The good fight

They don booties, gloves and shiny black helmets. They pad their torsos. They pop in mouthguards. Then, the dozen people gathered on this snowy Friday evening await word from their teacher.

“Find a partner,” Master Allan Kunstmann instructs. The students comply, pairing up based on size and age—kids with kids, teens with teens, and adults with adults.


With fists raised, family medicine resident Kyrstin Ball, DO, begins hopping from side to side. She jabs at her partner, flips around, kicks him in the shoulder, and then, again, in the back.

“Sorry,” Ball says, breathlessly. The combatants dance around each other a few seconds more before Ball’s counterpart punches. She punches in return. He kicks; she kicks back; and the round is up.

“Thanks,” Ball says, giving her classmate a half-hug before springing away to square off against someone else.

During sparring night at USA Karate, housed in a Maple Grove, Minnesota, strip-mall studio, Ball is in her glory, laughing and grunting as she works up a sweat. “It’s a time that you can take everything that you’ve learned throughout the week, put it to a test, and see how it works,” she says.

After studying karate for 14 years, she has plenty to put into practice. One of the most skilled participants in the room, Ball sometimes plays the part of coach, encouraging her partners even as they attempt to land their blows. She allows one opponent to put his foot on her hip, push off, spin around, and kick her on the side of the head. “That was nice,” she tells him.

Within the culture surrounding karate, Ball explains, individuals who have more experience help those who have less.

Ball has been coming to this studio since she “dove in, headfirst” to begin practicing the martial art at age 15. Attending classes six times a week, she earned a black belt in less than a year (a school record only recently broken). She continued classes while playing three sports a year in high school and while attending the University of Minnesota as an undergrad. She’s competed in tournaments and taught at the studio. The only time karate took a back seat in her life was when she went off to Lake Erie College of Osteopathic Medicine in Erie, Pennsylvania.

Ball says karate has made her strong (she can break two boards with her hands—and three with her feet); limber (she can do horizontal splits); and able to defend herself against nearly anyone. It’s also helped build confidence and focus, two traits she needed when trying to get into medical school. As the first in her
family to pursue a health care career, she found the application process to be “a huge learning curve,” she recalls.

Now married, a mother, and in her first year of the St. John’s Hospital family medicine residency program at the University of Minnesota, Ball makes the 25-mile trek, two or three times a week, back to the karate school she loves. For her, the place is home. It’s not only where she’s chalked up many accomplishments (Ball is now a fourth-degree black belt); it’s also where she maintains connections with friends and family. “There was one point where it was me, my little sister, my older brother, my dad and two of my cousins who all went to karate there,” she says. Today, Ball is often accompanied by her husband and son. “It’s kind of like my constant,” she says. “It’s my time that I can do something I love and relax at the end of the day. It’s with people I’ve known for a long time, and it makes me feel more connected with the world.” – CARMEN PEOTA