

The Ultimate Martial Artist

Book Line:	Ultimate Series	SKU:	101
Book Type:	Rules Supplement	Formats:	Hardcopy, PDF
Author:	Steven S. Long	Released:	May, 2002
Cost:	24.95\$	ISBN:	1-58366-001-1
Page Count:	192	Hero Designer:	Yes (SKU: 705)
Common Abbreviations:	UMA	Print Status:	Out Of Print

The Review:

Reviewed By Gordon Feiner

The Upside:

The Ultimate Martial Artist takes a look at Martial Arts in the HERO System. From how to simulate various martial arts in HERO to creating your own maneuvers and styles.

Chapter One - Martial Arts Styles And Maneuvers. The first chapter covers a broad spectrum of material from new maneuvers, martial arts (both real and fictional), creating new maneuvers and styles and related material.

Part one, Way Of The Hero, starts with an expanded list of Martial Maneuvers, both Hand-To-Hand and Ranged. There's a short section on how Maneuvers and Weapons interact and which weapons can be used with which maneuvers. The last section is probably the most useful covering Learning Martial Arts. How to treat learning a new art in game from scratch (instead of at character creation with a back story), the rate of learning and other skills that are appropriate to learn along with the Martial Maneuvers. There is also a discussion on adding multiple styles or maneuvers from another martial style to one already known. With a useful section on how to treat learning new styles where the mechanics of the Martial Maneuvers overlap. Lastly there is a piece on Belts And Ranks and suggestions for several ways to measure that in the HERO System.

Parts two and three are the Martial Arts themselves. First is real world Martial Arts, then Fictional Martial Arts. There are fifty-nine real world arts described, with over a hundred variants and sub-styles with them. And there are thirteen fictional arts described. Both sections are presented in the same manner, starting with a history of each art. The histories range from brief to moderately detailed, this is not a comprehensive look at the history of martial arts around the world. They provide enough information so a group playing in a given time period will know which arts are around to be learned. After that the descriptions provide the Maneuvers used with the art. Optional Rules, which provides information for using Hit Locations with various maneuvers. Special Abilities describes and defines extraordinary abilities attributed to the art and its practitioners (such as the fantastic feats of Kung Fu Masters). Sub-styles describes any variants or off shoots from the main Martial Art, giving information on which maneuvers best define it.

Next is an entire section on Advanced Ninjutsu, after all what's a modern martial arts resource without a section on ninja. It covers a brief history of ninja in the real world, and provides a Package Deal for Ninja Characters. After that it covers creating more cinematic ninja. First it provides four fictional ninja styles of different clans. Second it gives details on Special Abilities, both mundane and mystic. The mundane are rooted in actual abilities displayed by historical ninja, the mystic are from

the fantastic abilities attributed to them. Third there is a section on Equipment used by the ninja, much of it historically accurate. The last part covers ninja from other lands, since Japan wasn't the only place where this particular class existed.

Parts five and six cover Martial Arts and Maneuver Creation. Opening with a discussion on how to go about creating a new Martial Art from scratch and going on to creating new Martial Maneuvers. First is Hand-To-Hand maneuvers, then Ranged maneuvers. The rules are simple, easily followed and versatile. Creating martial maneuver is a two step process, decide on the Base of the maneuver, and then add Elements to specialize it. Elements come in two forms Helpful and Restrictive, as they imply the first adds bonuses (such as increased Offense) and the second adds negative elements (such as decreased Offense). The only real restriction is the final cost must be no lower than three point and no higher than five, unless the GM rules otherwise. These rules alone are worth the cost of the book. It finishes off with guidelines for fleshing out a new Martial Art with skills, weapon elements and other pertinent information.

The last section of Chapter One covers adding Advantages to Martial Maneuvers. Which is a moderately convoluted mess of figuring out how much a Martial Maneuver is worth in Active Points and creating a form of Naked Advantage for the Maneuver. While it's not that difficult it's certainly one of the more esoteric set of rules in the system. It's also suggested that this not be a common practice in games. While figuring out how much an Advantage costs is a minor pain, the added flavor to a Martial Art can be worth the benefit. It can be used to elevate Martial Arts to the fantastic, making them feel epic without the need to delve into Powers.

Chapter Two - Character Creation. This chapter starts out with a look at various Character Archetypes for Martial Artists, drawn from popular culture and source material. These provide help on backgrounds and motivations to focus a character on being a Martial Artist instead of just someone who knows some fancy moves.

The next sections cover how Skills, Perks, Talents, Powers, Power Advantages and Limitations and Disadvantages can be used in Martial Arts campaigns for Martial Artists to make them distinct in other types of genre's. The Powers section stands out as particularly useful as it provides a number of example write-ups and interesting uses for Powers. As well as a few new concepts such as Stances, Feints and some interesting builds for Aid.

Chapter Three - Combat. This chapter is divided into three sections, Combat Maneuvers, Special Cases and Optional Rules, and Weapons. Combat Maneuvers is expanded information on the standard and optional maneuvers from the main rule set. Of particular usefulness are the expanded rules for Grabs, Throws and Nerve Strike maneuvers.

Special Cases and Optional Rules covers a number of situations that can be used to make martial arts, and campaigns using them, more flavorful. There are number of interesting and expanded rules for various details, most include situations common to games focused on hand-to-hand combat such as being blinded, bound, cutting through barriers, and hidden weapons. There are few Optional Rules in this section that stand out as being either particularly useful, or interesting. First is Critical Hits which HERO does not have as a default. Interposing expands the rules for one character to defend another character more directly. Mystery damage can add a sense of tension to combat. And Sequence Attacks are particularly interesting, and common occurrences in Martial Arts source material. There are also rules for fighting on unusual surfaces (such as hills, zero-g, on the ground or flying).

Martial Arts Weapons covers power builds and descriptions for over one-hundred martial weapons used through out history from the mundane strait-razor to the iron mandarin duck. This section

greatly expands the available weapons write-ups from the main rules. There is also a short part on armor, which isn't common in Martial Arts Campaigns, covering Samurai Armor, Kendo Armor, Karate Armor, and Leather Hand Wrappings (the predecessor to boxing gloves). The section finalizes by gathering all the new Limitations for weapons and armor built in the chapter into one list.

The Downside:

This was the first Ultimate Series book, and in fact the first published supplement for HERO Fifth Edition. As such the organization of later books isn't here. Chapter one especially could have been broken down into several chapters, as is it seems to be a bit of a clustered mass of information. The Powers section from Chapter Two contains a number of write-ups that could have been moved to their own section of the book for easier organization.

No sample characters are provided. It would have been nice to see several characters from various genre's with a martial arts focus as examples.

The Otherside:

Given this is mostly HERO System mechanics for martial arts, martial weapons and dealing with combat there isn't a whole lot for the non-hero gamer. For those who don't play Martial Artists or predominately Martial Artist Campaigns with HERO this book can still go a long way to making Martial Arts interesting.

It has been said this is one of the most essential books to get after the main rules. While I wouldn't go that far, I would put it in the top five Hero Books in terms of overall usefulness to a game. Especially a game that wants to focus on hand-to-hand combat over other aspects.

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