

STRONG-ARM TACTICS

An interview with reality-based self-defence instructor Jim Armstrong

'Learn Self-Defence' is a phrase often seen on martial arts clubs' flyers, but rarely ever explained. This can result in instructors teaching ineffective methods, or students joining a particular club to learn self-defence, and never really knowing if they've received the schooling they desire. Or worse even, finding out for sure that they haven't in the street. Jim Armstrong, instructor with Melbourne club Raw Combatives, tells us what self-defence means to him, and how he goes about teaching it.

STORY AND IMAGES BY CHELSEA ATTARD

Jim, how old were you when you started training in martial arts?

I started training at around 16 or so from a karate book – yes... I know. I trained almost daily for six months and then started training in freestyle karate with the ECKA, which was basically kickboxing with a syllabus and belts.

Why did you first start training?

I was brought up in quite a violent area of Newcastle upon Tyne and was involved in confrontations and fights on almost a weekly basis – mainly with bullies but also sometimes with me being the aggressor – from a very young age. Some of them not the proudest moments of my life, but they did help shape who I am today. I'm not talking about a few slaps either, I'm talking about some people being hurt quite badly and some scarred for life. I remember one night, when I was around 16, where I witnessed a big fight. It was 10 or so guys against two. The two guys were beaten very badly. I hadn't seen that much blood or that many teeth on the ground before. I was rooted to the spot; I just couldn't believe what I was seeing. After this, even though I had been in many fights one-on-one, I decided I needed to learn a martial art. I thought it would make me the Geordie version of Bruce Lee.

What are some of the different martial arts you've trained in over the years?

Over about seven years in England I trained in ECKA

– which is a freestyle karate system – Thai boxing and eskrima, as well as dabbling in a few other arts for a few months at a time. When I moved to Australia I trained at a few kickboxing gyms over several years and then started eskrima at the A.I.M. academy [in Melbourne] where I remained for around six years. I have also trained and graded in the Philippines twice. I have been teaching off and on since around 1991. Over the last 15 years I've collected a lot (too much, according to my wife) of training material – books, DVDs and the like – as well as attending seminars by people who I thought could help my knowledge and teaching. I am always researching and experimenting to find better and safer ways to teach material that works for the ordinary person on the street.

Do any of these stand out as being particularly influential in your training today?

The Thai boxing gave me a better ability to deal with pain, and an excellent work ethic. The eskrima taught me to relax and flow but, more importantly, to question and think about what I'm doing. More important than the arts I've studied are the people I've met through the martial arts. It's really people who add to you, rather than specific arts. I'd rather be influenced by people's experiences than the styles they teach.

What does self-defence mean to you?

Self-defence still conjures up pictures of people fighting/defending themselves, but it is really all about confidence. That is, confidence in what you do and more importantly in who you are. I want people to not only have the ability to protect themselves and those around them but more importantly to learn who they really are and how powerful they actually are. This not only benefits their self-defence but also makes a huge impact on how they live their lives as well as how they interact with people.

Do you think self-defence often means different things to different people?

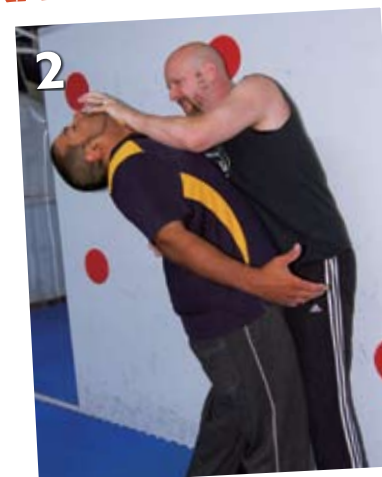
I think a lot of people believe it to be only a physical act, which it isn't. Some people seem to want to be turned into terminators while others want to learn tricks that they can

pull out at the drop of a hat to defend themselves. I have met a lot of people who have thought after six or so lessons that they can now walk down dark alleys and not be worried about being attacked as they now know... ta da – self-defence! It's not their fault; the fault lies with whoever taught them. Every martial arts club teaches so-called self-defence but very few deliver anything even mildly effective. From what I've seen they show them how their 'art' is effective against a person who is attacking with little or no real energy or intent. If something outside the gym does happen, they end up getting hurt, as well as getting a newfound disrespect for the martial arts. Or you get the schools who are way too combative, where every threat is taken as a life-or-death situation so their supposed attacker is

'SCENARIO TRAINING'



Armstrong plays the unlikely victim...



