

MassBJJ Arlington builds community for female Brazilian jiu-jitsu athletes

By Erin Renzi



Photo: Courtesy of Christie Pellegrino. Christie Pellegrino, a Brazilian jiu-jitsu blackbelt and instructor, training with her husband, Mike Pellegrino, at MassBJJ Arlington.

“Send me to my coffin with good stories and a broken body,” Brazilian jiu-jitsu black belt and award-winning women’s team instructor Christie Sullivan Pellegrino said of her torn labrum early in her jiu-jitsu career in 2006. At that time, men dominated the mat, and few women’s jiu-jitsu competitive teams existed. In 2012, Pellegrino set out to change that narrative — she founded the Ralph Gracie Association women’s team program, which gave more women in the San Francisco Bay Area space to practice the art of Brazilian jiu-jitsu.

Four women joined Pellegrino's first class and soon, attendance skyrocketed. Her all-women's team won many matches and took home trophies. Pellegrino earned her black belt — the highest belt in Brazilian jiu-jitsu — in 2015 and her program began to receive more attention across the Bay Area and West Coast. Male coaches from other academies came to participate in Pellegrino's program. She hosted some of the sport's top athletes including jiu-jitsu world champion Luiza Monteiro and current UFC fighter, Mackenzie Dern at her seminars.

Pellegrino not only hosted classes and led seminars around the Bay Area, but also built an empowering community for female jiu-jitsu athletes. She moved to Boston in 2016 and still prioritized the creation of safe spaces for women. After she joined MassBJJ Arlington, a Brazilian jiu-jitsu gym in East Arlington, Pellegrino taught both women's and co-ed classes there. MassBJJ offers female Brazilian jiu-jitsu athletes women-only spaces where they can train safely and form meaningful bonds with other women. For a sport dominated by men, these spaces remain vital, according to those who go there. Several other Brazilian jiu-jitsu facilities offer women-only classes in the Boston area like Gracie Barra Boston and DF Fitness & Martial Arts Center in Gloucester.

MassBJJ holds a women's fundamentals class on Tuesday nights and a women-only open mat on Sundays. Jennifer Phan, a Brazilian jiu-jitsu athlete since 2015 and a purple belt, teaches the women's fundamentals class and a co-ed fundamentals class. Phan's women's class features the same warm-up drills and skills as the co-ed fundamentals classes.

“If you go into the women's class, we're going to cover techniques that work for our size or our body frame and confidently be able to train with each other knowing that we're going to be safe,”

Phan said. She explained that female and male athletes can train together safely, but women might remain cautious when sparring with a larger-bodied man.

Some female athletes participate solely in the women's fundamentals class and then enroll in a co-ed class once they gain more confidence. Phan said many women participate in both classes — the women's class provides space where women can “go 100% with each other if they want to.”

“I really enjoy being able to share something with other women who maybe are in the same boat that I was in when I started,” Phan said.

Pellegrino described her open mat sessions as more “community-based” than a fundamentals class. On Sunday mornings, women stroll into the gym with coffee and donuts to share. After breakfast, training begins with warm-up drills led by Pellegrino. She then polls the room to see what skills athletes want to work on for the duration of the open mat. Higher-level belts might want to work on something specific for a competition, while lower-level belts might prefer to break down a move. Pellegrino bounces between groups to ensure all athletes benefit from the session.

Many female athletes seek out the supportive environment cultivated by Pellegrino and Phan. Erin Maxwell, a blue belt, started training at MassBJJ in 2019 after attending a women-only seminar held by Pellegrino. Maxwell discovered that MassBJJ offered more of an inviting community than the training facility she belonged to at the time. “It's one of the few gyms that I've been to where there's a very good women's presence and they've always been very welcoming to new people trying out the classes,” she said.

Maxwell enjoys the women's programs at MassBJJ because she was the only woman at her previous training facility. In the women's classes, Maxwell trains with athletes that match her height and weight. She still enjoys training with men and does so in co-ed classes but explained that when you are newer to Brazilian jiu-jitsu, it is difficult to practice with men who weigh over 200 pounds when you only weigh 120 pounds and stand at 5 feet, 2 inches tall.

"I think when it's just females or just males there's a little bit of that let your hair down kind of vibe, where you don't have to talk big or be worried about anybody around you," Maxwell explained. "You can just kind of be you and do you."

The female spaces at MassBJJ don't exclude those who identify as nonbinary and gender nonconforming. Ace, (who asked not to be further identified) a jiu-jitsu athlete since 2014, identifies as gender-nonconforming and occasionally attends the women's classes. Ace decided to learn Brazilian jiu-jitsu after an uptick in the levels of confrontation and harassment they experienced in the city related to their gender presentation. Ace joined the MassBJJ community in 2017 after they determined their previous training facility didn't provide the inclusive environment they sought.

Ace fondly remembers the diversity of athletes at the first MassBJJ women's class they participated in. "Some people had long hair, some people had short hair, some people were heavier set, and some people were really tiny. And in spite of that, we all worked together and had a great time," Ace said.

As a gender-nonconforming individual, Ace sometimes questions if they belong in the women-only spaces — although they feel welcomed. "I was assigned female at birth, so I feel like I have

a right to be here,” Ace said. “But I also don't really identify as a woman so then maybe I shouldn't be taking up space here.” They explained how they often wonder about this, but not too deeply because they don't think that there is an answer.

Pellegrino believes that female and gender-nonconforming jiu-jitsu athletes should train in whichever spaces they feel the most comfortable. When it comes to teaching, she prides herself on being able to teach both women and co-ed groups.

“I think that's the cool part — not only being able to overcome all the hard training to get a black belt in a male-dominated sport — but then to grow the female community and then be in a place where you're not just teaching women,” Pellegrino explained. “I teach co-ed and women classes I think that's the most feminist thing.”