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Jeremy Lesniak:

Hey everybody! Thanks for tuning in, coming by and listening! This is Whistlekick Martial Arts Radio episode 298. Today, we are joined by Kru John Johnston. My name is Jeremy Lesniak, I'm the founder here at Whistlekick, I'm your host on this show. I've got the best job in the world because I get to talk about martial arts, I get to train martial arts as my job. And of course, we do all of this in the effort to share with you some of the products that we make available at whistlekick.com or over at Amazon or maybe, if you're one of the lucky ones, your school, you have a wholesale account with us and you can pick our stuff up right nearby. We do these show notes for this show at whistlekickmartialartsradio.com which includes photos and social media links to other episodes and guests, other things that we think are relevant that will bring you context for the various episodes because we're just kind of looking to support you as a martial artist on your journey - wherever that is from and to. Because martial arts are great, aren't they? I think so. But then again, I do have, as I've said, the best job in the world.

Let's talk about today's episode. I met Kru Johnston last year 2017 at Master Terry Dow's Martial Arts Symposium in Manchester, New Hampshire. And I was just blown away not only with this man's passion but his skill and just the way he approach not only teaching martial arts but the way he interacted with others. And it's a powerful presence not just because he is a physically imposing man but he just has this personality that is really difficult to not feel drawn to. I had the chance to see Kru Johnston again this year at the same event, got to watch what he was doing and I was just, again, blown away and said, you know what I've done the community a disservice



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not having him on the show prior to now. So of course, I reached out to him and I said please will you come on the show? Fortunately, he accepted and we're here today. He tells some great stories, some pretty powerful stuff. Stuff that you may find insightful, enlightening, and may give you a different approach to your own training. Regardless, I'm not going to talk anymore. I'm going to let him say everything because this is his episode after all. So let's welcome him to the show.

Hey, Kru Johnston, how are you?

John Johnston:

I'm good. How are you?

Jeremy Lesniak:

I'm doing good! How's everything? How are things? I just saw you couple of weeks ago.

John Johnston:

Yep. Everything is going great. Build the Ironclad here so everything is going awesome.

Jeremy Lesniak:

Good. Tell me what you got going on.

John Johnston:

We got a whole bunch of stuff going on. We got our kids' classes, they're going crazy. We got, coming up, this month we have, actually, it's going to be our 3 year anniversary June 22nd.

Jeremy Lesniak:

Oh, cool.

John Johnston:

So we're doing an ice bucket challenge. So members are challenging each other to dump a 5 gallon bucket of water over their head with ice in it. And then we also have a crazy kickboxing class that's going on. It's knocked around here.

Jeremy Lesniak:

Nice. Just from the little bit that I know of you, you strike me as someone who likes when it's crazy.



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John Johnston:

Oh yeah. Absolutely, yes. I like being busy.

Jeremy Lesniak:

You and me, both. Have you always been that way?

John Johnston:

Yes. If I'm not active, I'm bored.

Jeremy Lesniak:

Yeah, it's almost... For me, it's a switch. It's either I am completely bored or I'm completely busy and it seems like whichever state I'm in, there's a part in me that's asking for the other. You know, I struggle to find that.

John Johnston:

Exactly.

Jeremy Lesniak:

I think that's a common martial arts thing because you're, I mean, martial arts is never done, right? I mean, just keep doing it and keep finding new ways to implement and train and so on.

John Johnston:

That's right.

Jeremy Lesniak:

Alright. Well at this point, we have a decision to make. Either we can just keep talking and kind of let this be our intro or if you have questions or anything about how this is going to go, we can kind of pause, kind of cut it off and...

John Johnston:

No, I'm good.

Jeremy Lesniak:



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Okay. Well let's just keep rolling then. Let the listeners feel like they're getting some behind the scenes stuff because everybody likes that.

John Johnston:

Sounds good.

Jeremy Lesniak:

Cool. Alright, well you know, I've had the opportunity to train with you the tiniest bit down at Master Dow's at the symposium, and seeing you and other things. But I really don't know a ton about your background so I'd love if you could maybe take us back and tell us how you got started.

John Johnston:

Well, me getting started in the martial arts was not, to be honest with you, in the beginning, it wasn't my choice. When I a little around 11 years old, I grew up in Malden, city next to Boston and it was, you know, kind of the kid that I hang out with weren't like the greatest kid but you know, he was my friend and I kind of had a little temper, you know with my parents, and so forth. And then my parents actually put me into martial arts. They brought me to Master Richard Byrne, Tang Soo Do in Malden. And what ended up happening was they were bringing me there for discipline. And I kind of showed up there and my parents said that we were going to go out one day and they put me in the car and off we went. We showed up to this Karate school and I was like, what are we doing here? And my parents brought me upstairs and this enormous man comes walking out of an office and it was Grand Master Richard Byrne. And you know, here I am 11 years old, not very big, this little twig of a kid and this huge guy is standing over me and he comes out, he says hello, I'm Master Richard Byrne and I said, I'm John. And then he looked at my parents, he said okay you have two choices. You can either stay here and be quiet or you can leave. Leave mine for two hours. And I didn't know from the beginning that they had already spoken to Master Byrne about me so I thought this was their first time, you know, them meeting him, too. But they had already gone down and spoke to him and set up this plan to have me come in. So Master Byrne looked at me, alright are you ready? And I said, yeah? With kind of a little bit of an attitude and he looked at me and he said, alright 10 push-ups. And I was like, for what? And he said 20 push-ups. And every time I kind of spoke back to him, he kept adding push-ups so I think I got up to about 80 push-ups and then I finally did them. And then I stood back up again and he said alright, now I'm going to ask you again. Are you ready? And I was like, yes? And he was like, 10 push-ups. And I was like why am I having to do push-ups? And he goes, 20 push-ups. He said, after you get done with these push-ups, I'll tell you while. So I did my 20 push-ups so got up and he said okay, how did I introduce myself? And I said, Master Richard Byrne? He said, okay now put yes in front of that. He said, I'll ask you a question, are you ready? I said, yes Master Byrne. He put his arm around me and that was the start of my martial arts.

