



Episode 416 – Kru Christopher Ballard | [whistlekickMartialArtsRadio.com](http://whistlekickMartialArtsRadio.com)



### Jeremy Lesniak:

Hello, everyone, welcome! This is whistlekick martial arts radio episode 416 and today, my guest is Kru Christopher Ballard. My name is Jeremy Lesniak, your host on this show, founder of whistlekick, martial artist at large, oh, I just made that up. I should put that on my business card. I love the martial arts! I love everything about it. I love the people I get to meet. I love the training. I love the way it makes me better physically, mentally, in short, it's just awesome and that's why I dedicated my life to advancing the martial arts through whistlekick. If you want to find out more about what we're doing to move the martial arts forward to help it gain its rightful place at the top of the pursuit/hobby/sport pyramid, I don't know if it's pyramid, but it's a good enough analogy as any, right? You can head on over to [whistlekick.com](http://whistlekick.com). You're going to find a whole bunch of stuff over there. You're going to find the products that we make and you can use the code `PODCAST15` to save 15% on any of them. You'll find links to other projects that we're involved in. You'll find a blog. You'll find links to our social media. You'll find the sign up to our newsletter that we send out like a couple times a month just to keep you up to date on what's going on, maybe drop a discount in there. There's some original content that goes out on that newsletter and if you head to [whistlekickmartialartsradio.com](http://whistlekickmartialartsradio.com), you're going to find show notes for this and every other episode of the show. Transcripts, videos, photos, links, we have everything arranged chronologically as well as by style, by location so if you want to dig in and maybe find some episodes that you have missed or want to find out who's close to you, you can do that right there but let's talk about today's guest. If you've been listening for more than a little while, you know that I live in



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Vermont. Whistlekick is based on Vermont. I've been here since college and it's a great place but there aren't a whole lot of people and so, when you start to dig into the martial arts in Vermont, it's kind of a small group. There are plenty of people participating but most people aren't that far separated instead of 6 degrees of separation, maybe we're talking about two and that's why it's been so funny that I've heard of and known of our guest today for years but yet, our paths never crossed. Well, it took a mutual friend reaching out and saying, look, it's time. You have to talk to this guy to make it happen so we did. It's a wonderful conversation. We did it over audio just to make everything easier logistically but I have no doubt that I'll be getting together with this guy soon. Maybe we'll even do some video, who knows? So, I'd like to welcome Kru Ballard to the show. Kru Ballard, welcome to whistlekick martial arts radio.

**Chris Ballard:**

Hey, how you doing? Thanks for having me on.

**Jeremy Lesniak:**

It's great to have you on. Now, at some point, we're going to have to remedy this but we actually haven't met in person and listeners might be hearing that, saying okay, no big deal, Jeremy, you talk to people all the time. You are, I'm going to say, no more than 45 minutes away right now.

**Chris Ballard:**

Very cool!

**Jeremy Lesniak:**

Your school is about 35 to 40 minutes away depending on traffic. I know where it is. I've known of you for years and it took a mutual friend, thanks Rex, for introducing us and making this happen so I'm excited.

**Chris Ballard:**

Me too, absolutely!

**Jeremy Lesniak:**

It's funny. Vermont is one of those states that we have these pockets of things that people can be doing something for decades in this little corner and if you're not living in that corner, you don't know about it. In fact, once in a while, I learn of a martial arts school. I thought I knew them all especially in Northern to Central Vermont. There's a whole lot of people so I thought I knew all those schools and it was like 6 months ago somebody said, oh, do you know this guy? It's funny how we just kind of all co-exist but don't always know each other.

**Chris Ballard:**



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This is true, very true.

**Jeremy Lesniak:**

I'm happy for the opportunity to get to know you better and listeners get to come along for the ride, whether or not they like it or not, I honestly don't care because I'm going to enjoy our conversation.

**Chris Ballard:**

Oh yeah, I'm really happy to be on the show. Very glad to come in.

**Jeremy Lesniak:**

Good, good. Thank you and I appreciate your time and let's start. Let's start in the way that we always start. It's the fundamental way, it's the white belt of questions and that is how did you find martial arts?

**Chris Ballard:**

Excellent question. I actually had a pretty rough upbringing, believe it or not, and my mom was the first person to ever suggest me doing something in the contact sports, martial arts realm and it just so happened that she had moved to Kennedy Drive in South Burlington and there was a very, very small dojang that had opened up called Primetime Taekwondo. I believe this was 1984, maybe '85, quite a long time ago and that's kind of how it started for me was going in there and then from there, meeting other local martial arts instructors as I kind of progressed in age, bounced around to almost all of the local Taekwondo studios in the [00:05:25] county area and yeah, just never stopped and 35 years later, here we are.

**Jeremy Lesniak:**

Yeah, no, of course. I introduced you with a title that really doesn't fit with Taekwondo so, obviously, some things happened and there, you start with Taekwondo and anyone who knows, Northern to Central Vermont Taekwondo is pretty heavy here. We've got a lot of Taekwondo presence. Not a ton of other things so was that part of it? Were you reaching out looking for other things or what's that story look like?

