

stick comb

By the 19th century, the walking stick had become the hallmark of distinction, authority and strength. For the gentlemen of the era, it was not only an indispensable fashion accessory but also a source of confidence, security and non-verbal deterrence on the streets of Europe.

In its various designs and configurations, the walking stick was also valued at home, where it served as an objet d'art and an effective weapon against invaders.

The French developed the walking stick into a formidable self-defense tool that became known as *la canne*. Adopted into the traditional *savate* training halls of the 1800s, it's remained by the side of the kicking art for more than 200 years.

The Walking-Stick Fighting Method of Savate

by Craig Gemeiner

at

Inspiration and Perspiration

Pierre Vigny was one of the most innovative masters of *la canne*. Born in France in 1869, he began training in *savate*, English boxing and fencing at a young age. During his teenage years, he often ventured from one academy to another, learning new techniques and testing his skills against anyone who'd pick up a sword, stick or pair of boxing gloves.

In 1886 he joined the army, where he served as the fencing master for the second regiment of the French artillery at Grenoble. After leaving the military in 1889, he moved to Geneva and opened a combat academy. During this period, he devoted several years to the perfection of his own method of *la canne*.

Vigny devised a system that could be described as a mixture of several indigenous European self-defense methods.

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PASSING THE STICK: An ambidextrous approach to training is emphasized in the Vigny walking-stick method of self-defense. To illustrate, Craig Gemeiner (left) adopts the high rear guard as he faces his adversary (1). He initiates a strike to the face with his rear hand (2), but midway through the movement, he transfers the stick to his left hand (3). Gemeiner completes the strike using the extended reach provided by the hand switch (4).

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GUARD BY RESISTANCE: Entry maneuvers, infighting and disarms are valuable skills for overpowering an enemy who's armed with a heavier stick. Standing in the front guard with his stick held low, Craig Gemeiner (left) invites an attack to the head (1). He meets the opponent's strike with a guard by resistance (2), then gains ground by stepping forward with his rear foot while seizing the man's elbow and forcing him to shift his weight onto his rear leg (3). Before the opponent can regain his balance, Gemeiner moves his left foot back, creating the distance he needs to deliver several horizontal strikes to the knee (4).

Many of the passes, thrusts and wards resembled techniques from German swordsmanship, and a collection of the foot skills were borrowed from savate and French boxing.

Upon receiving an offer from Edward W. Barton-Wright to assume the position of chief instructor at the Bartitsu School of Self-Defence, Vigny relocated to England in the late 1890s and introduced la canne and savate to the British. During his time there, he met and trained with two celebrated *jujutsu* instructors: Yukio Tani and S.K. Uyenishi. From them, he acquired new techniques for his already efficient repertoire of self-defense skills, after which he formulated his method of personal combat, which included moves from wrestling, savate, *jujutsu* and sword dueling. The addition of the new techniques was deemed necessary because of the rise of hooliganism throughout England.

Perfection of the Art

Vigny's skill as a fighter and teacher attracted the attention of both the working class and the aristocracy. He served as a coach at the London Boxing Club and instructed at Aldershot Military School. Seeking better business opportunities, he moved to London, where he opened a school in 1903 under the patronage of Grand Duke Michael of Russia and became director and manager of the New School of Self-Defence and Fencing Academy. Interestingly, his wife also taught there, offering ladies instruction in the use of the parasol and the steel-spiked umbrella.

The syllabus at the school catered to students who were interested in a variety of fighting arts. Even though he conducted classes in the fencing foil, sword, savate and self-defense from morning to night, la canne remained Vigny's pet project. He taught courses that lasted 12 weeks, a length of time he believed was sufficient to give the average person the ability to handle almost any emergency.

Shunning the lighter assault canes that were popular in the academic training halls—Vigny referred to them as "chopsticks"—he believed that a true walking stick should be rigid and sturdy. Because of his dislike for the less-functional mod-



LONG-RANGE KNIFE DEFENSE:
The adversary (left) brandishes a knife (1). Craig Gemelner lashes out with a horizontal face strike (2) and swings the stick around his head (3) to deliver a two-handed blow to the opponent's weapon-bearing limb (4).

