Benefits of Cross Training with Taekwondo
A Case Study

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Introduction -

This project will be a study on the benefits of cross training using Taekwondo. For this case study, I will look at an individual named Zlatan Ibrahimovic. Zlatan is a premier professional soccer player, who is also a black belt in Taekwondo.

I first discovered Zlatan Ibrahimovic about a year and a half ago when my mom told me about him in the car. When I learned about his Martial Arts background, I was inspired to watch him play soccer in professional club games. His skill and unique game style impressed me greatly. As I was researching to find a suitable topic for this project, I came across an article about Taekwondo where they listed other famous practitioners of this Martial Art; I discovered Zlatan Ibrahimovic! This took me by surprise due to the fact that I knew he did Martial Arts but I had no idea what kind. After a little more research I found that he was a Black Belt in Taekwondo.

For me being a Black Belt in Karate and having played soccer all through my life, this project grants me the opportunity to connect these
parts of my life, and demonstrate how these sports complement each other. Through my years of training in Martial Arts I have learned the following, many Martial Arts have their own unique speciality or areas/techniques in which they favor. For example, Brazilian Jiu-Jitsu is focused on ground work, therefore close range ground combative is its speciality. While on the other hand, Taekwondo is the art specializing in kicking, mostly from farther range, which is its speciality. Both of these Martial Arts need specific physical attributes to help them succeed in their speciality. A Brazilian Jiu-Jitsu practitioner would benefit from the attribute of hand strength to grip and control their opponent and apply submissions, while a Taekwondo practitioner might benefit from the attribute of leg speed to sneak their kicks toward their targets before an opponent can respond.

Each Martial Art has its speciality and through training in that Martial Art you will gain specific attributes to benefit you in that discipline. In this case study, I will look at Zlatan Ibrahimovic and demonstrate how cross training Taekwondo has helped him reach new heights in his professional career of soccer.
Taekwondo -

Taekwondo means “The Way of the Hand and the Foot”. This art’s founder is credited to an individual named Choi Hong Hi. He was born November 9, 1918 during the Japanese occupation of his country. Choi’s tutor for school was a master of Taekyon, an ancient Korean Martial Art. Due to the Japanese occupation Choi’s tutor had to learn and train Taekyon in secret. Noticing Choi’s frail body build, his tutor decided to teach him Taekyon. Soon after he left to go study in Japan he learned Karate from two different people, a teacher in Kyoto named Kim, and Gichin Funakoshi the founder of Japanese Shotokan Karate. Choi trained and reached 2nd Dan in Shotokan Karate in 1939. Soon after that, he along with many other Koreans, were drafted to join the Japanese army. Upon his return to Korea he refused to take part in the occupying force of his home country so he hid, but was then captured by the Japanese. After starting basic training he was arrested by the Japanese for trying to escape to join the underground Korean Liberation Army. He was sentenced for execution on August 18, 1945. Luckily for him, this date was three days after Korea was liberated. After the liberation he joined the
Korean army and was quickly promoted to a high ranking officer, eventually becoming a General. There, he was a Taekyon instructor for the military. During his career in the military General Choi Hong researched many Martial Arts, mainly Taekyon, Kung Fu, and Karate. Ultimately, General Choi successfully united several Martial Arts under the banner of Taekwondo.

The Korean art of Taekwondo places a great emphasis on kicks. To be successful in this art you must know the appropriate range in which to operate. Therefore, Taekwondo prefers kicking range. Accuracy, flexibility, power, speed, anticipation, balance, and timing are key attributes for success in Taekwondo.

**Zlatan Ibrahimovic -**

Zlatan is a professional soccer player who is also a Black Belt in the art of Taekwondo. He was born on October 3, 1981 in Malmo Sweden, and made his first soccer Debut in 1999 at the age of 18 shortly after receiving his black belt in Taekwondo one year earlier. Currently he is 36 years old and he plays for the club Manchester United as striker. In soccer, Zlatan is
known for his remarkable ability in the air, his speed, and his powerful shots. He is considered as one of the best strikers of his time, and is regarded by most as being one of the top five players in the world.