Jeremy Lesniak:



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There's a lot there that we can unpack but the thing that I am most interested in is, you know, it sounds like you remember a lot of details to that moment so I'm going to guess that you remember a bit of what was going through your head.

John Johnston:

Absolutely. I mean, like I said I didn't want to... It wasn't my choice, I didn't want to be there. My parents brought me and they said, you know why you're doing this.

Jeremy Lesniak:

But by the end, by the point, it's just... listening to you tell this story now, you know you're talking about the attitude in your voice when you started but when you got to kind of the end of this story where you say, and I said yes Master Byrne, your voice leveled a bit. It kind of almost dropped and it just kind of mellowed. Is that only in retrospect or at that moment were you starting to maybe embrace a little? What was happening?

John Johnston:

I definitely, you know, I do remember kind of you know looking at him and saying yes Master Byrne in a way that, you know, out of respect because he... by him, kind of making me do the push-ups and by not allowing me to kind of run the show, I think it built more respect. It gained my respect for him.

Jeremy Lesniak:

Did your parents choose to stick around or did they leave?

John Johnston:

They stayed. My parents sat there and they stayed and you know, I'm 47 years old and when... back in the day of the martial arts, it wasn't like it is today. Back in the day, I remember Master Byrne coming at me, grabbing me at one point during the class when I was fooling or when I wasn't paying attention. He came over and he grabbed me by the back to the neck and like walked me over into a corner and say push-ups. And obviously nowadays, if you do that it's a little bit of... you know, you're not going to do that. Nowadays, it's not going to happen.

Jeremy Lesniak:

There is a risk in doing that today, for sure.

John Johnston:



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Right. Definitely. You know, times have definitely changed. You know, that was the thing, my parents were sitting there and they were quiet and pretty much whatever happened, happened.

Jeremy Lesniak:

Talk to me about what happened as you were training with Master Byrne over the next however long you were there.

John Johnston:

In the beginning I could tell you I did a lot of push-ups. You know, because, I kind of still has a little bit of my attitude and then as time went on, I actually started to embrace the martial arts and I actually started to enjoy doing it. And with the traditional martial arts, it was Tang Soo Do. And it's funny because about 6 months into me doing classes with Master Byrne, that's when I met Grand Master Bill Wallace. So over the years, I had trained and met Grand Master Bill Wallace a bunch of times and then kind of, you know, as my life went on and I stopped doing martial arts, Tang Soo Do. And I started, you know, I went off to college. About five, maybe six, years ago at Master Terry Dow's symposium, I met Bill Wallace again. And he remembered me and it was awesome. And so it's kind of like a big circle, you know, things kind of came back.

Jeremy Lesniak:

Right. But talk to us about what happened in the meantime in that circle because I... just from what I've observed, Tang Soo Do it not at least your primary art now.

John Johnston:

No, it's not. You know, throughout the years when I came back from college and so forth, I started a business. I started a dog training school back in 1994. And a few years into owning that school, a gentleman by the name of Mark DelleGrotte came into my school to train his dog and we started to talk a bit and he told me that he owned a Muay Thai school in Somerville called Sityodtong. And I was like, oh I did some martial arts when I was a kid. And we kind of started talking about it, things like that. And he said, oh you know you should come by and check out the school. And I said, alright. So one day, I just called him up and I said, you know, I want to come by and see the school. He goes, yeah come on by. I want to introduce you to one of my other trainers and see what's going on. So I drove down to Somerville and he introduced me to Kru Eric Armington. And I started to talk to Eric and I started to talk to Mark and then I just decided that, you know what, I want to start getting back into this. And I started to do private lessons with Kru Eric Armington for Muay Thai. So you know, I would do two private lessons a week with Kru Eric and two privates a week with Kru Mark just strictly in Muay Thai. So doing pad work and stuff like that, I really started to kind of get the itch again. And then back at that time, Kenny Florian, Marcus Davis, Patrick Côté, Jorge Gurgel, a bunch of UFC fighters were in the gym and they were training and you know, being a bigger guy, they would always... they wanted to do some training with me so



