



Episode 100 – Sensei Jeremy Lesniak | [whistlekickMartialArtsRadio.com](http://whistlekickMartialArtsRadio.com)



#### **Jeremy Lesniak:**

And there's no better parallel than this entire journey that has been whistlekick and martial arts radio than that story not because I'm anybody particularly special, I just chose to jump in and do this.

#### **Daniel Hart:**

Hello, everyone! It's episode 100 of whistlekick martial arts radio, the only place to hear the best stories from the best martial artists and for this episode, I'm your host for martial arts radio. Whistlekick makes the world's best sparring gear and some great apparel. We'd like to extend a warm thank you to all of our returning listeners and welcome to those joining us for the first time. If you're new to the show or you just not familiar with what we make, check out our no-sweat athletic shirts. You'll notice how comfortable they are and how they aren't too tight or too loose. They fit just right. they're great for working out or wearing with your uniform. We have lots of colors and sizes to choose from so take a look. You can learn more about our gear and the rest of our products at [whistlekick.com](http://whistlekick.com) and our gear is also available in Amazon. If you want the show notes, you can check those out over at [whistlekickmartialartsradio.com](http://whistlekickmartialartsradio.com) and while you're over there, get on the newsletter. We offer special content to subscribers and it's the only place to find out about upcoming guests for the show. We only email a few times a month, we'll never sell your information and sometimes, we mail out a generous coupon. On episode 100, we hear from the whistlekick founder and our regular host, Sensei Jeremy Lesniak. Throughout his martial arts career, he's achieved a black belt in no less than 3 different



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disciplines. A native to New England, Sensei Jeremy is a friend to many schools, not just as a great resource for the best sparring gear, but someone you may see in a seminar or guest instructor. Sensei Lesniak started martial arts at a young age but continues to demonstrate his passion to this day. I've had the pleasure to work with him as a student in one of my seminars and as a guest instructor in my own dojo. Without further ado, let's welcome Sensei Jeremy to the show. Sensei Lesniak, welcome to whistlekick martial arts radio.

**Jeremy Lesniak:**

Thanks!

**Daniel Hart:**

So, I've heard you interview a lot of different people.

**Jeremy Lesniak:**

That's true.

**Daniel Hart:**

And we've heard you hear other people's stories but I think it's time that we get to know you a little bit so why don't you tell us a little bit about your history and the where, the when, the how, we want to hear that.

**Jeremy Lesniak:**

Sure, sure. So, it's really weird being on this side, on this side of the equation. It's different...I can even feel my voice is different being asked the question versus asking the question so I will try to not make it too different and too weird. I started martial arts when I was 4 and I told bits of the story before on here and on other shows but I vaguely remember being 4 years old, being at the town beach, the public beach and swimming and for some reason, I remember having an Aquaman shirt on. That was my favorite shirt. I don't know why I remember that but that was definitely there and my mother calling me out of the water and introducing me to this woman and saying, she's starting Karate classes, do you want to learn Karate? And me saying sure and having no idea what that meant but the energy and the way the question was presented, it sounded like something I was supposed to agree to. You're 4 and do you want to have a root canal? You can get a kid to agree to things when you have the right inflection so couple months later, class has started in the community center and my memory's pretty vague of that time but I remember getting yelled at a lot from walking from knot to knot in the floorboards. That was my focus like wherever I stepped, I had to put my foot on another knot in the board. I recall, years later, my instructors saying that they took me at 4 and after I started, they wouldn't take anyone under 6. They kind of wonder if it was me so I stuck around at that school until I went to college so that's 14 years earning my black belt there.



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**Daniel Hart:**

I know you have a black belt in many disciplines. What was the first discipline?

**Jeremy Lesniak:**

So, this school, I was pretty lucky. It was 2 instructors, one having grown up in Kyokushin Karate and the other having grown up in Isshin-Ryu Karate and they got together and they got married and they opened the school together so we had 2 sets of forms, kata, and 2 different ways of looking at things. I would say that just because their personalities and Kyokushin which was Sensei Beth's original style kind of dominated Isshin-Ryu for anybody that has seen Isshin-Ryu, it's not the sexiest style of Karate. Really effective as I've gotten older, I appreciate a lot more so the black belt was kind of in that school rather than one style versus the other. At one point, I knew all of the katas and I'm actually working on it now.

**Daniel Hart:**

So, where we left off before I cut you off there was you get to college.