**Chris Ballard:**

Basically, I had started there. That was my root. I met Master [00:06:06] Charlie Farmer, all these great Taekwondo practitioners [00:06:14] way out in Hardwick, even, and, at some point, probably around, I don't know, I guess I'd say 18, I really want to make the jump from point fighting and semi-contact what have you style of fighting to a more full-contact style of fighting. Unfortunately, as you know, being in a really small area, there wasn't a whole lot to choose from outside of the traditional realms so I ended up driving up to Tristar gym in Montreal from 1999 to about 2003 and I met the guys at Tristar and they were a gym that specialized in kickboxing, Thai boxing and mixed martial arts so that's really where that



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fraction for me happened and it just grew out of partially wanting something different, wanting to expand my own base but the competing was really big to me at that time and I really want to go that route with it.

**Jeremy Lesniak:**

Now, Burlington to Montreal, it's not a long drive but it's not a short drive either. What was it about the idea of full-contact or something beyond point and partial contact fighting that you were that interested, that invested? You were going to make that hike for 4 years.

**Chris Ballard:**

It started with watching videos of early kickboxing like Benny the Jet, Joe Lewis, stuff like that and then, I actually found Thai boxing and I started watching a lot of the old, golden era, 1970s, 1980s Thai boxing matches that took place in Thailand and I would just thought to myself like man, if I'm going to do something that's going to be full contact, I'm going to do something like this and then, of course, the realization was there's nothing like this around me kind of sunk in so that's what kind of what prompted the driving and I was more than happy to make the drive up there because I fell in love with the coaching stuff and the gym pretty much immediately when I got there even when I couldn't get there as much as I wanted to, I would still get up there twice a week, basically, and it just really sparked my interest and I fell in love with Muay Thai from there, learned more and more about it and that's what prompted me to start traveling to Thailand to train.

**Jeremy Lesniak:**

You said you started this journey into Muay Thai, 18. I'm going to assume at some point in there, you took a fight?

**Chris Ballard:**

Yeah, yeah.

**Jeremy Lesniak:**

How quickly from the start of that training did you start fighting?

**Chris Ballard:**

Oh god, I think it was that same year, to be honest with you. I think I took my first match in '99 or right around '99 and I fought for the United States Kickboxing Association which is defunct now. Actually, the guy that used to own it, Paul Rosner, passed away and I also did some matches under the IKF, International Kickboxing Federation, then I did some smoker events and some amateur events as well. Nothing to really brag about. I never won a championship but I did it and I loved it so, like anything else, it becomes kind of addicting and the more I train, the more I love it and the fighting was just kind of the



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apple on top or the cherry on top, rather, because it was the style of fighting that I really wanted to experience and get some history in and, up until then, all of my competition experience had basically been point and Olympic-style Taekwondo fighting so again, it was just, it was really the initial thing when I was 18 years old was wow, this looks different, kind of interesting, kind of captivated me.

**Jeremy Lesniak:**

What was it about your Taekwondo background that both helped and hindered your time with Muay Thai?

**Chris Ballard:**

Oh, that's a good one. I think the distance and the timing and, obviously, the kicking and the cardio that came along with it. Those were the physical things. When you strip martial arts down into tenets or into basic principles, I think the indomitable spirit really helped as a kid doing push-ups and sit-ups and flutter kicks and being told don't quit, that really transitioned over when it was a little more aggressive training and a little more real was that don't quit mentality, indomitable spirit, never give up.

**Jeremy Lesniak:**

And how about the other side of that coin? What did you find you were set behind and maybe some habit, some patterns from your Taekwondo time, things that you had to unlearn?

**Chris Ballard:**

Believe it or not, and this sounds contradictory to a lot of what we learn as martial artists, but being on the balls of my feet a little too much, being side-facing or bladed in my stance, not having a huge repertoire, at that time, of boxing techniques and also, the format of the point-fighting. Some tournaments will limit contact to the open face, most will not allow contact with anything like a knee or an elbow or a leg kick so some of the rule sets that I was learning and applying back then weren't necessarily great for the new rule set I was walking into but I think there was enough good stuff, both mentally, physically, spiritually, that I gained from traditional martial arts that helped me going into the kickboxing.

**Jeremy Lesniak:**

I can see that. Alright, and so, here you are. We've gotten up to 2003, you're training in Montreal, Muay Thai. You're taking some fights, some matches, and where does the journey go from there?

**Chris Ballard:**

Believe it or not, it goes straight into the military.

**Jeremy Lesniak:**



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Okay, that's a transition I wouldn't have expected.