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we would spar, and I started to get the itch even more. So I told Kru Eric that I wanted to see about fighting, taking a Muay Thai fight. So I started taking that and then, you know, training for a fight and so forth. And then at my first fight, it was January of 2008 and it was a Muay Thai fight and it was actually at a place called Club Lido in Revere and I'll never forget. I was sitting there, I had no idea who I was fighting. I was just sitting there and kind of looking around the room seeing if I could see any of the big guys and Kru Eric was sitting next to me and next thing you know, this guy comes walking in and he literally docked under the doorway. And I just had this feeling and I'm like, that's the guy I'm fighting. And it was, it turned out to be the guy I was fighting. I weighed in at 230 pounds, he weighed in at 254 pounds and he was 6'9" and I'm 6'4". So I was like, okay I guess this is happening. And I fought and I won by unanimous decision. It went all three rounds and it was definitely the toughest fight. It was a ridiculous fight. It felt like I'm being hit by a Mack truck for like the next week but it was tough and that's kind of how things got started with my Muay Thai. I had a couple more fights in Muay Thai, two more fights in Muay Thai and unfortunately, Kru Eric ended up getting killed on a motorcycle accident. So, you know, that was a big heartache to me and I started to kind of get the itch to fight some more and it was no more... Like back then, Lion Fight, which is a big organization for Muay Thai, Lion Fight wasn't allowed here. So to find Muay Thai fights for someone who is my size was hard to do. So I switched into doing MMA and then I started doing like Jiu Jitsu, wrestling, more boxing. Obviously, kicking was more Muay Thai and that's kind of how my career unfolded for that.

Jeremy Lesniak:

Wow. One of the things you said really struck me - the idea that you, you know, here you've been out of martial arts for a little while, you didn't talk about how long. You know, college, you come back, dog training, and then from a conversation, you're doing four private lessons a week. Most people don't go from zero to 60 like that with martial arts. In less, they have a background say they really have something either that there's a goal they're working for or something just kind of clicks. And so here we are with a very different martial art than what you grew up with but you jumped in with more than both feet. What was it about Muay Thai at that point that just worked for you, that you were so passionate about it from the get-go?

John Johnston:

Well I think, like, I did Tang Soo Do from when I was 11 years old up until I was about 18 years old. So for 7 years, I did martial arts. And when I was out of it, for the time that I went to college and so forth, I definitely missed, you know, I missed it. But when I came back after college, going back to Malden, I didn't really have the opportunity to do that. And then I've always been an active person, I've always been in the gym, you know, lifting weights or doing some kind of training. So I've always had that passion of training, of working out. And then when I was able to, you know, meet Kru Mark DelleGrotte and Kru Eric Armington, it just clicked like the three of us just clicked right away. And you know, not only did they become my trainers, my Krus but they also became close friends of mine and it was very quickly that it happened. And we would hang out even outside of the gym. So I think by me jumping in both feet, even like you said, even more so by doing four privates a week, there was one of those things that you know, the passion just hit me



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right away that I had with the martial arts. Also the Muay Thai; Muay Thai is a very oppressive style and I think I liked that. I liked hitting the pad, I liked, you know, kind of the physicality of the art. And then seeing guys like Marcus Davis, Patrick Côté, Jorge Gurgel, Stephan Bonnar, Pete Spratt, you know, guys like these, even though at the gym and seeing these guys in the level of physicality and the level of expertise that these guys has, it's just like that's what I want to do, that's what I want to be. You know, it just kind of emprise me to work even harder.

Jeremy Lesniak:

Sure. We've heard some stories - this is your episode so I'll step back.

John Johnston:

Alright, you know what, and then the other thing is Sityodtong, it has a huge name, got great fighters out there. It also has, you know, Kru Mark DelleGrotte who, he's done a lot in the martial arts world. So you would think that this gym, the Sityodtong is like this global gym type of thing but then when you got there, it was a basement. There was almost like a Rocky gym, you know. Like you're in Rocky III going down to Philadelphia and, you know, not even Philadelphia. Where was [21:36](#) but it's how I walked into that type of gym. It's like, alright this is a gym that you have to work, you know? There's no Wing Chun here. So I think when I have that, definitely, I have that... I built that mentality of competition. So when I got down there and I saw that, I think that even made me even more wanting the level that these guys were at.

Jeremy Lesniak:

We've heard a few stories from you today and I always love hearing stories and you know, I felt like I was there as you were sitting there for your first fight and this larger man comes through in. And listeners, let me just tell you, we've heard how tall Kru John is and he gave us his weight for that first fight but neither of those really make clear the presence that he has. I mean, when you're in a room sir, you are the focal point of that room. You are a big man, you have a big personality. So for you to describe someone as large is rather a powerful statement to anyone who has met you. I'm sure you have other stories so I would love to hear one of them if you had to give a speech in front of a room or something and you are asked to lead with a story, maybe your favorite story from you time training, what would you tell?

