

Release your inner Jedi: Students wield lightsabers in exercise class

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Marsden O'Neill, 30, of Miami, Florida, practices moves during a lightsaber combat class in Doral, Florida. The class combines concepts from the "Star Wars" movies with yoga and martial arts techniques. Barbara Corbellini Duarte/Sun Sentinel/TNS

DORAL, Fla. — When "Star Wars" fans have seen all the movies, studied the stories, and bought the cool toys, what's next? Now, some fans want to learn to move like Jedis.

Lightsabers in hand, fans are meeting every other Saturday in a group called Magic City Jedi. They gather for a new yoga-meets-dance class that incorporates "Star Wars" Jedi moves with martial arts. Think Lightsaber Combat 101.

The 90-minute classes are held at I Am Equilibrium yoga studio in Doral, Florida. Longtime friends Alfred Smith and Santiago Martinez started the class. The pair believes South Florida needs a place where people can play-fight with lightsabers to escape the daily grind of their jobs.

Martinez, 38, works at a Miami bank. "We knew there was going to be interest because there are 'Star Wars' fans everywhere," he said. "As old as the movies are, there are certain ideas and ways of behaving that can translate to real life.

“What kid doesn’t want to be Luke Skywalker or Han Solo? What kid doesn’t want to swing a stick like a laser? This is something that allows me to forget what is going on in my life and go into the class and live out a fantasy.”

Escaping Daily Grind With Little Fantasy

Smith said he studied the moves that lightsaber groups in San Francisco, California, and New York City, New York, performed. Based on what he saw, he began developing his own class with Santiago. Although their project was in the works for a long time, the December release of “Star Wars: Episode VII — The Force Awakens,” the series’ latest movie, “put fuel to the fire,” said Smith.

Smith, 40, is a yoga teacher in Fort Lauderdale, Florida. “I have been following this for some time, lightsaber combat in general,” said Smith. “I’m a big ‘Star Wars’ fan.”

At a recent Saturday class, 17 barefoot men, women and children lined up in rows before Smith and Martinez. Some students brought their own fancy toy lightsabers that light up and make electronic laserlike sounds. Others used the class sabers made of plastic pipes wrapped in colorful pool noodles.

“Star Wars”-themed shirts were everywhere. A teen girl had one that read: “Physically, I’m here, mentally I’m in a galaxy far, far away.”

Learning Mental Discipline — Like A Jedi

Before they could learn Yoda’s moves, however, the students had some meditation and yoga to do.

“This is balance, this is presence, attention,” Smith told the students as they performed the tree pose. “Throughout the movements and throughout the practice, you are engaged.”

The teachers then reviewed lightsaber defensive and offensive techniques.

With their strongest foot forward, students lurched their sabers downward to each side, and then up to the mid-section and eventually to the head.

“Imagine you are drawing an ‘S,’” Smith said, watching as the students practiced in pairs.

One, Two, Three — Strike!

Each lesson tied into a Jedi theme.

“A Jedi is always aware of everything, not just what they are focusing on but also their surroundings,” Smith said.

Although the teachers were serious, some of the wannabe Jedis giggled as they lifted their sabers and struck their partners. One student wore a GoPro camera on his headband to capture every step.

The students learned several new moves. One was called a “flourish,” scurrying forward or back while twirling the lightsaber like a baton. They also learned how to “bash,” which is a fast forward attack that ends with a recoil.

“If you think of a snake, it’s a quick strike,” said Santiago, as he demonstrated the move. “Every ‘Star Wars’ movie starts with a bash. ... It’s a hit and pull back.”

Class ended with a final meditation.

Making Yoda Proud

Everyone ended the class with a smile. Most agreed it made for a fun workout.

“You really feel like a Jedi,” said Valerie Villar, 26, of Kendall, Florida, who attended the class with boyfriend Gerry Brenes, 29.

“It’s a great opportunity to continue to live out that fantasy,” said Brenes. “Just the sense of centering yourself and meditating.”

Victoria Diaz, 17, brought her best friend to class. She said she signed up because she “wanted to learn how to become a Jedi, and this is the closest thing to becoming one.”

The class was Frankie Andollo’s third. The 35-year-old from Coral Gables, Florida, brought his copy of Luke Skywalker’s green lightsaber to class and wore a T-shirt from the new movie.