**Jeremy Lesniak:**

Yeah, got to college. Went to college, in part, because I wanted to train with someone I met on the tournament circuit. A gentleman who's actually been on the show and I'm going to probably not use a lot of names because I don't want to just namedrop all of these people that I've reached out to to bring on the show. I don't want it to feel like that, it feels funny but in order to get to his school, I needed a car and I didn't have a car the first 2 years of college so there was Karate Club on campus and it was this style and it's basically Shotokan but they didn't like to call it Shotokan, they liked to say it was something else and then, there was a Capoeira club so I did a couple years of that. That was a lot of fun. Finally get a car, go up the road to actually train Shotokan and so, I had 4 years there where I train in 3 different schools and then, moved to Vermont for non-martial arts reasons and decided hey, I'm ready. I'm going to open my own school so I moved in, found a spot, ran a school for a couple years and realized that I just didn't have the energy to dedicate to my students because I was trying to grow these other businesses, non-martial arts business, and I couldn't do both and I wasn't going to not give my students 100% because it just didn't feel right. I would've rather they go somewhere else.

**Daniel Hart:**

I heard an old proverb once that a fox that chases 2 rabbits gets none.

**Jeremy Lesniak:**

Yeah. Yeah and that's definitely apropos here. I remember, anybody who's worked as an owner of a startup business knows it's not a 9 to 5 or an 8 to 4. This is like a 6 to 5 endeavor and I'd pick up classes at 6 o'clock and teach for 2 to 3 hours and just be fried and I found myself dreading those days, not because I didn't love teaching, I love teaching. You've been in classes with me. You know I dig it. I really



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love sharing what I know or at least, what I pretend to know and there wasn't enough Jeremy to go around so that was tough. So, shut that down, there's a lot of tears there and kind of floated on my own for a couple years and the irony is that the town that I moved to in Vermont, prior to me, had two martial arts schools so, this town of 5,000 people had 3 martial arts schools, I thought that was kind of interesting and after a couple years of realizing I got to do something. I'm not motivating myself to train. I was in my mid-20s and just didn't have that fire without someone yelling at me, telling me what to do, I needed that so I lucked out. No disrespect to the other because I know the people there but, for me, my personality, I picked the right one and still call that gentleman my instructor today and that was, of course, the Taekwondo school and that was 2006. It's been 2006 since I started training there so it's been a decade.

### **Daniel Hart:**

Awesome. You've accumulated a bunch of great stories just from the conversations you've been sharing with many of the guests you've had on whistlekick martial arts radio but let's think about the stories that you've had for just Sensei Jeremy, what are the things that help make you a martial artist? Tell us about one of those stories.

### **Jeremy Lesniak:**

I've known that this episode was going to come for a long time because right around episode 15 or 20, people that were listening to the show were saying that they wanted to hear me on the other side of the mic and I pushed it back as long as I could, in part because of this question, because I knew this was this question I was going to struggle with the most but I've also, as we were talking about before we started recording, I felt that everyone else's story were great and before I started recording with them, they tell me oh, all I have is lame stories. We'll be done in 15 minutes and 90 minutes later I'm trying to get them off the recording so that's my long-winded delay from actually answering the question. I think the challenge that I have is that most of stories aren't long, they're not words, they're really short, they're more anecdotes like when I started practicing bō staff, my arms were so short that I could barely hold the bō over my head and the first time I worked partner bō work with my instructor, the bō didn't quite make it high enough over my head and she came down, not super hard, she wasn't trying to bust through my bō but she was expecting my bō to be there, and *DONK!* Right on top of my skull. I was probably 5. There's some dents, they may be from that night, who knows. I remember, probably, being 8 and thinking it was a completely reasonable question to ask one of my instructors why we were practicing jump spinning crescent kicks at the end of the class while we were all tired, why we didn't do that at the beginning of the class when we had more energy, receiving a lot of pushups for doing that. I was a pain in the butt. As I look back, I was one of those students that probably really tried my instructors' patience and the irony of all of those people that started training back then, that day, or even that year. To my knowledge, I'm the only one that still trains, I mean, dozens of people. What is that saying? One out of 100 people that start, earn a black belt, something like that and if those numbers would be believed, it's a way lower ratio but if someone really pins me down and says what's



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your favorite story around martial arts? Do I have to bring in one of the guests to wrap that in and that's Bill Wallace. I was approached by someone else who has been on this show and said, I've been looking at offering a Superfoot seminar, a Bill Wallace seminar, would you want to partner with me on that? I said yeah, that sounds like a lot of fun, let's do that.

**Daniel Hart:**

That was down in Rutland, right?

