



Episode 72 - Grandmaster John Pelligrini | [whistlekickMartialArtsRadio.com](http://whistlekickMartialArtsRadio.com)

## **Jeremy Lesniak**

Hello, everyone. It's episode 72 of Whistlekick Martial Arts Radio, the only place to hear the best stories from the best martial artists, like today's guest, Grandmaster John Pellegrini.

My name's Jeremy Lesniak, and I founded Whistlekick, but I'm also your host for Martial Arts Radio. Whistlekick, as so many of you know already, makes the world's best sparring gear, as well as really great apparel and accessories, all for practitioners and fans of traditional martial arts. I'd like to welcome our new listeners, and thank those of you checking us out again. If you're not familiar with our products, why don't you head on over to [Whistlekick.com](http://Whistlekick.com) and take a look at everything we make? One of our most popular gear items is our shin guards. They're double layered where it counts, shaped to wrap around your shin, and the design not only makes them more comfortable and effective, but they last longer.

If you want to see the show notes, those are on a different website, and that's [WhistlekickMartialArtsRadio.com](http://WhistlekickMartialArtsRadio.com). While you're over there, go ahead and sign up for the newsletter. We offer special content to subscribers, and it's the only place to find out about upcoming guests for the show.

Today we get to hear from Grandmaster John Pellegrini. As the founder of Combat Hapkido, which has been called the science of self defense, Grandmaster Pellegrini has become very much in demand as a seminar presenter. He also holds rank in Taekwondo, and has received significant media attention over his career. His episode came as a suggestion from one of our listeners, and I'm so glad we reached out to him. He's an entertaining man and a passionate martial artist, two qualities that always translate to a great episode. Don't skip over today's outro as we ended up adding a bit of our personal conversation after the show ended. So let's roll!

Grandmaster Pellegrini, welcome to Whistlekick Martial Arts Radio.

## **John Pelligrini**

Pleasure to be here.

## **Jeremy Lesniak**

Oh, the pleasure is mine, and I know we've got at least a few of our listeners out there that are really looking forward to this episode. We got, actually, multiple requests to get a hold of you and interview you, so there's at least a few of us that are going to be happy, and I'm one of them. Let's go on. Let's start the way, as those that listen to the show weekly know, we always start in the same way. How did you get started in the martial arts?

## **John Pelligrini**



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Well, it's interesting, because I had some interest in my teenager years. I grew up ... I was born and grew up in Italy, and I had a couple of friends that did Judo, and one of them did some Karate classes at the local college, and I got interested, but I did not pursue it. You know, I attended a few classes, I went there to watch, and I did not have the passion at that time. I never thought that I could really get into the martial arts as a life-changing activity.

Then, when I was 19, I was in the military, and because of the special unit I was in, they were teaching a lot of hand-to-hand combat, and being a fairly small guy, I immediately realized the benefit of learning the skills and techniques that can help you against a bigger opponent, or someone with a weapon. I think that's when my passion developed.

After I got out of the army, and I moved to the United States, I started taking classes, first in Karate, but then because I was moving a lot, I transferred to New York and I started taking Taekwondo, and I got into the Korean martial arts. That was the genesis of my beginning.

### **Jeremy Lesniak**

That's great. What do you think changed for you in your perspective, in the way you saw the martial arts, from when you were first introduced to it and you weren't interested, because if it was simply about the combat aspect, I'm guessing it wouldn't have become such a big piece of your life? There must have been something else.

### **John Pelligrini**

Yes. You must understand that I spent most of my life in law enforcement and corporate security, and the self defense aspect was always the most important part to me. It was not the sport, although I enjoyed some competition in my early years in Taekwondo, although I enjoyed going to watch, you know, martial art shows and stuff like that, and movies. I was always interested in the more practical aspect of the arts and what they can do for the individual, and I don't mean only physically. What they do by giving you the skills of self defense, the martial arts also help you develop self confidence, awareness, respect, a healthy respect for danger and understanding all the different situations that we face throughout our lives. So I feel that the martial arts were also character-forming, like I said, not just physically. The physical aspect is important, of course, but they also help you spiritually, I think, and intellectually, to develop into a stronger and better person.

### **Jeremy Lesniak**

And I think that that response probably resonates for a lot of our listeners. I mean, certainly people that listen to the show know my views on the martial arts. I love the martial arts, and for all of the reasons that you just named.

### **John Pelligrini**



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Yes.

### **Jeremy Lesniak**

Now, I'm sure, as someone who has been training for a while, and, you know, you've trained internationally, you've been around. Right? You bounce around, very highly regarded. I know you've got a ton of stories, but if I had to press you and say, "Tell us your absolute best one," why don't you take a second and go ahead and tell us that?

### **John Pelligrini**

Well, that one is a little bit of an ambush question, because there has been so many stories. When you travel the world, you're blessed to meet so many great martial artists. You also meet a lot of jerks, and a lot of wannabes, a lot of fakes. I could tell you dozens of stories, but unfortunately, when you put me on the spot like this, it's very hard to come up with one.

Well, I can tell you also that some of the people that I've trained, I met, and interacted with, have passed on, and they have left really some very beautiful memories in my heart, and I can name some of the people if you want me to ...

