



MARTIAL ARTS AND MMA: NOT ALL BLOODY KNUCKLES AND BLACK EYES

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Ronda Rousey, former Ultimate Fighting Championship (UFC) Women's Bantamweight Champion, was born with her umbilical cord wrapped around her neck, depriving her of oxygen; she could not speak intelligibly until she was six.

Holly Holm, daughter of a preacher and another former UFC Women's Bantamweight Champion, began her love of boxing during an Aerobics class, thus commencing her journey into a world of which her mother did not approve.

Georges St. Pierre, retired UFC champion, learned Kyokushin Karate from his father at a young age because he was being bullied at school in his middle-of-nowhere hometown.

Jon Jones, current UFC Light Heavyweight, began MMA and cage fighting to make ends meet once he found that he and his high school sweetheart had a daughter on the way.

Every fighter has a story and every champion has a starting point.

Upon hearing the words 'Martial Arts,' a standard response is usually an induced cringe with raised apprehensive eyebrows and visions of Bruce Lee's bloodied body fighting (and winning) against multiple opponents. In today's society, people now probably envision an octagonal cage encasing an advertisement-laden floor smeared with dried blood and two people trying to physically hurt, submit and defeat one another.

It has been considered savage, barbaric and reminiscent of a time when Roman emperors would pitch gladiator against gladiator. Time has passed, the sport prevails—but only in a society caught in a never-ending paradox of loving and hating violence. The question remains: why would people be so interested in such an intimidating spectacle?

It is not all bloody knuckles and black eyes. What the general public has been exposed to is only the tip of the iceberg. For some, the reality of what happens when you become seduced by a centuries-old art form never even makes it past the stereotypes of what many think is just a brutish, anger-driven sport. In fact, many would be surprised to find that this so-called ‘sport’ is just as much of an art as dancing or painting—perhaps intensified by the discipline and exercise required of the human body...but an art form no less.



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MMA class at the College. (Photo by Michael Wiser)

What's Your Story?

John Di Giovanni, 52, is a personal trainer, editor of the local fitness magazine “Oblique” and adjunct professor at the College. He teaches Martial Arts and Tai Chi classes, which propagate from when he was a student learning the art himself. DiGiovanni found that by teaching others, he learned even more, helping him to fully utilize the lessons and lifestyles to which he was being exposed.

“I got into Martial Arts later than most people,” Di Giovanni stated as he adjusted the navy-blue bandana layered underneath a worn baseball cap. “I was interested in the breathing aspect—I had trouble breathing when I was younger.” Of course, the physical component also attracted the instructor as Martial Arts is a pinnacle of fitness; it comprises “flexibility, endurance, power, strength [and] fluidness.” For Di Giovanni, who has earned his Black Belt in both Shaolin Kempo and Kung Fu, the objective of his class is not to just teach students how to fight—the mentality and psychology behind causing harm to someone only goes so far. Instead, the goal is improvement.

Learning Martial Arts is not just physical. There is a mental, for some even spiritual, characteristic. This quality is derived from the harmony between mind and body: the movements, the breathing, the mentality should all be connected. Harmony between mind and body can be taught, but only achieved through practice – which is the ultimate challenge in Di Giovanni’s class: to learn, then practice, then improve. The student’s job is to become better than the person they were the day before—after all, everyone is their own most formidable opponent.

Stereotypes are often started by those who are uneducated or unfamiliar about the subject, which explains the prevailing assumptions society has about those who learn martial arts. Especially with the rise in popularity of cagefighting; many think that the ones in the ring are the same as the ones wearing karategis in a dojo. Employing an analogy about fitness versus bodybuilding, Di Giovanni explained how those who look to adopt a fitter lifestyle do not necessarily look to become bodybuilders; the same applies to Martial Arts.

The desire to become a professional fighter comprises a small portion of those who are interested in Martial Arts. For those who believe that there is no difference between the two, it is recommended that they witness an actual demonstration of a class. The techniques and methods will be the same—after all, cage-fighting is a conglomerate of different martial arts, which is why it is called MMA (Mixed Martial Arts). If you were to take a peek in Di Giovanni's class, one would find a plethora of college students attempting to better their lifestyle in some shape or form—not one of them is cut from the exact same ilk, which sublimates the class from simply an instructional how-to to one of fellowship and introspection. The motive and vigor behind a student who only takes a class to learn how to fight and a student who takes it to learn Martial Arts, will be blatantly obvious.

Where's Your Starting Point?

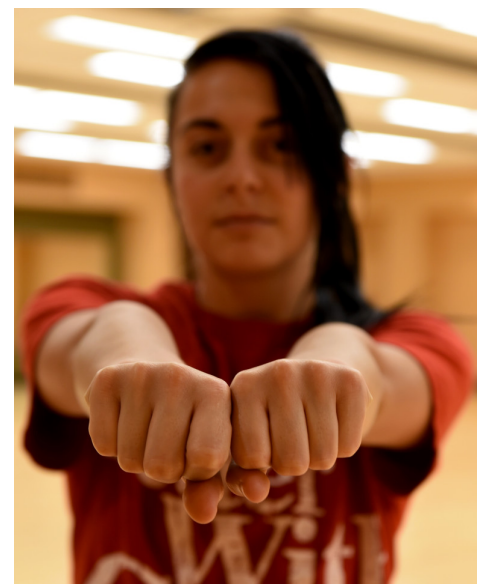
"It is hard for someone to walk through the front door," Matt Robinson, owner of Charleston's Krav Maga & MMA facility in West Ashley, explained only minutes after getting done with teaching class for the day. Krav Maga, a descendant fighting system of Israel's defense units, emphasizes how to defend and protect oneself, even if in the worst case scenario.