...before he brings the necessary pain.



Armstrong in teaching mode

told to back off and if it's not heeded, they are then gouged in the eye, kneed in the balls and then attempt to twist their head off their shoulders as they are finally dumped to the ground and stomped on – a little bit excessive, I think. Yes I do teach dangerous techniques but I also teach the responsible use of force. I want to help people out there, not add to the problems out there.

How do you go about accommodating these differences when you teach?

Everybody is different and everybody learns differently. My job is to get them to believe in the base concepts of what we teach and ultimately to believe in themselves. I achieve this by getting to know them and then work from there. One of the advantages of being a small club is that I get to know everyone personally and help them the best way I know. I also wholeheartedly believe that everyone already knows how to fight, they just don't know how to access these skills. You really need to work with who you are, personality-wise, rather than trying to turn yourself into something you're not.

Can you tell me a bit about what you teach in terms of reality-based self-defence (RBSD)?

I teach people to prevent, recognise and deal with emotional, physical and verbal conflict, and hopefully avoid conflict all together. Avoidance and verbal de-escalation are two of the most important parts in RBSD, but they are not the most fun! With the physical part we keep a simple directive: stop the attack and escape ASAP. The physical part is taught much like any other club. We hit pads/dummies, work technique, do combative fitness but we also test what we do against progressively more aggressive and emotionally charged partners. Realistic scenarios are then used to ensure it actually works.

One of the big differences between what we do and what some other schools do is get people to be happy in being on the back foot. It's all good and well to be Mr. Tough Martial Artist or Master At Arms Combat-boot Boy when you're fit and strong, but what happens when you're

ill, older or injured and you can't access those somewhat ego-filled training and fitness attributes? I believe you need to train to be effective when you're not on top of the heap – better to be effective under bad conditions than to excel under favourable conditions.

The combative mindset is important and you do need to develop one, but you need to know when to switch it on and when not to. If [an altercation] goes physical, then you need to enter that mindset as soon as possible so you can stop the attack. You don't want to enter it every time you have

correct mindset. Some of the most dangerous and some of the most successful people I know are not that big, nor technically gifted, but have an excellent mindset. I personally don't care how big you are or how skilled you are, I want to see you when you have nothing left to give. When your strength is gone and your skills are of no use, then let's see who you are and what you're made of.

I personally don't kid myself that I am the hardest man in my street, let alone Melbourne. I do pride myself on the fact that I am one of the most honest people I know. Anybody



Bringing a bit of reality to the classroom

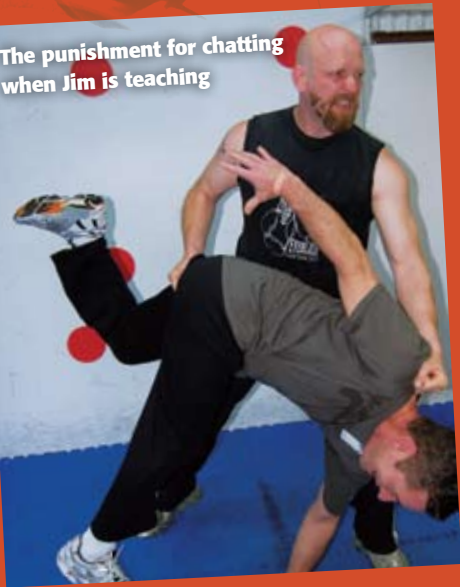
a confrontation, as this may cause an incident that may have been avoided had you used your verbal skills and common sense.

The three main things to work on in order of importance are: mind, athleticism (body) and technique (skills). The mind is always the most important part to work on, as this controls who you are. No point in looking like Hercules and having the crisp techniques of a seasoned boxer if you don't have the

can be beaten by anybody – it just depends on circumstances. Hence, don't get into fights if you can avoid them. If we can make people more honest with themselves and give them true confidence in their abilities, then we are most certainly on the right track. If we create people who want to test their skills because they have issues with themselves, then we have failed.

How would you describe your teaching style?