John Johnston:

Oh man, there's so many. I guess it would definitely be from my first MMA fight. My first MMA fight was in 2011 and I was fighting the guy, his name was Sandor Binkley Now I was 40 years old when I fought for my first professional MMA fight. And Kru Mark was, at first, he was against it because he wanted me to continue being a trainer and he wanted me to keep training the guys and making sure that, you know, because eventually from me being a student, I was with Sityodtong for 15 years. So Kru Mark put me into kind of a trainer mentality and taught me a lot



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and you know, me now starting to teach fighters and train fighters and do pad work, and into that nature of Muay Thai. So it's now my turn and I wanted to fight. I wanted to be the focal point of the training and things to that nature. So there's a proper tournament who were my Jiu Jitsu instructors. One of them is named Juliano Coutinho a.k.a. Banana, and another one is Chris Aldrich, who the both of them, both Juliano Coutinho and Chris Aldrich are both black belts under Daniel Gracie. Now there was no hiding it but at that time, my grounding was very minimum. So when I started MMA everybody was like, oh just take John down and you'll win the fight. Well I have guys like Chris Aldrich and Juliano Coutinho who are massive men. Now again, obviously yes, I'm a large guy but you know, Julianna was walking around at probably 270 pounds, Chris Aldrich is probably walking at about 240. Chris is a world champion arm wrestler so he is ridiculously strong and Banana, Juliano, he is ridiculously strong and both of them are black belts in Jiu Jitsu. And they decided that they're going to be my training partners for this fight because they have to make sure that I don't get taken down. They have to make sure that I'm not, you know, I'm not going to be on the ground. They want me to use my stand-up advantage. So for months, we got this fight and I think I had 12 weeks that I was going to be able to train. So that's about 3 months that I was going to be able to train for this fight. So the first couple of months it was literally me getting my butt kicked every single day by these two guys. Put up against the cage, picked up, slammed on the ground, make him get up again, picked up, slam on the ground again, make him get up again, and I could just keep going on and on and on and on and on. And the night of the fight, the Sandor comes running after me and tries to grab onto me and it was almost like in my mind, I could not want to deal with Chris Aldrich or 'Banana' Juliano Coutinho. I did not want to deal with them. So in my mind it was like I was fighting against them to not getting get slammed on the ground. And every single time, Sandor would put his hands on me, it was like he was fire. I would get away from him so fast and it definitely resonated into my head that, you know, these guys put all that work into me and I was going to prove that I respected it and prove that they can, have them be proud of me. That it did, that their work helped. So I finished the fight the fight in a minute and 12 seconds but I never once got taken down, never once even in trouble of getting taken down. So right after that fight, Kru Mark came up to me and he was very proud of me and you know, he basically kept it. The fact that I was okay, let's make a run at this and let's do this for you. So that was it, that was a huge part of my life.

Jeremy Lesniak:

What did that mean to you on the other side once that it was clear that your preparation had worked well and you came out of the fight, obviously, in the way that you had hoped to?

John Johnston:

What it meant more to me was that so much as just the training, you know. As much as it meant that I had these guys that care and that want to help me and that, you know, they are eager to drive from... they live down the Cape and they're coming to Somerville 2-3 times a week to just put the work into me. And you know, it meant the world that these guys would mean that I meant so much to them that they would do that. And now, I definitely call them family. And obviously to this day, we're very much still in touch and we see each other often.



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Jeremy Lesniak:

I think quite often some of the traditional folks, myself absolutely included, who have never taken a full contact fight whether that be mixed martial arts or kickboxing or any... even something like Kyokushin fight, most of us listening, most of the guests that we've had have never been in that situation. You grew up with a traditional, non-full contact background and made that transition into, not only that style of training but that style of competition. What might you share with the folks listening about what that's like? I mean we can imagine but I'm always curious from the people such as yourself who have not only been in those circumstances but succeeded?

John Johnston:

You know, it's like I said before I'm a very competitive person and I like to have that competition and I like to have the odds kind of spat against me. And just you know, it's one of those things that when you're training, my thought was yeah, I'm doing all this training but I want to see if that training actually works. And going into the Muay Thai fights that I had and going into the MMA fights that I had, it wasn't, honestly, it wasn't about me at all. I'm a very humble person and I didn't care about the attention that was brought onto me. I didn't care about, you know, the glamour or the fame or anything like that. What I cared about is that the guys that trained with me and that prepared me for the fight, that I appreciate it. And I went out to all those fights, to thank my team, to thank my trainers, to thank my family, to thank my fans because they're the ones that give you the drive. My son Evans, they are the ones that gave me the drive to go out there and do it. And I'm also the type that, you know... like I've also done Krav Maga for many years. And you know, like I said, some people that have never competed or never even taken any kind of full contact match or even some people out there who have never been in a street fight, who have trained for so many years, I look at it as though, you know, I've trained but I've also applied it in real situations where you know, I'm in the cage. And when you're in the cage it's just you and the guy. You don't have friends, you don't have your trainers backing you up, you know? Yeah, they're there as support but they're outside the cage. And now it's time to, for you, to either put out or shut up kind of thing. And when you go out there, you know, win or lose you want to prove that you have the ability to do the things that you need to do.

Jeremy Lesniak:

Are you done with that style of competition?

John Johnston:

In 2014 was my last fight in October of 2014. I fought so many times in MMA I'm 7-0 with 7 wins by knockout and first rounds and one heavyweight title for CES back in March of 2014. I then fought again in October of 2014 against Keith Bell. And then right after that, I kind of said farewell to the fighting and you know, decided to go a different route in my life. So I'm in the martial arts but I decided to open up a school of my own and you know, kind of put everything that I know into students.