**Chris Ballard:**

One minute, I'm in Tristar and I'm in a place that's up and coming and there's people like Georges St-Pierre and David Loiseau and a slew of other fighters that are going to go on and become, basically, legends in their respective sports but I had always wanted to be in the military and I had a short stint in the Navy fresh out of high school but we had a loss in the family. My gram had passed away and they let me come home on a hardship discharge and I re-enlisted while I was home into the National Guard because I either had to go back to the Navy to finish out my training or I had to join one of the other service branches so in between all of this training and fighting and everything else, joining the military became this thing that I really, really wanted to do and the National Guard kind of fit the bill because I knew if I did that I might have time still to schedule my own martial arts training in between. Not being active was the appealing thing because I knew I would deploy but the in between times, I knew I would have time to train, basically.

**Jeremy Lesniak:**

So, as you're looking at this, as you're dealing with this military career, martial arts is still a priority and not just a small priority, it sounds like.

**Chris Ballard:**

Still priority, in fact, as soon as we...I did get into the National Guard in 2003 and I joined the Medevac unit, the Dustoff unit here in Vermont, and as soon as we're mobilized to deploy to Iraq, I wanted to really become the unit trainer for the combatives program that the Army was running so I'm literally even in training to prepare to deploy, I still had the martial arts bug. It was still heavy on my mind.

**Jeremy Lesniak:**

A lot of time when we get people on the show, it's pretty clear that martial arts is filling this hole, whether you want to think of it as a puzzle piece or just something, quite often, lacking in what they had or maybe something in their upbringing; does that resonate for you? Did martial arts fill some kind of hole for you?

**Chris Ballard:**

Yeah, I mean, I think it filled the general hole of sport, number one. It was something that was an activity that I had to be physical and I wasn't really a football player or baseball, basketball, kind of your traditional sport athlete so when I was younger, it was sport. As I got older, I think it became more, almost more of a spiritual thing. As time went on, it got less and less about the physical training, as I'm sure you and other martial artists know, martial arts training can morph. You don't always end up training for the same reasons as you started. So, yeah, it's kind of where it took me, I think.



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**Jeremy Lesniak:**

Okay, I can see that. makes a lot of sense. I think for a lot of us, as you said, martial arts becomes that sport that clicks for us in a way that basketball and football and whatever else never really did and I can't speak for you but I know for a lot of listeners that I've heard from, from myself personally, I was able to correlate my effort with my results in a way that I wasn't always able to with team sports. I could really work my butt off at, let's say, basketball. I'll make my shot better, dribble better, pass better but if the other people on the team weren't better, none of us were better.

**Chris Ballard:**

Absolutely. It was like an individual sport and it really makes you draw internally after a while. I think a lot of people will come to it for sport or weight loss or self-defense and what have you and the longer you train, the more I find people that have trained the longest that it really, truly becomes part of their life. It's not just something that they do anymore. I tell my wife all the time, it's more like brushing my teeth. It's so ingrained in what I do now. That's just what it is.

**Jeremy Lesniak:**

That is an analogy I have not heard before. I like it! I like that a lot. Now, I got to go back for a quick second. One of the things that I do when I talk to people on this show is I try to put myself in the position of the listeners and every once in a while, I get this kind of imaginary voice in the back of my head saying no, go back and ask him about that so it sounded like you said that you trained at the same gym as Georges St-Pierre when he was coming up. Did I hear that right?

**Chris Ballard:**

Yeah, Georges was there. There are different training times for all the different [00:16:46] but I would see him in the gym. David Loiseau who is known as The Crow used to train at the gym too. They had a tremendous amount of kickboxers. Conrad Pla is actually the owner before Firas Zahabi which, who everybody knows now. Conrad Pla was an ISKA world kickboxing champion back in his time too and he actually fought Javier Mendez from AKA. So, even the current gyms have older gyms and the current owners have older owners but yeah, it's a really amazing place to be in and train and just be inspired especially for a young guy just coming up and looking to get his feet wet with it.

**Jeremy Lesniak:**

So, I have to admit, when you were talking about making a multi-hour drive multiple times a week for years, there's a part of me going, okay, why? There's something I'm not understanding in what you've said and now, I feel like I'm getting it because of the people who were there and, what I would imagine, the caliber of the instruction and what, I'm going to guess, the passion of the other people training. Probably pretty magnetic.



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**Chris Ballard:**

It was amazing. It was definitely magnetic and that's a word I would definitely use to describe it. You go into a lot of gyms that maybe don't have that caliber of athlete or coach or whatever it is that makes it special and you can learn a variety of things from that gym and you can be satisfied with it but, in some level, being in that other space where some of the best in the world are really did make a difference. It really did want to make me make that drive. It really wanted to make me push and say, okay, I could just do local stuff but let's get out of the comfort zone here but it was a big commitment for a young kid. I remember telling my parents sometimes, they'd call me, hey, where are you? I'm heading back up to Canada. They're like my god, you must be racking up so many miles on your car, that type of stuff. Well-worth it, well-worth it when I look back.

**Jeremy Lesniak:**

One of the things I always like to ask the guests about are the stories that they've picked up along the way. We learn skills, we learn various styles. We had, maybe, some belt rank, maybe some bruises or broken bones but through it all, there are stories so if I was to ask you for your favorite story from any point in time in your training, what would that be?

