

IN THE REAL WORLD, GROUND GRAPPLING IS JUST A STEP CLOSER TO BEING SIX FEET UNDER

by Craig Smith

Few have done as much in recent years to promote the combat sports as the Gracies and other practitioners of Brazilian Ju-Jitsu. As Tae Kwon Do practitioners did in the early seventies, the Gracies brought marketing genius to the world of martial arts and developed an entirely new segment of enthusiasts who studied and promoted their discipline with an almost religious fervor. Like most religions, Tae Kwon Do and Brazilian Ju-Jitsu promoted themselves as being superior to other arts and systems – the one “true way”, as it were – with Tae Kwon Do billing itself as “super karate” (though it was neither “super” nor *karate*) and Brazilian Ju-Jitsu billing itself as the “ultimate” (the “ultimate” in the Ultimate Fighting Championships). New students flocked to each of these exciting sounding systems, and, armed with claims by their instructors and the exuberance of youthful naïveté, further promoted the “invincibility” of their respective styles to all who would listen.

With marketing savvy, each developed the reputation of their disciplines within the controlled environment of their own circle, Tae Kwon Do eschewing karate tournaments for closed “Tae Kwon Do” only tournaments, and the Gracies building up the legendary UFC, in which, as Jim Harrison pointed out in his paper, “*Grappling vs. Punching and Kicking... Which is Better?*”, elite grapplers were matched up against less-than-elite strikers. Each developed a large participant and spectator following, and, as activities within themselves, I have no problem with that. Nor am I suggesting that I feel I have a right to pass judgment on either within the scope of their own parameters. However, when a system is promoted as being street or combat effective, I feel I am able, and have a right, to consider and make some determination concerning those claims, as that is an area in which I have a bit of experience. The proliferation of ground grappling training to police and military is of particular concern to me, as I feel such training is resulting in an increased and false confidence on the part of many trainers who do not have much personal street/combat experience, and who therefore do not realize that ground grappling is not the panacea there are being told it is.

I went through the Kansas City Police Academy in the pre-lawsuit era when they still made recruits stand at attention to get hosed down with mace. Those were not sissy days, and more of us came off of the streets, where we had had ample opportunity to develop our “interpersonal-conflict” skills, than out of college. In fact, recruits broke down into two basic large groups – those just back from Viet Nam and those who had been mixing it up for years on the streets. I was fortunate to have Jim Lindell as my DTI and Form (platoon) Instructor. We spent two hours a day, every day for six months, running, doing push-ups, sit-ups, calisthenics, and practicing what was then referred to as “hand-to-hand combat”, which consisted primarily of judo and oriental ju-jitsu. Yet I don’t think I ever used any of those techniques in the field, even though I worked extremely “active” (a euphemism for *high violent crime*) districts during an extremely violent era.

I spent the first five years of my police career working uniform in inner-city districts, the first two along the well-known Troost and Prospect Avenues of Kansas City and the final three in the infamous “Dogpatch” on Kansas City’s east side. Dogpatch was a slum, situated between the incorporated areas of Kansas City and Independence, Missouri. From Interstate 435, which bordered its west side, drivers could see only a few old houses stuck up among the trees – if they bothered to look at all. If they took the exit off of I-435 onto Truman Road, the main street through Dogpatch, and then were foolish enough to turn off of Truman onto the “Patch”, they would find world few were aware of – and even fewer would understand.

A little “Appalachia” set down in the middle of a city, Dogpatch was a labyrinth of winding, deteriorating roads going up into hills of trailer houses, tar paper shacks, cinder block “shooting galleries”, and a variety of other shelters inhabited by one of the meanest species known to man – *hillbillus americanus*, the American hillbilly. There were no sewers and few streetlights. Some shacks had dirt floors, and a number used 10 gallon paint cans for toilets (some conveniently placed in a corner of the living room) – the nicer ones having a stolen toilet seat on top for comfort and a touch of luxury. Teenage girls with kids outnumbered teenage girls who could read, most males between 12 and 60 were “between incarcerations”, empty beer and whisky bottles outnumbered teeth in most houses, and knifings, shootings, and firebombings were the preferred methods of conflict resolutions.

To add a little more spice, two motorcycle clubs (gangs) had their headquarters in the Patch, and a blast furnace roared 24 hours a day at a metal “recycling” yard (recycling stolen copper and aluminum ingots for resale), always ready to receive and dispose of the evidence and remains of the latest eastside homicide (recycling the late Joe Blow into Joe Smoke, who then drifted over the unsuspecting city as a dark cloud). It was a great district to work.

