



Episode 334 – Sifu Jeff Westfall | [whistlekickMartialArtsRadio.com](http://whistlekickMartialArtsRadio.com)



**Jeremy Lesniak:**

Hey, what's happening everybody? Welcome. This is whistlekick Martial Arts Radio episode 334. Today, I'm joined by a fellow martial arts podcaster, Jeff Westfall. If you're new to the show, you might not know that we have show notes with transcripts and links and all kinds of great stuff at [whistlekickmartialartsradio.com](http://whistlekickmartialartsradio.com). You also might now know my name. I'm Jeremy Lesniak, I'm the founder here at whistlekick. I get to talk to martial artists as part of my job and the other part of my job is whistlekick - [whistlekick.com](http://whistlekick.com) where we make protective equipment and as of the recording of this, quite a few other things are nearly on board. It is going to be an exciting fall. But of course you might be listening to this in the future. We don't put any kind of dates or times really on our episodes. We just let them out there for posterity. You can listen to them anytime you want, we don't charge for them. We don't charge for, you know, the old ones or the new ones or any of those silly things that some podcasts do. We really just want to help spread the traditional martial arts through podcast. Getting you excited, getting you motivated, helping you answer some of those challenging philosophical questions that might, you know, hold you back from your training or maybe an answer comes up in an episode that helps enhance your training. We do this for you because, to be honest, I wanted to do it for me.

But let's talk about today's guest. Mr. Jeff Westfall is the host of The Martial Brain Podcast which is an incredibly thoughtful, original, really philosophical podcast on, you guessed it, the martial arts. I've enjoyed to the episodes of his shows that I have listened to. Full disclosure: I don't get to listen to all of them because there's a lot of great martial arts content out there and as you might imagine, a lot of time



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goes into creating these stuff. But of the shows that I do enjoy listening to, his is definitely up there. Not gonna say if he's at the top because I don't want to make anybody else feel badly but he's in that mix with a few others and for a good reason. Here on martial arts radio, he doesn't hold back; he goes deep. He talks about what makes him tick, what makes the martial arts so powerful, so transformative for him. And we talked about philosophy and training and his influences and so much other good stuff and rather than continuing to try to summarize as I'm doing right now, I'm just gonna take a step back and let's welcome him to the show. Mr. Westfall, welcome to whistlekick Martial Arts Radio.

**Jeff Westfall:**

Thanks. I appreciate.

**Jeremy Lesniak:**

Hey, thank you. Here we are, we're chatting on an American Holiday - it's labor day today - but you know, I generally find myself celebrating Labor Day by working.

**Jeff Westfall:**

Are you familiar with the origin of the Labor Day as an American Holiday?

**Jeremy Lesniak:**

Barely.

**Jeff Westfall:**

Well most countries of the world that celebrate "labor", celebrate May Day. There were riots in Chicago back in the late 1800s, a lot of the corporations hadn't lost power yet until Roosevelt busting up monopolies, and there were a lot of labor people killed at a riot in Chicago [03:44](#) And all things sort of cropped up, people were terrified, the communists were gonna take over the United States and mayday became associated communism. So United States, one of the only countries in the world celebrates a separate Labor Day, separate from May Day.

**Jeremy Lesniak:**

Well there we go. I just learned something and now we can end the show. You know, that's... I'm gonna be the first one to admit, I do not have the time to listen to all of the podcasts I want to listen to. When your show -

**Jeff Westfall:**



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Oh, who does?

**Jeremy Lesniak:**

Right? When your show popped up on my radar, I did, you know, I listened to a few episodes. And the story you just told, that informative bit, I think it's a pretty good anecdote for you if I may say - that you're very knowledgeable and you kind of wander around in what I do and just talk about stuff. Is that fair? Am I offending you in saying that?

**Jeff Westfall:**

Oh, no. Not all, not at all. I am a constant irritant of those around with me with unsolicited information, unsolicited trivia, and I am frequently reminded by people that they really just don't care.

**Jeremy Lesniak:**

Well, if there ever was a forum for you to present unsolicited -

**Jeff Westfall:**

Exactly

**Jeremy Lesniak:**

- information about almost anything -

**Jeff Westfall:**

Yeah, podcasting is perfect because you know, you can turn it off, you know? I tell people I would tell you right now about this but I made it in number 37 so go listen to it or don't. But now I got it out of my system and I edited it and I got it just the way I want. It's kinda like having a dad or a grandpa that keeps telling the same old stories, you know? So I just, instead of repeating it, I just go number 38!

**Jeremy Lesniak:**

And you say it in that voice, too, don't you?

**Jeff Westfall:**

Exactly, yes.



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**Jeremy Lesniak:**

That kind of crotchety get off my lawn sort of [05:46](#)

**Jeff Westfall:**

Well it is. It really is a perfect format for someone who likes to talk about things and then really put it in good form or put it in a good format. Do the research, leave out the uhs and the ahs and the you knows, you know? It's a really... And another thing that one of the reasons I got into podcasting was I'm really into scientific skepticism. And that's a big part of the structure of the podcast, kind of the inner section between science and the martial arts and especially critical thinking and skepticism. And I actually occasionally go to gatherings of scientific skeptics and it occurred to me one day when I was at one that I was the biggest jock there. And then it occurred to me that when I'm at a gathering with martial artists, then I have been the biggest nerd there. And I thought wow, I sit at an intersection. And that was really the beginning of the podcast.

**Jeremy Lesniak:**

That's... you know, I think I can relate. I think I can relate generally when I'm in among my academic friends. I would be the only one telling stories that involve sweating profusely.

**Jeff Westfall:**

Right, right. And they look at you like you have third eye growing in the middle of your forehead or something.

**Jeremy Lesniak:**

Right. Yeah, why would you do that? Now normally we don't do this at the top of the show but since we've already gone, you know was that, close to five minutes, we've talked about the fact that you have a podcast but I'm sure there are listeners out there slapping the speaker, their phone or something saying Jeremy, this is rude. What show? Now I'm sure we have a ton of crossover listeners, at least hopefully, because you have a great show and we're kind of -

**Jeff Westfall:**

Thank you.