**Chris Ballard:**

It would probably have to be in 2007, I went on my first trip to Thailand and I was training the entire time I was there and it was a really serious atmosphere. Everybody got up in the morning really early and ran a 5 or 10-mile jog before two different training sessions that lasted between 6 and 8 hours total and I really think that that was probably the best memory I had of training, in general. The coaches were so funny that we went out one night, toward the end, to a country western bar that was sung in the Thai language and it was absolutely hysterical to see these rock men, these guys that just trained, conditioned their body, they fight every single weekend for years on end singing country western in a karaoke style out of the local spot. It just really, it stuck with me. We're just eating bad food and doing all the things wrong that you shouldn't be doing while you're training like that and the coaches were pretty much right there along with us and it was kind of hilarious to me and that's always stuck with me.

**Jeremy Lesniak:**

Now, when we...anybody that knows anything about Muay Thai, if you've seen the fights, it's intense and they start them young. It's almost this factory and I don't mean that in a negative way but there are a lot of volume. There are a lot of people training Muay Thai, coming up, starting at some of these schools pre-teen and, as you said, training weekend after weekend whereas here, in the US, we're used to a full-contact fight 6, 8, 12-weeks. There's quite a bit of time in between but these guys are staying at the top of their game and somehow finding ways to recover is that other side of the coin, that letting go, that country western bar and, I assume, the partying that's going along with it, is that a typical part of that experience for them to kind of decompress?





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**Chris Ballard:**

I think a lot of those guys do and because there, it's a totally different culture. A lot of kids, like you said, are orphaned or they would be had they not found a Thai gym and they get taken in and they get medical attention, schooling, all the benefits that come along with being a part of the camp are extended to the younger athletes and I think by the time, I would say, they're probably 25, 26, the majority of the stadium fighters are retired. Not all of them like some of them like Saenchai, Buakaw [00:22:14] they go on and fight into their 40s but the vast majority of them retire young and my feeling on that was they don't fight, a lot of the trainers themselves don't fight in the stadiums anymore so I think they do decompress maybe more as they get older. You certainly don't see the younger kids out doing much other than training but the older coaches definitely tend to decompress because I think just the lifestyle has been so hard on their bodies and their spirits for so many years and it's good sometimes to just, like you said, just go on that other side of the coin for a little bit just for a minute.

**Jeremy Lesniak:**

Yeah, I once heard a statistic, I have no idea if it's true that the average pro career for a Thai fighter is about 2 years and say, that's really short but how many fights are happening in that 2-year span. That's a 10, 20, 30-year career for quite a few other combat sports.

**Chris Ballard:**

Sure, absolutely and I would believe that. I mean, sometimes the kids would start as young as 4, 5 years old which I know people have mixed feelings about. I, myself, have mixed feelings about that to be perfectly frank with you but yeah, even by the time, they're 19 or 20, you can imagine they're being brought to the stadiums every single weekend from the time they're 4, 5 until they're 18, 20 years old. It's kind of crazy the amount of fights they would rack up. It's just phenomenal.

**Jeremy Lesniak:**

Now, at some point in this journey, you started teaching so what caused you to flip that switch?

**Chris Ballard:**

Actually, I was injured during my tour in Iraq and it took a couple years of being home to figure that out medically. Once we did, I kind of realized that I wasn't going to be flying around in helicopters anymore and loading patients in and out and stuff like that so my wife said, hey, you know, you've always really loved martial arts and why don't you consider teaching locally? Just teaching. So, that's kind of what sparked that. Up until then I had a desk job. I worked at Vermont Federal Credit Union as a member service rep for 6 years, on and off, in between all the deployments and all the trainings and everything else that was going on so it just seemed like a really good time to kind of switch gears again which was weird because, originally, fighting was on the menu and then, the military became the top priority and then it kind of turned back to teaching so it's been a weird rollercoaster, honestly.



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**Jeremy Lesniak:**

Wow! So, you're here. You're still teaching, right? You've got a school and what's that experience been like? The way you just talked about it, let me pull back, let me ask this question a little bit differently. Quite often, the folks that we have on this show, teaching has been this kind of natural progression in their training. It's something that, at some point along the way, they say I really want to do that. It's something that they were passionate about but it sounds like your transition into teaching may not have been pre-ordained. That it was an effort for you to keep going with martial arts but also, find a job. I don't ask this question in a, I'm not trying to belittle your experience but it sounds like a little bit different than what many of us have heard in past episodes so I'm thinking there might be some stuff to unpack there.

**Chris Ballard:**

There's more backstory that being injured from the military also comes with benefits or not so, once I was extended benefit from the military, money wasn't really the driving factor. It was more what are we going to do now, what do you want to do now? My wife said well, you've always loved martial arts so why don't you try your hand at teaching? So, it's kind of been like a labor of love. My best friend was Glenn Dufrayne. He passed away. He was a martial artist here, 4<sup>th</sup> Dan TKD type and he actually originally started teaching with me. He ran our Shelburne School and I ran my South Burlington School so that's kind of the gist of that. It wasn't really for profit. It wasn't really for career. It was more what are you going to focus your life in doing? Some people want to be singers, actors, this or that, what do you want to do now? But you're right in the fact that my path kind of was changed for me, almost, several times so it's kind of adjusting. You should be willing to communicate but you got to be willing to adjust, improvise, adapt and overcome so, I mean, 3 separate lives. If I would've gone down 3 separate roads, I could see myself being a banker, being a lifelong military member or being an instructor and that's really where my passion was so I think that's why I ended up on the road that I did.

