



Episode 301 – How to Start a Martial Arts School | whistlekickMartialArtsRadio.com



Jeremy Lesniak:

Hey everybody, thanks for tuning in. This is whistlekick martial arts radio episode 301. Today, we're going to talk about starting your own martial arts school. I'm gonna give you my thoughts on how you can do that, all the options, the ups the downs, pros, the cons. So, let's hang on for that but first, couple of things I want to let you know about, don't forget, you can head on over to whistlekickmartialartsradio.com. I'm hoping some of you out there that have comments feedback, will leave those over on that website on the show notes page. I'm also hoping that you might check out whistlekick.com it's where we sell all our sparring gear, all our apparel, all the new things that were bringing in and bringing on, all the time, some really fun stuff so check that out. Sign up for the newsletter, while you're there, because we are sending that out every other week. You're going to get some discounts, some news, info on new products, really, it's just kinda the condensed, the reader's digest version if you will of everything that's happening with whistlekick.

Let's talk about starting your own martial arts school. Now, some of you that's been listening for a while know, I talk about it once in a while, I did have my own karate school for a couple of years after college. It was a lot of fun, I learned a ton, it's also a lot of work and wasn't the most financially beneficial thing that I've done in my life. And we've heard from a number of guests both the upsides and the downsides of having a martial arts school. Being a martial arts instructor whether that's full time or part time, there are a lot of things you wanna think about. So, this episode is really for the folks who have not started a martial arts school. Maybe you are considering it, maybe it's down the line, maybe it's a dream of yours



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but for the folks who are listening who have a martial arts school, I would love for you to listen because I wanna know what I've missed. There are always things that I'm going to miss, this is my set of opinions and thought and experiences and its lacking because it's not everybody, together we are all better than any of us are individually so that's why I'm asking for everyone listening to contribute to the conversation at whistlekickmartialartsradio.com. Thank you.

Alright, let's jump into this. Now there are of course a lot of ways you can start your career as a martial arts instructor, but we're gonna start with the pros and cons of why you should even do that before we get into how to do that, why should you do that? Now on the plus side, you get to own your own business. As a multi time entrepreneur, I think that's a wonderful thing, it's not for everyone, but owning a martial arts school is, I don't wanna say safer way but a less intense way of becoming a business owner as compared to with too many, many other options out there. Of course, you get to do something about teaching martial arts and if you've spend any time teaching people, you know that it furthers your own understanding, your own comprehension of martial arts. You get to become a better martial artist by teaching others and of course you get to pass on your knowledge. But then on the downside, you own your own business. A friend of mine put it best once he said, I love being a business owner, I get to have a complete control and I have to only have to work half days and I even get to pick which 12 hours I work. Now maybe as a martial arts school owner, you're not gonna work 12 hours especially if you're part time but that idea still holds true, it's still a lot of work, it's still a job. If owning a business, any kind of business were easy, that's the path everyone would choose. There's a risk reward in owning a business and you have to decide how much risk you're willing to put in for whatever you value of the potential reward. Because remember, nothing is guaranteed. Now the hard work of owning a martial arts school can make your own training difficult. I often hear from school owners that they don't work on their own training as much anymore, they can't. Because at the end of the day, they're tired, they have other commitments, they need sleep and of course as much as this may not resonate for some of you, a number of you are going to nod your head by adding teaching to your life, you risk being over saturated with martial arts. Now, you're training, you're teaching, maybe you're traveling to events, if you have a competitive at your school, a good number of your weekends maybe taken up, it's a lot. It can be difficult to make your life outside of martial arts when you are a martial arts school owner. I know quite a few people who have martial arts schools and most of them have just jumped in with both feet at one point or another and martial arts is their life the majority of the time and that's not for everyone. And of course, if you are a martial arts school owner, you have to play the political game. There is stuff that matters. Considering where to open your school or schools, where are you teaching, who are you teaching, how are you teaching, what is your instructor think, what are your fellow martial artist in the area think? There is so much to worry about and that could probably be an episode in of itself, but it's not gonna be, at least not right now.

