

# Everybody Is 'Cane Fu' Fighting At Senior Centers, So Watch Out

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## Older People Get Healthful Exercise And Learn to Wield a Ready Weapon

BY JENNIFER LEVITZ

CENTERVILLE, Ohio—The St. Leonard retirement village here has a whole new way of thinking about recreation: Bingo has made way for cane fighting.

"Down on top of the head and up between the groin!" urges instructor Debra Stewart, of nearby Chung's Academy of Martial Arts, commanding a dozen gray-haired students swinging canes at imaginary attackers. "Stomp him! Dig it in there. Do it hard!"

Jim Ghory, an 82-year-old retired toolmaker, volunteers to take a few demonstration shots at Ms. Stewart, who has a black belt in tae kwon do, a Korean martial-arts discipline. "You want [it in] the collarbone or the ribs?" he asks.



Jim Ghory

Senior centers and retirement communities are looking for new ways to promote exercise in order to stave off physical decline. Older people interested in honing their self-defense skills, meanwhile, are delighted

to find that something they already own can be used as a weapon.

"Oh my gosh, it's a huge hit," says Lena Mast, manager at Lodges at Naylor Mill, an independent-living complex for seniors in Salisbury, Md. Ms. Mast began offering cane classes for residents in April and says "it's now the top thing they look forward to."

Mitchell's Martial Arts, the school hired by Lodges, says it is teaching cane fighting at five senior centers a week, up from one  
*Please turn to page A8*

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Continued from Page One

last year, and also has been demonstrating the cane at local health fairs. Cane Masters, in Incline Village, near Reno, Nev., one of a number of schools that report rising demand from seniors, expects to teach 110 cane-fighting classes around the country this year.

Martial Oceans International, a California cruise company, is planning to offer its first classes in cane fighting on a trip to Mexico this month. On YouTube, a video titled "Granny C. Takes on the BulletMan!" shows an agile woman in her seventies jabbing and taking down a man in a helmet pretending in a cane class to be an intruder.

Many credit the rise of cane fighting to Mark Shuey, a 61-year-old tae kwon do and hapkido expert who owns Cane Masters. Mr. Shuey started studying cane moves in earnest about 10 years ago while practicing hapkido, which incorporates stick fighting at advanced levels. At the time, his father was starting to use a walking stick, and he had heard reports of attacks on seniors who carried canes but didn't know how to use them to fight back. By 2003, the Cana-

dian magazine Martial Arts Experts was calling canes "the weapon you can take anywhere." Cane fighting, also called "combat" cane or "cane fu," has been endorsed by at least eight martial-arts organizations.

Instructors say any kind of cane is fine for self-defense, including aluminum canes or the wooden canes made of pine available at the drugstore. But best are hard-wood canes made of hickory or oak that don't easily break on impact.

Mr. Shuey travels the world teaching his "American Cane System" curriculum to other martial-arts teachers. He says that in two years the number of instructors who teach it has tripled to about 300.

The cane has a rich history as a weapon, notably in the U.S. Capitol. A number of 19th-century canings at the Capitol included a brutal 1856 attack on the Senate floor by South Carolina Rep. Preston Brooks on abolitionist Massachusetts Sen. Charles Sumner, who had mocked a relative of Mr.

Brooks in a speech. Mr. Sumner was carried away unconscious and bleeding. It took him years to recover.

Most of the seniors who take cane classes rarely wield them against anyone. But Bill Carter, a 56-year-old who took a class

from Mr. Shuey in Florida a few years ago, says the instruction came in handy one day in April last year when he walked into his house in suburban Jacksonville to find an intruder in his kitchen taking TV dinners from the freezer. As the man approached him, "I popped him on the kneecap," Mr. Carter says, and "hooked him behind the neck, and was able to guide him to the door."

Cane-fighting converts say one of the best things about the cane is that it's a legal weapon that can be carried anywhere, unconcealed. "No one will tell you can't take it on an airplane," says Victor Cushing, a 68-year-old who teaches women's self-defense at the University of Scranton, in Pennsylvania.

The Department of Home-



Bill Carter

## Speak Softly, Carry a Curved Stick

An example of a cane-fighting maneuver, the defensive two-handed jab:



Source: Cane Masters International Association

land Security says it does allow canes as carry-ons on planes. "Just like we allow walkers or crutches," says Carrie Harmon, spokeswoman for the Transportation Security Administration, a division of the department. But, she cautions, all these devices "have to go through the X-ray machine."

According to the agency, baseball bats, cricket bats, bows and arrows, golf clubs, hockey sticks, pool cues, axes, hatchets, cattle prods, crowbars, billy clubs, brass knuckles, meat cleavers, ice picks, pellet guns, stun guns, spear guns, saws, swords, sabers and snow globes are also allowed—but they must ride in the luggage compartment.

Mr. Cushing doesn't need a cane for support but totes one everywhere. His repertoire of

moves includes "bopping" the fragile bones on top of the foot ("now you've got an attacker who's limping away"), or whipping it against the shins ("hurts like the devil").

Senior centers refer to cane classes as a gentle form of exercise. But Mr. Cushing worries that some instructors are teaching overly fancy moves that could make older people lose their balance. Swinging the cane against the shins is one thing, he says, but "if you actually need the cane for balance, you can't be swinging it in the air." You'll fall over.

Carol Vincent, an 85-year-old retired teacher, joined the classes at St. Leonard's, in Centerville, to feel safer on her daily walks in the woods. Ms. Vincent says she realized her own strength in an exercise where

she had to use her cane to break the grip of a classmate who grabbed her from behind. "I think I hurt one woman," she said. "She's never been back; I shouldn't have pulled the cane so hard."

John Myers, 66 and retired from a plant that made oil seals, was grabbed around the neck in a mock attack by Ms. Stewart's fellow instructor, Bob Dempsey. Mr. Myers's face reddened. He could feel himself getting angry. "I wanted to hit him," Mr. Myers said later.

Instead, he used his cane to pull down and break his attacker's grip. Ms. Stewart coached, "Stomp on his foot, which is going to create some pain!" He did. Then, as taught, Mr. Myers jabbed the cane's tip behind him, into Mr. Dempsey's ribs. Mr. Dempsey fell back, feigning defeat, but later he described Mr. Myers as "ferocious."

"He could take me down," Mr. Dempsey said.

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ONLINE TODAY: Watch demonstrations of cane-defense moves, at [WSJ.com/OnlineToday](http://WSJ.com/OnlineToday).



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