**Jeremy Lesniak:**



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- flipping the format here on the show. You're welcome, you're welcome. I appreciate anybody that will dedicate themselves to this format and get beyond episode 10, has some dedication; they have some passion and that's why I think I've connected as we were talking before I hit the record button. You know, I've made friendships with several other martial arts podcasters. I think we all have something in common - probably a lot in common - but why -

### **Jeff Westfall:**

Either dedication or neuropathology, one or the other.

### **Jeremy Lesniak:**

Likely both. I would suspect there are quite a few symptoms that we could check off on a diagnosis. Tell the listeners just a little bit about your show and then we'll go all the way back in time and we'll start talking about you and how you started in martial arts.

### **Jeff Westfall:**

Cool. It's called The Martial Brain. Someone told me early on, you should call it like The Martial Philosophy or The Martial Mind. And that just didn't quite hit it because one of the elements of scientific skepticism, especially in brain science that fascinates me, is that your mind is not separate from your brain. There's this concept of the Cartesian duality that your mind and your body are separate. And I didn't want to do that; I didn't want to have any confusion so I wanted it to be the brain of the martial artists as the theme. And a lot of people got confused and they think I'm calling myself a brain and that I'm the namesake of the podcast and nothing could be further from the truth. So it's kind of... First of all and first most, it's simply me talking about whatever the heck I want to talk about and it's free so you don't have to listen. But I try to keep it, most the time even if I have to drive 30 miles out of the way, I try to steer it back to the martial arts no matter what I'm talking about. And it's my take on the intersection based on a given topic on a given day, the martial arts... Scientific skepticism, critical thinking skills, science in general and science literacy, and history and language and all kinds of stuff. So it's basically me giving myself license to blabber, and kind of keeping martial arts as a theme, if that makes any sense at all.

### **Jeremy Lesniak:**

It absolutely does because I think that's, quite often, how I look at Thursday episodes for us, you know, we do two a week. And Mondays, you know, this will come out on a Monday, I'm not sure which one yet. On Thursday, -

### **Jeff Westfall:**

Two a week? You are a busy young man. Holy cow.



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**Jeremy Lesniak:**

I am. I am a busy man. And you know, on "vacation" last week and as I was travelling back to States from New Brunswick, Canada, I had my GoPro on a dash mount and I was recording a Thursday episode. There was something that I needed get off my chest, I needed to talk this out. And what better way to work things out in your own mental process than knowing when someone else's listening.

**Jeff Westfall:**

Sure, sure. That's very well-put. I'm gonna steal that. I was interviewed for another podcast last week and the host said something really pithy and I stole that. So I'm gonna steal that; I like that, yeah. It's sort of like a dead line sharpening the mind. When you know there's gonna be an audience, it changes the way you do it, it changes the way you put it together, which is cool.

**Jeremy Lesniak:**

Absolutely. And I think that we can draw some corollary there with martial arts. There are plenty of people -

**Jeff Westfall:**

Absolutely.

**Jeremy Lesniak:**

- who... I mean for good or for bad, the way they will spar and the way they will practice their basics, the same movements; the way they put themselves into them can be so dramatically different.

**Jeff Westfall:**

Yes, yes. And that can change overtime to the influence of a good instructor or training partner, too.

**Jeremy Lesniak:**

For sure. So let's bring it back now. Now that the audience knows you're a thoughtful person with a martial arts podcast, then we both likely need to be committed or engaging in that endeavor. Let's talk about how martial arts found its way into your life.

**Jeff Westfall:**



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Sure. Like so many of my generation - I'll be 61 next month - My Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtle and Power Rangers was Kato - Bruce Lee playing Kato on the Green Hornet. I think when that series got started, I was about 10. And that just, it was... I kind of like to compare it to Star Trek as well. A lot of people like to make fun of the Green Hornet or they like to make fun of the original series but that is so out of context because when you look the wasteland of television in the '60s and compare it to what else is out there, the martial arts that Bruce Lee was doing on The Green Hornet was just so far beyond anything else including the James Bond movies, you know. Anybody who looked at him move, some holy cow, look at this guy move. And I was utterly captivated. And two years later, in 1971, he did the pilot episode of a TV series called Longstreet about a blind insurance detective and the very first episode was entitled The Way of the Intercepting Fist and it featured Bruce Lee and guy teaching martial arts to this blind detective. And that's the first time I heard the phrase Jeet Kune Do was in that episode. And I had already started taking Kyokushin Karate when I saw that episode. I had been training it for, I don't know, about a year or so at that point. And I was a constant irritant to my teachers by asking them about Bruce Lee right from the beginning. As I'm sure a lot of people nowadays are irritated by the students [13:54](#) about this YouTube video or that YouTube video. And that was kind of... he was kind of my lodestar. I read every article he wrote in the magazines before the Jeet Kune Do came out and was obsessed with his philosophy. And even though I was in Kyokushin which is a very traditional style, I was also thinking hard about things that he said. But I was in Kyokushin from the time I was 13 till I was in college. That's a... a lot of people call it Japanese Karate. It's actually hard to pin down because its founder was a Korean non-citizen of Japan named Masutatsu Oyama; he was a second class citizen because you couldn't be a citizen in Japan and not be Japanese. His parents were migrant labors in Japan but he trained under Gichin Funakoshi in Shotokan and then founded his own system. So he was a Korean who trained in an Okinawan system under a Japanese guy. So whatever you want to call that style of Karate, that's the style I was in. And then at the mid-'70s, I started getting involved in a Kung Fu style called Tai Lung and it was sort of a... The guy who put it together grew from Wing Chun for short range and from [15:13](#) for longer range fighting. And I stayed in that quite a while. Actually, I go my Nidan in Kyokushin, my 2nd degree black belt, when I was in the Gong Fu system, I got my... He adapted the belt ranking system that used sashes so I got my black sash about 1979 or so. And then right around '78, before you know, well that was still going on, I got involved in boxing - really, really liked boxing. I was drawn to it because I knew Bruce Lee, you know, he said quite frequently that it was... had more reality; boxing and Judo had more reality in it than a lot of the styles he'd been exposed to so I was following that. And then in 1984, a number of years later... Well I started my own academy in '80. Before that, I taught people starting in about '77 in garages and basements - one on one, one on two. And then I started my academy in 1980. And after about four years running my academy and teaching mostly the Tai Lung Gung Fu but also having a boxing class, also having students in for open sparring on Saturdays. Actually not just students, I started a tradition of inviting anyone from any academy to come in [16:42](#) with no pressure to join and spar every Saturday. And that was our laboratory because we didn't... The only rule was, you know, be friends when you're done and be careful with each other. So we ground fought, we took each other down, you know. We did all kinds of things. We didn't just stick to point-fighting rules. But anyway, while that was going on in 1984, I finally got to realize the lifelong ambition and that was to go train for a week with Dan Inosanto. He was Bruce Lee's bestfriend and the guy who ran his Chinatown Academy for him. And I met him in St. Louis Missouri, he taught a seminar. There was a one week seminar, was five 8-hour days and that was my first exposure.