Now we're gonna move on to talk about the how. We're going to go through, how many do I have here, six different ways that you can consider teaching your own martial arts program. Now of course, you could teach for yourself or you could teach for someone else. There are even martial arts franchises that



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you can buy into. No, I'm not going to recommend or discourage any of them because I don't know them from the inside, in fact I have never participated in a school that was one of those. I will let you decide based on the information I give you on how might want to proceed. Of course, you can always reach out, you can email me with questions jeremy@whistlekick.com. I can't promise I'm going to write back to all of those emails in perpetuity. I expect this might be an episode that people listen to long into the future, but of course, I'll do my best as always have. The first of the six ways that I have down on my list of course that's the one that most martial arts school owners start with and I would venture to say, most martial arts programs at least in the united states, are in this kind of a format, the instructors teaching part time in some kind of a shared space. Meaning they're you know, using a community center gymnasium or something similar. The pros, this is the easiest way to start out, you've got the lowest expenses, you likely need some insurance, you need to pay for the space and then from there, all you have to do, "all" is growing the program. You can focus on your marketing, you can focus on elevating this program with whatever time you have. If you don't have a lot of time, your program might just spread through word of mouth or maybe you wanted to be a little more aggressive with it, maybe you have the time and you're gonna travel and introduce yourself to people in the area, you're going to teach at community events, teach self-defense programs and just otherwise build your reputation, these are all great things. And finally, the one that I think a lot of people don't talk about enough, the financial piece, you get to keep your day job. For a lot of people, I know who teach part time in a shared space, all the money is [00:07:58.26] you know once the taxes come out, and of course I'm not going to discourage anyone to not pay taxes on this money, whether or not you feel you have to, that is your decision, and you should probably consult an accountant or other tax professional. That's extra money, it's a part time job. And it's a part time job that in theory, you love. Now the cons. It's hard to have enough time and energy to grow a program in this way. The reason that there's so many of these programs because they're easy to start up but I don't see a lot of people that start programs in this way and then have them grow into something more. I rarely see someone that is teaching part-time in a shared space become a full time martial arts instructor. Doesn't mean it doesn't happen, if you've done it that's great, I wanna hear from you, I wanna hear how you've done it. But because of the commitments of day to day life, because of the effort you have to put into your day job or maybe your family or whatever other obligations or hobby you have, there's not a lot left for your martial arts program. And this was the challenge I have. I was building my last business, an it company, and at the end of the day, I didn't have enough left. There was not enough Jeremy that go around and so after a couple of years, I shut the program down, I was really sad to do it, but it was the right thing to do for me, for my students because I was exhausted, I was spent. And honestly, my teaching was starting to show it. From a marketing perspective, these programs don't always have the most professional image. When you consider prospective, prospective students if they're evaluating multiple schools, if they have the option of a full-time school in a mall or something with a beautiful space all built out just for martial arts, that compared to what you're doing in a school gymnasium or a church basement, it's kinda hard to compete solely on the appearance. You have to do other things to make sure that your program can stand on its own against those and you can do it. There's plenty of ways to do it, I know plenty of people who do it.



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Of course, your next option, you can stay part-time but you can control the space. You can rent a space, maybe own a space, maybe own a space, maybe it's a large finished garage on your property or maybe you have a great opportunity to sublet a dedicated space from somebody else or something. You know, there are something where when you are not teaching martial arts in that space, it is not being used for something else. Of course, that gives you a lot of upside. You have more control it's easier to grow the program because you don't have to spend time, you know, bringing mats onto the floor or putting them away. You can still keep your day job but you can a little bit more focus because when you're in the space, it is a martial arts space. It is only a martial arts space and not only is that going to have an impact on you and the way you approach the space but also your students, also anybody that visits that may want to join your program. The cons, there are, it's an even greater expense than when you're sharing a space. And of course, there is more time in managing that space, cleaning the bathroom, little stuff like that that we don't tend to consider, it adds up. It's actually pretty considerable if you want to have a nice space cleaning the mats, cleaning the floor, washing the window, whatever that stuff is. It adds up. And this is why in a lot of schools, there are days where student may come together and help clean the training space.

The third way, you can go full time but you can be in a shared space. No this doesn't happen often, it's even unlikely but I've seen some fitness centers that have an excess of space and they're willing to let people teach you know, 20-30-40 hours a week out of those spaces and sometimes the financial arrangement is a flat fee, sometimes it's a per student fee. Sometimes you know, you can outsource the management of the financial piece to the space. There is some upside there but it's generally hard to find a space that is going to work in that way. Usually this becomes an employee relationship and that's actually number five, we'll get to it in a moment. The upside though to being fulltime in a shared space, is when you factor in your expenses per student, your expenses per dollar, they're the lowest. They're generally quite low. And of course, you're all in. It allows you to forget about the distractions of a fulltime job or another job maybe you have a part time job. But it gives you more time, more space in your mind to focus on growing the program. You know how as much in the way that's distracting you. And of course, you have little to worry about with regard to the space. You don't have to focus on cleaning the bathroom or any of that. So again, it gives you the option to focus on your marketing, on growing the program. The downside, it's still kinda hard to seem professional. In fact, if someone says hey wait, you're fulltime but you don't have your own space why? Let's face it. People assume, if you're successful, you have your own space. Whether that's your own home in life, or your own car in life, we are still at a point in time where even though we're on the front end of this kinda shared economy, you know, uber and lift and there even services now to rent tools or planes. I mean, there's a lot there for this kind of crowd-sourced product sharing economy thing that were again, the front edge of. There's still perception that if you are renting or rather sharing a space, you are less successful. So, you need to consider that. The one that I hear people talk about the least until they're into it, it's actually something I haven't mentioned before and I actually should've mentioned in the first option with the shared space, you don't get full control over that space. You might get kicked because the building wants to refinish the floor or they're having a performance or you know, somebody forgot to unlock the doors. You know,