**Jeremy Lesniak:**

Yeah, we did that in Rutland so here it is, we're recording this June of 2016 and that was August of 2015 and we did that and so, someone else, a third person, that knew Superfoot said, let's go, you can meet him, put down the deposit check and whatever. There's some logistical stuff and I don't usually get star struck like I think it's cool when I meet somebody who's famous or whatever but I realized on the drive down, I was super nervous and I didn't know why like I kind of knew why but I knew this isn't a movie star, this is an exceptional martial artist and I've met plenty of exceptional martial artists, that's what I was telling myself and I was a blithering idiot when I actually met him the first time. So here I am, we're at this hotel in Connecticut, there's a few of us and he's making jokes with me and anybody that's met Grandmaster Wallace knows he's a funny guy. He likes to pick on people, he likes to make jokes and he's just ripping on me and normally, I'll give it right back but I just didn't have the capacity to do that at that time because here I am, and I'm realizing that this is the greatest kicker of all time and he's picking on me and I just couldn't wrap my brain around that kind of paradox because, up until then, when I had met famous martial artists like [00:15:12], quiet, reserved and I don't want to say respectful because that implies he wasn't respectful and he absolutely was but it was just a different vibe and, I'm not sure I'm doing the best job explaining this, it was surreal. I think that's probably the best way. It's a surreal moment and being in it was really hard for me to wrap my brain around.

**Daniel Hart:**

I've actually experienced that before with one of my favorite musicians. I couldn't speak real words to him and I had all these things that I wanted to say but I just, for some reason, lost the motor skills in my mouth to really make it go from my brain to my mouth to actually interact the way I wish I could have.

**Jeremy Lesniak:**

And so, Part B to that story because it continues to be more surreal, so we go from I meet him, we talk logistics, we get the datebook, I write him a check, he comes on the show, Episode 14, in part to promote that we were doing that seminar and what follows...at the seminar, I didn't get the chance to learn anything. I was working. I was making sure that everybody had what they needed, we had the kids first and then the adults and so, I'm working. I was on the floor for maybe 10 minutes and that really bummed me out because it looked like fun stuff so I reached out to his senior student in our area, Sensei



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Terry Dao who was a couple hours away and just shot him a message and said, can I come down to your school for an hour? Can you just show me the basics of this stuff? He said yeah, sure so we picked the time and I drove down and we start working out. 30 minutes in, he's like you've got pretty good kicks and so, well, cool. It's quite a compliment coming from you and a few minutes later he said, you know, we're having a Superfoot testing up here in April, you should test and I said what? You want me to test for a black belt under Bill Wallace? Yeah. Okay? So that kind of set up my path for the next few months while I was working on behind the scenes, not that anybody on the show knew that. I go down the next week and he says, Sensei Terry says, Bill brings all of his black belts together in Florida every year to train, you should come with us. I said you want me to go to Florida to train with all the Superfoot black belts and he said yes and I said oh, okay.

### **Daniel Hart:**

So wild.

### **Jeremy Lesniak:**

So here, in a matter of 6 months, I've gone from blithering idiot with this man to having a black belt with him and calling him my friend and there's no better parallel to this entire journey that's been whistlekick and martial arts radio than that story. Not because I'm anybody particularly special, I just chose to jump in and do this and these are the opportunities that presented themselves to me and I honestly question, on some days, do I really deserve them? Doesn't mean I'm going to turn them down because they're fun as heck but it's, you know the show the Greatest American Hero? You ever watch that show? Okay. The theme song? It's that. It's that song and if anybody doesn't know that song, you should go look that up. We'll link that on the show notes. I don't even know if I'm doing the show notes. Questions that we haven't answered yet.

### **Daniel Hart:**

So, martial arts affects us all differently. We all get our, we take away from it a unique experience, every single person. Every single person experiences a black belt differently so how do you think martial arts and these many experiences you've had have made you a better person?

### **Jeremy Lesniak:**

One of the things I'm committed to doing in these conversations is not throwing anybody under the bus. I don't like that and, fortunately, most of the guests have not done that, at the very most, it's implied. My childhood wasn't always the best which was my Mom and I, she did the best she could. The challenge was there. As I alluded to, I may not have been the easiest child to raise. [00:20:38] but I had a lot of other role models, a lot of people in the dojo that helped raise me. If you follow the show, if you follow whistlekick on social media, one of the things that you'll see from time to time are these quotes and some of them are from other people and we always attribute whoever that is and a lot of them



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come from me and just these, almost epiphanies I had and one of them, I think is really appropriate to what I'm trying to say, it takes a dojo, a school, to raise a martial artist. When I think back on these people that had such tremendous influence on, not just my martial arts but my childhood, because when you start so young, you're really soft clay. It's super easy to mold and had I been with a different set of people doing things differently, I would become a completely different person and I'm proud of who I am and I thank these people for all that effort on all of the things that they did. I would've been a pretty angry person, I think, I've got a pretty strong emotional side that I've learned, through martial arts, to channel pretty well but I think I would've ended up that stereotypical person that flies off the handle. I see that having been me but I didn't have, not just the outlet of martial arts, but the guidance of the people in it.

