This week, ladies and gentlemen, I am pleased to say that I have entered a bold new world in my training. A world that is both terrifying and exhilarating. A world of pain and reward. A world where my wrong moves have very clear and immediate consequences.

Because today, for the first time, I started sparring.

Now, let me just say that this was very light sparring – minimal contact, no clinching, no elbows or knees. All of which was fine by me. But man, what a great experience this was. Not necessarily for the reasons you may think though.

First lesson learned – I suck. Really, I'm not very good. And while this may sound disheartening, it's not. I'm very new to this game, and looked at this sparring as a chance to find my weaknesses – see where I am struggling so that I can focus on those spots for next time. We sparred in a round robin format, and the guys involved were at various levels. Having a chance to spar with someone who is both above you, and a very generous teacher, is extremely helpful. He caught me, a lot, but every time was able to give me a quick pointer on how to correct my problems. This is a huge help.

Second lesson learned – DEFENSE. I'm not surprised to discover that this is my weakest area. Always has been for me; whether I'm competing in an actual sport, playing chess, or playing a Nintendo game, I'm much more offensive than defensive minded. And of course that leads me to some troubles in sparring. My main defensive difficulty is checking kicks. In the heat of the moment, to my still training body, the natural instinct when a kick comes in is to deflect it with the hand. Which of course is a great way to get yourself punched right in the face. But the idea of quickly getting my leg up for the check is tough – partly because it's still a motion I have to think about a bit instead of doing naturally, and partly because I'm still too heavy on my feet, so checking requires some weight re-distribution before I can check. That's too long, and by then, the kick has landed. So then the next time my mind says to me "you'll never get that leg up in time, just swat the kick away with your hand." And I do. And I get punched in the face. Have to work on silencing that instinct.

Over the course of this session I did manage to develop the motion of keeping my lead leg very light on the ground and frequently bringing it up in a check motion. And, for now at least, it worked! Not only did this help me check kicks, it also made it easier to throw a teep off the lead

leg, or a quick stepping right kick. I definitely didn't master this, or suddenly start blocking everything and landing every kick – but I improved. And a day later, as I feel some minor aches and pains, I'm pleased to know that little improvement happened. And I absolutely can't wait to get back in there and try it again.

Up next – that tough boxer guy who keeps up the pressure with charging punches. How to keep him off me?

Training Diary is a weekly series documenting my journey starting Muay Thai training. For more on this series, read the first entry here . I train at Conviction Fitness & Martial Arts, 4430 N. Western Ave., Chicago, IL www.convictionfitness.com .