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RHYTHM OF A WORKOUT



GEORGE KAM

- >> **Age:** 85
- >> **Favorite pastimes:** Fishing and watching wrestling
- >> **Biggest inspiration:** His speed boxing students
- >> **Interesting encounter:** Taught two legally blind people to speed-box. "It was fascinating to watch them walk in with their sticks and put the speed bag up, and they learned faster than some of the guys with perfect eyes," Kam said.
- >> **Personal speed boxing lessons:** 4-7 p.m. Mondays, 4-10 p.m. Wednesdays and Fridays at the Nuuanu YMCA on a first-come, first-served basis

For an 85-year-old, speed boxing is his passion and teaching others is his reward

By Deborah Manog
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George Kam's forehead wrinkled slightly as he closed his eyes and reminisced about his first encounter with a speed bag, decades ago in the shade of a colossal mango tree.

Kam was 13 when his uncle called him into the backyard of their Kalihi Valley home to help him hang a ratty old speed bag and a heavy punching bag from the branches of the mango tree. There, in the shade of the tree, Kam learned the boxing basics.

As he and his uncle threw punches, ripe orange mangoes rained down around them, echoing the sounds of their clenched fists as they smacked the leather bags over and over and over.

"That racket, that tat-tat-tat, it was like music to me," Kam recalled. "That's why I really liked it, because of the sound."

It was also a great strength

and cardiovascular workout, Kam said, remembering that his arms felt noticeably stronger, as did his shoulders and back.

Speed boxing, the coordinated repetition of fists on a speed bag, became a regular part of Kam's teenage years. He never boxed in a ring or hit an opponent, but he fell in love with the staccato sound of speed boxing. Then adulthood arrived and Kam had to replace one love for another.

"I got married and moved away, the mango tree died, no more the speed bag anymore," Kam said after opening his eyes.

THE MEMORY OF his boxing origins was quickly replaced by the escalating sound of punches ricocheting off a nearby speed bag in a small room at the Nuuanu YMCA. The private boxing room was built specifically for the 85-year-old Kam to teach speed boxing to YMCA members, for free, three times a week. Kam said the practice requires total concentration and has kept his mind sharp and his body physically active.

Freddy Bolosan, left, observes George Kam working on the speed bag at the Nuuanu YMCA. Bolosan learned speed boxing from Kam, a longtime speed-boxing instructor who volunteers three days a week at the YMCA, giving one-on-one lessons.

But even though Kam can't imagine life without speed boxing, he had lived without it for years and only found it again by chance.

In 1986, Kam had just retired from his job as an electronic technician at GTE Hawaiian Tel, and he needed something to keep himself busy. He asked his dentist to recommend a good gym, and that same day, the dentist walked Kam over to the Nuuanu YMCA.

Kam instantly spotted three speed bags as soon as he walked into the Nuuanu YMCA weight room and thought, "Whoa, I think I goin' like this place."

By watching others use the speed bag, Kam's rekindled skills grew rapidly, and curious gym members sought out his

boxing advice. Kam said he realized early on that his passion was not to become the best puncher, but the best teacher.

Sharing his knowledge with others in the art of speed boxing still fills Kam with a sense of purpose.

"Getting you to see what I see, hear what I hear and feel what I feel — that's the hardest part," Kam said.

THE FIRST THING Kam teaches newcomers is to loosen up and become as relaxed as a motionless speed bag hanging in front of them.

For Dean Tomino, a 51-year-old Hilton Hawaiian Village guest services agent from Kalihi, that was the hardest concept to learn.

"When I come to punch after work, I'm just mad and take out all my stress," Tomino said as he demonstrated how he used to aggressively attack the speed bag and bounce it in all directions. Tomino learned to calmly keep his eyes on the bag darting around in front of him so that he could repeatedly

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KAM: Sound of speed bag is like music to local retiree

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connect his fists and elbows with it in a fluid motion.

"When I see somebody learn and is happy, then I know I did my job," Kam said as he watched Tomino turn his punches into a musical medley of punching patterns. "That's my satisfaction."

Freddy Bolosan, who graduated from Kam's informal speed boxing program several months ago, said Kam is a patient instructor.

"He's very truthful about your performance, and he'll correct your mistakes," said Bolosan, a 31-year-old credit analyst at Hawaii State Federal Credit Union. "He'll only go as fast as you learn, at a pace you're comfortable with."

The spry Kam, who struggles to control his gout and high blood pressure, said teaching the sport to a younger crowd allows him to grow old gracefully. Meet-

ing new people and interacting with different personalities make him feel young. It's no surprise that Kam regards the Nuuanu speed boxing room as a second home and that he even found comfort here when his wife died in 2004.

"This room, all these people, that's what keeps me going," Kam said.

He said he'll teach as long as he can. He wants everyone to fall in love with a speed bag.

"To hear you say one day, 'George, I went put one up in my house,'" Kam said, "that is my biggest reward."

And music to his ears.

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