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I filled a yellow legal pad notebook and my head exploded everyday more than once while it was going on. And I followed Dan Inosanto around, the Midwestern United States training with him at seminars two, three, four, five times a year for the next seven years. And finally he said, you know you should really test for an instructorship with me. So that kinda blew me away that he thought I was worthy of that so I did. He pointed me a number of directions, he pointed me towards my Muay Thai instructor who is his current good friend - man named Surachai Sirisute The guy who brought Muay Thai to the United States in 1968 and I've been under him ever since. As a matter of fact I'll be bringing him to my academy in a few weeks. I sort of followed Dan Inosanto's lead. I mean he's always going off finding new things to train in. He got me interested in Shoot Wrestling which took me to training under Erik Paulson. He got me interested in Silat which kept me training under him, eventually becoming an instructor that he has developed called Majapahit Martial Arts. And I got involved in Brazilian Jiu Jitsu starting in 1993, right at the very beginning of the grappling revolution that hit - I went to a seminar with Rickson Gracie in Cincinnati, Ohio and started there. I got my black belt in Brazilian Jiu Jitsu about 10 years ago, took me 17 years to get because my attention's divided between so many different systems.

**Jeremy Lesniak:**

Sure.

**Jeff Westfall:**

That's a long rambling account. I have a Nidan in Judo. When I got back from the seminar, one of my students who was a Judo teacher said, why don't you let me teach you Judo now that you got into Jiu Jitsu? I said, well okay. So I took private lessons with him for about 5 or 6 years and got my Nidan in Judo. He's a really good teacher, a top level competitor in the Midwest back in the '60s. I'm not sure if I left anything out. I got a pretty bio for you, does that work?

**Jeremy Lesniak:**

Yeah. That's a good summary of the what. So let's look at kind of the overarching important question of the why. Why did you start martial arts at 13 and why at, if I heard you right, nearly 61, are you still training?

**Jeff Westfall:**

Well, again, my role model is Dan Inosanto in so many ways. But the reason I started was my whole life was pretty dysfunctional. It was a very violent household. After my father left when I was 4, my mother married a real violent loser - alcoholic - he was very abusive. My mother was pretty abusive, too. My older brother was not pleasant to be around. It was a very violent place to be and I was... By the time I was a young teenager, I was really messed up. I was a smart kid, I was a nerd, and I was scared of my own shadow. And when I first into martial or got to train in martial arts, I asked my mother, first of all, if I could





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take classes and she refused flat out. She said we couldn't afford it and she didn't want me to mess with it. So what I did was at first, when I first got into Kyokushin, a buddy of mine, his older brother, train in the backyard because there was no Kyokushin instructor in Evansville --- he had trained in another town and just had a green belt. But he worked out hard in his backyard, he has a makiwara, he would get anybody in the neighborhood to come over and spar with him. There was a Taekwondo school locally, he tried to get those guys come over and spar with him. And so I would go over there and I didn't really take it seriously because I was convinced that I wasn't athletic and I could never be athletic. But I was, like a lot of nerds, I was fascinated by it so I just wanted to sit and watch but he wouldn't put up with that. He made me get up and do what I could. And after a couple of years with that, I started training more formally. But I joke with people that it took me my first two years of training to reach the level of physical ability of a standard issue of human being. I was, you know, I'm not an athletic kid. But I really believed at that time, by the way, that it was impossible for me to improve myself physically through practice. I just had it in my head; I tell myself in this box mentally that well practicing and exercising is a waste of time for me because I'm not athletic. I'll never get better so why spin my wheels? And of course I'd put myself in this box myself and then one day, this fellow, we were talking about martial arts and I threw a side kick and held it out a little bit. And he goes, wow, Jeff, your side kicks has gotten a lot better. In my mind, I couldn't get better and this guy who I respected told me that. And I said, you know, don't lie to me, and don't play with me. He goes, no, no, it looks better than mine. And my head exploded when he said that, and all of a sudden I thought oh my gosh, I can get better if I just practice. And that's when I started getting into more formal training. Also as I said, from the beginning I was obsessed with Bruce Lee's eclecticism when it came to martial arts. My first few teachers weren't that good, I don't want to name too many names but I had a lot of bad examples coming up. Actually John, my friend, was a pretty good teacher but he wasn't very far along. I liked his attitude. But a lot of teachers that I got after were, you know, either extremely, extremely doctrinaire merchants you know, drill instructor types or a few of them were... one fellow who I tried to train with turned out to be a fraud. You know, lots of different things; I went through a lot of bad instructors which gave me a lot of drive to never teach like that, you know what I mean? And so in the early days, I was the classic martial arts teacher. And when I finally met the gentleman I train in Gong Fu, who's a pretty good teacher sometimes, other times not so much, and I learned a lot of interesting things but we butted heads a lot. And then when I finally met Dan Inosanto, that was it. I knew I found a good teacher. Unfortunately, I couldn't afford to move to Los Angeles. But I would listen dutifully to what he showed and what he did and train it like crazy. And then when I go back, I harass the heck out of him saying, is it like this? No, it's not like that. Watch during the seminar, they... And he would pull me up to be his dummy frequently. And I probably have spent a number of hours him, you know, beating me up and locking and making me tap between years of 1984 and 1994 a lot throughout the Midwest. And it was just, you know, I noticed when I finally went out to his academy, we went together to a Jiu Jitsu academy to the Machado Brothers Academy, and I noticed how happy his was to put on a white belt. And how it just made him really happy to not be the teacher but to be the student, and I emulated that. I thought, well that's really cool, you know. And as time is going on, I've realized how smart he is. Because there's nothing like - I say this in one of my most recent podcast - there's nothing like taking a big bite out of a steep learning curve. And the learning curve is so steep at the early part of the martial arts. You know, when you first get into it, you learn in bug chunks and I just find that interesting to compare the basics of



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one system to another and find out what they share with each other. I mean, I don't know. I've been rambling, does that makes sense?