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Jeremy Lesniak:

Can we talk about that transition for a moment? Do you mind?

John Johnston:

Yeah, absolutely.

Jeremy Lesniak:

Okay. So here you are, you're 7-0 and if I may say, you're a little bit older than most of the folks competing in this way at that time.

John Johnston:

A lot older than people competing.

Jeremy Lesniak:

I'm not going to say it that way, I'll let you say it that way. What's going through your head?

Most people when they're successful at something, keep pushing. Most people don't stop when they're on top of their game. What was going through your head that you said, I'm going to stop doing this, undefeated, not just undefeated but you know, dominant, and go into teaching others?

John Johnston:

Well, the age definitely got in the way. You know, one of the problems was that I was 44 years old and my body was holding up. I had, obviously, little mixed and cuts and bruises and things like that throughout the years but what kind of came down to it was we had a little talk with the upper level UFC and Bellators and things like that. And what ended up happening was that my age could have been a factor. Because in different states, you need to get licensed in different states. So whatever state you're fighting in, you have to get licensed in that state by the commission. So what would happen is that let's say, for instance, I got a fight by the UFC and I was going to be fighting in Colorado or wherever. I could send in all my medicals and my medicals could be fine but just cause of my age, they may not want to license me. So it's one of those hit or miss types of things. Anytime you see any of the fighters now, for instance in the UFC battling in their 40s, they've been in the UFC for many years. They've been there since they were early 30s maybe even 20s and they're kind of like grandfathers. Whereas here I am, 44 years old, they're not going to sign a contract with me because who knows how much longer I have left? Though obviously, any injury and so forth that I may obtain might take longer to heal. Whereas somebody in their early 30s, let's say for somebody in their early 30s gets an injury, they're out for 6 or 10 weeks, they're back at it. Somebody in their mid- to late 40s gets an injury, they're out for 6 to 10 months.



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So it's one of those things that I kind of looked at and I said to myself, you know I have sat down with my trainers, I sat down with my manager, and we all just kind of said, you know what we made a great run at this - undefeated, heavyweight champion - and where am I going to go with this? I'm not going to make it, I can't make it into a career because at the age that I was, how much longer in that career am I going to make or am I going to have? So that's where I just kind of sat down, I said okay. To better myself, to better my son, to make a life for us, you know a better life for us, and the direction is to go back into teaching and, you know, open up my own school so that I can pass on everything that I have done and everything that I continue to do to my students now.

Jeremy Lesniak:

I would imagine that you as most people would wonder, what if I had started this sooner? Was there a sense of regret as you looked at that? I mean, is this something that you think about on days, what would my life be now if I had started...

John Johnston:

I wake up every morning wanting to fight again. The passion is still there. I get offers all the time to this day to fight again. I got an offer for June 29th to fight a Muay Thai fight. I still talk to Jimmy Burchfield Jr. who runs CES and Pat Sullivan. At any point in time, if I went back to them and said hey I want to fight, they would 100% have a fight for me right away. But I also know that I don't have the time anymore to train like I used to before. And I don't have the, you know, I don't have... I mean I still have my trainers and so forth but I can't put in, I can't commit the way that I used to being able to fight. You know, before when I was fighting, that's all I did. I fought, I taught privates, I taught some classes and that was it. I was in the gym all day every day. And I was training for myself, I was training three times a day, six days a week just for myself - pad work, strength conditioning, Jiu Jitsu, wrestling. And I would make my schedule around my personal training for my fights. Now, by owning the school that I have and the amount of students that I have, I would never be able to put that type of commitment into training for a fight. And me, myself, personally knowing that I can't do that, I would feel like I'm cheating myself.

Jeremy Lesniak:

One last question on this, I won't keep beating you up on it. How hard is it to not take those fights when they're presented?

John Johnston:

Very hard. Extremely hard. You know, my manager Tyson Chartier, I talk to him every single day. He's a very good personal friend of mine. He was here at my school yesterday and I talk to him every single day. He just constantly looks at him and he's like John, there's no reason to. You've done everything. You're undefeated, you're a champion. There is no reason to take a stupid fight



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just to fight, you know? And this what something that people need to understand, too. I hope that your listeners understand this. Fighting is not about the money because there is no money in fighting. Unless you're at the highest level in all of the UFC Bellator where you're one of their, you know, poster child, there's no money. You have guys at the UFC that are making \$12,000 to fight and \$12,000 to win and they get \$24,000. Out of that \$24,000, you got to pay taxes, you got to pay your trainers, you have so much stuff to pay that by the time you actually get a paycheck, from \$24,000 you probably end at about \$14,000. So for 8 or 10 weeks of training, you know, for all that effort and all that time that you had to train, \$14,000 that's what you make. Now, if generally, fighters have a passion to fight, there's something inside a fighter. I tell you right now, myself included, if you're going to be a fighter, you have a screw loose somewhere in your body. Because getting punched in the face is not comfortable but there's like an urge to want to do it. There's always that urge to want to do it and that's the passion of fighting. It has nothing to do with the money at all. It's the desire to want to get in there and to fight. So, you know, when my manager, Tyson, talked to me, he kind of puts me into retrospect and he says look John, why do you want to fight? Just to fight? You want to fight just to fight for what? You've done everything that you could possibly have done. You fought when you were 44 years old. That's almost unheard of. No actually, I was almost 45 and that's not normal. Normally, you don't see fighters at that age. Fighters are already retired by that age and I still wanted to do it.

