

My Dog's Bigger

Why do kids claim their dog is bigger, faster, nastier, or more loyal, friendly, courteous and kind? For the same reason they used to say, “Yeah, well my dad could take your dad.”

Recently, a student of mine told me about a 4th degree black belt with whom, at a dinner, he was comparing notes about the martial art that they both studied, albeit under different teachers—only the comparison was rather one-sided. Mr. Yondan bragged about his instructor but would not pay attention to my student's reference to me. I certainly don't need another teacher's student's begrudging recognition, but I thought it significant that Mr. Yondan was willing to “share” his enthusiasm while unwilling to accept my student's.

I find fascinating the idea that both experienced and not-so-experienced martial artists, by virtue of their having enrolled in a school or having been ranked in a style, can miraculously acquire the skills of instant judgment and absolute and correct conclusion. I encourage students to visit other schools to discover the good in other systems and perhaps to let the other schools reveal their own prejudices, should they exist. Pavalo drove into the city to visit a school of an art similar to one he was studying with me. He was open about why he was there—interest in other systems, comparison of methods, etc. When my name did not ring a bell with the head instructor, Pavalo showed him my picture on our brochure. Sensei regarded the photo and puffed, “Hmm, no essence,” before strutting onto the mat. WellThenThereNow, his skills of summary judgment were obviously developed to a high degree, even if his definition of “essence” was not forthcoming.

We see this all the time in YouTube comments. Somebody, whose name is hidden by his online handle, feels obliged to pass all-wise verdict on the validity of some martial practice, usually accompanied with a colorful adjective or the name of a body part substituting for a predicate nominative. The fact that the guy in the video may have spent more time stepping into his *zori* on the way to the locker room than Mr. Comment has spent on the mat seems not to enter the calculus. Summary judgment is, after all, a very personal thing and is offered for very personal reasons. And we dare not challenge the validity of personal reasons, in this politically correct world.

The real reasons that people come to instant summary judgments and are unwilling to hear about opposing opinions, in my humble opinion, has to do with a number of factors, one of which is the My Dog's Bigger Than Your Dog syndrome. Children, unwilling to face another child against whom they may feel inferior, defer to their mastery of their pet. In essence: “I don't want to fight you, but because the dog I control [or my dad, or my sensei, or my style] is obviously better than yours, you should accept that I could beat you and thus am superior to you. People brag about their sensei [style, dad, dog] because they cannot brag about themselves and they seek to borrow the qualities of he whom they brag about as if those qualities rubbed off upon them by association.

Mr. Yondan was thrilled with his sensei, which is great! He did not want to hear about my student's sensei for two reasons: (1) because any positive thing my student may have said might give Mr. Yondan doubt about his own summary judgment, and (2) any doubt about his judgment would have negated his opportunity to feel superior.

I met a karate-ka once who bragged incessantly about having studied Tang Soo Do under Chuck Norris, that is, under the Chuck Norris system. "Did you ever get to train with Mr. Norris?" I asked. "Oh no, he is too busy with movies to visit his schools." Of course, that was a reasonable excuse for not having seen the world-famous martial artist. But still his bragging was not about his personal, direct instructor, but about his instructor's instructor—the world-famous guy whom he had never met, but whose notoriety and value he felt free to fetch...er...filch.