**Jeremy Lesniak:**

It does. And you're hitting on a subject that we've talked about quite a bit with quite a number of guests and you're talking about it too. This notion of maintaining the mindset of a white belt, this realization that there's always -

**Jeff Westfall:**

Absolutely.

**Jeremy Lesniak:**

- So much out there to learn and there seems to be, you know... We talked about science and scientific method and some things early on but I don't think anybody's done any "research" on this but I suspect that the best martial artists and the happiest martial artists are those who have trained in the most different things, who have engaged in the most diversity with their martial arts experience. Would you agree?

**Jeff Westfall:**

I would agree with that. A lot of it depends on what it is, why they're doing the martial arts? I mean let's face it, there are plenty of people who practice the martial arts for reasons that we might disagree it especially those who do it for status, you know. I jokingly say that I know a lot of martial arts instructors that are instructors so they could tell people that they're instructors. So you know, for me, I agree that what makes me the happiest is I hope I learn a technique the day I die. You know, I just love... And I love analyzing and synthesizing and coming up with stuff on my own. And you know, I remember when I finally gave myself permission to do that, you know whereas like... Someone said to me once like if you just make up a technique, that's not legitimate. I said well, Bruce Lee said you know, absorb what's useful, reject what is useless and keep it as uniquely your own - what works for your body. Because your body will invent moves that you didn't even realize based on the way you're built. So yeah, I'm most happy when I'm either learning something new or doing analysis - comparing how this Brazilian Jiu Jitsu instructor does this technique versus that instructor versus that instructor though each do the same technique a little differently. And I'll ask why do you do it like that, you know? Well if you put your big toe two inches this way, you get leverage like this. I'm just... I love that stuff. It's amazing to me.

**Jeremy Lesniak:**



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One of my favorite things about martial arts is that - and I don't know if this will ever change and you've got a couple of years on me so maybe you can speak a bit more to it to validate or blow up my theory - but it seems that the more I learn about martial arts, the more I realize how much more there is to learn. And this, depending on your perspective, incredibly depressing or immensely exciting realization that you will never learn all of it.

**Jeff Westfall:**

Yeah, I like to compare that phenomenon that you just described to a, on a larger scale, to science. You know, the more we discover, the more we... Science is going on, we've picked a lot of the low-hanging group. You know, the stuff that you could just simply figure out through observation. And now we're having to extend our senses through scientific instruments and go deeper and deeper. And now things like, you know, dark matter and quantum physics are becoming harder and harder to study and it takes more and more precision and deep thought. And the more and more we discover, the more we realize my gosh, it just simply pushes the frontiers further out of what we don't know. And I can see where that can be depressing on the one hand but on the other hand, you know, I think it lifts the quality of what you're doing, you know? The myth that you can ever "master" any martial arts gets blown out of the sky as it should be. And so I think on the one hand, like you said, the more we learn, the more there is yet to learn and becomes completely... it becomes completely unattainable all the things we'd like. And yet at the same time, I find a comfort in that. Because, you know, the people come along behind this, they want to look at us as some sort of paragon that knows everything. And we just turn around and go no, son I'm just one step ahead of you on this thread, you know. Jump up on here and learn what you can before you die.

**Jeremy Lesniak:**

Yeah.

**Jeff Westfall:**

Yeah. And I'd like to compare it to the history of science. I think they both have a similar arc in that regard.

**Jeremy Lesniak:**

Can you apply... there's a notion I'm turning into words here, can you train in the martial arts scientifically?

**Jeff Westfall:**

Well sure, yeah. First of all, scientifically is a very broad term.

**Jeremy Lesniak:**



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Intentionally, so.

**Jeff Westfall:**

I was gonna say I bet you meant it that way. I think first of all, a lot of people have tried to pin down exactly what the scientific method is. And there's debate among scientific philosophers about what exactly it is. But I think a good basic working model is to observe the universe around you, observe the natural world. Once you gather enough information, maybe formulate a hypothesis and then continue to do research but in the direction of trying to disprove that hypothesis rather than prove it. And if you can't disprove it, you get closer and closer to finding out whether or not you're onto something. And I think you can do that with martial arts. Now of course the traditional paradigm is you train with an instructor and you listen to what the instructor tells you respectfully, as you should, but at the same time, you know, you have training partners and you can test hypotheses when you're sparring or when you're doing different drills. And if your instructor's open-minded on this, you can even ask him questions about why does this technique work? What's the physics behind this technique? And if he's not sure, you know, learn for yourself. Learn a little bit about physics, learn a little bit about biology and absolutely, the more you learn about the human body, the more you learn about the laws of physics, the more a lot of the things that we already do begin to make sense. And I think you can extend that overtime. Now, I think a big factor in whether or not you can train in the martial arts scientifically, first of all, starts with what is the level of scientific literacy of the people who put the system together that you're training in and what is your level of scientific literacy. I think most modern martial arts systems have a healthy dose of science in them. I mean you know, the reason that martial arts stance has stability is because of the number of square inches or square centimeters, you know, connecting there like if you draw a line connecting your two feet when you're in a stance, connect your heels with the line, connect your toes with the line and then you measure the number of square centimeters in that, that's a direct reflection of how stable that stance is. And I think a lot of people, they may not know it exactly that way but just through a sheer repetition and figuring things out, you know. There's been a lot of sort of rule of thumb science applied from the beginning. [33:22](#) a lot of folks did it without having a degree, necessarily, or doing the math of it. Absolutely, to be honest, I think the question is can you do martial arts unscientifically. I don't know if you can, really.

