



Episode 221 – How whistlekick Gear Was Born | [whistlekickMartialArtsRadio.com](http://whistlekickMartialArtsRadio.com)



**Jeremy Lesniak:**

Hey what's up everybody! Its episode 219 of whistlekick martial arts radio. Today, I'm going to talk about whistlekick, how we got started with the sparring gear and don't tune out yet. If that's not something that you're interested in, this is actually going to be more of a business lesson, kind of an intersection of whistlekick and how we got started and some of the things that I learned, so if you're interested in whistlekick or sparring gear or business or maybe my voice just helps you fall asleep, you'll want to stick around.

If you're new to the show, if maybe you've had an aneurysm lately, my name is Jeremy Lesniak, I'm the founder of whistlekick sparring gear and apparel and we do everything we can to move the martial arts world forward. You can check out our gear, you can check out our podcast, you can check out everything we do, the hub for us online, our digital home is [whistlekick.com](http://whistlekick.com). The show notes, the other episode for this are at [whistlekickmartialartsradio.com](http://whistlekickmartialartsradio.com)

So, what's the story behind whistlekick gear? And that really the story of whistlekick because whistlekick's first stuff, our first product, our first goals were all around our line of sparring gear. If you're not familiar with our gear, again you could check it out online [whistlekick.com](http://whistlekick.com) but we make a type of protective foam gear that's fairly standard, excuse me, standard in the sport martial arts world. A lot of schools use it for training internally, it's your kind of standard slip on gloves, boots, helmets and



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shin guard based around a foam design and I was tired of what was out there. I would buy gear, and it would fall apart within a few months and that really stunk. It didn't seem to matter what company I bought it from, it didn't matter how much I've spent on it, so I just resigned myself to do what so many others do. I bought the color that I liked and wore it until I felt I'd got my money out of it which was usually far too long and then I would repeat the process. And I would come home from class, and I would think, there's got to be a better way. Got to be somebody out there making better gear.

So, I'd grab a beer out of the fridge and sit at my computer, this is like 2008, and I wasn't finding anything. And I would look at the new products from the bigger companies and see that they really weren't that different. And I would get to try them out because somebody at the school or at a tournament would have them and I'd look at them and see it's just a gimmick, they're not really different. Where's the improvement? Where is the growth, the progress that we're taught to have as martial artists? As martial artists, everything we do is supposed to get better, right? And it seemed like it was actually going in the other direction. And I didn't know what to do and one of my mentors, because I have another business, I had an IT business, for those of you that may not know. One of my mentors, I mentioned this to him and he said well, you know, check it out see what you can find. See if there's a prototyping company out there and I looked and looked and I couldn't find any prototyping companies that worked in these sorts of materials, the foam stuff. The short version, he did. He found a company out in the Midwest and I spent a couple of years working with them coming up with designs. And to be honest, everything they came up with was terrible. But they did do one thing, they connected me to a perfect factory.

Now if you know me, or if you have listened to this show for a while, you probably get to sense that I like knowing people I do business with. If you've ever emailed in, if you've ever purchased a product from us, I've got a lot of involvement in that and I'm going to do that as long as I possibly can because this is my business and it means a lot to me. So, it means a lot to me when the people I'm doing business with have the same mindset. And this factory that I've found was just over the border from the US and Mexico. I could not find, the prototyping firm could not find a factory that could scale to what we needed in the United States. And I've got some theories on why it has to do with a little bit of labor cost but it's actually more regulatory stuff with chemicals and whatever, I won't go too much into that. But the bottom-line is, I found a factory owned by a brother and sister just a few hours over the border from Texas. So I went there, and we spent a couple of days hand cutting foam and trying things out, my Spanish is okay but it's not great and the two owners they speak good English so would sit in the break room which was the only air-conditioned space in the whole facility and one of the owners would come in and we'd sit down and talk and we'd sketch something out or we'd cut something out and he would call the floor foreman up and he'd show it to him and he'd give him the instruction in Spanish and the foreman would look at it and say: "what? Really?" you know it was in Spanish but I could still tell he thought I was nuts. He didn't get it, because he wasn't a martial artist. He was just comparing it to the other stuff they make for the other companies. And after three days I left, I flew home from Mexico, and a couple months later, the pre-production the hand cut test units showed up at my house. The first



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whistlekick gear was there and I tried it on and it was great. And that gear is what I'm still wearing today, five years later. Now I don't wear it everyday, I don't even wear it every week but I continue to wear it for a couple of reasons. It means a lot to me, emotionally. This was the very first gear that I made and secondly, they continue to test and see how it holds up are there some scuffs and some rips on it? Absolutely. But it still works and it still looks far better than most other gear out there after just a couple of months.

