



Episode 309 – Handling Risky Students | [whistlekickMartialArtsRadio.com](http://whistlekickMartialArtsRadio.com)



**Jeremy Lesniak:**

How's it going everybody, welcome! This is whistlekick martial arts radio episode 409. Today, were talking about handling risky students. My name is Jeremy Lesniak your host for the show, the founder whistlekick and I love the martial arts. It's probably my favorite thing and that's when we do the show, I come to you twice a week Mondays we bring an interview, Thursdays, we bring you some kind of topic episode like this one and we do it all for free. Then you can find this and every other episode at [whistlekickmartialartsradio.com](http://whistlekickmartialartsradio.com) along with show notes, photos, and a whole bunch more. Of course if it's easier for you, you can also find a show on YouTube, you can find it in pretty much any podcast player you could imagine and we even do transcripts of many of these episodes. In fact all the episodes are getting transcribed and we're even going back and doing some of the earlier ones, all the earlier ones ultimately as transcripts. We got a lot more than simply martial arts radio, you can find everything that we do at [whistlekick.com](http://whistlekick.com). And if you check out the store over there, you can get 15% off by using the code `podcast15`. So we somebody write in and they were curious on my take of how an instructor, how a school might handle risky students.

So let's talk about that, what's risky student? So I'm using that word risky, we could also throw in a bunch of other words, sketchy, dangerous. And were to start with a bit of an extreme example someone with a known criminal record. Now of course there are nonviolent criminals and there are violent criminals and we could talk about handling the two of them differently. But let's stay at the a bit of the more extreme example. Let's talk about someone who is convicted for a violent crime and for purposes



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of exercise, let's make something not over the top, now let's roll it back a little bit because if we get too extreme with this, I might have some people to kinda shut down. So let's not talk about someone is convicted of murder, let's talk about someone who is convicted of simple assault and I'm not using the term simple to trivialize anything, simply to state, there's that word again, that there are degrees and simple assault is one of them. When you look at this from the perspective of a martial arts school owner, the responsibility of the school owner is the student's progress and safety. We've talked about that first is safety, secondly is progress. I don't care how much better your students are getting if they're not safe you're doing it wrong. I don't mean safety in terms of not getting bruised or banged up, I mean safety in terms of major injury and selecting appropriate drills for appropriate level and not telling a large adult male to go full contact with a small 12-year-old, that's safety. But we also have a legal responsibility, as an instructor you have to demonstrate that you have the best interest of your students at heart, in practice, a hundred percent of the time. It can be exhausting. If you've run a school you know that trying to manage all the different personalities, everyone's different desires for growth and rate of growth within the martial arts, it can be a challenge. So throwing into the mix someone who has screwed up in the past and done so in a violent way that could put people at risk, there's something to be considered there.

Now there are only two ways you're going to find out about this the first is, the student, the potential student is going to come to you and say hey I think you should know I was convicted of this crime but I'm sorry I regret it, I'll never do it again, and I want to get better at life so I'm interested in coming to train in martial arts with you. That person is probably not someone you have to worry about. What I would suggest in that case, is you do some private lessons because if you've been training long enough, you can start to sense when people are reacting poorly to physical contact. Most of us to train with someone who doesn't do well with getting hit, so to take someone through a handful of private lessons and give them a little bit of contact. You're going to know probably everything you need to know about how they'll respond in class. You can look forward in their eyes, you can see how much they tense up and if they handle that, if they seem to shake it off fine then you're probably safe to put into the class. And in that case I wouldn't say anything to anyone. I would just invite them in the class, they would join regular classes and you could maybe supervise a bit more than you would otherwise. If you have an assistant instructor you might follow along a little bit more with them. You might make sure they know what's going on and that they're understanding of this person's personality in their past.

But what you do if you don't get a heads up? What is this person comes in the class, what if they've been there for a couple weeks and then you hear about it. What if somebody finds out and then rumors are circulating or somebody comes to you and says you know, I know this person. They did XYZ. I'm not comfortable having them in class. In that case, you probably already have some context for how they are handling their training. Because if you bring a new student in the class you should be doing a good job of observing them because what is the most risk in bringing a student in, it's messing up the culture, their personality, the vibe of those classes and of course new students need attention. So between you and your assistant instructors you should have a good idea of how that person's reacting already and it