**Jeremy Lesniak:**

Now, you just rattled off a couple things and I'm guessing came from your military training.

**Chris Ballard:**

Probably.

**Jeremy Lesniak:**

You sped up when you said it so it didn't hit quite as well so communicate, adapt, overcome. Was that...?

**Chris Ballard:**

Yeah, improvise, adapt, overcome, yeah.



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**Jeremy Lesniak:**

Yeah, and that, I assume is military training?

**Chris Ballard:**

Absolutely. Things don't always work out the way they're supposed to "work out" so you have to be flexible in your approach and I think that was true in me finding my path to teaching.

**Jeremy Lesniak:**

I think we can all imagine how much your martial arts helped you in the military. There's regiment, there's familiarity with training and training hard and training with other people and working towards goals but let's go back the other way, so what was it from your military training, other than examples like we just heard having a quick set of wisdom you can rattle off to? Okay, yeah, this resonates. What did you pull out from your military time that you bring into the way that you teach your students?

**Chris Ballard:**

I think that I'm very laidback and that might sound weird saying how did the military accomplish that? Because in the job that I was in, like I said, things change at the drop of a hat and I really had to be flexible with what I thought so with my students, I'm a little bit lax in the fact of you come into a Thai class and everybody's in shorts and t-shirts. That could be off-putting for somebody that's used to training with tenets and belts and dobok so I'm a little bit more laidback on my approach but that comes from, I think, trying to adapt and times change. People change but the martial arts, the core of martial arts, I find, don't really ever change. It's usually how the instructor presents it to you. Some instructors are very gruff and black and white and this is how it is and I try my best not to be like that as much as possible.

**Jeremy Lesniak:**

What was your upbringing like in terms of that structure? Was it very structured or moderately structured? I'm curious because I suspect there's something there too.

**Chris Ballard:**

Sure, I mean, I was in traditional martial arts most of my life until I became old enough to go up to Canada so my experience with it was, at first, very formal. It was bowing and yes, sir, yes, ma'am, that type of stuff. Just the core...man, I don't even know how to say it...like the core fundamentals of martial arts and it extended to all the coaches like if I think back to the first 4 or 5 martial arts instructors I had, it was all belts and uniforms and rank and file and that helped me as a kid because I was really lacking that, I think, growing up with one parents and whatnot and not having, like you said, a traditional sport to fall back on so my upbringing in martial arts was very traditional. I don't think it was very abnormal and until I found Muay Thai and kickboxing, it was very black and white, I think.



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**Jeremy Lesniak:**

It almost sounds like that structure was there until you no longer needed it.

**Chris Ballard:**

Kind of. It's weird, is what it is.

**Jeremy Lesniak:**

Interesting. It's really neat stuff. We've talked about a few different places you trained, a few different instructors and I'd love for you to think about who you are as a teacher. I usually ask this question a little differently. I usually ask for you as a martial artist, who's been the most influential person? But I want to ask about it in terms of how you teach, your philosophy, the way you run your classes. When you think about all of the people that you've learned from, which of those people kind of set the tone the most for your teaching style?

**Chris Ballard:**

I would probably say the first coach that I worked with in Thailand, Prumak, was an older gentleman. He was in his late fifties at the time and he was just so laidback and it was very awkward coming from a very traditional martial arts background. He demanded a lot of work out of you and all the students there but he was very friendly in how he did it. It was almost like you can yell and scream and you can demand something from someone or you can smile and nod and get the same amount of work out of them so he was kind of interesting to me. He was just a really laidback guy that really, really worked you to the point of exhaustion and up until then, I hadn't really experienced that and I think I kind of modeled myself after him. In terms of the fight training and the actual training portion, I allow my students if they're 5 minutes late from work to be 5 minutes late from work within reason. Stuff like that, stuff that might not be okay at another facility or you know, the hey, coach, I forgot my hand wraps, do you actually have an extra pair? Yeah, absolutely. Because I know I'm going to get that work out of them regardless. I think I keyed in on him a little bit.

**Jeremy Lesniak:**

It sounds like it. It sounds like it, yeah. Now, let's kind of flip that question around, if you could train with somebody else, somebody you haven't, like anywhere in the world, anywhere in time, who would you want to train with?