### **Jeremy Lesniak**

Please.

### **John Pelligrini**

... that have really had a great impression, and one of them was Professor Wally Jay. I think he was one of the greatest martial artists that ever lived, and not just because of his wonderful techniques, but he was such a gentleman, and such a kind person. When I met him the first time, we were in - just to tell you a quick story - I was doing a different style, obviously. I was doing Hapkido, and he taught Small Circle Jujitsu. I went to one of his seminar, we met, we talked, and he was so open-minded, and I said, "Look, Professor, I'm not going to do your style. I'm just here to steal some of your technique," and he looked at me and he says, "Thank God for that. I'm so happy." It was totally disarming, because I thought that maybe he would resent the fact that I was there learning, and then taking some of his material to put into my material, but instead he was happy, and he gave me some advice, and he encouraged me to continue doing that, and continue learning.

That was a great story, I think, but there is another one I think you'll find funny. I decided that I wanted to compare Aikido to Hapkido. Hapkido being Korean in origin, Aikido being Japanese in origin, but both founders of the two systems, they study under Sokaku Takeda, the Father of Daito-Ryu Aikijujutsu. So I wanted to find out for my own education why these two men went in such different direction. Aikido is softer and has different characteristic than Hapkido, and I



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wanted to know what the difference is, so I decided to study Aikido. I placed myself under Fumio Toyoda Sensei, who passed away. It was in Chicago, IL. I study under him for a few years, and finally I tested and got my black belt in Aikido.

After the test, we went to a restaurant, and we were having pizza and a beer. He was a fire plug of a man, you know, probably 5'2", but as hard as a rock, and a great sense of humor. I happen to open my mouth, like an idiot, and during dinner, I said to him, "You know, Sensei, you know, Aikido is beautiful, but it's not very practical for self defense. It's very flowery, and some of the movements are really unrealistic, so I love the art, you know, but it's not very practical for self defense."

He looked at me, and he said, "Ah. You want self defense?"

I said, "Yes, sir."

"Buy gun."

It really ... He was funny in a sense, but he also taught me a lesson. A great lesson in humility, a great lesson in understanding that not every art is designed for the same reason. Some people, as you know, join the martial arts because they love the sport aspect. They want to compete, they want to go into tournament and championships, and some of my best friends, like Bill Wallace and several others, have made their name in the competition circuit, in the sport aspect. Other people learn it, like me, and pursue it for self defense, because we like the reality-based aspect, we want to teach police officers and military, and we believe that self defense is the most important element. But there are other people that study for the tradition, for the beauty, for the aesthetic and spiritual part of the art, and they should not be discounted. All three aspects are valid, and sometimes they overlap, they compliment each other, but no one should discourage an art because maybe it does not contain all of the elements, and that's the lesson I learned that day from my Aikido instructor.

### **Jeremy Lesniak**

And I think that that's a great lesson, and it's one that I wish more people would learn, that there is absolutely value ... Well, I'm curious to see if you agree. My personal feeling is that all martial arts have value. If they didn't, they wouldn't exist. They would just cease to exist very quickly if no one found value in them.

### **John Pelligrini**

Yeah. Absolutely. I've written several articles with that particular phrase that you just said. Every martial art is value. They only thing that we must understand, however, they have different values for different people. So, if you are 6'5", and 300 lbs, maybe you're drawn to kickboxing, or MMA, or Sumo Wrestling. If you are 75-year-old and 120 lbs, maybe you want to do Tai Chi.



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There is value in every single one of them, but it's really up to the individual and what they are looking for.

Self defense and the martial arts are not a one-size-fits-all. Otherwise there would be only one style. There is only one baseball. There are not 500 styles of baseball. Baseball is baseball. And by the way, I don't follow it, so, you know, maybe there are other styles that I don't know about. All I'm saying is that there are so many styles of martial arts coming from different cultures around the world because the human nature is different and it tends to gravitate toward something that is of interest to the individual. The individual has to find his own meaning, his own value into the art. They are all worthwhile, they are all valuable, and they all have great lessons to teach.

**Jeremy Lesniak**

I'm glad we agree, and you said it so much better than I did, so thank you.

**John Pelligrini**

I doubt it.

**Jeremy Lesniak**

Oh, I don't. I don't. So, let's pretend for a minute that maybe you didn't go into the service, or you didn't go into that unit where martial arts became something that you valued and you wanted to hold onto, that your only experience was as a teenager, where it didn't really resonate for you, and you continued your life, and you no longer are Grandmaster Pellegrini. You're Mr. Pellegrini. What do you think would have been different about your life without the martial arts?

**John Pelligrini**

Um ... Oh my God. That is really good question, but it's a very profound one, too, because basically you are asking me to imagine what my life would have been like without the martial arts, and that is a very difficult question, because none of us can possibly think of what an alternate universe would be for us, but I'll try to answer it.

