

Why Grappling is Great

Anyone who has been reading my articles might understandably triangle-jump to the conclusion, because I have said some unsupportive things about cage fighting, that I don't really like grappling. Nothing could be further from the truth. In fact, my first non-Asian martial art was informal backyard wrestling especially after watching Big Time Wrestling and Antonino "Argentina" Rocca. Okay, okay, I know the small screen stuff is not really martial and is big on art, but what we were doing in the backyard with 3-second pins and painful submissions, was at least somewhat closer to the martial side of the equation. My first formal Asian martial art was judo, which, I was happy to discover, had a strong grappling element with both hold-downs and submissions.

When the Gracies entered the American martial arts scene I was surprised, not because they challenged other martial arts, but because everyone seemed intrigued by an art that I had taken for granted for thirty years. The problem is that judo took its grappling element for granted as well. Judo always seemed to emphasize the throwing aspect, even though many matches ended up on the ground. Judo training drilled us on throws, throwing combinations, and standing *randori* (freestyle), but rarely gave details about *ne-waza* (mat techniques). I suppose this was because throwing was more spectacular and exciting for the spectator.

The Gracies offered a judo-based mat work with a plethora of detail and strategy, certainly more than we learned in judo. Good grapplers always managed to create their own combinations and variations, and pass them down to juniors, but their wisdom was never put into a curriculum. Like much of what we did in those days, we learned by doing. There is nothing like down and dirty hands-on training — nothing except rational theory applied to down and dirty hands-on training. The rational theory is what the Gracies, to their credit, supplied.

So, when I see a NHB match and it goes to the ground, I am actually put off by the admittedly realistic ground-and-pound aspect. I'd rather see strategic wrestling. But, just as throwing in judo appealed to the spectators, pounding in ground fighting appeals to the horror-show addict who'd rather see real blood than another edition of *Saw*.

To me, grappling is great because it not only employs strength and speed (undeniably essential to most athletes) but also leverage, skills, tactics, and strategy. It is much more of a chess-game than is boxing, kickboxing, or point sparring, despite the fact that those martial sports employ a great deal of skill, tactics, and strategy. In addition, there is more tactility involved. Often a grappler has to sense where his opponent is rather than see him, and feel what leverage will occur when he twists to a new position or if he will have sufficient leverage to successfully apply a lock, choke or hold down.

I confess that in a real self-defense encounter, pounding from an unskilled opponent might challenge the skills of a grappler. This is why NHB cage-fighting fans believe their sport to be the ultimate in real world self-defense. Sure, for self-defense I advocate a many-skills approach, but the cage is not the real world, not even a

poor estimation of the real world. Unfortunately I think the insistence on no holds barred not only mixes martial skills, but also depresses certain skills of its components, in this case, grappling.

Okay, I recognize that this is the inverse of the arguments *for* NHB training: that each martial arts works well in its own context, but when out of context, it can be defeated by the skill-set of another art. The argument is sound, but it still doesn't allow us to witness that which is great about grappling. Ironically, the very integration of cage-fighting skills (commonly, and I think erroneously, called Mixed Martial Arts) has prevented us from seeing the heights of the skills that compose cage-fighting. This is not a criticism so much as an observation. It seems undeniably true that you cannot have a system that is both complete and unified.

In the 1930s, The Austrian mathematician and logician Kurt Gödel produced a "incompleteness theorem" which stated that if a system is capable of proving certain basic facts, then one truth the system cannot prove is the consistency of the system itself. Gödel was talking about mathematics, but Douglas Hofstadter in his brilliant *Gödel, Escher, Bach* extends the idea to non-mathematical systems. I am extending it to martial arts. Actually, I am making up my own corollary inspired by Gödel (sorry Kurt): To the extent a martial practice is holistic in unifying types of martial skills, it will necessarily be incomplete in the skills it unifies.

Guess you can't have your cake and eat it, too. But it would be nice to see great kicking, great punching, and great grappling once in a while, as well as a great deal of blood, sweat, and cauliflower ears.