### **Daniel Hart:**

Yeah, my school has been a really great source of community and community is so important for everyday human life and I find martial arts schools, like you're saying, really provide a unique community with unique support and they're helping you with discipline and listening to your elders and listening to your peers and cooperation. I am hearing all that from you.

### **Jeremy Lesniak:**

I think that difference comes from a couple things. One, you're hitting each other. When you bleed, when you sweat, when you experience pain with someone, there's something very deeply psychological, there's a connection that happens that you really can't ignore and if anybody has ever trained with people that as individuals, they absolutely, I don't want to say hate, but strongly dislike but still find themselves willing to work with them and finding them excellent training partners. I've had several people like that over the years. I would not want to hang out with them. In fact, wouldn't even want them to have dinner in my home but I'll mix it up with them because they're great training partners and help me get better and the other thing is being that refusal by the higher ranks to accept anything but respect. I think that's really guiding especially for someone so young.

### **Daniel Hart:**

So, we just talked about some really awesome things to help make you who you were, make you a better person. Now, all of us find points in our lives where the swings just keep coming at us, we have, I mean, life happens and when life happens, some people have other skills like martial arts that can help you through those moments so why don't you tell us about how your martial arts training has helped you through a moment where life was particularly tough.

### **Jeremy Lesniak:**

So, a black belt is somewhat a universal goal for those of you who attained it in a similar experience, it kind of binds us but different schools apply different meaning to it and the school that I started in where



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I earned my first black belt, we didn't talk about what the test involved publicly and I'm going to respect that, not talking a lot about the specifics but one of the pieces that we did kind of let out was that once you earned your black belt, you knew you could do anything and that wasn't something that I fully understood until I was older. I earned my black belt when I was 16 and to tell a 16-year old, you can do anything, you already think that. To be a teenager, you're invincible, right? that's why so many kids get into so much trouble but right out of college, I started my first business as we talked about and it was not martial arts-related. It was computer-related. I started a consulting firm two weeks after graduating college and things worked pretty well for a while and managing that growth was tough. A year in, I opened a second location and at one point, I looked up, I had 15 employees and then, one day, I took a really hard look at the books, because my office manager was telling me something was off and we were broke. I knew we were so far beyond broke. It was just a stupid amount of debt and I just wanted to curl up in a ball and cry. I did, I'll be honest. It was a dark point but I was able to reflect back on my black belt test and a similar moment where, in that test, I was considering giving up and the face of a man who was in that test and showed me such love and compassion and empathy but was also not willing to let me give up and he helped me transition through that moment and realize that where I thought my boundaries were was arbitrary. I can re-draw them and I did the same thing in this business space. I didn't think I had the energy to keep going, to dig out from this hole I put myself in but I told myself, if you can get through that black belt test, you can get through this and that's become a mantra in my life for a lot of things that my black belt test was a ritual one, was probably the hardest thing I've ever done. Hopefully, it will remain the hardest thing I've ever done but I can always reflect back on that and say if I can get through that, I can do anything.

### **Daniel Hart:**

So, you've had, countless now, interactions with martial artists, instructors, other teachers both from a professional standpoint with whistlekick. You've been at a myriad of functions, shaking hands with people, meeting people, having conversations and learning from people outside of martial arts so let's have you try and name someone, someone other than your instructors that was an integral part of you becoming who you are today sitting across from me.