Ibrahimovic Use of Taekwondo Attributes in Soccer -

Through analyzing his performance, watching his skills, and having knowledge of his past training experiences, I believe that Ibrahimovic's Taekwondo training has helped him to become a star in soccer. The attributes gained in Taekwondo such as accuracy, flexibility, timing, speed, anticipation, balance, and power have developed his unique game, and enhanced his playing style to put him above other players.

**Accuracy -**

Accuracy is vital to the Taekwondo practitioner. Taekwondo is the art of kicking, and each kick has a specific target. For example, the roundhouse kick should go to the head, or the front kick should go to the solar plexus. When performing a front kick you must point your ankle, and pull back your toes so that all the power of your kick is directed into your opponent's body accurately to get the full effect of the kick. Common training tools for improving accuracy are focus mitts and [Focus Mitt](#)
clappers. Regularly kicking targets will improve your accuracy and train your body to kick perfectly every time with little thought.

Likewise, accurately striking the target every time without thought is a goal to strive for in soccer. Soccer and Taekwondo are similar regarding the accurate placement of the foot on the target. In soccer, to get a desired effect on the ball, you must hit it at the correct place. For example, while performing a goal kick, the desired effect on the ball is for it to go far, high, and have just a bit of backspin so the ball finds its intended destination. To achieve this you must accurately kick the ball on the lower half so it gets height, distance and backspin. In a different example, when passing a ball to a teammate, you want a firm kick on the ground so the ball arrives with speed and control. To achieve this task you have to kick the center of the ball. I believe that Zlatan’s training in Taekwondo has helped him gain a unique ability to accurately hit the perfect spot on the ball to get the ideal result.
Flexibility -

Flexibility is another fundamental skill improved through Taekwondo training. As stated earlier, Taekwondo specializes in kicking specific targets. In competition, the highest reward targets are high targets such as the collarbone or the head. To get your foot to that target level requires flexibility. Frequent stretching and high kicking help to train your body for the flexibility needed to kick at high levels with ease.

Flexibility is a skill in soccer that is necessary in many different scenarios. Flexibility allows the soccer player to wind their kicking leg back further, resulting in a more powerful kick. Flexibility is also used to trap a ball that is really high and it can be used to kick a ball that is high in the air. The flexibility developed in Taekwondo can be used in soccer to enhance the way you play in many ways and Zlatan has clearly utilized his flexibility.
in soccer very effectively through his high kicks and shots to score goals.

**Timing**

Timing is also enhanced through training in Taekwondo. For example, in a Taekwondo sparring match you must time your techniques properly to score points. To do this successfully, you must execute your kicks at the exact moment when your opponent's target opens up. The more experience with timing techniques the more naturally it occurs.

This skill of timing is also essential in soccer. To kick a bouncing ball without an extra touch requires precise timing. Additionally, timing is required to accurately shoot a ball that is in motion on the ground, or heading a ball in the air. Zlatan’s clear mastery of timing also allows him to jump up, attempt crazy kicks and shots, hit them well, and turn these scarce opportunities into magnificent goals.
**Speed**

Speed is also a key attribute enhanced through training in Taekwondo. In Taekwondo, it is very important to have your kicks be fast and executed with a snap back return as when you are standing on one leg you lack movement and this puts you in a vulnerable position. During a Taekwondo sparring match, you have to kick with speed, hit the appropriate target and return your kick to the ground as quickly as possible. Speed, along with timing and accuracy are what allow you to score points.

In soccer, apart from running, there are two main uses of speed, speed of play, and speed with the ball. Speed of play is the speed in which the ball moves around the field, how fast the players pass the ball, and how fast they move to receive the ball. The faster the speed of play the more difficult it is for an opposing team to keep up. The second use of speed in soccer is speed with the ball. This is how fast you move with the ball, how fast you dribble, how fast you apply moves to get past a defender, or how fast you can
take a touch and shoot. The attribute of speed which Zlatan has
gained through training in Taekwondo, and the knowledge he has
with the importance of speed in a sparring attack, enhance his
soccer skills of both speed of play and speed with the ball which
benefits his team.

