

Self protection vital in a dangerous world

■ *Times* reporter, Rebecca Gardiner learns self defence is about knowledge, not just physical power

BEING pushed around, sworn at and feeling generally terrified isn't your average Saturday afternoon activity. But I'd recommend it to any woman.

A few weeks ago, armed with a good deal of trepidation and no prior training in self-defence, I went along to local class Safe For Life.

At the end of what seemed like a very long driveway, I was greeted by about 12 women dressed in track pants and t-shirts.

The large concrete room looked like something out of the movie, *Rocky*, with punch bags suspended from the ceiling, and gloves and helmets bundled together in boxes. Yes, I'd come to the right place.

After filling out a health and safety form, I chatted nervously to my neighbours while waiting for the class to begin.

The organisers turned out to be a friendly husband and wife team, Phil and Athena Thompson, aided by their muscular sidekick, Nick (despite his intimidating height he actually turned out to be a real softie).

From the outset, the group was warned the physical skills we were about to learn were dangerous and even deadly.

At this point, I thought, 'what was I thinking? Did I really volunteer for this?' Judging by the uncomfortable shuffles and nervous glances exchanged around the group, I wasn't the only one.

After a few introductions and general safety tips, Phil read out a disturbing letter from a grieving boyfriend whose partner had been brutally raped and murdered. Its content had me close to tears and looking for the nearest exit. But it brought home that while confronting the possibility of rape or sexual assault is frightening, the prospect of being attacked and unable to defend yourself is far worse.

So, after learning how not to kill each other — Phil is apparently infamous for going off on

tangents — it was over to us and down to the business of physical self-defence.

While learning flying Bruce Lee kicks and rippling *Rambo* punches would've made pretty good party tricks, I discovered these sorts of moves have no place in the street. Avoiding the situation and talking your way out of trouble was just as important.

That said, five hours later my body was sore having endured an afternoon of being kicked, squashed and strangled by fellow classmates — including my petite sparring partner, Glenda.

The final two hours were the most challenging as we got on to real-life rape, home invasion and mugging scenarios.

I'm usually the last to volunteer myself for the spotlight, but before I could chicken out, I found myself sticking up my hand to take part.

The scene went something like this: after a late night at work, I walked out of the office and was confronted by a dodgy looking man who claimed to have hit my car. He was played by Phil, who took on the role of an agitated drug addict scarily well.

The speed of the attack overwhelmed me. All I could see was a blur of clothes and flailing limbs as we crashed on to the floor mats.

The adrenaline was up and my heart palpating, even though it was all "pretend".

I'll admit my body was sore for the next few days, probably down to my lack of fitness as much as anything...

To coin a seriously overused phrase, the class was empowering and proved self-defence is more than just physical power — it's about self-belief and the knowledge that you're fighting for your family, friends and ultimately, your future.

At the end of the session Phil asked us whether we felt able to defend ourselves in the real world. Everyone put their hands up.



■ *Times* reporter Rebecca Gardiner and Safe for Life co-ordinator Phil Thompson demonstrate how to fend off an attacker. Times photo Wayne Martin