The punishment for chatting when Jim is teaching



Passionate; I love what I do and what I teach. Personal; I also love helping people and finding out what makes them tick. Honest; I hate bullshit and endeavor to tell the truth as much as possible — as long as I don't hurt someone, too much anyway! Fun; I believe this is missing from a lot of places. I believe you learn a lot more if you know you can laugh while training.

Are there people that have influenced your teaching style?

Obviously my old Thai boxing coach Barry Norman and my eskrima teacher Rob Hallijian, but the people that have really influenced me the most are the guys I train with: Jezz De Silva, Vlado Sedlaravic and Colin Staples, who are also great teachers in their own right. I also learn from people who I believe are very good at what they do e.g. Deane Lawler, Richard Dimitri, Ray Floro and Doug Tucker, amongst others. I have also gained a lot of teaching knowledge from people who train with us and especially from the ones who are not martial artists or natural fighters.

What motivates you to teach RBSD?

I do still love teaching boxing and eskrima but I feel what I teach needs to work for people of all sizes, age, athletic ability and personalities. When the chips are down, I've always

believed that what I've taught is based in reality, but it's been the last four years that I feel I have really gotten to grips with what it's all about. Everyone is very different, which is why it has to be personal. As much as I love the physicality of it all, it's really about being a better person. If you are learning RBSD as I believe it should be taught, then you should not fail to become a better version of yourself. If you turn into a paranoid, aggressive, ego-driven idiot, then you have really missed the point.

Do you think it is possible for someone to be able to teach RBSD without having ever been in a confrontation themselves?

There are already lots of people out there teaching arts with a self-defence component who shouldn't be, so why would it make RBSD any different! Look, as long as their teacher has had experience with confrontation/violence and can impart good honest information, I don't see why not. The person has to be honest to the people they are teaching though and say 'look, I have never been in a confrontation, but this is what I've learnt.' Anyone can teach it but they have to be truthful with their students and, more importantly, with themselves.

What would your advice be, for a student wanting to learn effective self-defence?

Ask yourself why you want to learn self-defence. Is it an

ego thing? Are you lacking self-confidence? Are you afraid of the possibility of a physical confrontation? Find out the real reason and then look for somewhere that suits you. It is hard for people to find a good place to learn self-defence, as they have no real point of reference. All they can do is ask the right questions and see what sort of person the teacher is, as well as the other guys training there. Use your common sense and listen to your inner voice and don't believe the bullshit.

What do you think are some of the biggest challenges often faced by people learning RBSD?

With regards to the way we teach at Raw Combatives, it's having to think and be completely honest with yourself. Dealing with the shouting, swearing and people getting in your space is very confronting, which is why we progress slowly to build confidence rather than strip it away. I also find that a lot of people have trouble hitting/hurting other people in training, which is a good thing, but it needs to be addressed. If you can't bring yourself to hurt a willing partner, then it's going to be hard to hurt an attacker. This is all about desensitising people to violence while keeping them as well balanced as they were when they came to us. The last thing we want to do is create more idiots.

What have been some of the biggest challenges faced by you as an instructor?

Learning not to step in all the time and give people all the answers. People need to discover things for themselves. If I tell them something, they'll sometimes forget it by the time they walk to the end of the street, but if they figure it out themselves, they have a much better chance of retaining it. The longer I teach, the more I believe it has to be quite an organic process.

You teach both women and men. Is there a big difference between women's self-defence, and men's self-defence?

No, I don't believe so. The situations either sex may find themselves in can be very different so you need to run different scenarios. You may need to change the way you teach but the underlying concepts remain the same. Not only is everyone different, they also learn differently. Again, we teach the same base material but put it across differently so it makes sense to everyone personally.

Do you find it easier to train men?

It can be easier to teach people who are similar in thought process and wants, in a group situation — it really doesn't matter which sex they are. I don't like teaching people who don't ask questions. I prefer them to ask questions and use their own common sense. At least I know they are listening and thinking. At the end of the day, I'm not going to be there if they find themselves in trouble, which is why they really need to believe in themselves and their skills and not in their chosen style or guru.

What have been some of the rewards you've gained from your martial arts career so far?

Really good friends. It has definitely created a better me, which has in turn improved other parts of my life such as my relationships with my wife, family and friends. I have fought in the ring on a few occasions and competed in the World Stick-fighting Championships in the Philippines twice, but they pale in comparison to the friendships I've made through the martial arts.