**Jeremy Lesniak:**

An interesting concept and one that I suspect if we really dig into that rabbit hole, we're probably not coming out today. So I want to put that one aside and leave it for listeners kinda you know, contemplate on their own. Here on the show, I love stories and I love getting people to tell stories and that's really kind of the... was the impetus for this show. I was tired of going to events and having to wait for all of the masters or whoever to have a few too many beers before I heard great stories. So I said I'm gonna make a show that coaxes people if not browbeats them into sharing their stories. So what is your favorite story from your time training?

**Jeff Westfall:**



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Goodness. I'd have to think about that.

**Jeremy Lesniak:**

Quite okay.

**Jeff Westfall:**

A lot of them I've already put on my podcast. Some of them were more humorous, you know, some of them were sad... Gosh, I don't know about my favorite. Man, I really have to think about this.

**Jeremy Lesniak:**

It's alright. And it doesn't have to be anything of any particular format. You know, we've have folks who have shared unfortunate real world self-defense scenarios they've found themselves in or individuals who had something particularly funny or even something that was, in hindsight, very pivotal for them. And that's why I use that adjective - favorite - you know instead of saying best or... actually, it used to be your best story. And that made people think it had to be something big and dramatic but I find that when we ask the question in this way, not only do we get to hear a story, which makes me happy, but the story that you've chose, by virtue that you've chose it, tells us something about you and who you are.

**Jeff Westfall:**

Let's see. I have to keep thinking here a minute.

**Jeremy Lesniak:**

Okay.

**Jeff Westfall:**

There are so many. Well one, I don't know if this will apply or not. You know, I mentioned Guro Inosanto suggested that I test with him and I said well I don't know if I can make it out to Los Angeles anytime soon and he goes, well just keep coming to seminars; and I did. And I started noticing that he started pulling me up to be his dummy [36:25](#) more and more and more. And then one day at a seminar in St. Louis in 1991, no, I'm sorry I think it was... I'd have to go back and look at my certificate, it might have been a year or two after that but I think so. Anyway, when the seminar was over, he was handing out participation certificates, he called me up and he promoted me right there to instructor. And I didn't realize I was being tested also. And I noticed at the seminar that for the first time ever, he called me up to be his assistant or to demonstrate things every time he wanted something demonstrated. He didn't demonstrate a lot of the things himself; he had me come up and do it. And I thought wow, this is unusual. And then at the end of



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the day, he hands me the certificate and I was there by myself. I didn't have a training with me, I met a guy there who would become my training partner and I had no one at the moment to share this with. And I just started bawling, you know. I didn't think... As I talk to so many people about when you earn a significant ranking in the martial arts, you almost never feel like you deserve it, and I was like I don't deserve this. And I was happy and shocked and I was... If I had a cellphone, I would have called my wife the moment I got in the car on the way home - of course, cellphones didn't exist yet. And I drove home and told her about and she was like, oh that's nice. You know, I had to tell my students and my friends before anybody who grasps the significance of it and could appreciate it. That might be you know, one of the pivotal stories... It's not really much of a story, it's just an incident that happened.

**Jeremy Lesniak:**

But pretty fundamental to who you are now -

**Jeff Westfall:**

Yeah. Very fundamental, yes. You know, he's just such a great guy. I remember getting ready to go to this first seminar of this first week-long camp with him in 1984. And I had already trained with some other folks whom I won't name, some big names, who I learned good things from but I just didn't like them as a person. And I was so interested in Bruce Lee's approach to the martial arts, that I was perfectly prepared for him to not be a very nice person and I was gonna put up with that as so many of us have with various teachers through the years to get to the knowledge. And it was such a delight to find out what a wonderful person he was, and how humble he was. You hear that a lot about a lot of martial arts teachers but Dan Inosanto is almost pathologically humble. Sometimes you almost want to go over and say brag a little bit, Guro, you know. But he is just such a great role model and so I was so humbled and touched when he did that to me and for me.

**Jeremy Lesniak:**

Certainly, Dan Inosanto was a name that is kicked around a lot. I mean plenty of stories out there, plenty of mentions even on the show we've talked about him quite a few times. Do you think -

**Jeff Westfall:**

I did an entire four-part podcast about him

**Jeremy Lesniak:**

I believe it. I believe it and we'll make sure we'll link that on the show notes and this is probably a good time to let people know, you know. We're gonna link to everything, we'll to your podcast, everything you



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got going on - your social and whatever - over on our show notes [whistlekickmartialartsradio.com](http://whistlekickmartialartsradio.com). That way people don't have to jot notes if they're driving.

**Jeff Westfall:**

If I could throw in one more thing about him

**Jeremy Lesniak:**

Yeah, please.

**Jeff Westfall:**

He's almost got this Forrest Gump-like or Zelig if you're familiar with the Woody Allen movie or you know the game Six Degrees of Kevin Bacon - the amazing people that he has been connected with in his life. Not just because of his fame but even before that are so many people. And that was the theme of the four-part podcast I did. I called it one or two degrees of Dan Inosanto. And it was combination of a biography of him and how he connects up with all of these amazing famous people all through his life story. It's probably the highest rated four episodes of my podcast. Anyway, I interrupted you, please go ahead.

**Jeremy Lesniak:**

Quite alright. This is your episode; it's my show but it's your episode so as far as I'm concerned, you should be interrupting me and certainly not the other way. But when you look at this man, I think we can all agree living legend in the martial arts - and we don't have a lot of them anymore -

**Jeff Westfall:**

No.

**Jeremy Lesniak:**

Do you think that humility is part of why he's reached not only the standing, you know, the place in our hearts, but more importantly, his skill?

**Jeff Westfall:**

Absolutely and I'll tell you why. It comes down to one phrase: martial arts' diplomatic genius.

**Jeremy Lesniak:**



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Okay. That's something that you've said before, I suspect. That came off the tongue far too easy.