### **Jeremy Lesniak:**

It's funny when I look over this question list, because I've put together this question list. It's been refined over the last however many interviews done, this is the one question that I had never had any doubt and it's my mother. My mother's been a huge influence in my life and always will be and those people that know me well, personally know that doesn't always mean it's a positive thing. My relationship with my mother is a little complex. I think we'll leave it there but when it came to martial arts, she pushed me. She pushed me in a way that she didn't push me with anything else. I mean, she pushed me in everything. She wanted me to give my best regardless of what the thing was I was doing whether it was stacking wood or skiing or schoolwork. She had no problem with me, even failing, so long as I was putting in a hundred percent but something about whatever she saw in me when I was young in martial





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arts, she pushed really hard and during the years as a teenager where I was competing heavily, she was my coach. She gave a lot of time and that was tough. It was tough on both of us and I remember going into the dojo and working my katas when no one was around on a floor that didn't have insulation in the middle of winter and my feet getting numb and her saying one more and it wasn't always a nice one more. Anybody that remembers kind of that stereotypical 1980s Eastern European gymnastics coaches, Béla Károlyi and whatever yelling at their athletes. She had those moments. There was definitely a lot of motivation out of an aggressive place and I learned that same lesson from her that I learned through my black belt test just in a very different way that wherever I'm drawing those lines, they can always be re-drawn. There's always more we can do. You can always do a little bit better and I believe strongly that had I had anyone else as my coach during those years, the results would've been traumatically different and not in a positive way. Not saying that those were easy years but a lot of my skill in martial arts came from the attitude that my mother instilled in me, that refusal to accept anything less than my personal best and that's where the slogan for the company, never settle, has come from. Those weren't words that she ever used but the attitude that she instilled.

**Daniel Hart:**

It's pretty awesome to see that sort of early inspiration, early mentor also be your family member and have that come all the way through your professional life and decades later be able to have such a meaningful impact to you.

**Jeremy Lesniak:**

Yeah, and to be honest, I did not realize that that's where it came from until now. It was just something that hit me one day and I even remember roughly when it happened and I shared it with a couple people and what do you think of this slogan and they liked it but it's definitely from that mindset, definitely owed to her.

**Daniel Hart:**

Well, she did a good job. So, I already know the answer to this question so I will rephrase it a little bit here. So, competition means a lot of different things to different people. You compete against yourself, you compete against your friends, you compete against other schools, it's all in the spirit of growing. Why don't you tell us about a moment in competition that you felt like was probably your best competition? I want to hear about the time when you felt like you were your own worst critic and you know you could have done better and just tell us about those moments, a little polarization.

**Jeremy Lesniak:**

The worst one is easy and it's a moment I've reflected back on a lot because it's the one time I ever screwed up, really screwed up in competition and as we just learned, I hold myself to a pretty hard



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standard so to make an error in competition is hard for me to let go off. It was my high school talent show.

**Daniel Hart:**

In front of all your friends?

**Jeremy Lesniak:**

Yeah, the thing to remember, the thing that I think is pretty important to say is, as we've talked about in this show, I was the quintessential nerd in my school. Good grades, big glasses, did an extracurricular that few others did and nobody understood, martial arts, tried to participate in team sports and did horribly, soccer, and not because I wasn't any good but because nobody passed me the ball because I was a nerd. They don't want to pass the nerd the ball but my senior year, I finally started to figure out a little bit about who I was and have some friends and so I was kind of coming out of my shell a little bit and willing to try new things and there was a talent show and some people I knew were playing guitar and doing dance and things. I don't know if it was my idea or somebody else's idea that hey, Jeremy, you should do a martial arts routine. I was like okay so I came out with something completely new, choreographed it to music on my own. My mother didn't like the song choice.

**Daniel Hart:**

What was the song?

**Jeremy Lesniak:**

Boom, boom, boom off the Jock Jams soundtrack.

**Daniel Hart:**

Oh, I know exactly what you're talking about.

**Jeremy Lesniak:**

So, here, I'm sort of keeping some show note ideas here so I will see if we can find that and throw that in there and I did it with a bō staff and I got halfway through and I forgot it. My mind completely went blank and I threw the bō down and I walked off stage and I just, I couldn't wrap my brain around the fact that that happened because I, at that point, I'm a senior in high school, it was towards the end of senior year. I had spent years at a pretty high level competing, never had an issue. Now, whether it was because it was a newer routine, I didn't have time to practice with, it was the environment, it was me being cocky, whether it was in front of my peers, I have no idea. I still don't know to this day. I begged the person running the event to give me a second shot so I went back out there, not a minute later, did it again and nailed it. From my vantage, it went the way it's supposed to the first time. Thank God they let me do it again because otherwise, I would have a really hard time. Best moment, so, forms are my