**Chris Ballard:**

Wow, that's difficult. I mean, the obvious choice would be Bruce Lee. I read all of his books growing up. Took a lot of what he was trying to say and really tried to internalize it even with the gym. We were one of the, well, not the first definitely not, but one of the first gyms to have such a wide range of coaching stuff and I always take what's useful from all the arts. Wrestling, boxing, Taekwondo, kickboxing, Thai



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boxing, anything, Bruce Lee and Jiu Jitsu, anything that you can learn value from and learn technique from so I would have to say him because he really did change the way I thought about martial arts. He changed my perception as a young person about martial arts when I started reading his content.

**Jeremy Lesniak:**

And I think that's an eye-opener for a lot of us whether we hear it from Bruce Lee via his books or one of his interviews or we hear the concept come from someone else. This idea that martial arts training can and, depending on your perspective, should be diverse. It's pretty enlightening. Now, you said that you have multiple disciplines happening at your gym. Was that intentional or just people kind of show up and say, I can train this thing that you don't already have and you said yes, how did that come to be?

**Chris Ballard:**

Master Dufrayne actually told me, Glenn, my best friend before he passed, you know, if we ever teach, it should be a place that doesn't just do karate or just Taekwondo or just boxing. It'd be really cool if we did more than one thing. We're limited by our own experiences so that would take coaches that are willing to work with other coaches in the same space. That can be difficult but that's kind of where it came from. It came from Glenn's suggestion of hey, let's call this United Fighting Arts. Let's broaden what we're doing here, you know what I mean? Let's make a center that, if you're just straight not interested in martial arts and your thing is boxing, well, you can do that or if you're not a boxer and you're interested in traditional training or not, you can do that. It was up until then there weren't very many places like that

**Jeremy Lesniak:**

No. No and, I would argue, even most of the places that claim to be that now, it's still 75 or 80% a single style. The style that the instructor, instructors are most familiar with, most comfortable in teaching and then they add some other things in and I don't mean to disparage that. everyone approaches martial arts and their training and instruction in a way that works for them and that's great. That's the beauty of martial arts, as far as I'm concerned, but it sounds like, from what you're talking about, there's no 75%. It's a bunch of 15 and 20%.

**Chris Ballard:**

Yeah, absolutely. It's a group of coaches that are amazing and that have gotten together and truly share the space. I actually sold the facility to my wife about 4 or 5 years ago. I had some spinal injuries that I needed to address so I took a step back and I've been coaching twice a week. Ever since then, I still go in Tuesday and Thursday nights but, as far as you just said, it's totally true. There's a Jiu Jitsu coach there, wrestling coach, boxing coach, Taekwondo and they all share the schedule and share the space so it's not dominated by just one, like you said, a 75% heavy on one style.

**Jeremy Lesniak:**



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Now, I'm sure that there are timeslots that are more desirable than others so how do you handle that?

**Chris Ballard:**

That took a little bit of finagling and it's still an art form, to be honest with you. You got to know your students and I think a lot of people probably end up coming in because of the diversity so being really aware and how many people are and what class on what night was kind of Debra, my wife, Debra's task when hammering out the schedule with all these different coaches and whatnot but I think she does a good job and I think we have a really good mix on the class nights and times but you really have to pay attention to your membership in order to get days and times that work for 80, 90% of each group.

**Jeremy Lesniak:**

Now, you've mentioned a couple times this best friend of yours who passed, this man that you owned this business with. Would you be willing to talk a bit more about him?

**Chris Ballard:**

Yeah, absolutely.

**Jeremy Lesniak:**

Because I, anytime someone loses someone important, especially someone who was on a path with them towards something that they're both passionate about, something that you're still passionate about in martial arts, I suspect that there were probably some lessons learned and I suspect there's an element of carrying on the torch and maybe doing some things that you feel he would've wanted that you might talk about.

**Chris Ballard:**

Yeah, I mean, Glenn was a great person. He was very into video games, of all things. He was an avid competitor. He loved sparring, point fighting, he loved breaking. I love blindfolded breaking. That was his big thing and he was a true martial arts practitioner through and through even how he conducted himself in his normal life. There have been many times that it would've been very easy to say okay, we've taught, I guess, 16 years now and we're good, we're done but Glenn definitely wouldn't have wanted that. He looked at the gym and training as a lifelong process. He really didn't look at it as you know, I'm going to get this belt and then I'm going to stop so, for me, I've had quite a few times throughout my teaching career when I definitely could've hung up the gloves, so to speak, but I don't feel like I'm there and I don't really feel like I ever will be there and I really feel like the martial arts is just a part of me and I think he helped really reinforce that for me.

**Jeremy Lesniak:**

That's powerful stuff and I'm sorry that he's gone.



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**Chris Ballard:**

Oh, thank you, I appreciate it.

**Jeremy Lesniak:**

Martial arts tends to build these relationships, these friendships that don't happen often outside of martial arts. There's something to be said for punching your friends in the face and saying thank you for it. It builds these relationships that people outside of martial arts, I'm sure the people listening, I'm sure you have had this experience where people just don't seem to get it. People outside of training don't seem to get why we do the things we do the way we do them because it's so foreign to everything else. I think the closest thing I can imagine would be something like football. Something where there's that intensity of training and that physical contact that you recognize you're making each other better in doing so.