After about 20 years or so career in the law enforcement throughout which I was taking classes sporadically sometimes. I would go two, three times a week. Sometimes, I would not go for two months, depending on my workload and everything else. I start facing a little bit of a crossroad because I realized all of the sudden, it was like a revelation, that I enjoyed not just learning, but I was enjoying passing it along, and helping teaching classes at the school that I was attending, and people start coming up to me and saying, "You know, you're really doing a great job. You have personality, and you should consider teaching." It never crossed my mind until then. Never



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in the least I thought that I would one day do martial arts full time, and become a fairly famous martial artist. That never, never in a million years ever crossed my mind.

How my life would have been different, I would have continued with the career that I was doing. I was very stressed out. I used to smoke. It was a very stressful job. I don't know what would have happened to me, both physically, mentally, emotionally. The martial arts have totally changed my life. I opened up my first school while I was still working in my full-time job in 1985, and after two years, I had to make a decision. It was either doing the martial arts justice, or do my other career justice, because I was too stressed out to do both. After some reflection, I give up a very high-paying job, and I quit. I just went in there and I quit, and I decided to do martial arts full-time.

It was not an easy decision, I'll tell you. It was scary, actually, because of the loss of income, of steady income, but I felt that I had a passion, and I could do this. That was really the pivotal moment. That was truly the catalyst that changed my whole life. I worked very hard for that, but I became successful, and it took my life in a totally different direction. Through the martial arts, I also met my wife. Martial arts totally changed who I was as a person. Obviously, I quit smoking. I used to have a fairly hot temper, and that changed. I became more patient, more, you know, more mature, more sensitive to other people, more respectful of other people, less negative, much more positive, so it affected me in so many ways. And I don't know if I'm answering your question or not, but I have no idea what my life would have been like if I did not make the change, and became a full-time martial artist. I have no idea what would have become of me.

### **Jeremy Lesniak**

And that's kind of the beauty of this question, I guess. On the surface, this is really a terrible question because anyone that's been training for a long time struggles to answer it. They can't imagine what their life would be like without the martial arts. I'm the same way.

### **John Pelligrini**

You're absolutely right.

### **Jeremy Lesniak**

But everyone answers that question in a different way. None of them answer it the way I might call, the right way, because it's nearly impossible, but your answer tells us so much about you and the way that you look at the martial arts, and that's really the goal of asking you that question is to watch you wander through and come up with an answer, so thank you for indulging me with that.

### **John Pelligrini**



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You're welcome.

### **Jeremy Lesniak**

Now, let's come back to reality where you are you, and you have had all of your martial arts training, and I'd like you to think back over your life and tell us about a point that was particularly challenging, and how your experience in the martial arts allowed you to overcome it.

### **John Pelligrini**

Initially, like, I think, most people getting into the martial arts, I look at the physical aspect, and I'm 5'11", and my average weight always was around 160, 155-160, so I've always felt that a bigger person would always have the best of me, and I will never be really good at the martial arts, because I felt to be, you had to be able to punch a brick wall and jump 30 feet up in the air. I was never very athletic. I was never really into sports. I was not particularly coordinated, and I was basically a person with a small frame. The most challenging part was to realize that I could do it, and that I would do it, and my size would have nothing to do with it, and I could overcome being a little bit uncoordinated, I could overcome flexibility issues, I could overcome all these things and actually become very good, and very coordinated, and fairly athletic, and be able to kick and punch and do all the things that martial artists are expected to do.

So, to me, the hardest part was to really overcome the insecurity that I had concerning my own body and the things that I could do with my body. You know, if you are a football player, or you've been in sports all your life, and you're very athletic, or maybe you've done gymnastics or something, you go into the martial arts already, I think, with an advantage. You go in there, you know, a little more confident because you know your athletic ability. I had nothing of that, of the kind, so for me, the challenge was to learn how to accept myself, and realize that I could do those things and be good at it. When I started feeling that confidence, truly it was life-changing.

### **Jeremy Lesniak**

What might you recommend to someone else that maybe was starting in the martial arts, and feeling some of those same sensitivities, someone smaller? I'm smaller than you are, and I can relate to what you're saying, but let's say someone was brand new. They had just put on a white belt. What might you tell them about feeling insecure in that way?

### **John Pelligrini**

I use myself as an example. I look at them and I say to them ... You know, I got to use a little sense of humor here, not take yourself too seriously, so I tell them, I say, "Look. Look at me. If I could do it, you can do it. It's that simple." That's what I would tell them, and that's what I have told many people over the years. They come to me, I use example, real life examples. If I have an older woman come into our organization and say, "I would like to learn, but I think I'm too



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old," that's what we get many times. Then I tell them, "Well, we just graduated a 73-year-old lady to black belt last month." We have people in wheelchair coming to us and say, "Oh, I would like to do this, but I can't." I say, "Why can't you?" They say, "Well, my legs." "Okay, so don't kick. Just use your hands. You can do it." And we have people in wheelchair doing the martial arts.

So, regardless if the person is young or old, skinny or fat, if they have good abilities or not, everybody, everybody, and I mean this literally, virtually everybody can do the martial arts, because there are so many styles, and can be adapted. So, you know, you want to do Taekwondo, maybe if you are in a wheelchair, maybe that's not the best start for you, but you can certainly do Jujitsu, you can certainly do Hapkido, you can certainly do other arts. So, you work around your limitations if you have any. Some are self-imposed limitations and you can overcome them. Others are real. I mean, if somebody has no legs, they can't kick, so, you know, we cannot be hypocritical about it. That person, he really should not do a kicking art, but they can do an art that involves a lot of hand techniques, pressure points, striking, joint locking.