**Anticipation -**

Anticipation is a major attribute enhanced in
Taekwondo. In Taekwondo it is very important to
anticipate what move your opponent might use against you so you
can counter it. For instance, if your opponent is attacking with a roundhouse kick to
the head, then you can anticipate this attack and counter it by
moving forward into their stance, jamming their kick, and attacking
with a hand attack or a sidekick. Through Taekwondo training, you
develop the ability to anticipate, allowing you recognize what is happening so you can be proactive and counter their attack.

Anticipation is a skill frequently used in soccer as well. Zlatan, using his experience in Taekwondo, can anticipate the placement of the ball in the air and strike it with force. In addition, when a ball is played past the defensive line, he can anticipate where it is going, route a course, and get there fast. His remarkable ability to anticipate is likely a result from his years of training in Taekwondo.

**Balance -**

Balance is heightened through Taekwondo training. Taekwondo promotes kicking techniques where you are required to stand on one leg. In addition, the higher the kicks are the more balance is required. Through repetitions of kicks your body will adapt to improve balance allowing you to kick to high levels without wobbling. The spectacular kicks that Zlatan Ibrahimovic is known for require tremendous balance. This skill is needed when you have to bring your leg up to
strike the ball with power. The reason Zlatan is able perform kicks that other players would not even attempt is likely a credit to his many years of Taekwondo experience and training in balance.

**Power -**

Finally, power is an essential attribute enhanced through Taekwondo. In self-defence training, power is a necessity. Powerful kicks are trained through repetitions on a heavy bag. Additionally, board breaking is a common skill performed in Taekwondo to develop power. With Zlatan’s background rooted in Taekwondo, he uses the power he developed through a board break or on a bag to kick a soccer ball instead. The motions for Taekwondo kicks and soccer kicks are very similar. For both, you want to kick through the target and lock your ankle. With the same power used to break boards, Zlatan uses to get powerful soccer shots.
As you can see, both soccer and Taekwondo have similar qualities which require similar attributes and techniques. The techniques/attributes used in the side volley and the techniques/attributes used in a Taekwondo roundhouse kick are very similar. The technical similarities are found all through soccer and Taekwondo. Whether kicking the ball of the ground, or doing a bicycle kick, sprinting to the ball, or jumping up to defend a goal, the attributes/techniques are enhanced through Taekwondo training and can bring soccer techniques to a new level. This is exactly what Zlatan has done, and he has become one of the best in the game of soccer.
## Technical Skills Analysis

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Technical Skill</th>
<th>Side Volley</th>
<th>Roundhouse Kick</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Base foot pivoted</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Toe pointed</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hips brought in for power</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Timing to hit the target</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Precision to strike the correct part of the target</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lean in opposite direction to counterbalance</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Speed</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Flexibility</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Balance</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tighten as you strike</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lock ankle</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Follow-through the target</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
In addition, being tall, he is also considered strong; however, most tall people are not able to move their legs so nimbly, with speed, and finesse. Zlatan’s training in Taekwondo has allowed him to gain these characteristics which aren’t usually found in a person who is 6’5”. Most people who are of his size can’t kick their legs over their head like he does. His knowledge of the Taekwondo has helped set him apart from other players.

**Conclusion -**

Through the study of Taekwondo you develop specific attributes such as accuracy, flexibility, timing, speed, anticipation, balance and power in order to be successful. The practice of Taekwondo has helped Zlatan succeed in soccer due to the crossover of skills of both sports. The study of Taekwondo has helped Zlatan develop his own unique style of soccer. He doesn't play like anybody else. His training in Taekwondo allows him to do things with his body that other people can not do. He has used what he developed in Taekwondo and applied it to his profession of soccer and become one of the best players in the world.
Bibliography


http://www.telegraph.co.uk/sport/sportvideo/footballvideo/9679848/Zlatan-Ibrahimovic-taekwondo-blackbelt-key-to-Swedish-strikers-goalscoring-prowess.html

https://www.biography.com/people/zlatan-ibrahimovic-21342025

https://itftaekwondo.com/about-us/founder/

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Zlatan_Ibrahimovic%C4%87

Videos

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ln35qLphK4I
I used this video for an overview of his skills and to find pictures of specific things he did.