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thing. Sparring has never been my thing. I like sparring but it just never been the thing that resonated for me. Probably from a similar place of that individual sports rather than team sports kind of a place and that's where I saw my success competing was in forms be it weapons forms or openhand forms and I'm going to guess most people have that are listening, have seen a martial arts competition. Forms are scored. It's a subjective thing and usually they'll say, each of the 3, 5, 7 whatever referees will award a score between this low score and this high score. Very rarely is it opened up to a full 10, I don't know why it just isn't so I was in this division and I was coming off my heaviest year of competition. I was probably three-quarters of the way through and they had set an arbitrary high score of 9 and I came off and it felt good and they gave the scores and 4 out of the 5 referees gave me a 9 and it wasn't so much the scores that mattered in hindsight but that feeling of validation for me, in that moment, that those people loved what I did and it set the tone for me for the rest of that competitive season and it's a moment that I think back on now when I do forms that I am capable of re-drawing those boundaries of rising to whatever the occasion is and that's why I love competition is because I'm at my best when other people are going to observe me. I thrive on it.

### **Daniel Hart:**

Yeah, I can imagine how a moment like that would be just so empowering to have people that probably don't know you or if they know you, they only know of you to be able to say this person just did a fantastic job. This person just really showed us what it is to be a martial artist. Perfect score! It's got to be an amazing moment. So, I imagine the answer to this question may have changed over and over again and this is probably circumstantial to what day of the week it is but if you could train with any martial artist of any discipline, alive or dead, who would you pick to spend your time with?

### **Jeremy Lesniak:**

It does change. The one universal is that it always ends up being someone that started something, something that some style or whatever that is passed down through because whenever someone has started a martial arts style, they have taken whatever they knew and either created things of their own or filtered out things that they knew. They created a set of whatever it is and there's a thought process that goes into that and I don't think that we get that thought process a lot when we look at a martial arts style that goes back to the '20s or '30s, whatever. None of those people that were around when it was formed are around now to tell us the why and we have some writings and things but I really dig that why. So, who would those whys be? Funakoshi is up there. I would love to go super way back and, assuming our knowledge of this history is correct, the Bodhidharma brought martial arts to China and trained the monks. I would to be there then. I'd love to train with him and say, okay, so why? Why was this the physical discipline that was important for the monks and not yoga? Not something else, not some ancient version of parkour. There's got to be gymnastics. There's a lot of different things and obviously the combat elements make sense. That's a sensible thing but I'm guessing it's more than that so that's, I'm a nerd, I've always been a nerd and clearly, I'm still a nerd. I like the whys. Why are we



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doing jump spinning crescent kicks at the end of the class and not the beginning when we have more energy?

**Daniel Hart:**

I've always been a why person myself. Some people take the question why a challenge and really, it's just curiosity. Some people just have to know.

**Jeremy Lesniak:**

Yeah.

**Daniel Hart:**

So, I asked my wife last night, do you want to watch a dramatic comedy or do you want to watch a martial arts movie? Because we both do martial arts. Made me happy that she chose martial arts and so,

**Jeremy Lesniak:**

She can stay.

**Daniel Hart:**

Yes, so she can stay and I love martial arts movies. While they're overly dramatized and fantastical, I loved them all, even though there're really corny ones. There's such a great creative energy in it and there is a lot of amazing martial artists that are real martial artists outside of the movies so I want to talk to you about movies. Why don't you tell us what your favorite movie is and if your favorite actor isn't in that movie, I want you to tell us who your favorite martial arts actor is?

**Jeremy Lesniak:**

I love martial arts movies. I tend to gravitate more towards the bigger dramatic ones, the ones that have more kind of fantastic choreography. Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon blew my mind. I mean, just the choreography was absolutely outstanding and there's an artistic element to it.

**Daniel Hart:**

And a beautiful story.

**Jeremy Lesniak:**

Yeah, yeah, the story's wonderful. That's not my favorite movie, though, and the irony is that my favorite movie doesn't have that quality to the fight scenes and that's the original Karate Kid because that was the first martial arts movie I saw and it came out just after I started training. I was super young. My mom never took me to the movies but we went and saw this and it validated what I was doing. This is the early '80s and I'm a kid who just started kindergarten. I knew I was doing martial arts but here



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onscreen was this guy, obviously who is older than me and I recognized that, but I could tell he wasn't an adult. At least, he doesn't look like an adult. In hindsight, [00:48:20] when he did that movie but I was still, even at that age, not seem weird to throw these labels in Kindergarten but I wasn't a cool kid, still kind of on the outside. To be validated that this thing that I was doing was different wasn't just okay was good and so that resonated for me and whenever I watched that movie, I have that same feeling even now, even knocking on 40. Watching that movie just makes me feel like I made the right choice to not just start training but continue training.

