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Why I . . . do combat sports

Specialist registrar Daniel Pan tells **Adrian O'Dowd** how combat sports helped him regain his mental and physical strength after being hospitalised with severe covid-19

Adrian O'Dowd

The covid-19 pandemic took a serious toll on the health of Daniel Pan. As a specialist registrar in infectious diseases and general medicine at University Hospitals of Leicester NHS Trust, he was at the sharp end of the response from the very beginning—so only too aware that his life was in the balance when he was admitted to intensive care with covid-19 weeks later.

The past few years have been “quite stressful,” he admits. “At the beginning of the pandemic, I saw the first patients with covid-19—and that quickly transformed into the majority of my workload.

“As a doctor specialising in infectious diseases, you're also expected to keep up to date with the latest treatments, infection prevention, and public health guidance,” he says. With that knowledge, being admitted to hospitalised himself and in intensive care was “particularly traumatising,” he says, since he knew that up to half of those who were admitted did not leave.

“My colleagues looked after me so well. They had a ventilator on standby. The intensive therapy nurses, in particular, were good at keeping me distracted and talking to me.”

His recovery took several months. A year on, overweight and with long covid symptoms, Pan, also a NIHR doctoral research fellow at the University of Leicester, rediscovered an old pastime from his student days—martial arts.

“When I started going to classes, I didn't realise just how good it would be for me, physically and mentally,” he says. “I used to do martial arts at university and at one point was part of the Great Britain Chinese martial arts squad. But I wanted to be the best doctor I could, and this required me to sacrifice time that I spent training after I graduated, so I gave it up.”

He returned to the sport in April 2021 after seeing an advert for a mixed martial arts class in Leicester. “I thought I could do it because of my martial arts background from university and I also thought I might find it relaxing.”

He trains at Leicester Shootfighters and does a variety of combat sports, including boxing, Muay Thai, wrestling, and Brazilian jiu-jitsu. “I revelled in being able to learn a new skill with people from diverse backgrounds,” he says, and now he goes four or five times a week.

“Like many doctors I worked longer hours during the pandemic so, initially, I found it hard to fit this in. However, over the course of the past year, I've chosen exercise over overtime for some days of the week.

This has proved beneficial—it's allowed me to improve my productivity and career goals rather than having any negative impact.”

Pan's weight has dropped from 100 kg to 82 kg, but he says it is his mental health that has benefited the most.

“Mentally, it has been amazing because when I go to that session, I can't think about anything else and I don't need to make decisions, like I constantly do at work. You have to focus on the activity because someone is punching you in the face or you are punching them. For those one or two hours, I am focused entirely on the training.”

Combat sports provide a release from everyday life, particularly work stresses, offering “a safe outlet for any tension and frustration that comes with my role within the NHS and the university,” Pan says.

Pan recently competed in his first interclub kick boxing fight in the ring, and says, “It was a great experience and felt like a real personal achievement.”

He also encourages other colleagues to try combat sports. “I have brought some of my colleagues to the gym. I would absolutely recommend it. Not everyone has to fight but it's such a great activity to do and so different from work.”

How to make the change:

- Look at websites such as YouTube and learn some basics
- If you've never been active before, attend some online sessions to get fitter
- Look for a good gym that can focus on beginners
- Commit—the biggest challenge is turning up for training or classes
- Look into the type of martial arts you might enjoy. There are also forms of martial arts that are not combat focused