

What does Martial Arts mean to me?

I have thought long and hard on how to answer this question because karate means so many feelings for me that I can't even put into words. How do you put your entire life and passion onto one page? I've been doing karate for coming up to 7 years now. To think my mum forced me into my first lesson as a nervous, shy 9-year-old compared to where I am now is actually quite astonishing. I've had my try in many different types of martial arts, including kumite and kickboxing, but for me it has always been kata. It's something I can continuously work on and improve, it's the reason for so many opportunities and experiences in my life. When I step on the tatami all my worries disappear and it's just me. It's a feeling I can't even explain until you feel it, it's just safety and security, passion and strength, the 2-3 minutes that you must prove to everyone you are strong and that yours and your coaches work has not been wasted.

SESMA is my home. It's a place where I feel alive and free but also a place where I know I won't be judged for my actions. I've never been a stereotypical "normal" girl. I'm loud and crazy and let's just say I'm a character! Throughout my entire life my biggest insecurity has been my quirky side, people have always told me I'm weird and I always viewed that in a negative way. Especially when I entered high school, I very quickly became quiet, not allowing anyone to see that side of me apart from my family. That was until I met my people. The people who have the same passions as me, similar goals, and people who feel the same indescribable feeling I feel when I step on the tatami. They very quickly taught me that being "weird" is not negative, in fact it shows the individuality of your character. SESMA is a place where we don't judge the people we work with, we support them. We are teammates, friends, and most importantly family. Karate has taught me respect, discipline, and most importantly how impactful kindness is on someone's life.

My biggest inspiration in karate is not a World Champion or a WKF kata player. It is in fact the person who has put the most effort and time into my karate. My competition coach Will. He knows how to keep me in check and motivate me but is also the one reason I am where I am today. He's opened so many doors for me and my teammates and puts so much time and effort into leading us to strive to achieve our goals. He's taught me the importance in hard work and repetition and made me believe that my goals aren't unreachable, but I do have to work hard if I want to achieve them. My favourite saying of his is, "Well, we all have to be a little weird to be as successful as we want to be in this sport." I spend my hours either studying or doing karate, it is quite literally my life and the only thing I can imagine myself doing forever. I want to reach the top and am willing to put that work in. I'm determined to achieve my goals and I'm entirely lucky and grateful to have people and opportunities supporting me to achieve that goal.

I have also made so many friendships along the way, especially throughout the elite squad. SESMA is my family and so are my teammates. The memories that I have made with them will last a lifetime. They have taught me so many lessons and have allowed me to truly find my people. They truly are my favourite people in the world for more reasons that I can describe, a few being: Nyah for her laughs, Chloe for her bluntness, and Rhys for his humour. They have taught me it's okay to be "weird" and even nicer when you find your own set of "weird" people. We support each other like family and have such close bonds and friendships.

So, what life lesson has martial arts taught me? That I am weird. That's the easiest way to put it. Straightforward and to the point. But it's taught me to be proud of that, to embrace who I am, and to help others feel comfortable to be themselves. That being weird isn't always a bad thing. Everyone who is determined and dedicated enough to be one of the best at something is "weird". And even

though I'm nowhere near that point now. I am determined to be one of the best in the future and I will do everything I can to get there.

Karate makes me feel whole. It makes me feel happy and when I step out on that tatami, it's me against everything. It's the best feeling in the world and I never want it to stop. Achieving my black belt will allow me to get one step further to achieving my dreams. It's one of the upmost honours of a martial artist and has been a dream of mine since I was young. I want to be able to inspire and help others, but also feel proud of my grade and ability.

Karate is my everything and I thank anyone who has helped me along the way. I am truly grateful for the friendships I have made and the memories that will last a lifetime. Achieving my blackbelt would be another unforgettable memory and achievement for me.

Thank you for reading,

Isabel Swanborough