

STORY AND PHOTOS BY CLARA LOCK

FIGHTING TO THE TOP

Youth is more often associated with parties and revelry than financial independence, but that has not stopped this 24-year-old who went from overweight kid to self-defence instructor, and is now the owner of his own gym.



When Mr. Ong Guanlong picked up martial arts more than 10 years ago in a bid to ward off school bullies, never did he imagine it would lead to his life's calling. "I was chubby and short," says Mr. Ong ruefully, pulling out an old photo for evidence.

But the Nanyang Polytechnic engineering student is now one of three owners of Protect-SG, a gym specialising in Krav Maga, the Israeli art of self-defence.

Mr. Ong is well versed in a variety of hand-to-hand combat techniques including taekwondo, wushu, muay thai and wing chun. He picked up Krav Maga over a year ago, and was instantly drawn to it because of its practical nature.

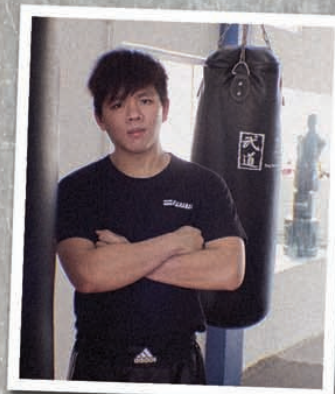
Krav Maga training simulates real-life situations, and teaches students how to react fast and defend themselves from an attacker to get out of a situation safe and alive.

At Protect-SG, located atop a five-storey walk-up that is a workout in itself, students clad in protective gear pummel each other aggressively in what is known as a milling drill, as they learn to throw punches and deflect blows.

They are also taught to disarm an attacker, practicing on each other with rubber guns and knives in a safe and controlled environment.

Mr. Ong recounted how a friend of his, who had picked up the basics of Krav Maga, was able to defend himself when he was wrongfully attacked outside a bar. "With other kinds of martial arts, the techniques may be pretty and fanciful, but it doesn't mean they're useful," he said.

That belief, coupled with the faith of his older brother and a like-minded friend, led to the trio setting up Protect-SG last year.



They pumped a total of '20 to 30 thousand' into the business, all of which came out of their own pockets. And between school and running the gym, they have time for little else.

"We're here every day," said Mr. Ong, who has cut down heavily on personal expenses since starting the business. He added, with a laugh: "Guys also want to go shopping too, you know."

Mr Ong's dedication and sacrifice has convinced his parents, who initially thought a gym was 'not practical', that he is serious about making this a career.

"I love being active, so I cannot imagine myself at a desk job," revealed Mr Ong, "Martial arts is my interest, my hobby, my everything."



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