



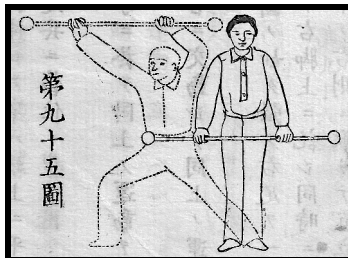
# THE LEAN BERETS

## AVENGERS OF HEALTH!

### “Health Wand” History

**“With a wand the pupil can exercise thoroughly every muscle, the power, strength, and flexibility of the muscles and joints being tested more or less as the exercises are done...” –Beale’s Calisthenics (1882)**

“Wand” exercises have been used for generations. Earlier forms are traced back to China. American physical culture also used exercise wands extensively from the late 1800s into the early 1900s. While some forms of wand are considered martial, our emphasis is only upon wands as “restorative” tools—or “health wands” as with ancient Chinese usage. Initially, wands are great tools to promote better posture, joint mobility, whole body strength, and to restore shoulder and spinal function; however, they can also enter a spiritual realm of *wholistic health* when deeper breathing and relaxation are included that goes beyond mere biomechanics.



**Wands, Sticks, & Staffs:** The term “wand” can get confusing considering the different variations of “stick” tools. Here’s an “incomplete” list, and while similar, it’s helpful to know the basic differences between “health wands” and other wooden or metal exercise and martial art weapons. “Eskrima” is a light-weight Filipino fighting stick made from rattan used for martial arts around 1” diameter and 26” long. Traditional Chinese “Health Wands” used in *Jiangan* called “Gans” were most often made from bamboo and about 1” diameter and 48-50” long. Chinese believed in very light wands (under 300 grams or 10.6 oz) as the extra weight would interfere with the flow of movements in their philosophy. American health wands during the late 1800s varied in size from youth versions  $\frac{3}{4}$ – $\frac{5}{8}$ ” diameter around 3’ long. Adults used  $\frac{3}{4}$ – $1\frac{1}{2}$ ” diameter to  $4\frac{1}{2}$ ” long for adults. Most American wands were wood, but they also used iron and nicked steel wands ranging in weight from 2-7 pounds each. Due to current society’s decreased quality of movement and ability, we are making a light 1”x5’ hardwood wand our base. The extra 6” will help people just starting as the shorter wands are more difficult. “Long Staffs” are martial art weapons usually from 6-9’ long and from  $1\frac{1}{8}$ – $1\frac{1}{4}$ ” diameter and are often made of solid hickory or two-layer laminated ash, but long staffs are also made from bamboo, other woods, and in light metals too. Most health wands were totally round, but some of the vintage models had small bulbs or globes on the ends for extra weight—these wands were sometimes referred to as “barbells” in the older references. There is a new technological neurokinetic wand available now we use for rehab and fitness applications called a *SmartFlex* which is spring loaded to expand but can also be separated to use like Indian Clubs or independent weights.

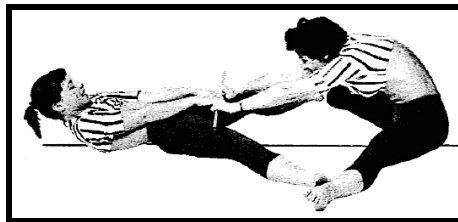


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*The two basic philosophies to consider with wands—Eastern & Western.*

**From The East:** Eastern roots go deep into Chinese history for thousands of years. The Chinese system was very breath led—never forcing and only flowing. Chinese wands were used daily as preventative health tools for royal families. Chinese did not “count” their exercises as repetitions, but rather, they used the yin-yang system with five natural element labels of earth, metal, water, wood, and fire to name their movements. The Eastern use of wands lies with the Chinese system which is rooted in 17 specific and fundamental exercises. Grand Master Bruce Johnson has been credited as the first modern American to bring ancient Chinese wand use to Western Culture. His 1977 book *“Chinese Wand Exercise”* and work was quite popular during the 1970s-1980s. In 2012, Michael Davies wrote an excellent follow up to Johnson’s work called, *“Jiangan: The Chinese Health Wand.”*