So, you know, the martial arts are open to everyone. If a person thinks, "Oh, I just started. I don't know if I can do it," it's because they are imposing their own limitations, and someone like me can help sometimes by using a little humor, and challenging them, and say, "Listen, I could do it, and I was uncoordinated. I'm a small guy. I'm a skinny guy. You can certainly do it. Don't worry about it." You know, you phrase it in a positive manner, in my opinion, with a little bit of humor thrown into it, people respond very well to that. Like I always say, let's not take ourselves too seriously. You know, we are all human, and we all can share into the same things, but no two people will do them exactly the same. You know, I will never be Bruce Lee. You know, there was only one Bruce Lee. I tell that to people, too, when they start. I say, "Maybe you'll never be Bruce Lee or Chuck Norris, but you can still learn and have fun, and it will change your life."

### **Jeremy Lesniak**

Yeah. Yeah. Very well said, and thank you, and I think that there's a couple motivational posters in there that people may want to break quotes out of. I certainly took some notes. You might see some of those on our social media, guys. Now, as you've traveled, you mentioned towards the beginning that you've had the opportunity to train with some pretty incredible people. If you had to pick out someone other than your immediate instructors, the people that you've trained with for a real period of time, who would you say was the most influential on your martial arts?

### **John Pelligrini**

Outside of my instructor, who is celebrating his 50 years as a black belt in Korea, as a matter of fact, next year, he is a wonderful individual. His name is Grandmaster In Sun Seo, and he is an incredible martial artist, and incredible human being. So, if I do not count him in my answer, I would have to go back to someone I've already mentioned to you during the interview. I think Professor Wally Jay was one of the people that really inspired me. Let's use that word because I think it's a great word. He gave me a lot of inspiration, encouragement, and I respect him so





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much, but there were others, too. The late Professor Remy Presas was also a friend of mine, and an incredible, incredible human being. They were always so open-minded.

One thing that I admired, I want you to understand that in my answer, one thing that I admired, it's not just the technique. Somebody can be really good. Somebody can be a phenomenal technician, a phenomenal martial artist, and still be a jerk, believe it or not. These were people, however, that were phenomenal martial artists, but they were also incredibly humble, accessible, and truly inspired people with their kindness, their friendship, their encouragement, and their generosity, because they freely shared their knowledge without really asking for anything in return. Amazing, amazing people.

### **Jeremy Lesniak**

When I think about the people that we put, and certainly those people that you named are in this group, those people at the top of the martial arts, and I've been lucky enough to meet some of them. Some of them have been on this show. They all share that quality that you're talking about, that openness, that willingness to learn, and to share what they know, and I think that there is something pretty special about that, and I don't think it's an accident.

### **John Pelligrini**

No. No. It's not an accident at all, because in a very modest and humble way, I want to tell you that I find myself in the same position now. Now that I spent over 40 years, that I've reached the top of the hierarchy, I share my knowledge with people freely. I attend other people's events. I try to be as humble and accessible as humanly possible, because I realize that I was blessed. I was so fortunate to find myself at the right place at the right time. I was so fortunate to take the fork in the road that one time in my life that allowed me now to be who I am, that all I want to do is to share it with other people. All I want to do is to give something back to the community. I mean specifically to the martial arts community. I want to encourage other people, younger people, or older people for that matter, to get into the martial arts, to achieve the benefits that it has to offer. So, you know, these people that you mention and that I mention are that way because, really, the martial arts make us that way. We feel that we have been very fortunate, and it is incumbent upon us to share and to give something back.

### **Jeremy Lesniak**

And I'd encourage people to roll the "tape" back about 30 seconds and listen to that again, because that's a pretty powerful sentiment. Now, let's talk about competition. You mentioned early on that you have some experience with martial arts competition?

### **John Pelligrini**

Yes.



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## **Jeremy Lesniak**

Could you tell us about that?

## **John Pelligrini**

Yeah, and it was not a lot to brag about actually. I opened up my first school in 1985, and I opened up my second school in 1987. This was in Florida, and basically being initially only a Taekwondo school, we attended a lot of Taekwondo tournaments, probably once a month minimum. I took students with me, and I also competed myself. I won't lie. I would love, absolutely would love to tell you how many trophies I won, how many medals, how many championships. Unfortunately, the sad truth here, I wasn't that good. It was never really my passion, and I did it because it was part of the pageantry of the art. It was part ... Everybody in Taekwondo went to tournaments, and as a school, I had to participate. I got to tell you, deep down inside, it was never a passion for me. It was never what I wanted to do, and therefore I was never that good at it. I was never gifted.