**Daniel Hart:**

Which Karate Kid is it with the bonsai tree? Is it 2 or 3?

**Jeremy Lesniak:**

Pretty sure that's 2.

**Daniel Hart:**

Ever since I saw that movie, it had the martial arts inspiration that all the Karate Kid movies have that really just sort of empower you to believe in yourself but I always wanted a bonsai tree but because of that movie and the respect in it, I'm not ready for my bonsai tree yet because I don't have the right place and it's, they have these big lessons in those movies and that's one lesson that stuck with me is like don't bite off more than you can chew like I want a bonsai tree but I know that it's not just like a movie where you can just go buy it and it's going to take care of itself.

**Jeremy Lesniak:**

Well, the first one has bonsai too but I guess it depends on what scene you're talking about. Tell me, is it about the one where he climbs down?

**Daniel Hart:**

Yeah, he climbs down.

**Jeremy Lesniak:**

Yeah, that's 2. Yeah, there's a lot in there.

**Daniel Hart:**

It's an overarching theme that are inherently part of the martial arts and people think it's just part of the movie but that's really like, that's really just [00:50:23] throughout. I can see that connection. I also love that movie.

**Jeremy Lesniak:**



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It's great. There's magic in that movie that most martial arts films aren't able to capture.

**Daniel Hart:**

It's probably also the most referenced one. Mostly, the wax on, wax off.

**Jeremy Lesniak:**

Yeah, and the crane kick.

**Daniel Hart:**

And the crane kick.

**Jeremy Lesniak:**

At the end. The part being about my favorite actor, it's not Ralph Macchio, it's not Pat Morita and it's not Bruce Lee and that's shifted as well. In high school, it was Jackie Chan without a doubt. I used to joke and tell people he was my dad because I was an awkward teenager and I thought it was funny but as I've aged, I've gone more towards that artistic side and it's all Kung Fu practitioners. First, it was Jet Li and now, it's Donnie Yen and Daniel Wu because of the beauty in what they portray and we don't get a lot of, really any, Karate-influenced fight scenes or Taekwondo-influenced fight scenes that have that beauty as well as the brutality.

**Daniel Hart:**

Donnie Yen is one of my favorites. I haven't seen him yet in a movie that I did not enjoy like every single one. Some of them aren't the best movies but his martial arts are just so much fun to watch and I've also seen on YouTube a number of clips of him just training before the movies that are just wild and his physique and his artistry are, they blow my mind, constantly, he is an amazing martial artist and really, it's hard to find someone who is an amazing martial artist and a great actor. He's really got both.

**Jeremy Lesniak:**

So, it's funny that you're saying these things because I was in a group of martial artists a week and a half ago and say, somehow we're talking about movies, basically I'm saying the things that you're saying and I didn't know all of the people in this group. One of them went to high school with him so I'm getting these Donnie Yen stories before Donnie Yen was Donnie Yen. I mean, this guy trains Kung Fu now and knew his mom and just was able to really fill in that early gap.

**Daniel Hart:**

So it's this six degrees of separation.

**Jeremy Lesniak:**



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Yeah, super crazy. In martial arts, it's like 2 degrees but it actually, it made me respect him even more because famous people don't always talk about their colorful past and his past was really colorful.

**Daniel Hart:**

Did you see that he is going to be in the Star Wars movie, Rogue One?

**Jeremy Lesniak:**

Oh yeah!

**Daniel Hart:**

I am so unbelievably excited that he is going to be in my favorite franchise. It's long overdue.

**Jeremy Lesniak:**

Light saber please.

**Daniel Hart:**

It's long overdue that someone Kung Fu-centric in that franchise, we could have a whole conversation about Star Wars and Donnie Yen.

**Jeremy Lesniak:**

We could and hopefully, we would be able to after.

**Daniel Hart:**

Maybe that will be one of your other episodes. We'll talk about Rogue One.

**Jeremy Lesniak:**

Yeah, let's do it!

**Daniel Hart:**

So, you just talked about actors and movies. Some of us that take martial arts home with us and don't just do it once or twice a week or some people a minute more than that, we'd like to read and watch at home so the reading part, do you have any books that stand out to you that you would say were influential or inspirational to you as a person and as a martial artist?