**Jeff Westfall:**

Yeah. Well, he has trained in so many different systems and so many of the people who he's trained can't stand each other. And he can them in the same room with each other and no one else can. He has got this ability to just navigate the shark infested waters of martial arts politics. And because he's such a nice guy, it's impossible almost to hate him unless you're just such a, you know, pathological cretin that you've manufactured a reason to hate him, that has enabled him to have access to all these different sources of information, I think. So I think that his humility has been directly connected to his ability to find these different sources, find these different people. I think another element was - I talk about this in the podcast about him - try to think back to what it must have been like when Bruce Lee died for him. He was in-charge of Bruce Lee's Chinatown Academy. He had left Dan Inosanto in-charge of it when he went to Hong Kong to make movies. And then, of course, he died suddenly. Well here's Dan Inosanto running this academy under Bruce Lee's name, what do you do? What he did was he closed it and he was absolutely terrified that people were gonna think that he would then capitalize or try to capitalize on Bruce Lee's name. And he nearly took a vow of I'm only gonna train in private from now on. I can't open a commercial school - people will read it the wrong way - and he had to be badgered by a number of people before he would start to teach again in public. One of the... Like the actor Steve McQueen who was one of Bruce Lee's pallbearers, wrote him a really nice letter, begging him to start teaching again. A lot of the students said, you know, you're not betraying anyone's memory by starting to teach again. And he had to be dragged kicking and screaming back into the world of teaching martial arts. So he never told me this himself but I think one of the best uses he made, subtly, of his connection with Bruce Lee was it enabled him to make connections with other people. Of course, they were anxious to meet Dan Inosanto. They were anxious to meet Bruce Lee's successor in a way. And so that just opened doors for him. So he took something that at first was a negative which was, you know, the fear that people were gonna think he was capitalizing. And instead of using it to make money, he used it to expand his martial arts knowledge which is brilliant. Does that make sense?

**Jeremy Lesniak:**

It does. It does and it's kind of how I've always perceived him. I haven't been fortunate enough to meet him but there's always been that thread of humility, that thread of, I guess, quiet confidence, whenever I've heard stories from folks who have trained with him. And he's probably at the top of the list for me, personally, of people I haven't trained with but I want to.

**Jeff Westfall:**

Well you should come to my Academy in April 2019.

**Jeremy Lesniak:**





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Okay. We'll talk about that. We'll talk about that off air. Now you have my attention.

**Jeff Westfall:**

Okay. And he's... I'll tell you what, he is just so fun to watch him teach, you know? I think he's 82 now and you know, you can tell he's an 82 year-old man when you're riding around in a car with him and talk to him although he's quite a spry an energetic one. And you know, when you take him into the academy and you get all of his gear out of the way and he always very humbly ask me, when would you like me to start? He's telling me he want to start. And so the instant that the class bows in and everybody gets going, it's like 50 years fall off his shoulders and I'm sure you've seen thin phenomenon many times with other people. And it's just so neat to watch him just do his thing. I have to remember to pay attention because I just find myself grinning watching him, you know, do what he does so well. Training under Guro Dan has been compared to drinking from a fire host. Because he'll show something, like he'll show... I have this mental picture of him say doing a sequence with stick and dagger, and he'll say well one of my teachers did this sequence like this and then he goes now, and then one of my teachers did it this way with this little difference with your left hand, and another teacher did it this way. And his wife will have him video tape all his session and she'll watch and go, you're showing them too much, you're confusing them. And he's constantly laughing and telling me all the critics that his wife gives him based on, you know... she was a school teacher and she thinks he overdoes it and shows too much. But he's got this dilemma of... There are people who come to the seminar as their very first exposure to anything that's not their... the art they started in. Let's say some young kid that's a green belt in Taekwondo that wants to train with Dan Inosanto and they show up, he knows that there are people like that there. And he knows there are people like me that have been with him for 30-some odd years that he would like to give at least one new thing to also. He's trying to have enough tea to pour in all those cups at the same time and he does it so well and it's a joy to watch.

**Jeremy Lesniak:**

Yeah, certainly a dilemma. I'm sure anybody out there who has instructed a mixed rank class even in their own school can relate to the dilemma there. If you consider yourself an instructor -

**Jeff Westfall:**

Absolutely. And it was -

**Jeremy Lesniak:**

Really want to share -

**Jeff Westfall:**



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And a great role model for him to learn how to do that, too.

**Jeremy Lesniak:**

How does he... Let's back that off a little bit. You are an instructor yourself, correct?

**Jeff Westfall:**

Yes, sir.

**Jeremy Lesniak:**

Okay. So how has his influence, his ability to handle that situation, how has that impacted the way you teach personally?

**Jeff Westfall:**

Well first of all, I constructed to schedule of classes and the curricula based on what I saw at his academy in Los Angeles. I patterned it very, very consciously after the way he does things then bringing it down to a little more granular level. I steal a lot of his ways of presenting things. In one way, like sometimes I teach my regular classes seminar style. And what I mean by that is today, I'm gonna throw a lot of information at you but it's not so that you retain the information but so that you can see the connection between the different ways of doing this or achieving the same thing like if I'm teaching the Brazilian Jiu Jitsu class. You know, normally I'll have a curriculum that I want the students to work on. I'll give each one a task to do, work around, correcting form. Then if I'm teaching seminar style, I start throwing out a techniques one at a time - I go here, here's this one. Boom, I show it to them, make a few suggestions, turn them loose. I do not give them enough time to do reps on it to the level that they may have want to do it. Then I come back and I go like, here's a related technique - boom, boom, boom, work on this. And see the similarities, you know? So sometimes I teach to pass across a technique but sometimes I'm teaching to pass across a concept and I definitely lifted directly from Guro Inosanto. You know, I'll it to them, I'm not concerned that you won't remember this sweep that we're working on right now two weeks from today or two months from today. But if you can grasp the importance of what is in common between these five sweeps that we do, then everything I teach you in the future will make more sense and you'll learn it faster. That's sort of the way that he teaches - a very conceptual method of teaching.

**Jeremy Lesniak:**

I suspect that you, like myself, unfortunately have been blessed with great instructors but also some less than great instructors. And as you're talking about -

**Jeff Westfall:**



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Absolutely.

**Jeremy Lesniak:**

- concepts, I think I'm realizing that the better instructors taught was concepts whereas those that I would put in not as good camp just taught the action.