Then, listen, there was another aspect to it. Now, I know it's going to be a little controversial, what I'm going to say, but there was a lot of egos, a lot of cheating at tournaments, with judging going to the students, the judge belonging to the same school of the students, and favoring their students, a lot of bad calls by referees, there was a lot of politics and a lot of, you know, games being played, and I was not interested with that part of the art. The kids, they saw what was going on. Some of them felt cheated. They went back home, and they didn't want to go back to class, they dropped out, so there was a negative aspect to the competition part. After several years of that, I decided basically to stop, and I stopped competing, and I stopped taking my students to competition. I didn't forbid it. If any of them wanted to go on a weekend, wanted to attend a tournament, well, God bless them. I did not encourage it, but if they went, they were free to go. I just decided I did not want to be part of that anymore, and that was my choice.

## **Jeremy Lesniak**

You know, we've talked a lot on this show about competition, about all of the positive aspects of it, but I'm realizing as you were talking that we really haven't talked much about the negative aspects.

## **John Pelligrini**

Sure, because most people ... I'm sorry, but most people don't want to talk about ... Nobody wants to talk about the negatives. Everybody always wants to be positive, and I understand that, but, you know, there is a dark side. There is a negative side to the competition, and I think also that exists in the big ones like the UFC and the MMA, and I think there is a dark side to it that honest people need to address.



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## **Jeremy Lesniak**

I agree. I agree, and without digging too much into the specifics of what you're talking about, because we don't want to offend anyone in particular, but there's one piece that I do want to pull out that I had never considered, and that's how an unpleasant competition experience for someone, especially a younger rank or a younger student, can actually pull them out of the martial arts. It can be so negative that they choose to leave.

## **John Pelligrini**

You are so right, and I'll tell you for personal experience, okay? This is not fanciful. This is not making it up. This is personal experience. If I would take 20 students - mostly youngsters, by the way - to a tournament on a Saturday, then Monday in class, three or four will never show up again. This happened. This happened every single tournament I went to. Even if we brought back several trophies, some kids will be super excited and happy because those are the ones that won. The ones that didn't win, or felt cheated by the decisions of the judges, they got so beaten about it, so disappointed, just some of them, not all of them, but some of them never came back to class. What a terrible loss.

## **Jeremy Lesnia**

Right, so if I could bounce this off of you, it might sound like you would say there's a minimum standard for quality, for maintaining that the judges are objective, for making sure everyone ... Obviously, everyone can't win, but everyone can have a positive experience. That you would say that if an event is not going to maintain that level of integrity, that we're actually doing our entire industry a disservice.

## **John Pelligrini**

That's because we're simply human, and, you know, just because somebody's a judge in a tournament, that doesn't take the person and transform them into a super objective and fair human being all of the sudden. We all have our own passion, our likes and dislikes, our preference, and it's not easy to maintain the level of fairness, and I don't know if it could ever be achieved. That happens, by the way, outside of the martial arts, too. Looking in the legal system, you know, the fairness of the legal system. Sometimes the guilty goes free, and sometimes the innocent gets convicted in a court of law, so we cannot expect people judging the forms at a tournament to be totally unbiased. Maybe they don't like the form. Maybe they don't like the uniform the kid is wearing. Maybe they don't like the haircut.

You know, things happen. We're human, and that's why, you know, I don't ... I have nothing against competition. If people like it, it's a wonderful thing. I just chose not to be part of it anymore. I shifted the focus of our schools and our students in a different direction. So, I don't



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want to be critical of other people doing it, and there are certainly some great positive aspects to competition, too. I'm just saying that it was not really the direction that I wanted to go.

### **Jeremy Lesniak**

And you're not the only one. We've had guests on the show who have ... They entered one event as a child, and realized very quickly, "This is not for me." One of the things I love about the martial arts is not only are there so many different styles of martial arts, but there are so many different ways to engage with the martial arts, to practice, you know, competitions and not, seminars, and there's something there for everyone, as you certainly know, as all of our listeners certainly know.

### **John Pelligrini**

Yes, you're absolutely right, and like I said before, maybe all you want to do is improve your health because maybe you are of advanced age and you want to take some Tai Chi classes, or like you say, you want to become an MMA champion. There is something for everyone, and we need to respect as long as the motives and the intentions and the actions of the person are proper, then we cannot criticize which aspect they choose to pursue in the martial arts. You know, as long as a person acts in a proper manner, in an ethical manner, we cannot judge why they take martial arts, or which style they prefer, or which aspect of the martial arts they want to engage. It's up to them. It's up to the individual. It's the character that counts, and how the person basically conduct himself or herself in the conduct of their activity. You know, that's the only thing that really counts.

### **Jeremy Lesniak**

I agree. Now, if we go back and we make a long list of all the people that you've had the opportunity to train with, I mean, some amazing names that you've already just given us, but if we take a look at those names, and we put them aside, and we take all the wonderful martial artists left that you haven't trained with, who would you want to train with? Let's even open it up to people that have passed on.

### **John Pelligrini**

Well, the first thing that comes to mind to probably every single martial artist on the planet is probably Bruce Lee. It is really strange that I was in California in the late 60s and early 70s, and I might have had an opportunity to stop by the school in Chinatown, but I never did. You know, it could have been that incredible magical moment in my life but it never happened.

The other one that comes to mind is Grandmaster Ed Parker. I read so much about him. I saw him in films and other documentaries and stuff, and I have a tremendous amount of respect for who he was and the style that he was teaching. A phenomenal martial artist, so I would have



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loved to have met him, and even briefly for a seminar or something, it would have been fantastic for me

There are probably others, but I don't want to disrespect anybody in a sense by omitting, but those two truly come to mind as being people that I would have absolutely loved to have met.