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there are some challenge there and it's something that needs to be considered because, even though it's not your fault that classes don't run because the floor is getting refinished, your students still aren't happy. They're paying for that time and they don't get to train and who does that roll down to cause you know what rolls downhill? You.

Now going full time, this is number four. In an owned or rented space, this is the most professional, it gives you the most flexibility, you can do whatever you want. Especially if you own the space. You get to focus on your martial arts program, on your students, on growing the school. And that has a lot of upside but got some downside too. Especially if you don't have a program yet, you're going 0-60. You're biting off everything at once. If you don't have experience with this, you're learning how to manage a space and deal with the marketing and teach the program, and it's everything. It's everything all at once. There are systems out there that will help you do this you know, monthly fees, people who are experienced with helping you grow your martial arts school, and if you are going to jump in with this number 4 with going full time in your own dedicated space, that probably means that you've got a bit of financial cushion there at least upfront, I'm gonna suggest that you look to someone else that has done this. Whether that's a friend in the area or one of these management companies, it's probably a good idea cause you don't know what you don't know. And remember, if this stuff was easy, everybody would be doing it. This really is the most expensive option because you don't have your day job, you have all the expense of the space, and you're probably going to need help in some way. If you're teaching a full-time program, most full-time programs I know, people are teaching five days a week and they're teaching generally some morning classes, maybe some classes at lunch, and then a whole bunch of classes in the evenings, well, you're probably gonna need some help whether that's cleaning the space or plowing the driveway, if you're in the north. Or maybe help from some others teaching the classes. There's even more money going out for that. And you're most likely to have the lease, if you don't own the space you've gotta lease and commercial leases, they're not generally for twelve months, they're for three to five. Which means if you outgrow the space, moving becomes a challenge. Or if you look at downsizing the program or just changing it in some way, you're likely committed, you can't just kinda change on a dime as you do with smaller programs especially in generally shared spaces like a community center where you're paying a fee.

Number five. I know several people who run martial arts programs as an employee of an organization, like a boys and girls club or a YMCA. And that can be really synergistic. That actually for the people that I know doing that, it seems to be incredibly rewarding. I don't know that I wanna say the most rewarding, but it seems pretty good. Look at the upside, you might be able to be part-time or full-time, you can even possibly grow as the program grows. You get lots of the marketing taken cared of for you, you know a lot of these programs they're publishing lists, calendars, they have a captive audience with people coming in to use the space for other purposes. They have email marketing already, they have you know, they're sending out schedules, there's a lot done there. And if you're an employee, you may have a guaranteed income, maybe it's per student or maybe they're paying you an hourly fee. This is where I want to take a step out and encourage you to decide what's most important? Why are you



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doing this? If the money is not important to you, I know plenty of martial arts instructors who don't really care about making money, they just don't want to lose money, this is a great option. You can partner up with an organization that does the things that you don't wanna do. If you just want to teach, look for somebody who's willing to put in the marketing time to reap the financial benefit. You can get in on their insurance, there's one less expense for you and you know what, if you're sick, maybe they've got somebody who can cover for you, maybe you've cultivated someone. There's something to be said for doing something as an employee versus an owner. It's a mindset and it can be a lot more fun. Not gonna lie. As with everything, there are downsides though. You're limited to what you can do because you're going to have to answer to someone else. If you know half a dozen parents and complain to your boss, that you didn't do something that they liked or did something that they didn't like. Well, guess what? You're probably gonna get called in, you're probably gonna get scolded, you could even get fired because you don't own the program, you probably can't take it elsewhere. And the organization's problems are your problems, whether or not you're an employee. If the billing system on the back end continually double charges people or there are issues with that, guess they're who they're gonna be unhappy with? You. You're the representative of the organization. So, the downside here is that, there is a disconnect between your authority, cause you're an employee and your responsibility, you're the face of the program. And the majority of problems that I've seen on business come from either, poor communication or a disconnect between authority and responsibility.