Jeremy Lesniak:

How has that experience with your fighting, with stepping back when you had nothing left to prove, how was all that made you a better martial artist and a better teacher to your students?

John Johnston:

Because you can look at it and say okay, you know what, when someone is at the highest point that they can go but there's still one more level but yet you know what it's not reachable not because of you but just because of circumstances, how can you take that and transfer it to everyone else to show perseverance? To build confidence? To just kind of have people understand that look, your life isn't over just because you can't do something anymore. You know, you can make your life better and that's what I did. I made my life better.

Jeremy Lesniak:

So what is your training look like now? You're teaching and I've seen you teaching -

John Johnston:

I own a school called Ironclad Martial Arts Center in Wellington, Massachusetts and we train, we teach kids from the ages of 4 years old all the way up to adult. And my school is designed around more of a mixed martial arts style. So we teach Muay Thai, Jiu Jitsu, and Krav Maga. I started Krav Maga about 10 years ago with a couple of people. One person's name is Chris Cole, he is



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just staying at a place called America's Best Defense owned by Master Paul Garcia. I trained with Master Paul Garcia a few times and I also trained with another gentleman, his name is Cory Buzzell. And again, same thing, out of America's Best Defense and they're affiliated with Alliance Krav Maga who is a gentleman by the name of John Whitman who owns that and I started with Corey and with Chris Cole about 10 years ago. So I was doing privates with both of them for Muay Thai and for MMA. I actually trained Chris Cole for one of his fights and then you know, I was interested in learning more about Krav Maga. So that's basically all they did at America's Best Defense was Krav Maga. They would do Krav Maga with their adults. So I started to do that and really got into it because of the, mostly because of the aggressiveness of Krav Maga and the practicality of it. So I went ahead and I get a whole lot of that, a lot of training to that and then I became an affiliate to Alliance Krav Maga. I went ahead and tested under them and got my certification to being an instructor for Krav Maga. So then I started to implement it this year at my school. When I decided to open my school, I wanted definitely Muay Thai, I wanted to continue the lineage that I had. Jiu Jitsu because I feel that, like I said, a little bit ago in talking that my ground game wasn't the best but by doing Jiu Jitsu and wrestling and so forth, obviously I have a ground game now. And I think it's very, very, very important for people to have a ground game because you know, when you look at just self-defense, being able to defend yourself on the street, 90% of the time you're going to end up on the ground. And if that happens, you need to understand how to work on the ground. And I think that's where a lot of, you know... and there's nothing, and I always say this, I respect all martial arts and there's nothing against traditional martial arts, like your Kenpos, and your Taekwondos and things like that but having a little bit more of a mixed style to understanding how to be on the ground and how to work on the ground, especially for your, you know, self-defense-wise, that's a huge step in real life situation. In understanding you know, if I'm on the ground, what do I do? And everybody could say, when you're on the ground, just get up. Okay, well, if somebody's on top of you how do you get up?

Jeremy Lesniak:

Right. It's hard to get up when you're on the ground, somebody's sitting on you, punching you in the face and you've never been in that situation before.

John Johnston:

Exactly. And that's why it's... When I opened up school, my mentality was you know what, I want all of my students to be well-rounded. To not only understand the martial arts lifestyle of understanding respect, self-control, self-confidence, perseverance but to also understand that if you're standing this is what you do. If you're on the ground, this is what you do. If you're up against a wall, this is what you do. If you're pinned against on the ground, pinned against the wall, this is what you do. And I take my experience of being a MMA fighter, I take my experience from my Krav Maga training, I take my experience from my Muay Thai training, I take my experience from my Jiu Jitsu training, and that's all blended together. So now I teach 4-year old kids punches, kicks, knees, elbows, wall walks, understanding how to get up from the ground if somebody's on top of them. I teach them, you know, different self-defense. You know, we do age-appropriate self-defense with our kids. So our younger kids, like our 4-year olds, we don't do a lot of striking



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with them. We'll do more of control. They control that if they're on the ground, this is how you get up, this is how you control. As the kids start to get older, they go into our next level which is our Karate kid from 7-11. That's when we start to implement a little bit of striking then as with our self-defense. Then when they get into teens, it's all striking - self-defense striking. Then we obviously do the same thing with the adults. So it's all understood with our kids, with the adults. Anywhere that you have to be able to defend yourself, anywhere the fight goes, you have the ability to control back fight and this is how you do it.

Jeremy Lesniak:

One of the subject that has come up and you kind of spoke to this almost, maybe with a little bit of apology and I'm going to need to tell you don't need to. One of the subjects that' come up on the show is this idea of diversity of your experience of your training and, you know, we can sit here and you put two martial artists in a room and you know, they're going to argue about what's best. But I don't think anyone disagrees that all is better than any slice of the pie. And the more stuff that learn and learn with competency, the better you are as a martial artist, especially when it comes to the lens of self-defense.