**Jeremy Lesniak**

Those are great names, and Ed Parker is one that doesn't get named on this show very often, which has always surprised me

**John Pelligrini**

Really?

**Jeremy Lesniak**

Yeah.

**John Pelligrini**

It's incredible because I am good friends with Grandmaster Jeff Speakman. As you know, he was a student of Ed Parker, and become a fairly successful actor also with some brilliant action movies to his credit, and we talked about that, too, and how Kenpo has branched out in many different styles, like many other martial arts, but I think that we need to give more credit to Ed Parker for basically popularizing the system, and really creating a great, a great group of phenomenal martial artists. He was a really wonderful human being, and he needs to get more credit. I agree with you.

**Jeremy Lesniak**

Yeah, and it might take us putting together an episode on him. Sometimes we do some features on martial arts actors or other subjects of prominence in the martial arts, so maybe we'll do one on Ed Parker and we can tell everybody how great he was, because he certainly was great.

**John Pelligrini**

Yup.

**Jeremy Lesniak**

Now you mentioned a couple ... I mean, actually you mentioned three people that have been in movies and have some notoriety for movies. Are you at all a fan of martial arts film?



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## **John Pelligrini**

Absolutely. Even the absolutely horrible ones of the 1970s where the voice never matches the face, and people flying up in the air and do seven somersaults. They were ridiculous. You remember Kung Fu movies of Sunday afternoon on TV? I mean, they were phenomenal. They were so ridiculous, and yet we loved them. But, yes, but I got to tell you something. There has been also some very good martial arts movie. Not all of them were, you know, kind of ridiculous, and if you look at some of the stuff that Bruce Lee did, obviously that comes to mind, they were great movie, and to me, actually, the greatest martial arts movie of all time, I have to tell you, was The Karate Kid.

The very first Karate Kid movie, I think, changed the way Americans looked at the martial arts. It was so inspirational, and at that time, I tell you, I had the school in Florida, and right after the movie came out, the phone did not stop ringing. So many parents, they actually saw something different. They probably thought the martial arts was violent, it was about fighting and beating each other up. All of the sudden, they saw something with a lot of moral and ethical lessons, and they ... I think the character, Miyagi, of course, in the movie, he was so ... Such an inspirational character that he really made a lot of people see martial arts in a totally different light.

That was my favorite of all time, but there has been many others. Enter the Dragon, of course, was probably the best martial arts movie ever made, and there are many others. Yes, I am a fan. I am a fan of martial arts movies, the good, the bad, and the ugly.

## **Jeremy Lesniak**

Yeah. Yeah, there ... You know, just like with martial arts styles, they all seem to have value. Well, almost all of them. I've seen some that are pretty bad that I wouldn't watch again, but there's usually at least a couple good moments in there that make it worth your time. We just did, a few weeks ago, a whole episode talking about The Karate Kid, and digging into some of the pieces of that movie that most people don't know. I did a lot of research for it, and that's fun if people want to go check that out, but did you know about Fumio Demura's involvement in that movie?

## **John Pelligrini**

No. I was not aware, but I recently read about it, and I met Professor Demura a couple of times. He's a phenomenal martial artist, obviously, and I also had the pleasure of meeting Pat Morita, the actor in the movie. It's amazing, most people don't know that Pat never did martial arts, but he did such a great job in the movie, and now we finally found out why.

## **Jeremy Lesniak**



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Yeah. Yeah, there's some fun stuff, and I'll share this bit with you. As I was doing the research, the piece that stuck out with me the most was, if you remember in that movie, the scene where Miyagi is fighting on Halloween with all the boys wearing the skeleton costumes?

**John Pelligrini**

Yeah. Yes.

**Jeremy Lesniak**

They had to keep restarting that scene. They had to keep filming it through a lot of takes because Demura was hitting them so hard that it was throwing them all off, that they couldn't continue, they would get out of place or something, and they complained to the director that he was hitting them too hard, and of course, anyone who knows anything about Fumio Demura, knows that he's not going to cheapen what he is doing. He's going to make it as real as he can.

**John Pelligrini**

Of course.

**Jeremy Lesniak**

So, he told the director, "If you let me put my students in the costumes, we will get it right in the first try." So they gave it a shot, and they did, first take, they got that scene right with his students.

**John Pelligrini**

Excellent. That's a...

**Jeremy Lesniak**

I thought that was fun.

**John Pelligrini**

Yeah, that's an interesting story. I was not aware of it, but that was a phenomenal scene because when he comes over the wall to protect what's-his-name ...

**Jeremy Lesniak**

Daniel.



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### **John Pelligrini**

Ralph ... Yeah, Daniel-san, right? To protect him, and the fight scene is excellent. It's absolutely realistic and excellent without going overboard. I mean, and I think the movie was just absolutely the greatest.

### **Jeremy Lesniak**

If it's not my favorite, it's definitely in my Top 3. I have a hard time picking favorites because it changes depending on my mood and how I'm feeling and where I'm at with my training at that point.