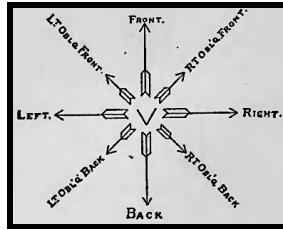
***“Our way of life damages the muscles of the upper back, arms, chest, and shoulders. Few of our sports offer much help, and daily tension shortens all the muscles involved. The wand can help you stretch and can also act as a daily test. If you can do the exercises easily, all you have to do is maintain that stretch to protect yourself. If you can’t do any one of them, you are already at risk.” --Bonnie Prudden, “Teenage Fitness” (1965)***

**Into The West:** While similar to Chinese wands, the Western approach was more military and used a 4-8 count cadence. These movements were very crisp and precise with a faster tempo. Music was often used to time the cadence. Wands were a big part of the *“Golden Era of Fitness”* during America from around 1885-1920 and prominent “restorative art” tools in physical education, community fitness, and military academies. William Reuter wrote a chapter on wand exercises in the legendary 1895 book, *“Gymnastics: A Text-Book Of The German-American System of Gymnastics”* and described the progressive wand arrangements as *“...pleasing to the eye, in the hope of awakening a sense for quick, accurate, and decided action, as well as for the beautiful in form and position.”* So while American wands definitely had a quicker and more military tempo, they were still intended to deliver an aesthetic quality to movement as well. Wands were also one of the “Four Horsemen” which included medicine balls, dumbbells, and Indian Clubs—all of these tools were used for health purposes to restore quality structure and enhance movement.

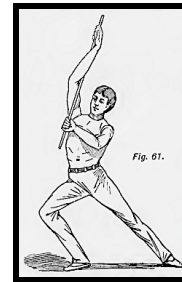
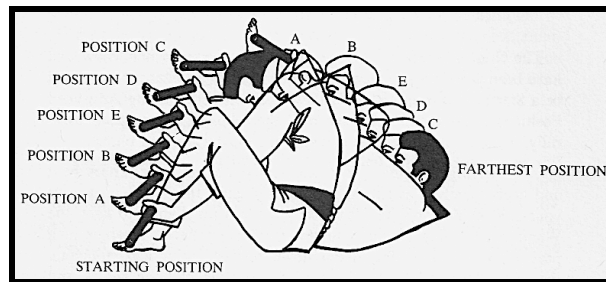


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**Beyond Upper Body:** While initial wand movements can be very shoulder focused, wands historically included many leg patterns in conjunction with the upper body movements making the movements more complex and neurologically productive. Many of the stepping and lunging patterns were quite sophisticated and elaborate. To get started, learn to move the wand with upper body first then add in some simple step patterns based on an *eight-point star pattern* above. Judo and many martial art forms use a similar line approach to combatives.



**Combining Systems:** Both Eastern and Western wand philosophies are quite productive for enhancing health. You can use one or the other system; however, here are some tips for “combining” the best of both worlds of wand use and history.

-  Health wands are “restorative” tools, so use them slowly with control at least in part of your practice when time allows.
-  Lead movement with breath as much as possible. If your ribs expand—breath IN. If your ribs compress closer together—breathe OUT.
-  Allow the wand to open your shoulders and spine gently. Don’t compensate by moving your head out of the way.
-  While the “Western” approach used more prying and pulling, it should be still be quite controlled and restorative.
-  **Think More; Less Force. *Your mind can open your body.***

**Book Recommendation:** We recommend, “*Jiangan: The Chinese Health Wand*” (2012) by Michael Davies who is a Tai Chi Senior Instructor in the UK. He has done an excellent job continuing Johnson’s work from the 1970s and provided a more in-depth explanation of the wand physics and history while respectfully preserving the integrity of the ancient Chinese Health Wand system.