John Johnston:

100%. You know I remember back when I was in Tang Soo Do, I was at school and this boy was doing something to me in school. He was grabbing me a certain way, he would always have me against the wall and I didn't understand. And this was again, when I was like 11 or 12 years old, and he wasn't necessarily doing anything. He wasn't fighting me. He wasn't coming after me to fight me but he would always do this to me where, you know it happened a couple times, where it frustrated me and I couldn't do anything about it. And I went back to Grand Master Byrne and I said this is what's happening to me. I don't know how to defend it. So then he took me off to the side and he said okay, show me what the boy is doing. So I showed him and he said okay, alright this is what you can do to fix that. And in my mind, I was saying to myself, maybe not necessarily at that time but definitely now, in my mind, I say to myself, why wasn't I learning that in class? Why am I not learning those types of different situations in class? And obviously, coming from Tang Soo Do which is a traditional martial arts, that type of technique was not necessarily been taught in a traditional martial arts. So I looked at it like, nowadays I look at it like I'm going to teach my students everything that could possibly happen to them or at least, you know, at least 90% of what could possibly happen to them in the street. If somebody comes up and grabs you like this, if somebody comes up and bear hugs you, if somebody comes up at you, grabs you by the back of the head, if somebody is choking and slammed you against the wall, if somebody is trying to take you down, if somebody has you pinned up against the wall and you're on the ground, if somebody has you on top of you, he's in mount position and is sitting over you punching, if somebody's in that control, if somebody's been... you know, there's thousands of different positions that you can be put into but how many styles, how many individual styles? Okay, if I look at Taekwondo as an individual style, if I look at Muay Thai as an individual style, if I look at Kenpo as individual style, there's not one style that trains all of that. So what we have to start doing and you know, like you said, understanding many different styles, I feel, now coming out of



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the kind of the background that I had, I'm more complete martial artist. I feel that I'm more of a complete martial artist. Not only have I learned the traditional style with my sidekicks, my spinning back kicks, my hook kicks, my spinning hook kicks, my jump front kicks, you know, my different 55:47 and things in that nature. But I've also gone into a Muay Thai which is a very aggressive style - punches, kicks, knees, elbows, 55:55 grips - understanding how you know, my different ranges of punches - where I can punch, where I can kick, where I can knee - not only that but doing low-kick, kicking below the belt - not just above the belt, not just to the body, not just to the head but to the legs. Then on top of that, the Jiu Jitsu that I've gone through. The cage work and the wrestling that I've gone through. By doing all of that and putting that all together and now, you know, what I consider our style of martial arts that we teach here at Ironclad, now I'm going to make my students much more of an all-around, you know, fighter and able to control situations a lot easier. I'm not saying that that's the best thing in the world but I look at it like, you know what, I'm going to make sure that my students are safe and they're going to understand every area that could possibly to them.

Jeremy Lesniak:

Right. And I look at it this way, if my job was as a scientist, if I was a biology researcher, I'm still going to be using math and writing and chemistry everyday even though my focus is biology. So without those other pieces, I can't take my focus nearly as far. I mean how well can you really understand biology if you don't understand these other interrelated subject? There's a reason that if you major in pre-med, you have to take things like organic chemistry and various math classes because it's required for understanding what it is you're going to do. And you know, whatever your primary martial art is, understanding... Even if your art is purely, let's say, a stand-up art, understanding how someone may try to take you to the ground is still going to make you a better Taekwondo practitioner because you know how the body moves.

John Johnston:

Mm-hmm. 100%.

Jeremy Lesniak:

So tell us a little bit more about what you see in the future for you, for your school, for your students. What's getting you up every day now? You know, you always seem like you're fired up. So what is it? Is there a 58:10 or something you're driving for?

John Johnston:

I mean, I must say all of my students. You know, coming into my school every day and just excited to teach, excited for my students. You know, I'm still into fighting. I still train Rob Font and Calvin Kattar who are both fighters in the UFC. I'm their striking coach and you know, I train with them every Monday, Wednesday, Friday - three days a week. You know, Rob has a fight coming