### **John Pelligrini**

Oh, you're absolutely right about that, too, but, you know, if you look at some of the movies today with, let's go with Jet Li, and certainly with some of the modern actors, Jackie Chan and others come to mind. I mean, the movies are so much better in quality, and the special effects, and the stunts, and everything. They're getting better and better. However, I would like to express my opinion. The moral messages that we got from the other movies, maybe from the 1980s, I think that they cannot be forgotten. We may have better technology, but the message of The Karate Kid, for instance, and a few others, really are, in my opinion, timeless.

### **Jeremy Lesniak**

I think the best movies tell a story. You can't short-change story telling for the sake of computer graphics.

### **John Pelligrini**

I agree.

### **Jeremy Lesniak**

Yeah. So, of those movies that we talked about, or maybe some others, is there a particular martial arts actor that you like the most?

### **John Pelligrini**

Oh, well, I'm actually friends with some of them, with, like I said, Jeff Speakman, Cynthia Rothrock, so I like them all, and, you know, if you look at comedy and acrobatics, I think no one can even come close to Jackie Chan. The entertainment value of his movies, they are funny, and the kind of improvised weapons and the fight scenes are just incredible, so I would say he's one of my favorite, but not because of who he is, but what he puts on the screen, you know? I





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never met Jackie Chan, so I don't know his personality or his character. I just can tell you, you know, from an entertainment value, he's phenomenal.

I think Jet Li is an incredible martial artist. Very realistic, very serious martial artist. And there are others, you know. There is ... Recently, there has been a series of movies with portraying the life of Yip Man, which of course was the ... Bruce Lee's teacher. I don't remember the name of the actor, but the guy is absolutely phenomenal. So, I have many favorite ones, probably not one in particular. I like many of them.

**Jeremy Lesniak**

I think the one you meant at the end was Donnie Yen?

**John Pelligrini**

Yes. That's the name. I think he's a fantastic actor, and I hope he continues to do movies, because he portrays the martial arts in a very, very positive and inspirational way. I really like him.

**Jeremy Lesniak**

He's one of my favorites, too, and he's just so incredible, and there are quite a few projects he's working on, at least at the moment, based on what I've seen, so I think we've got at least a few more movies with him.

**John Pelligrini**

Great. Great. I look forward.

**Jeremy Lesniak**

Now, how about books? Are you at all a reader?

**John Pelligrini**

Yes, sir. I'm an avid reader, and probably I read 80% of the martial arts books on the market. I used to buy them back in the 70s. Actually, there was a company called Unique Publications, and then of course there was Black Belt Publication, another, O'Hare, that was the other company, and they were putting out books on the martial arts by the dozen. I used to be a little bit of a maniac, buying every one of them and reading every one of them. Up to this day when some new martial art book come around, and it's a good book, or I know the author, or I'm interested in the style or the subject or whatever, I will go ahead and buy them and read them. I have three books myself on the market, my own books. One was done by Black Belt Magazine,



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and it's an excellent book. It's been a best-seller for a while, so I enjoy both reading and writing books. That's one of my passions, actually.

### **Jeremy Lesniak**

What are the names of the three books that you've written, so if folks are interested, they can check them out?

### **John Pelligrini**

Oh, okay. Well, the one published by Black Belt Magazine is called *Combat Hapkido: The Art of the Modern Warrior*, and it's available, I think, even on Amazon and everywhere. Then there is one published by Budo International in Europe, and it's called *Combat Hapkido: Intelligent Self Defense*. And then there is one that was self-published called *Legacy: The Journey of a Martial Arts Pioneer*, and it's basically a biography that my wife put together, and it's a really great book. Hundreds and hundreds of pictures of all kinds of martial artists from all over the world, so it's a very interesting book, too. It's not a book about techniques.

If you're going to ask me what's my favorite martial arts book of all times, I can tell you, because again, it's probably the same for 80% of martial artist, and it's *The Tao of Jeet Kune Do* by Bruce Lee. I think the book is fantastic, full of insight, full of not just technical knowledge, but also full of wisdom, and it is amazing that such a young man could write something so profound and so interesting. It just amazes me.

### **Jeremy Lesniak**

Yeah, it's an incredible book, and you're right, it's one that gets referenced quite a bit on our show. For listeners, we're going to have links to those three books that Grandmaster Pellegrini has written over on the show notes, [WhistlekickMartialArtsRadio.com](http://WhistlekickMartialArtsRadio.com) for anyone that might be new to the show, so you can check that out, and ...

### **John Pelligrini**

Thank you.

### **Jeremy Lesniak**

... buy the books, and support Grandmaster Pellegrini, and do that, maybe he'll write a fourth book.

### **Female Speaker**

He said so you can write a fourth book.



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### **Jeremy Lesniak**

So, I know that you're traveling, and you're giving seminars, and...

### **John Pelligrini**

Yes.

### **Jeremy Lesniak**

... talking to people like us from time to time, but what else are you up to? Do you have anything that you're working towards? I'm sure that you're still training, but do you have any goals for the future?