**Chris Ballard:**

Absolutely. It's like iron sharpens iron.

**Jeremy Lesniak:**

Yeah, yeah.

**Chris Ballard:**

Sometimes, it's painful, like you said, and sometimes people are like what are you doing? But it's powerful.

**Jeremy Lesniak:**

It's often painful and so, it builds these bonds when there're people that I've known through martial arts for 30, 35 years now and I can go years without seeing them and see them again and it's like nothing has changed, especially if you train with them again. To step back out on the mats, on the floor or whatever the training surface is. It can be 10, 20 years and you just fall back into step because you have that foundation.

**Chris Ballard:**

Amazing how that works.

**Jeremy Lesniak:**

Yeah, I don't think there's anything else like that. Maybe there is but I haven't experienced it with anything else. You talked a bit about Bruce Lee and his books. How about movies? Are you a fan of his movies?



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**Chris Ballard:**

I like Enter the Dragon which is, obviously, the big commercial one. I liked it. It was, for me, it was seeing all those different styles. Jim Kelly doing his thing, you have Bob Wall in there, you have all these amazing old school martial artists doing it a little bit different. They're all out there doing it but they're doing it different and even the other day, we watched that movie and the opening scene was Bruce Lee and Sammo Hung and they're wearing modified, temple gloves I believe they used to be called, but they're modified open-fingered gloves and they're doing full contact and they're doing standup and ground and throwing everything in between and I just thought about it and I'm like my god, this was in the '60s and '70s and here we are, finally competing like this in modern MMA today. It really set in how far ahead of his time Bruce was.

**Jeremy Lesniak:**

Yeah, I think throughout martial arts, there have been a handful of people who have looked at what everybody around them has been doing and seeing the value in each thing and kind of collecting it and, of course, one of the things that was special about Bruce was, not only he saw that, but that he was exposed to so many different things. Not everyone gets the opportunity to travel around the world and train or to be around one group of instructors and then pop the border to another country and train with another group of instructors of an amazing caliber, absolutely wonderful stuff and, of course, in both cases, it's lead to some pretty unique outcomes or, at least, it's what it's sounding like in your case and, believe me, some point soon, I've got to pop up and start training with you guys because it sounds like a great thing you got going.

**Chris Ballard:**

Anytime, sure. Yeah, it's great! I mean training in Thailand became important to me as I looked around. I don't know why I thought of this but I did so I'm kind of going out there on a limb.

**Jeremy Lesniak:**

Please.

**Chris Ballard:**

It became important to me because I saw a lot of, like you kind of alluded to earlier, some places would have a banner outside that says kickboxing or Muay Thai or whatnot and you go in and it really wasn't. It was more about cardio-oriented set up so I began really digging and looking, saying what makes an instructor in Muay Thai? Where does that actually come from because I see all these people that are "coaches" or running classes in it but they don't really have any depth of knowledge behind it so it made me start questioning okay, where did this come from? And that's what lead to all these different trips back and forth to Thailand to really get that under control like okay, the sports authority and the Ministry of Culture are the two big ones that certify instructors internationally so I began travelling and





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I'd ask the gym owners, are you through the Sports Authority or the Ministry of Culture and you wouldn't always get great responses doing that but I liken it to Taekwondo like you walk into the school, are you an ITF school or a WTF school? You know what I mean? Something similar to that but the more I looked, the less and less I found and then I thought about my travelling back and forth to Montreal for all those years and I'm like man, you know if there's people on this state that really want to train, they got to have to either move out of state or they got to have to be willing to drive like I drove so, for me, having that available here in Vermont was a pretty big deal once we got up and running and going back to Thailand. I've been 6 times now. It's really become more and more important as I get older and I see the way that the art is progressing.

**Jeremy Lesniak:**

And for those folks who haven't been to Thailand to train, which I'm going to assume is the vast majority, and I'm not even going to think the majority of people we have listening have experienced training in Muay Thai, if they were to hop in a plane and go to Thailand and step into one of these kind of, I see a lot of these one to two week residential learn Muay Thai kind of programs, I'm guessing you're far beyond that when you go there but what would the typical Karateka, Taekwondo, Kung Fu practitioner see that might be different if they go to Thailand?

**Chris Ballard:**

The workout, as I think, and the heat are the two first things that you notice. It can be a 5 or 10-mile run in the morning, like I said, 6 to 8 hours of training sessions broken up in the morning and afternoon so 3 in the morning and 3 in the evening or 4 and 4, respectively. So, even if you go for a month and you live in the camp and you're training with 10 to 15 world champions and you're doing 8 hours a day, I think that's the selling point of those type of things but you really have to go longer than a week or two and you really have to go more frequently than once in your life to really start learning names of techniques, feints, history, there's so much to the art that I didn't even know about. Even though I had trained at Tristar and I had fought as a young person, by the time I went to Thailand, I was learning about Krabi Krabong and Muay Boran like all these older styles that Muay Thai is based on that I had no clue at the time so you really won't get the full effect but I think, for the average US or European, whatnot, the traditional martial artist that goes, the heat and the volume of work are the two biggest changes. Contact can be learned. You can learn to deal with the contact. Your body, as you know, it gets used to it after a while with proper training but the heat and the workout part are just phenomenal.