**Jeff Westfall:**

Right. I agree. And you see a lot of that. I mean there's a gentleman who I know, who I love, he's a good guy, but he hasn't been... He was a good competitor in the martial arts that he did. He terrorized the tournaments circuit. And one day, I tried to offer him a little advice about teaching even though what he taught wasn't the art that I did, right? I was watching him teach and I tried to gently just offer a little bit and he goes, Jeff. Yes. He goes, how long have you been doing this martial art? I said no. Just [51:12](#) for a little bit. And he says, okay. He says, I know what I'm doing. And I had to mentally disagree with him but just not say it out loud because the way he was teaching was basically just... you know, here's a technique, do it. And he wasn't explaining why they were doing it or what the technique was for like I have seen from so many bad instructors - just shut up and do it like I'm doing it and eventually you'll figure it out. And that just doesn't make any sense to me as a teaching method. I mean intelligent students will learn despite having terrible instructors. I mean that's just a human gift all through history. There are plenty of great martial artists that came out of terrible programs. And there were plenty of... maybe not plenty, there's a significant number of very good self-taught martial artists. I'm writing a... I think my next article or your website is going to be on that - on the autodidact in the martial art. But anyway, to me, teaching is... The knowledge of how to teach is not derived from having taken lesson in the martial arts. The knowledge of how to teach is separate. That's why you get a degree in education separate from whatever else you're going to teach. Like one example would be to me, the most common thing you see is not striking the balance on what I call the teaching spectrum. And what I mean by that is not over-teaching and not under-teaching. We were just describing what I would consider to be under-teaching where the guy just demonstrates it, do it like that, and just leaves you to yourself. But others plenty of over-teaching. And I was terrible about over-teaching in my earlier days because I had so many under-teacher students, I decided - I vowed - I would explain very carefully, you know, the techniques to the students. And so a student would do a repetition and then I would stand there and do 10 minutes of all the mistakes you just made. And of course, I was ridiculously bad. I was 19 when I started teaching. I thought I was being a good teacher because I was doing the opposite of the bad teachers like that. And of course, Dan Inosanto was a huge influence on me in not over-teaching. You know, pass the concept across, explain it the best you can, demonstrate it a few times, give them a chance to do it, watch them a little bit. The experience... you know the dirty little secret that most martial arts instructors don't want to admit to themselves is that the universe is a far better teacher than they could ever hope to be. And so they want to sort of be control freaks sometimes and just try to turn the student on their side and pour the information in their ear. And you just can't do that. They've got to learn it. You can't teach it; you can throw it out there and hope that you present conditions for them to learn. So I really... Like there were times where I would see a student come up to Guro Inosanto and go, Guro you didn't correct him. He did this and this and this, and he would



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just smile at them and go, yeah I know. It just really struck me that his teaching method was, at first, it baffled me but then I came to realize that, you know, he's a firm believer in letting the student experience things in a safe environment and an environment that's full of information.

**Jeremy Lesniak:**

I'm just letting that sink in. Wow. Yeah. It's incredible. It is -

**Jeff Westfall:**

I also compare being a martial arts teacher to being the curator of a children's museum. And what I mean by that is that like think about all the things you would have to do if you're building a good children's museum. You know, first and foremost, the kids can't get hurt there. You gotta have foam padding on all the sharp corners and that's true of a good martial arts school, too, right? You don't want sharp corners sticking out where people are sparring. You gotta have a lot of stimulating, fascinating toys there for them to play with. You gotta have playmates there, ideally, for them to play with. And you gotta have information there for them to [55:20](#) lessons to be learned from the experience.

**Jeremy Lesniak:**

Absolutely. That's a wonderful analogy, one that I certainly haven't considered and one that I don't think I've heard before. So I'm totally giving you original credit on that one.

**Jeff Westfall:**

Thank you.

**Jeremy Lesniak:**

I like it. Cool. If you could train with anyone that you haven't, anywhere in the world, anywhere in time, who would that be?

**Jeff Westfall:**

Wow. Jigoro Kano because he's the first one that comes to mind.

**Jeremy Lesniak:**

Yeah, you didn't have to think long on that one. I mean, a great choice. Why him?

**Jeff Westfall:**



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Well the reason I picked him is I think he stands, and I maybe I'm giving him too much credit because I don't know all of history, you know, and there are people who, definitely, might say well he wasn't perfect about this or that and I'm not trying to say he's perfect, but to me he's the focal point of, the turning point, the pivot point between the way martial used to be done and the modern way that it's done. And he also, I don't know how much you know about Japanese history and Meiji Restoration

### **Jeremy Lesniak:**

Little bit.

### **Jeff Westfall:**

But he would not have been allowed to do what he did with his life had he born a generation earlier because Japan had a caste system. And he would have been... He was the son of a merchant and that would have been what he did the rest of his life. And merchants were not very high in the caste system. They were necessary for the money but they were not very high. They weren't as high as peasants in the caste system from the standpoint of, you know, how much honor they were given. But fortunately, he came along in time for the Emperor Meiji to seize power from the Shogun and to abolish the Samurai class along with his oligarchs and open... He was the Abraham Lincoln of Japan, the Emperor Meiji. He liberated the entire population and said okay, you don't have grow rice just because your parents did. You can actually go to school and I'm going to put together an education system and send you all to school. And Jigoro Kano was one of the first Japanese to get a degree in education. And he had both a western education and an eastern education. And part of his eastern education was in Jiu Jitsu and he realized very early on that he needed to teach the martial arts both in a traditional way but in a new way. He was one of the first people to popularize tapping to show submission which is a revolutionary thing. I mean before that, you just fought. If you and another Jiu Jitsu player wanted to see who was better, you went until somebody got hurt or somebody is unconscious and tapping was silly - that was surrendering. And no man surrendered to another man. And of course... And I think tapping is a perfect illustration of, going back to your question about can you train scientifically. Because the tap is a way of saying my technique didn't work here and yours did. There's data right there to be gathered. Whereas... of course you know that in science, if you're trying to experiment, you want a large sample size. You want to do the experiment over and over and over again so that you get statistically significant data from it. Well the tap allows you to do that over and over and over again and not get hurt, at least in theory. That was a very scientific, you know... I'm not saying he came up with the tap but it was... from what I can find with my research, it wasn't done very much before that time. If it was done at all, it was not considered something that you did. I'm sure there are people who did, you know, folks that were a little smarter than other folks. But insofar systematizing it, I can't find it back much further than Kano. And you know, he was the direct ancestor of Judo, Sambo, and Brazilian Jiu Jitsu. I mean like one of the two founders of Sambo trained under him in Tokyo, at the Kodokan. And of course, the guy who taught Jiu Jitsu to the Gracie brothers was a student under Kano. So think about that, you got one man as directly responsible for three very, very famous martial art; a pretty interesting guy. I would love to have met him and maybe he wouldn't have liked me, I don't know. I don't know what he thought of [1:00:02](#) but I would have loved to have



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trained with him and to have been a fly on the wall at that revolutionary moment in the history of the martial arts. So just a journalist, as a martial arts journalist and historian, I would have loved to have gone back and look at that.