And then the last one I'll give you, number six. You could buy an existing school. On the plus side, it's already established there are processes, there are students, there is cashflow, it's a school in a box. You have to step in and make sure that you don't blow it up. But on the downside, you're buying that's already established. It could be difficult to change things especially for people that have been training there for a while. You have the greatest upfront expense, you are taking out a loan or putting down a big chunk of money to buy in, on this school. And while that can reap some financial rewards later, upfront expenses certainly something that needs to be considered. And this is the one, number six is the one where you're gonna have to spend the most time deciding and doing research and talking to experts. And that leads to how should you start any of this? Once you have an idea of what option are or aren't for you and maybe you haven't narrowed down to just one, or maybe you think you do, but this next piece might change your mind, you wanna start by taking a look at your financial situation. And understand your own tolerance for risk. I know people who will never start a martial arts school, even though they would love to, because they can't wrap their brain around the idea of not having a fixed pay check. But I know plenty of other people that who will jump into nearly anything with both feet because their tolerance for risk is much greater. Of course, you should talk to friends who have started successful businesses not just martial arts businesses. But I wanna caution you that all advice is not equal. I've said it on the show, I say it in life quite a bit, I don't take diet advice from overweight people, I don't take money advice from people who are broke. I don't take business advice from people who've never started a successful business. And I'm going to discourage you from doing it. Sometimes people who have failed a lot and never succeeded, do have some great advice on what not to do but if you're looking for what to do, you kinda have to look to someone who's had some success with doing it. You should



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have a plan, you should put together some projections of what you need financially, what you need for a timeline, what would you need to do for marketing, what marketing works for your area.

this is where I'm gonna put in the plug for the small business development center which is a government organization, they exist in every state in the united states and I suspect for our international folks, there are things that are similar and the small business development center is an organization dedicated to helping people get started and run with small businesses. Full disclosure, I am on the board of directors for the Vermont SBDC. It's a great organization, honestly, I wouldn't have got my first business off the ground without the SBDC and that's why now I give back and I spend that time helping the organization. There's a chapter near you, there are people near you, there are also other organizations similar score, those are retired, generally retired professionals who have some experience to lend. You know, it's all about helping people, it's all about people helping you understand the stuff you don't know that you know. That's why I advocate for people working with experts. I already mentioned set a timeline, how far out are you for this? You know, if you're going to start your own program full time, maybe you have to build up enough money that it's gonna take you three years to do that. If you're gonna start part time at a shared space, maybe you can start next week. It's all about how motivated you are, and how honest you're going to be with yourself about the risks and what you're risk you're willing to take on.

And of course, the final thing you have to do, is you have to do it. I know so many people who have said, I'm going to do this and they never pulled the trigger. They're never quite there. There's always one more thing. There's a quote and I might not get the words exactly but there's a quote from the gentleman who started LinkedIn, his name is Reid Hoffman. And Reid Hoffman says that if you're not embarrassed by your first version of your product, you've waited too long. Of course, he was talking about a website but the same thing can hold true when we're starting any kind of a business, a service business like a martial arts school. If you are trying to make everything perfect, if you need the perfect websites and the perfect posters and the perfect space and you have to be full time doing it, and you have to have the perfect logo, that's embroidered on your martial arts uniform and any of the t shirts design and you need to, bring in you know a pro shop and yada yada yada, you're never gonna start. Quite often, I would even say the majority of the time, people that focus on building this perfect 1.0 businesses, perfect when it starts, they're actually scared, they're not willing to jump in with both feet, they're not even willing to jump in with one foot because if you never start, you'll never fail. And I look at it the other way, if you never start, you'll never succeed.

So, for those of you listening, I want your feedback, I want you to head on over to whistlekickmartialartsradio.com let's get some discussion going, let's turn on the notes for this episode into a resource for other people. Of course, this will be transcribed a little bit after release as with all the new episodes, we even go back and were doing the older ones, but this is a wonderful opportunity for us to help each other because remember, the world is better with more martial artist in it. What did you do to start your martial arts teaching if you have a school? What do you wish you knew before you



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would start at teaching? If you're looking to start, what questions do you have? What do you need? Hit the show notes, comment over there. For those of you that have made purchases recently at whistlekick.com, thank you, thank you, thank you, I appreciate it. We're seeing greater sales, some of it cause of the fun new apparel we've got going on, some of it because we're constantly expanding, the products, you know the protective gear that we've got, adding colors sizes, we're getting better about inventory, you know we're able to buy more as we grow. And sign up for the newsletter. So that's all I've got for today this was a long Thursday show. Thanks for bearing with me, I hope you enjoyed it, and I'd love your feedback. Until next time, train hard, smile and have a great day.