One of the questions I get, why Mexico? Why not china, why not Hong Kong, Taiwan? Why not one of these countries that has even lower labor cost that would be able to make stuff admittedly less expensive. I could sell it for less or more likely just make more on each unit. Well, it's my business philosophy. I like being able to email or to go visit these folks and say "here's what I need" and know that they're going to be there in a few months. They've been my only factory from day one and I'm loyal to them just as I'm loyal to the other who have treated me well. Things have gone on, they've bent some rules for me and I appreciate that. One of my favorite quotes, and I might get it a little bit wrong but Abraham Lincoln said I've never had policy, I've just always done what's felt right at the time. And that's what these folks have done for me and that's what I try to do in business. I try to do what feels right whether that's someone who, you know, orders gear and even though we don't have a warranty somehow, maybe some defect creeps or something, I'm going to do what I can to make it right because that's how I was taught that's how business should be. Business is incredibly personal to me, you could walk and you've probably tell that.

I want to talk about some of the features of the gear and I'm going to try not to make this to commercial-ly and all but it's important to understand my mindset and why this stuff needed to be better, why that was so important to me. If you take a look at our gear, we use a better-quality foam, it holds up as I've said, five years. That foam is still pliable after five years and if you have gear from other companies, you've probably seen that it rarely holds up that long, it starts to degrade and they'll lose materials that can bend or flex or squish, they crack, they break, they flake and that's when it starts to fall apart. That's not good, it's not safe, it's not comfortable, it's probably the comfort that's the most important part and in fact when I go to event, I still go to events, I'm still there, not always by myself but usually if were set up in an event, it's me behind the table. And so, I get to size people up, I get to put gear on them and one of my favorite things, is small kids. Small kids whose parent say they don't even like to wear pants when they're running around the house. Don't want to take off whistlekick gear because it's that comfortable. It's such a departure from what they're used to. I wear a large helmet, I could wear anything from a small all the way up to and extra-large because it's that squishy and not that I should wear small because it looks funny. It's not really safe but I can make it fit.

What else do we do? All the common places where it tears, we put double reinforcement. We cut as many ventilation holes as we could, we use a better velcro, there's more vinyl coating on it. And really, it's all about two pieces, durability and comfort. How do we make it better? How do we make all of these things just a little bit better and are there ideas for improving it even more, absolutely. There will



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be new versions of whistlekick gear coming out at some point. I don't know when, right now were busy rolling out colors. Let's see, can I say it? There are two new colors coming, right about the time this episode is going to come out. I'm not going to say them yet. One of them is a color that many of you been asking for and the other is a color that you didn't even know you wanted. It's amazing. Nobody has a color like this, it's gorgeous. It's not one of the blends like the horizon or the shark skin limited editions we did but this is an awesome color you're going to love it.

The boots, the biggest thing we've become known for in the sparring gear world is we don't have a toe strap. It's an elastic strap that holds it on, without the toes strap, you can keep your weight in the balls of your foot, you can move little bit more dynamically its closer to training barefoot. And if you know me, I don't like wearing shoes in general so having boots that is closer to bare foot is great. About 19 out of 20 people love it. Once in a while we got somebody who misses the toe strap that's fine, we don't need to make gear for everyone. We just want to make the best gear we can. Our gloves the wrist is chopped shorter, the helmet, there's a cut out for people with long hair that's not me but I wanted to make sure that was in there. And the shins are both double thick and there are already curves that you don't slide around as much like 11:25