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up on July 7th in Las Vegas. A huge fight, he's ranked number 12 right now, he's going to be fighting the number 3 rank in Banterweight. He's a 135 so that's a huge fight for us, for him. And you know, I'm still in the game with that but I'm a trainer. You know, getting these guys ready for their fight and in their highest level possible. They're up in the UFC. But coming in and just getting my students, you know, I love seeing my students' progress. I love seeing that in the beginning of the month when I'm teaching them a new technique and things are kind of hectic, things are kind of crazy. You look in that and they go on, oh my god I don't know if these kids are ever going to get it. And then by like the 3rd week, they're doing that technique like they've been doing it for years. That's it, that really fires me up and it gives me the more drive and more desire to want to teach these kids more of what I know. And it's kind of hard because when I'm in class, I'm like, this month we're going to do this, this and this. And I'm like, oh man I want to teach them this one now. And it's like I always want to teach something else because you know, I look at it like I have gone through so much in my life in the martial arts, so many different styles, so many different you know... I've worked with so many awesome trainers, like everyone that I've worked with I have taken a piece of their pie. And I want to put that onto my students. You know, I want to put that onto my son. You know my son, Evans, he's 12 years old. He's a goalie for hockey, he plays lacrosse, you know he loves his sports, but when he comes up to me and he says, hey dad can we do some pad work? I love it. The drive for me comes from them - comes from my students, comes from my son. And I love going out and teaching seminars because I love to pass on my knowledge and you know, what I've done in my life to other people and to show them look, this guy right here will be great for this situation or maybe implement this into your style a little bit. I look at everything as a toolbox. In my life, the trainers that I've had the opportunity to train with, they're all world-class trainers and I've been lucky enough to do that. I look at myself as a person having two different toolboxes. In one toolbox has kind of like my go-to's. These are my go-to techniques. These techniques I've worked on, I feel comfortable with, and these are the ones that I'm always going to use. Then I have my second toolbox which, you know, for instance Grand Master Bill Wallace, he's shown me so many things and I was lucky enough that I was able to test under him and receive my black belt under him. And he has shown me so many things but being a bigger guy, there's a couple techniques that he has shown me that I still have to work on so they get put in my second toolbox. These are my work-on toolbox. And when I start a little bit more fluent and start to use those without thinking about them, then they go into my go-to toolbox. Then I have a trash barrel and that trash barrel is somebody shows me a technique, I try it a couple of times and I look at it and go you know what, that would work for maybe a 180 pound guy but it's not going to work for me. And I throw that in the trash. Because I've tried it and it's either I don't understand it, my body just won't do it because I'll be the first one to say that I'm not very flexible. So if you're kind of trying to make me do something that I have to use a lot of flexibility, it's going to go right into the trash. You know, but by doing that I take all these that all my knowledge and all my toolbox stuff and I want to present that to my students. And my students have given me more drive to go out there and learn more so that I can come back and teach them.

Jeremy Lesniak:



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Awesome. And if any of the folks listening want to reach you, if they want to checkout Ironclad, find you online, social media, all that, how would they do so?

John Johnston:

We have our website, ironcladmartialarts.com. You can also look us up on Facebook under Ironclad Martial Arts. We're on Instagram @ironcladmartialarts or you know what, you can even just email us, ironcladmartialarts@gmail.com. I'm always eager to help people out and to teach people and if they have the desire to want to learn, I'll have the desire to want to teach.

Jeremy Lesniak:

Perfect. And of course if anybody new out there is listening, we do drop the links and all this over at the show notes whistlekickmartialartsradio.com so you don't have to worry about scribbling down notes while you're driving or on the treadmill or something. I really thank you for being here. This has been a lot of fun, great, great story and I'm wondering if you might send us out with some parting words for everyone listening.

John Johnston:

The one thing that I always say is that, you know, the only one that can beat you is you. So if you go out there and you're trying something and you're letting your mentality be negative or you're kind of saying to yourself, no I don't know if I have to do this. You know, the only that could beat you is you. So the first moment of negativity that you put in yourself, you've already beaten yourself. And also, go out there and, you know, I always say when I first wake up in the morning and I look at the mirror, I never say I'm tired. I always say today is going to be a better day than yesterday.

Jeremy Lesniak:

When we talk about martial arts, we're often, even if it's not intentional, using language to draw divisions, I am this style of Karate or I am this, I have trained in this and this understand this person. And while those can be identifying, they can give context. They can also put up barriers and one of the things that I found really powerful about Kru Johnston's words is that he talks about his history, his context for the martial arts, his views. But I don't get the sense that he's putting up any of these barriers. He's working with what he works with because he believe it works yet I suspect if somebody came out of left field, showed him new things that completely upended his views of the martial arts, I have no doubt he would accept taking those in and trying them out. And as he said, deciding which toolbox or trash can they're going to go in. Thank you Kru Johnston for coming on the show. I had a great time and I'm sure all of the listeners enjoyed everything that you said.



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If you want to check out the show notes, you can do so at whistlekickmartialartsradio.com. We've got some photos, we've got some links. You can check out Ironclad Martial Arts on social media and I hope you do. If you're ever in the New England area, definitely drop by the school, you know, you should message first. But here's someone who can give you some exceptional training. That is for sure. If you want to check out our Whistlekick products, we've got new stuff coming all the time and I say that and I don't think all of you believe it. But we're constantly rolling out new things. A lot of great apparel that us just fun, you know? We try to keep our prices low, we don't make a lot of money on our apparel. To be honest, we sell the apparel in the hope that you'll wear it around. People will see it and say, oh Whistlekick. And then maybe they'll go by some of the other stuff. We make a little bit of money on our accessories, our training equipment. The apparel is really just to break-even and hope to you'll do a little bit of "advertising" for us. That's all I've got today. If you want to reach out, you can - social media. We're @whistlekick, you can email me directly jeremy@whistlekick.com. Let me know who should we interview. Who do you know that I should have a conversation with? Until next time. Train hard, smile, and have a great day.