Some time ago, I wrote a column about *real* reality. Well, Dogpatch was reality squared. “Patchers” weren’t afraid of much, least of all the criminal justice system, where the weaker ones knew they could get cheap drugs and make shanks in the shop and the stronger ones knew they could get cheap drugs, lift weights in the yard, and get sex in the showers. Most had lived lives of hell on Earth, were somewhat surprised they had lived as long as they *had*, and had low expectations for the future. The lower levels were primarily concerned with surviving, while the predators were interested in power and devouring anything that would nourish them or that threatened their power. It was just like any other jungle.

Since neither Kansas City nor Independence wanted anything to do with a no-tax-base slum like Dogpatch, it fell to the Sheriff’s Department, for which I worked, to handle it. And when you worked Dogpatch, you worked it alone. With your closest backup usually 20 miles away (neither Kansas City nor Independence would send cars into Dogpatch to back you up), it was up to you to be able to do what you had to do.

Like most slums, Dogpatch was more a pressure cooker than a melting pot. It didn't take much to make the lid blow, and it offered the district officer regular opportunities to develop his physical "conflict resolution" skills. Thinking back, I can recall resolving conflicts in stairwells, dark (dank and dirty) basements, alleys, cluttered front yards, cluttered back yards, cluttered junk yards, trailer bathrooms, tangled in a wire fence, the laundry room of a warehouse (excuse me, I mean a *massage parlor*), on front porches, back porches, road shoulders, and even in a goat pen. Most of these conflict resolutions were made necessary as a result of the "unresolved" subject not wanting to do what I asked them to. Most tried to get away. Some were drunk, stoned, or just wanted to fight. Those who wanted to get away either tried to run away from you, go around you, or go through you. If they ran, they usually became "resolved" when you caught them. If they tried to go around you, they either became resolved or tried to go through you when they couldn't get away. Those who tried to go through you were a bit more of a challenge.

With all those possible variables, and the vast amount of variables that exist within each general situation, I never used an arm bar to resolve a subject. I never pulled anyone into my "guard" (can you say, "kill me *now*?"), never used a knee bar, toe lock, heel hook, "paint brush", or judo throw to resolve a conflict. Nor do I recall any situation in which I think I could have. Nor did I ever see anyone else use any of those techniques in the many resolutions I participated in or witnessed over the years. Did we use joint locks? Sure, but they were applied with violent (excuse me again, I mean aggressive, er, assertive) dynamic application that was intended to incapacitate rather than simply contain and control the subject, and they were done either with the subject on the ground or to *put* the subject on the ground (or into a wall) ready for cuffing or other resolution – not when *you* were on the ground. If *you* were on the ground, you had to realize your life was in jeopardy, and you tried to punch, kick, break, bite, scratch, or rip off, open, or into anything you could reach, in order to regain a superior position before he could incapacitate you or his compadres joined in or happened along.

I know things have changed since I was on, and that my opinions are not supported or welcomed by a great many police administrators, and even defensive tactics instructors, today. Hell, there were people even back in my day who weren't "comfortable" with violent resolutions – but most of them worked in the office. There are more police officers now than when I was on. Most police officers today work fairly safe areas, and even the traditionally high crime areas are not the powder kegs they once were. But police officers are still killed in the line of duty, often because they are under-trained and ill-prepared to handle violent attack or resistance situations. The fact is that bad guys will *not* "tap" to an armbar; you are never going to get them into any of the fancy holds you practice in the gym or dojo – mainly because: you are rarely going to have the room or time to work them, most folks who fight the cops are more like slippery wildcats on speed than the methodical grappling partner you are used to working with, and the average hardcase will be more than happy to rip your guts out with a shank, stick, broken bottle, or whatever else he can get his hands on if you get him "in your guard".

I have absolutely nothing against submission grappling or ground fighting as a sport. Nor do I have a problem with it being included as a *part* of an overall defensive tactics or personal combat training program – I think it *should* be. What I *do* have a problem with is ground-grappling being promoted as the preferred, or “ultimate” defensive tactics system – as it is being promoted to many law enforcement and military units today.

In the ring, victory by submission is the goal. On the street, the goal is whatever the winner says it is, and nobody who has made the decision to fight a cop is going for a “tap”. So, while ground skills may someday prove useful to you (which means things have already gone wrong), law enforcement and military should put renewed effort into developing their above ground skills, and do everything they can to stay *off* the ground. If you go to the ground anyway, you should know techniques that go way beyond the classic ground grappling techniques – after all your life is at stake.

We all have tendencies to try to stay within our comfort zone in times of stress. If you are too comfortable with ground techniques, at the expense of others, you will have tendency to go to the ground too quickly, and sometimes when you shouldn't. While it may be comfortable in sport competition, the ground is *not* a comfortable place for someone fighting for their life – it's just a step closer to being six feet under. So concentrate on developing all aspects of your “conflict resolution” arsenal. And remember, regardless of claims of what percentage of street fights end up on the ground, 100% of *losers* end up on the ground. Don't let that be you.