Now, what's the result of all that? The average span of other gear, you know, just from what I've worn and from talking to other people, seems to be 6 to 12 months, really should be 3-6 months for people that are using it frequently but people will make it last because stuff cost money. Our life span, over three years. We sponsor enough athletes at this point that I get gear coming back and I know how often these people are training and competing and I know how long this stuff's lasting. And some of our most active athletes which tells me that the average martial artist is going to get at least that and that makes me happy. Is our gear the least expensive option? No, it can't be. It is not possible because of what we're putting into it, but nor should it be because what we make over the long haul, over the entire time that its used is going to cost you less. If you can buy something that last three years, and even if its and it's not but let's say twice as much as something that lasts one year, well you're still spending less money over time. What we say, and this is kind of new and this is fun to see, I didn't expect this, parents of small children, their kids are out growing our gear and it's going to happen but it still holding up so well that they're selling it to somebody else in the school. It looks that good, that's so cool. I've never seen that before. I've seen it once in a while, oh my kid trained for a month and didn't like it but this is 6-12 months in and the gear is holding up that well. So, I take that as an immense compliment. Does that mean we lose a sale? Yeah. Short term, but long term, makes people happier and that's my business philosophy. I'm not interested in short term dollars. There are plenty of things, there are plenty of ideas, plenty of business opportunities, people come to us and want me to do this or that, to make a few bucks, I could. The number of sponsorship opportunities we have with this show, how many commercials do you hear? You hear me talk about whistlekick a little bit, why? Because this is a whistlekick show. And because long term, I want all of you to be on board with this movement in the martial arts to bring some unity and grow the martial arts. Get more people training, that's one of my





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missions. It's probably my biggest mission. I have the best job in the world, I get to make stuff that people love.

I get to do this podcast that continues to grow that's listened to in over a hundred and thirty countries. Martial arts is all over the world are tuning in and checking out what we're doing and that just blows me away. And that's thanks to all of you because as long-time listeners know, this show, the format of this show, everything is shaped by your feedback. To me this is service in the martial arts industry. I'm leading the charge but I know a lot of you have the same goals, you love to train. You love to get better and that's what whistlekick is about, training, getting better, bringing people together, having some fun.

If you are in the New England area or if you're up for making a trip, October 28, we're going to be having our second annual free martial arts training day and you can find information on that at [martialartswEEKEND.com](http://martialartswEEKEND.com) or at our Facebook page, we've got the event up there. It's a bit of a tangent but that's okay. Because it's another example of how whistlekick gets to give back, were not charging people to for that event, we just want to bring people together and share some stuff. Different people, teaching different sessions, you know, kind of like a seminar day but just trying to stuff as much goodness into it as we can.

What's next here at whistlekick, adding projects and things all the time, [martialjournal.com](http://martialjournal.com) is semi live at the point that I'm recording this and hopefully we will have some real content. Right now, it's just some dummy content up there but [martialjournal.com](http://martialjournal.com) you can check that out. If you want to write for it, if you want to get other people, to help write for it, we're looking for writers, we're not going to pay you, no one is getting paid out of this project, it's just kind of that same philosophy as free martial arts training day. There are people out there that writes some great martial arts stuff and we want to help feature that. So, check it out share it, whatever.

What else is next? New types of gear, so for those of you that don't play in the ITF taekwondo or the sport karate world or you use your maybe your Olympic taekwondo or you do some different style gear, it's coming, we will make it. Should I promise? I promise. I promise we will make your gear. More colors, more accessories, there are so much stuff on the way right now. The pile of prototypes is a little unwieldy.

So, my takeaways for you out of this episode, the things that I want you to remember, it's not about the features of the gear. If we earn your business as a customer, great, but that's not why I'm doing this episode, that's not what the show is about. This isn't a commercial, it's about my philosophy with business and how it fits so tightly with my philosophy on martial arts, to work hard, to get better, to work with people that you respect, that have integrity, and to find new and creative ways to get the job done. Those ideas apply equally to business and the martial arts. And the last idea, do something you're passionate about. If you're not passionate about your work, if you're not passionate about you're training, make a change. That could be a change in your head, that could be a change in life in the more practical logistical stuff whether that's training at a new school or new time a day, new training partners,



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a new job, starting your own business, lot of options there, a lot of possibilities and I hope you will take every one of them that you can to live the best life that you have available to you. That's all for today, until next time. Train hard, smile and have a great day.