Robinson, whose gym is the only Fit to Fight training facility in the Lowcountry, has been a student of Martial Arts since he was a teen. He was a basketball player who fell in love with the looks of Martial Arts and the balance and coordination it took to learn it. Robinson's vast experience and knowledge can be summarized by a glance at his ranks: he has earned a Black Belt in Krav Maga, a 3rd degree black belt in Karate and a Brown belt in Brazilian Jiu-Jitsu.

His story began as a young athlete hoping to perfect his coordination and become a better sportsman all around. He too had to walk through the front door; and now that he owns his own training facility, he can attest to the hardships and stereotypes that come with having a life dedicated to Martial Arts. As Robinson so eloquently put: "[People] fear the unknown, [they] think it is going to be some place they are going to get beat up...that is simply not the case."

Walking into a Martial Arts class takes tremendous courage; whether one walks into the class with the objective to defend oneself, get in shape or simply because the subject matter intrigues them, it takes guts. The perceptions that have been cast by movies, television and mainstream media today can cast an odious shadow over the art, one that usually showcases broken bones and ugly egos. At Robinson's training center, however, their objective is to train "incredibly safe and incredibly smart"—it would be counterintuitive to learning and bringing in new students if every class required an injury or outright competition.

The best advice Robinson could give to those who are interested in learning Martial Arts is to have an open mind. "Some people come in with a preconceived notion of what they are capable of doing or what they think should be done," he said. Everyone is a student because there is always room for improvement. If one cuts themselves off from learning



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(Photo by Michael Wiser)

something new because they falsely perceive they have learned all they can, then one will only succeed in never learning all that they could. This is where it becomes a mental trial instead of just physical. This is where it becomes about learning how to open up to new possibilities and methods, testing oneself even when one feels they have passed every test and dedication to putting in time to perfect what one has already learned.

Do not fear Martial Arts because it is deemed by some as just a matter of beating someone up and dominating them... which it is not. There is a finesse to it, a drive to not just submit the opponent but to surrender to whatever preconceived notions that are holding one's self back in the first place. Fears, egos, insecurities...no matter the background, race or gender, it all begins with stepping through the front door ready to conquer whatever challenges, be it physical or mental, that emerge. The key point though is that one must take that first step through the front door to begin.

A Different Form of Art

Many people would be thoroughly surprised to find that those who pursue Martial Arts come from many different backgrounds. The prevalent stereotype that gets associated with it, and likewise MMA or even Boxing, is that they are male-centric sports filled with anger and abusive pasts—which is not always the case, and is currently becoming even more and more inaccurate.

For example, Taylor Lynch, 18, a Studio Arts major at the College has studied Brazilian Jiu-Jitsu for two years now. Her interest was ignited a long time ago when her brother and father became involved in Martial Arts; it was not until she set down her paintbrushes for a while that she began to explore a new type of art.

Lynch did not get a lot of attention at first; many of her fellow students and teachers believed that she would be content with just learning a few basic moves to help her defend herself. However, her interest was far deeper than just a few beginning guards and mounts. The more she persevered and pressed to learn, the farther she got and the key to that was patience.

“You have to be calm, do not get angry. The angrier you get, the worse you fight,” advised Lynch, as she described her experience sparring and learning. “You do not fight from anger...it is not an angry thing.” A profound statement contradicting the majority of stereotypes showered upon the art. Lynch's passion for the subject seeped through her words in her penultimate statement about what she does: “I just like it. I enjoy it, the physical part of it. I love Art, and it is just like a physical form of Art.”

Martial Arts mimics real life. Perhaps that is the secret to its seduction: its ability to empathize with every student that seeks to learn more. Everyone can relate to that relentless notion of wanting to do better, be better and feel better. Everyone can relate to being pushed down or beaten down, be it physically or metaphorically, by life or by people. Everyone has come to that proverbial fork in the road where they must choose between picking themselves up and carrying on or staying down and letting the metaphorical bully continue to win.

Martial Arts is all of that; it is the commencement, the climax and the closure. It is breathing, it is patience, it is perseverance and it is acceptance. It is not biased to anyone, as long as they seek to take that first step to actively making their form, their mindset and their life better. It is more than bloody knuckles and black eyes; it is, quite literally, a way of life.

**This article first appeared in the April issue of the Yard.*

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ABOUT KIMBERMARIE FAIRCLOTH ([HTTPS://CISTERNYARD.COM/AUTHOR/KIMBERMARIE-FAIRCLOTH/](https://cisternyard.com/author/kimbermarie-faircloth/))

KimberMarie Faircloth is a sophomore Archaeology and Anthropology major. Originally from North Carolina, KimberMarie found her way into the Lowcountry on a leap of faith and one she has not regretted since. From watching copious amounts of old shows and movies to studying about digging holes to aimlessly walking around Charleston for hours, she loves learning and trying new things. KimberMarie also has interests in forensic/medical Anthropology, bioarchaeology and the proper method to making the perfect cup of coffee.

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