction to you, and in the next 2 minutes they will seek out confirmation to rationally justify their instinctive feelings.

Here's a lovely story that was told me by a couple I know. I have both his and her version and they provide a perfect example of this principle.

They went to try out a martial arts class. As a former Sanda practitioner ⁴ he knew the environment. She had no experience, but had agreed to tag along to “at least try it.” It

⁴ It is a full-contact kickboxing style designed for kung fu practitioners. Tough stuff. It's a very basic explanation, but Sam Wikipedia can help you if you want to find out more.

was fantastic to hear them both describe the same first class. The description he gave was of a standard martial arts class. Ok, so maybe the instructor was a little too pompous and should have progressed a little slower for beginners.

She, on the other hand, was extremely annoyed. This is how I remember her story:

“I was already upset that he didn't pay attention to us when we got there. He had seen us all right, he just pretended not to. Then after a while he came up and asked us what we did. As soon as I said yoga he flippantly told me it's worthless, that a woman should always learn to fight to defend herself first. So I was already pissed off. The class was a total drag and he assigned me exercises without even checking whether I did them right or not. At the end, even though I told him again and again I'd only come to keep my boyfriend company he insisted I try the techniques on a partner. I warned him I was scared to hit him because I wasn't sure I had understood properly, but he didn't listen to me. Try, he said, try. So I tried. And you know what happened? I hit my sparring partner square on the nose. QED. I spent the rest of the class on the sidelines. Never again. “

If you miss the boat on the first impression, in most cases you won't have another chance. So in the initial phase, when athletes introduce themselves, smile, shake hands, and take note of their names. Exchange chitchat.

When people first come to your course they are already feeling out of place: it's a new environment, they're with a group of strangers.

They only know about you what they have read, if they've looked into it at all. The martial art you teach usually has a set of technical information and a series of fears and expectations about how the lesson will go. Things aren't much different if the student has already taken classes in the same style at a different school. Sometimes it can be even worse, because the people don't know what type of person you are, whether you'll judge their level, whether their new classmates will put them to the test.

I'm not joking. The point I'm making might seem obvious, but it often happens that an athlete at a trial lesson gets treated as a number, without being given the least consideration.

And that's when the more expert practitioners don't decide to step in and show who's in charge. I know, it sounds like the Cobra Kai dojo in the Karate Kid movies, but it does happen.

Some instructors think they shouldn't treat students with too much familiarity. Others are overfriendly. Every person has their own personal style, but you need to hit the right note to make people feel welcome.

That's why it's crucial, when you introduce yourself to a new pupil, to always be at your best.

Take care of your appearance so that you always look tidy. You can debate whether you should wear the formal outfit of your school, depending on what style you teach, but your overall appearance should never be sloppy.

Say you're one of those people who doesn't believe in appearances and you are true to the saying that you shouldn't judge a book by its cover. That's all well and good, and I may

even agree with you, but that's not the way the human mind works.

A slipshod appearance can make the people who see you for the first time extend this detail to the rest of your person. It doesn't matter how professional and scientific a training you offer.

Here's a practical example. Imagine someone needs to undergo major surgery. In the first scenario, they run into a surgeon who is well groomed and in clean scrubs. In the second scenario, they find a surgeon with disheveled hair wearing a baggy, stained nursing outfit and smoking a cigarette.

Now, I'm not saying the patient would refuse surgery in the second instance, but I'm ready to bet they'd be a little nervous as they get wheeled into the operating theater.

I know what you're thinking.

“This is how I've always done things, and nobody has ever said anything about it.”

Of course not, and there are several reasons for that. Perhaps in your martial art this aspect is not a big deal, or perhaps over time you've been known to have this sort of “style,” so people coming to your class are prepared. But the main reason nobody has ever told you is that when athletes try out a class, they have no interest in telling the instructor anything.

If they like it, they'll stay. If they feel they don't fit in, they'll leave.

Why should they be interested in telling you how you could improve.

Of course having a tidy appearance also extends to being pleasant—or, as the best masters constantly remind their students:

“When you set foot into the gym, remember to leave your problems out of the door.”

This is twice as important for teachers.