**Jeremy Lesniak:**

Nice. So, let's kind of flip things, everything we've talked about has been in the past so let's look to the future now. When you look out over the next 5, 10, I'll let you cast that net as far as you'd like, years, what do you see for you and your training, for your school, your relationship to the martial arts?

**Chris Ballard:**



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Just giving back is the biggest thing. My wife started a free community self-defense program for women, empowerment through self-defense. We originally picked up hope works with it and has since moved on but we still do the seminars and we do one for multi-gender. Just trying as best we can. We host the Burlington police department's defense tactics program out of our facility, free of charge. We really are trying to...we're in a point where we're trying to give back to the community as best we can so if we can keep doing that for another 10 years, that would be great with me. My biggest thing is I just have joy in my life from being able to go there and do the one thing it is that I always have really loved to do and share it with other people so, I mean, hopefully that just continues and doesn't change.

**Jeremy Lesniak:**

Sounds like a pretty exceptional place you got going there and I suspect there're quite a few people listening who want to form something like that, the kind of school that you have. Do you have any advice for them?

**Chris Ballard:**

Yeah, train, train, train and don't ever stop training no matter what the circumstance is whether it's grades or relationships or war or disability or if it's something you love to do, you got to keep doing it and even as a coach, I still train all the time as much as my body will let me. I don't ever want to get stagnant in my training so they shouldn't get stagnant in their training too. Always be open to new things, always continue to train yourself because if you're not training, then you don't have anything except memories to pass on of techniques and memories of what you were told before to your students because you're not actively doing anything anymore so I really think training is a huge thing. I think also build bonds, build relationships with other coaches and that can be really hard because we all have our people, we all have our clan, so to speak, that are individual schools but if I would've never taken the time to build a rapport with the wrestling coach or the boxing guy or the Taekwondo coaches, it would've never been possible.

**Jeremy Lesniak:**

Well said and I really like that. If you're not actively training, all you have to pass on are memories. That's powerful! That's powerful stuff. We talk a lot on this show about white belt mentality. This idea that there's always more to learn and it sounds like you're exemplifying that and I'm going to guess that the other instructors at your school also feels the same.

**Chris Ballard:**

Oh yeah, they're still...I don't think there's anybody coaching that isn't still actively training in some way, shape or form.

**Jeremy Lesniak:**



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That's fantastic. So, if people want to find out more about you and your school and what you've got going and where, where on the web can they go?

**Chris Ballard:**

They can check us out on Twitter, on Facebook, on Instagram: UFAI or United Fighting Arts Institute. Either way, it should pop up, [ufai.net](http://ufai.net) is the website. They're always more than welcome to come in and check it out. We always do a free week for everybody regardless so if you want to just come in and check out every single class for a week, you can do that.

**Jeremy Lesniak:**

That's pretty exceptional and, of course folks, we're going to have links to all the social media, the website there at [whistlekickmartialartsradio.com](http://whistlekickmartialartsradio.com). No need to jot notes on your arm while you're driving or whatever else you got going. Alright, well, this has been exceptional and I'd love to ask for one more thing as we kind of fade into the distance. What parting words, what advice would you give to the people listening today?

**Chris Ballard:**

You're stronger than you think you are. Don't let anybody tell you you're not and don't ever quit.

**Jeremy Lesniak:**

I don't know what to say other than I had an absolutely wonderful time with this conversation. It's nice to talk to people who have similar outlooks on martial arts. It seemed like Kru Ballard and I clicked in terms of cross training and giving back to the martial arts and in so many other ways so it's great to finally meet him and, as I said at the top of the show, I really look forward to connecting with him and maybe sharing. Thank you so much, Kru Ballard, for coming on the show today. If you want to find the show notes with transcripts, links, photos, you name it, [whistlekickmartialartsradio.com](http://whistlekickmartialartsradio.com) is the place to go and [whistlekick.com](http://whistlekick.com) is the place to go to learn more about everything that we do and if you're headed now over there to shop, PODCAST15 gets you 15% off every single thing in the store. New stuff, old stuff, clearance stuff, digital products, uniforms. I'll stop naming things. There's a lot there. There're a lot of ways to help us out here at whistlekick specifically the show. You can share this episode or another episode. You can let somebody know about the show, maybe nominate someone to be a guest on the show or head on over to iTunes or Google Podcast, leave us a review because reviews help people find this show and that's an important part to growing this show. There's a lot of podcasts coming out and it's hard to stand apart. We're doing our best but your help makes the difference. Our social media is very creative, it's @whistlekick, you can find us on Facebook and Instagram primarily, but we are also on Twitter and YouTube. My email address, [jeremy@whistlekick.com](mailto:jeremy@whistlekick.com), we keep it easy. I'll see you soon but until next time, train hard, smile and have a