### **John Pelligrini**

Well, I think that a good martial artist should always have goals for the future. You know, we stop learning the day that we die. That is my philosophy. You never stop learning, and you also should never stop contributing to the field, to the endeavor that you have chosen, regardless of what it is. Music, any kind of human endeavor, if you become part of it, if you become a prominent figure, you should continue to contribute, you should continue to produce, never really rest on your laurels and say, "Okay, you know, I have reached the top. I have accomplished everything I want to accomplish. I'm done." There is no such a thing.

I start new projects all the time. I think of new products that I want to develop, meaning, you know, mostly educational, probably like DVDs and books. I'm in the process of writing another book, and my wife is helping me with that, and one of the things that I realized is that she's been by my side all these years building my organization and our business. We are in 20 countries around the world with about 200 affiliate schools. You know, we do seminars all over the world, and I realized that she has always taken the backstage in this, and now we have started a new project where she is going to start doing seminars on her own, and she has developed a whole program of women's self-defense that goes beyond just the techniques, but is also very motivational for women that have been abused, women that have suffered trauma, and women that have been, you know, in ... Let's say treated with ... Exposed to violence and other unpleasant situations, so she's doing a lot of work that's now her way of giving back and starting something new and to contribute to the industry, so we're working on that project.

I continue traveling the world and doing seminars, too, and promoting our system. We have a couple of new DVDs that we are working on, so we got some stuff that we will release in the next, you know, couple of years, and we're working on projects, but I'll tell you, it's never over. The way I look at life is that as long as I have breath in me, I will continue doing what I do. I



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always look at life as if, you know, I have many, many more years ahead of me to make a contribution. I don't want to stop, and, yeah, I think I feel that a little bit like it's my mission, it's my responsibility, because I've been so fortunate, to give back and to continue reaching out to as many people as possible.

### **Jeremy Lesniak**

And we're all very fortunate that you feel that way, and thank you, certainly. I haven't had the opportunity to take one of your seminars yet, but it is on my short list. To that end, if someone wants to find out where you're teaching, or if they want to schedule you, to bring you in for a seminar, how would they go about getting a hold of you?

### **John Pelligrini**

Well, we have a website, a quite extensive website, which has, by the way, a button that you can click on, Seminars, and I am booked and my wife to basically a year in advance, so they can see now where I'm going to be seven, eight, nine, ten months from now, and all they have to do is click on it, and they are open to everyone, not just people of our system. Everyone is welcome, including non-martial artists. We make them feel comfortable if they're not into the martial arts because we do most of our seminars without wearing a martial arts uniform, and we deal them in mostly self-defense. Of course, they are about our system, Combat Hapkido, but we welcome everyone, different styles, all ages, men and women, and they can come and have a good time and learn about our system. So, that's the place. The website is called [www.dsihq.com](http://www.dsihq.com). DSI is our corporate entity. It means Defensive Services International, DSI, HQ, Headquarter, but the style is Combat Hapkido. We also have a store online called [www.combathapkido.com](http://www.combathapkido.com), and people can go there and buy things, and look at our products, our DVDs, you know, all kinds of stuff. So, we are very active in the martial arts community. We are very active in events. We attend Hall of Fame events, and also we are very active in we want to continue reaching out to people.

### **Jeremy Lesniak**

Great. Great, and I hope you continue to do that. I know that I've heard so many positive things about Combat Hapkido and your contributions.

### **John Pelligrini**

Well, thank you.

### **Jeremy Lesniak**



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You know, really looking forward to connecting with you at some point and learning from you directly, but as we wind down the show here, we always like to part on the highest of notes. If you had some final words of advice for the people that are listening, what would you tell them?

### **John Pelligrini**

Well, what I would tell martial artists is never give up. Basically, that is. In life there are adversity. We have periods of good economy and bad economy. We have times of trouble, with terrorism, and with crime, and riots, and stuff like that. It happens that in our lives we have health and we have sickness, we have good times and we have bad times. If there is one lesson to be taken from the martial artist it is never give up. There is always tomorrow. We have to show strength, not just physical, but spiritual and mental. We have to be strong and never give up, even in the face of adversity.

And to non-martial artists, my words of wisdom would be what are you waiting for? Join us. Become a martial artist. It will make for a better and a safer society. There is nothing negative about what we do. It's all positive, both the self-defense aspect, the emotional, the character building, the respect that we show, the contributions that we make to society, it's all positive. There is nothing bad about it, so I would like to see instead of 3% of the population doing martial arts, I would like to see 95% of the population doing martial arts. That is really what I would like to say to people. Don't give up.

### **Jeremy Lesniak**

Thank you for listening to episode 72 of Whistlekick Martial Arts Radio, and thank you to Grandmaster Pellegrini. Head on over to [WhistlekickMartialArtsRadio.com](http://WhistlekickMartialArtsRadio.com) for the show notes, including an introductory video to Combat Hapkido, links to the books he's written, and so much more.

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### **John Pelligrini**



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One little thing I want to say, too many “Grandmasters” have lost the ability to laugh at themselves. They wind up taking themselves a little bit too seriously. We need to remember who we are. We are human. Just because we have a title, just because we have a rank, that doesn't make us any special. We just achieved a certain level of expertise in a particular field. But other than that, we're just like everybody else, and we need to learn how to laugh at ourself and how to not take ourself too seriously.