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doesn't mean that this new information doesn't change things, but you should have some context for how to handle this new information. But what if that person maybe does have a little bit of a challenge with physical contact. What if there are some hints that maybe things could go awry. Well you've got to remember, your responsibility first is to safety. And your responsibility is to the safety of the many over the few. You're not there for that one person. If you want to be there for that one person, they should be in a private class. You're there for everyone and sometimes as an instructor, as a school owner, you need to make difficult decisions. You make difficult decisions every day. I'll guess that the majority of you out there who teach in any given class, do something maybe even all of the things in a class that your students are not so fond of. Maybe they didn't want to do that drill, maybe they want to go that hard, maybe they want to break, they want water, does it matter? Your job is to facilitate growth as a martial artist among the students. And while group settings work well for most people, they're not the appropriate setting for everyone. If someone is a risk to your students, they may not belong in that class now of course there's a difference between, you know the person who maybe hits a little too hard with their control could use a little bit work and someone who is genuinely threatening. And you'll know what that person is threatening because you'll see the way others are acting around them. In fact, if you're not careful you'll see attendance drop off people may come less because they are scared of this person and that's when you need to take immediate action. If that happens it's time to pull that person out of group classes and give them unfortunately, a bit of an ultimatum. The class is not reacting well to you being there. We have to either figure out how you can alter your behavior, so the class can be comfortable with your presence or I need to work with you individually. We need to have private lessons with you. Now that doesn't mean those private lessons are indefinite, maybe you can help this person work through some of their challenges and bring them back in the class.

What about something that's a little bit less extreme? What if that person hasn't been convicted of a crime, but people around them are feeling you know a bad vibe, the person's kinda creepy and people feel threatened though they can't put their finger on why. Well, I go back to what is the role of instructor, it's to foster growth in the martial arts. People are more tolerant of others around them if they're being creepy or giving off bad vibes when their seeing progress. If there's someone in your school who always hits too hard, but they're getting better at it people are going to be more accepting of that because they see that they're working on it. We can all identify with people who are having challenges with various things but everyone roots for the people who were trying to make progress. We like an underdog. When we watch sports we see the person who is struggling but trying. People don't to root for the person who struggling without showing effort. And the same thing holds true with the students in martial arts classes. If someone makes too much contact or someone has poor control or just gives off bad vibes, but they seem to be doing a better job of integrating into the class then sometimes that can work. Sometimes the class can be accepting of it. Occasionally you have to reach out to individuals, people who seem to have a little bit more of the culture of the class on their shoulders than others. There are always people like this in every group, there are some people who set the tone for a group as an instructor, you are the most important one but you're not the only one. So to have one-on-



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one conversations with people who are part of the school and get their perspective and maybe share yours might be important.

It's important that in these some of these less extreme examples that you identify, where the problems are based in action or the problems are based in personality conflict? I've trained with plenty of people that I told like that I don't want my dinner table. Many of them have been great training partners they've challenged me, they're made me better and that's great. I thank them for that. But there have also been others because of that personality conflict create risk. They intentionally go a little harder, they intentionally relax their control, and that's where injury can become a problem. And as an instructor when you see that or when you hear about that, it's important that you take action. One of the most frustrating things for student is to feel dismissed by an instructor. Now maybe you have your reasons, maybe there are things going on that you know about that the students having a conflict with this troublesome person don't know about. Maybe you can't tell them but maybe you can tell them that there's more going on than they realize and this person deserve some compassion. At the end of the day you have to handle is the way that feels best. You have to trust your gut you have to remember that your job is to foster that growth among your students and not just one, but all of them and unfortunately sometimes, telling someone that they are not in the right mindset, the right place in their life to train in your school is something that you have to do it's incredibly painful when you have to do it. There's no magic wand, there's no eight ball that tells you what the right decisions are and being a martial arts instructor, especially a school owner, can be really challenging it can be heartbreaking because sometimes you don't know the right decision to make. If there was only a roadmap it would be easy and that everyone could do it, but then it wouldn't be martial arts now would it?

Now full disclosure I've never had to deal with the extreme examples that I gave here, I've handled personality conflict, I've been the instructor in that case, I've been the school owner, I've been the student and I won't say that I've gotten great at handling those situations but have gotten pretty good. I would love to hear from people even if it's privately, if you've had students come in that have had a criminal record. People who are known to be violent and I want to know how you handled it. We might do a follow-up to this episode if I get enough feedback, if you send me some kind of message be it email or otherwise, you know social media, direct message, I won't use names unless you give me permission. In fact, our default is to not use names when we reuse someone's words unless they give us explicit permission. So please don't be afraid of that. I'm just looking for some more context to respond to this listener inquiry. If you have comments or willing to share publicly, I would love for you do those over at the show notes page [whistlekickmartialartsradio.com](http://whistlekickmartialartsradio.com) this is episode 409. If you want to follow us on social media were @whistlekick all over the place and don't forget the code `podcast15` to get yourself 15% off every single thing at [whistlekick.com](http://whistlekick.com). Whether you are making a purchase, sharing this or another episode, leaving a review on Google or Facebook or Apple podcasts, or anywhere else, we appreciate that. If you want to email me directly [jeremy@whistlekick.com](mailto:jeremy@whistlekick.com) for any reason. I've been getting a lot of really positive supportive messages lately, and those have meant the world to me,



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they've been really helpful. Knowing that what I do, what we do matters all of you, it's the best feeling in the world. Until next time. Train hard, smile and have a great day.