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Not just for kicks. Aikido is a great way to shape up the body and the mind

BY MATT WAKE

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SENECA — There are over 330,000 defensive responses within aikido, a martial art derived from samurai skills. Although James Bartee has earned black belts in several disciplines, even he doesn't profess to know every maneuver. Bartee honed his aikido skills during 25 years with United States Secret Services. From 1975 to 2000 he protected five presidents, including personally defending the families of Bill Clinton and George Bush.

"Your response is going to depend on the situation," said Bartee, who is 49 years old. "Is this attacker an imminent threat to your life or just some drunk? Any response should be a measured response using the minimal amount of force necessary."

When many people think of martial arts, it tends to evoke far-fetched images, like the nutty action in "Kill Bill." Yet, the clandestine techniques were originally developed for very practical purposes.

“Aikido is a great art for a smaller person,” Bartee said. “That’s why they were developed, to help someone overcome an attacker that is bigger, larger and stronger. It’s not about what you’re doing to another person — it’s about keeping them from doing it to you.”

In addition to its self-defense uses, aikido offers aerobic, anaerobic and stress reduction benefits.

“It’s a good way to clear your mind at the end of the day,” Bartee said.

Laymen often lump all the genres of martial arts together. However, there are clearly discernible differences. Taekwondo uses more kicks than hand strikes, a ratio of approximately 80 percent to 20 percent. Karate features close to an even split of kicks to hand maneuvers. Contrary to popular notion, karate was not first developed in Japan, but on the island of Okinawa, according to Bartee.

Native terrain often helped shaped each discipline.

“It’s harder to kick on the side of a mountain,” Bartee said

Aikido is perhaps the most practical of the martial arts. Developed by Morihei Ueshiba, aikido deals mainly with up-close grappling and on the ground

maneuvers. Learning how to absorb a fall is an essential part of the curriculum. Instead of returning force with greater force, circular movements are used to blend in with the attacker, unbalance the rogue and resolve the conflict as soon as possible.

Not surprisingly, aikido is translated as “the way of harmony with nature.”

Unlike several other martial arts, such as Taekwondo, Aikido doesn't hold competitions. “This isn't a sport, it's a way of life,” Bartee said.

According to Bartee, the Aikido mindset is useful in day-to-day scenarios, whether it's dealing with work or one's interpersonal relationships.

“Although the training in martial arts has its roots in fighting and combat, (Ueshiba) realized there had to be a reason for continuing the practices in modern times,” Bartee said.

To cultivate martial arts acumen, commitment is imperative. Practicing a regimen two or three times a week is necessary to make any progress.

Since relocating to the Seneca area in 2000, Bartee has served as sensei for Aikido of Lake Keowee. The aikido/self-defense club is associated with the Aikido Schools of Ueshiba — a world-recognized

organization with 100 affiliated schools.

“Awareness” is a common self-defense buzzword. However, it’s not as simple as just keeping your eyes peeled. When Bartee would walk into a room with a president behind him, the Secret Service agent would always “look for something that doesn’t fit.”

“Saying we need more awareness is like saying we need more money,” Bartee said. “We know that. But how do you actually make it happen?”

Bartee’s expertise includes the Aikido, Taekwondo, Bando Karate, Daito-ryu Aikijujutsu, Hapkido and Wrestling disciplines. The Virginia native studied under Mitsugi Saotome, the chief instructor of the Aikido Shobukan Dojo in Washington, D.C. Mitsugi Saotome apprenticed under the Morihei Ueshiba, for 15 years until the founder’s death in April 1969.

The US Secret Service veteran is in the process of opening up a showcase dojo in the Upstate in the near future. For more information on Bartee’s martial arts and self-defense seminars, please call (864) 414-7425.