

Relaxed Tension for Fighters

By Brian Copeland, RKC

Anyone who caught the De La Hoya vs. Mayweather fight (5/5/2007) will recall De La Hoya coming out strong in the early rounds and then getting fatigued as the fight went into the later rounds while Mayweather seemed just as fresh in the later rounds as the early ones.

Now before the passionate onslaughts of “who should have won” and “he did this” or “didn’t do that” let’s just analyze and learn from the athletic qualities and save the controversies for some online forum shall we?

The bottom line was that Mayweather was much more relaxed and De La Hoya was much more tense during the fight.

The importance of an athlete mastering the skills of tension and relaxation can’t be overstated.

There are two different sides of the tension coin. One is to generate as much full-body tension as possible the other is to be as relaxed as possible. But a common question I hear new trainees ask is which one is correct or when to use one versus the other. Here are some quick guidelines:

Goals:

- To lift as much weight as possible
- To protect the joints while lifting a heavy or awkward object
- To protect an injury while lifting something
- To make your muscles look really toned while doing anything in front of a cute girl (guys are so sad, and yes I do it too)

= Get Tight!

Goals:

- To lift a lighter weight as many times as possible
- To keep going as long as possible in virtually any activity
- To move as fast as possible in a sub-maximal weight movement (like a punch or kick)

= Relax!

So a powerlifter who is going for his 1-rep max attempt in the deadlift would put on as much tension as he or she could possibly muster. The marathon runner would try to stay as loose as he or she could possibly be.

Since most sports and no martial arts are on those extremes of the strength/endurance envelope the rest of us must learn to master the fine art of tension vs. relaxation.

For instance, in a punch if one is too loose they will have no power but if they are too tight they will be punching with the brakes on and will be too slow and still have no power. Our puncher must figure out the exact timing of when to tense, how hard to tense and when to be relaxed. While some athletes will naturally figure this out I have noticed that most struggle with it.

How to master tension vs. relaxation:

First off we must consider the principle of relaxed tension. Huh? Isn't that an oxymoron? Let's take our punch again. If we are too loose we will first have to contract the musculature (tense up) to fire the punch. We need to be just tense enough and in just the right places so that we have some spring in our bodies. Consider a rubber band, if it is loose it won't snap, but load some tension in it and it becomes springy and will snap.

So 'relaxed tension' is springiness in a fairly relaxed body.

Now if we overdo it with the tension we lose our springiness and become stiff. We also tire out early and we lose the ability to efficiently transfer force from the hips through the arms or legs in our strikes. You must find that happy medium.

How do you find that happy medium? Oh it is so simple; PRACTICE.

Seriously, the more you practice your techniques as a fighter the more familiar your body becomes with the movement and the more efficient the body becomes with tension/ relaxation. You learn to stay loose but tense right before contact and all the way through your target for instance.



Bruce Lee spoke and wrote often of springy tension

Another important point is to match practice as close to actual fighting circumstances as possible. So if you are going to fight in a boxing match don't

train in kickboxing before the fight. You will learn to over rely on your kicks and will tense up when you are faced with only being able to use your hands. This is a psychological and physiological reaction you can't control. Ever see an endurance athlete try a new sport that they aren't used to? They tire out very quickly, go figure. Their bodies are tensing up because they aren't familiar with the amount of force required to accomplish the goal of the activities they are performing.

Also if you have never fought a bigger person you may be intimidated by their size and perceived strength/toughness and that will cause tension by the means of psychological stress.



Make sure to practice with scary buff bald dudes to get over your fear of them.

Aside from practicing your chosen martial art there are some exercises that are very good at teaching one to master tension and relaxation:

- Kettlebell Swings
- Kettlebell Snatches
- Kettlebell Clean and Jerks

Why kettlebell instead of barbell you ask? In the kettlebell versions there exists the ability to go for higher reps safely which facilitates the ability to cultivate a keen awareness of tension and relaxation. Believe you me, when you are cranking away at high rep kettlebell clean and jerks you will learn to relax whenever you can! Sure there are other exercises, but these are some staples.

Here is a quick summary:

- High tension equals more strength but faster fatigue
- Relaxation equals slower to fatigue but less strength
- Both extremes equal slower less powerful strikes
- Learn to cultivate a springy relaxed tension
- Practice techniques to learn to move as efficiently as possible
- Train in circumstances as close to the combat/competition you will actually face.
 - Tension comes from the body being in an unfamiliar situation and not knowing how much tension is required to achieve an action.

- Tension also is mental/ psychological so learn to deal with the demands you will face in actual combat to avoid too much tension caused by stress.
- Practice exercises that push the fatigue envelope and require tension to move the weights but relaxation to avoid early fatigue.

Brian Copeland is a Denver, Colorado based strength and conditioning coach, personal trainer and Certified Russian Kettlebell Instructor. Brian specializes in functional strength and athletic training, conditioning for martial artists, kettlebell lifting, fat loss and muscle gain. Brian has also rehabilitated several severe lower back injuries, including his own, through the use of "proper" strength and flexibility training.

Brian is available for private and group lessons and personal program design. If you are tired of not seeing results contact Brian, he will design a personalized program based on YOUR goals, YOUR time and YOUR lifestyle.

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