

Where I Am a Fan of MMA

If things were always what they seemed, they'd never warrant a second glance.

Although I have a really difficult time with the popularity of so-called mixed martial arts, emblemized by television cage-fighting, filching the “martial arts” title from traditional martial arts, although I have a problem with those who practice MMA in local schools thinking they have the ultimate in martial arts, and although I have concerns that the lack of tradition and etiquette in modern MMA opens the door to a more callous, less polite society, I do have to give the nod to one aspect I think eminently positive: the inclusion not simply of several martial arts, but of Western martial arts.

In a traditional karate, one might “mix” one's art by analyzing throws and locks secreted in kata, or by integrating some Okinawan weaponry into one's training. In this way, one stays faithful to one's art, but still experiences a broader perspective than if one only practiced blocks, punches, and kicks.

In traditional judo (not Olympic sport judo, but traditional judo), one incorporates *goshin-jutsu* (self-defense skills) at least in a kata format that includes striking.

In traditional ju-jutsu, one feels free to mix all sorts of skills including grappling.

In none of these arts, however, does a student study Western boxing or wrestling. Sure, karate is an Asian sort of boxing and judo mat-work is an Asian sort of wrestling and, in some aspects at least, the Asian counterpart is superior; but I must report that, in other aspects, the Western version is better. Unless you are very good at kicking, try sparring a boxer in the ring. I have. Luckily because I also studied boxing, I was familiar with his actions and he was unfamiliar with my rather free-flowing movements. As a result, even though he was a golden gloves champ, we called it a draw (I suspect however that by the third round his conditioning would have given him the win). Similarly, I have judo grappled with collegiate wrestlers. They tend to be strong, fast, and understand leverage. I tended to be fluid, unconventional (for them at least), and very good at escapes, so in this case, I won (although I was behind on points for the entire match).

In cage fighting, the martial art that is practiced before the match is the art one needs during the match. If your scheduled opponent is weak defending leg kicks, you'll be Thai kicking the banana bag for extra rounds this month. If your opponent is susceptible to arm-bars, you'll be grappling with an emphasis on transferring from a mount or a hold-down to a *kansetsu-waza* (joint lock). But for the average Joe who studies MMA, the attraction is that he gets a little of everything—and that's the downside as well. Just as traditional karate-ka can fall into the trap of being masters of one trade and jacks of none, the average MMA student can fall into the trap of being a jack of many trades and master of none. Yet here I am praising the local MMA school for including wrestling and boxing. To extricate ourselves from this apparent irony, let's take a broader perspective.

We don't want to be dilettantes but we must visit the village of dilettantism in order to fully understand our major martial art. My main karate style is Takeshin, but I am also ranked in Shotokan, and Kamishin, so I

practice kata that have their origins in Shotokan, Shito, Goju, Uechi, thus I have made myself familiar with different stances, different body tensions, and different engagement distances as well as the many and varying applications for each kata. Although I do not perform Shito, Goju or Uechi kata as well as Shito, Goju or Uechi students, I have become familiar with what they do. I think that makes me a more well-rounded karate-ka. Similarly, my main aiki system is Takeshin, but I have studied Aikido, Hakkoryu, and other systems of aiki, not to obtain a rank, but to feel my way around the whole aiki elephant. I don't do Aikido or Hakkoryu as well as Aikido or Hakkoryu stylists, but being familiar with several systems may make me a more well-rounded *aiki-jin*. In other words, I was a dilettante in order to approach mastery.

In the same way, I suggest that traditional martial artists become familiar with dominant western martial arts (read about them, watch them, practice a little here and there) so that the mastery of their art of choice condenses from a broad spectrum rather than expands to endlessly wider fields.

If things were always what they seemed, they'd never warrant a second glance. I'm a fan of MMA training to the extent that it broadens the perspective rather than worships a narrow, and often untested, point of view.