**Jeremy Lesniak:**

Yeah. He's an absolutely amazing figure and one that I think we don't speak of enough. I mean he's -

**Jeff Westfall:**

I agree, 100%.

**Jeremy Lesniak:**

- spoken about. Oh, Kano, he founded Judo. And that's usually where the description stops. Sometimes people will say, oh he's the guy that popularized belts to signify rank over [1:00:38](#)

**Jeff Westfall:**

Right

**Jeremy Lesniak:**

And I don't know that I ever heard anyone say anything more than that. So we did a research-driven episode on him, you know we'll link that on the show notes, but I got the opportunity to learn a ton about him and was just blown away at some of his, I mean, really revolutionary concepts at the time. I mean you just talked about some of them. But you know, I think evolution, whether you're talking about it genetically or anything else, assuming that you believe in it, you know, there are these periods of time these moments or things take a big leap forward. And martial arts for the most part has been pretty incremental but I think we can look at Kano as one of those revolutionary steps forward.

**Jeff Westfall:**

The quantum leap, yes.

**Jeremy Lesniak:**

Absolutely.

**Jeff Westfall:**



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Yeah, he was, in a way, kind of... I'd like to talk about a concept from a science called Emergent Property. It has to do with when the last piece of a complex system falls into place, the complex system [1:01:47](#) to life and appears almost to have [1:01:50](#) and have a personality on its own. Like if you have a component on your automobile that is vital to the running of that automobile, if you take it out, well your automobile doesn't act like an automobile anymore. He had that personality. So if you have figured out how to invent the car with all the pieces except the last one and you drop that last one in, boom, it starts up, headlights come on, turn on the radio, everything works - it has emergent properties. And a lot of times... Have you ever noticed when you're teaching that you have a student who will make an amazing quantum leap all at once that just seem to come out of nowhere? Where the heck did that come from? And I suspect very often that his game was building but he didn't have the vital piece yet to make it all work as a cohesive whole so you didn't see much growth even though it was going on. And when that last technique or that last concept drops into his brain and gelled, all of a sudden he seemed like he gotten a lot better. I think Kano was kind of like that. I think there were forces at work, not just through him but forces of modernity. And he was the guy - the right guy - at the right place at the right time to throw the martial arts forward in the modern world. Because let's face it, it could have easily dies because it was really an anachronism during the Meiji Restoration. It was something that they were... martial arts was part of what they were trying to get passed in a way, you know. And he saw an opportunity to turn it into physical education and use it in the public schools. And that was brilliant because I think he saved the Japanese martial arts as a result to a large degree. And he save it long enough for American GIs to then save it again and start to bring it to the United States.

**Jeremy Lesniak:**

If folks want to get a hold of you, you know, where are they gonna find you online?

**Jeff Westfall:**

You can usually get a hold of me by the wrists and ankles.

**Jeremy Lesniak:**

Best answer to that question. 300 and whatever episode, that is by far the best way anybody's answered that.

**Jeff Westfall:**

My academy's name is the Rising Phoenix Martial Arts Academy. And if you take the initials of that, RPMAA then follow it with 1, it's [rpmaa1@gmail.com](mailto:rpmaa1@gmail.com) and I love to get contacted by listeners and by other folks even if they got something to [1:04:23](#) with me, fantastic. I'm happy to do it. I'd love to get emails from all kinds of folks so send them in.



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**Jeremy Lesniak:**

And what parting words would you offer up the folks listening today?

**Jeff Westfall:**

I like to talk about critical thinking skills a lot in my podcast because let's face it, we live in a world that's far less violent than any world we've ever lived in and if you don't believe that, buy a book by a guy named Steven Pinker called *The Better Angels of Our Nature* and he has statistics to back it up for a lot of pages in the back of the book. You know, training in martial arts strictly for self-defense is becoming less and less and less important but the real lessons that it has to offer us, you know, start to rise up to the surface more and more. So it's still incredibly valuable but also the way you're more likely to be attacked in your lifetime is with, to keep it in a PG rating, to have baloney thrown at you, for people to try to con you, will try to fool you into thinking what they want you to think or buy what they want you to buy, and critical thinking skills are the self-defense for the brain. And I think that goes right along with the self-defense skills, you know, for your body. And so that's something I'm trying to talk a lot about in my podcast. Just as important to learn to defend your body as to learn to defend your brain, what you've grown to understand and to believe, and to understand that a skeptic is not a cynic. That a skeptic is this... the platonic ideal of a skeptic is someone who is exactly halfway between being open-minded to any new information and yet at the same time, fully armed with the tools to test what it is that you're trying to get them to believe. So train hard and think critically.

**Jeremy Lesniak:**

One of my favorite things about doing this show is that I get to meet people, to talk to folks who are like-minded. Because when I'm talking to someone who thinks in a similar way, it's easier for me to learn, to wrap my brain around what they're thinking to adapt, to grow. And this is a perfect example of someone who just flat-out had me thinking not only during the recording but long, long after. Thank you Mr. Westfall for coming on the show.

Of course, you can find the show notes with links to Martial Brain, social media, all kinds of other great stuff over at [whistlekickmartialartsradio.com](http://whistlekickmartialartsradio.com). I hope you do please sign up for the newsletter, maybe check out some of the stuff we've got going at [whistlekick.com](http://whistlekick.com), we're on Amazon. And of course if you want to get a hold of me the best way, email me directly [jeremy@whistlekick.com](mailto:jeremy@whistlekick.com). I love hearing from listeners. That's all I have for today. Until next time. Train hard, smile, and have a great day.