Details of Vigny's Method

- The preferred grip is the hammer, or full, grip, in which the thumb is folded across the fingers. The saber and foil grips are avoided because they're considered less secure under pressure.
- The stick can be passed from hand to hand. This is especially important when the practitioner's primary arm becomes injured.
- The stick may be held with one hand placed at each end or, alternatively, gripped like a baseball bat.
- Swinging blows are generally delivered with the wrist using a glancing or whipping action. That allows the wielder to deliver multiple strikes with little pause while providing for a quick return to the high-guard position.
- Point attacks are executed by gliding the cane through one hand as though it was a pool cue. If it's held with a single hand, the short end can be used like a dagger.
- Seizing the opponent's stick, infighting and disarms are considered valuable skills for situations in which the enemy possesses a heavier weapon.
- The high guard is a trademark of the Vigny system. Used for attack and defense, the elevated placement of the stick preps it for offensive maneuvers while offering a sound weapon-retention position. Another advantage of the high guard is the show of strength, or command presence, intended to impart a psychological or demoralizing effect on multiple opponents.
- Defensive maneuvers are divided into two categories. The first is referred to as "guard by distance." In it, the practitioner guards against blows not with his cane but with footwork. By passing back and counter-cutting, he uses distance to avoid the adversary's strike while staying in range to deliver his own counterattack. In "guard by resistance," he takes advantage of the superb shielding capabilities that Vigny's high-guard structure offers. The hand is required to move only a short distance to protect primary targets.

—C.G.



For More Information

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els, he had one produced to his own specifications. Termed the "Vigny self-defense stick," it was made from a medium-weight Malacca cane with a metal knob mounted on the end. The heavy ball served as the point of percussion, thus adding instant knockout effectiveness to the weapon.

Reaching Far and Wide

By 1912 London held little interest for Vigny, so he returned to Geneva, where he managed the Academy of Sports and Defence for a number of years. He put the finishing touches on what is arguably the most complete and effective stick-fighting system ever devised. Several police, military and martial arts academies adopted his syllabus.

During the 1920s, Superintendent Henry G. Lang, an English officer of the Indian

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TWO-HANDED THRUST: Craig Gemeiner (left) confronts the aggressor (1). He pre-empts the attack by gliding the stick through his lead hand to deliver a nontelegraphic thrust to the stomach or groin (2). Gemeiner then pulls the stick back (3) and executes an upward thrust to the chin (4).



police, was required to search for a less-than-lethal equalizer to oppose the commonly carried *lathi*. While on leave, he traveled to Europe to learn the Vigny system, and upon his return to India, Lang produced a syllabus that he documented in the now-classic book *The "Walking Stick" Method of Self-Defence*.

In 1941 Lang's manual was translated into Hebrew, and for a time it was adopted into the *kapap* curriculum, later to be included as part of the training undertaken by an Israeli spec-ops unit known as Palmach. It's estimated that up to 50,000 Israelis received training in the walking-stick method.

Vigny's influence also reached the United States through jujutsu and fencing instructor Charles Yerkow. By the early 1940s, Yerkow had written a series of books titled *Modern Judo: The Complete Ju-Jitsu Library*, which served as a supplemental manual for American hand-to-hand combat teams. The section on stick play is based on Lang's "Walking Stick" Method.

Today, practitioners of Vigny la canne are privileged to be able to tap into a system that's time tested, versatile and still very workable on the street. Anyone looking for a backup to his or her unarmed skills would do well to consider it, for it's as relevant now as it was 100 years ago. ✕

About the author: Craig Gemeiner is the founder of the Gemeiner Academy of European Combat Arts in Queensland, Australia. He serves as president of and technical director for the Australian Savate Federation Inc. For more information, visit www.blackbeltmag.com.