**Jeremy Lesniak:**

One of the things that's kind of cool about this show is that we got a lot of people on that they've written books and they send me their books. Sometimes, it's this autobiographical book and they send it to me and I don't even know who they are so I have this huge stack of books that I'm trying to slog



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through. Some of the guests that have been on this show or pending coming up on this show have asked me to help edit their books. No, that is not an offer to the public. I did spend a couple years as a professional editor so I get first crack at somebody's book so that's really fun but the one that had the most influence on me, we've talked about on the show a bunch is *Zen in the Martial Arts* by Joe Hyams and I've said it on this show. That book was in our bathroom forever. I don't know. From the time, it was probably in there before I was old enough to care about reading and it was there when I [00:55:58] and I don't care how many times I've read that book because it will be short chunks and just the stories in there, I don't even remember those stories because I haven't read it since. It's on my list to pick back up and read a book but I just remember reading that book, pieces of that book and knowing how significant it was and I don't think I got it back then. You read something, you hear something, you see something and you don't recognize the significance of it but again, this goes back to a time when I was so young, so impressionable that those words are in there somewhere. I'm sure when I sit down and read it again, it's going to all be familiar.

**Daniel Hart:**

Sound like the guy who went to high school with Donnie Yen who probably didn't realize who he was going to high school with at the time. He won't realize until 20, 25.

**Jeremy Lesniak:**

Yeah. Look, I wanted to have the author, Joe Hyams, to come on the show. Unfortunately, he's passed away.

**Daniel Hart:**

I will add that to my reading list.

**Jeremy Lesniak:**

It's a good book. The other one that just struck me because it's so crazy that it's true is *A Killing Art*. The story of the founder of Taekwondo and kept coming up on the show and people are suggesting I read it. I even bought it for one of my best friends as a gift and he read it and he was you got to read it so I finally sat down to read it and it was just crazy, killer book. The author's coming on at some point soon. We've got, I think we have a date worked out in the next couple weeks because it's just a mind-blowing story like you could take that book, turn it into a movie and not embellish anything and people would not believe it. They would think it was some exaggerated action thriller. I mean, just the amount of murder and scandal and backroom deals, it's like a Korean version of a Bourne movie. It gets nuts and so, to read that and know, holy cow! This happened and this is what people did because they loved, some of them, did it because they loved the martial art that they were cultivating so much. I've never loved anything enough to murder someone so, I can't empathize with that, right? But clearly they did and that's just, that's crazy.





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**Daniel Hart:**

So, you've got a successful company that supports martial artists by making the best sparring gear and apparel.

**Jeremy Lesniak:**

Thanks.

**Daniel Hart:**

That's a plug for whistlekick, in case you were wondering.

**Jeremy Lesniak:**

I'll take it! We don't usually do commercials.

**Daniel Hart:**

So, that's your company and your company has its own goals, its own entity and you're going to take that where you're going to take that but, for you, as a martial artist, do you have any...what's your next step? What's your next goal as Sensei Jeremy? I was at your test, recently, when you got your promotion and are you looking to your next promotion? Are you looking to another discipline?

**Jeremy Lesniak:**

Promotions are so weird because, I think, anybody that's spent more than 6 months in martial arts knows that rank and skill rarely correlate because it's about that personal journey so my journey continues whether or not I put more figurative stripes on my belt. I don't actually have stripes on my belt. I just want to keep getting better. I've always felt like the best analogy for martial arts knowledge is the wheel in trivial pursuit so your first style gives you that wedge but it's the biggest one. I mean, you spend your time 10, 12, 20, whatever years in whatever martial art it is and that's your foundation and as you train in other things with other people, you're adding more. You never fill it. You're never shooting back for center for that final quest in a game but there's always more you can learn and the more you learn, it does 2 things. It unsettles what you've already learned and changes your perspective on some of it but on the rest, it dovetails. It fits in pretty well. Taking Karate and Taekwondo and Capoeira and Judo and Jiu Jitsu and all the other things that I've done in seminars and classes and whatever, it's all different but it's all the same so I really enjoy adding to my repertoire. I'd like that feeling of not knowing what's going on, that white belt feeling. It's such a scary thing.

**Daniel Hart:**

That's how I felt in your kicking class. You came to the other school and got us all out of our comfort zone and it was really refreshing because I've been teaching, totally related to what you're saying.



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**Jeremy Lesniak:**

But I think that's where the magic happens. When you are scared of what you're training, especially after you've moved past that. I was lucky enough, I was visiting a school last night and it was this one woman's first night. Her husband and her son train and she'd been watching the kid's class for 6 months or something and she got out there. You can tell she was nervous but she was killing it. She was doing amazingly well because she just kind of jumped in with both feet and let it happen and I think, a lot of times, as martial artists and I do this, my tendency is to go back to what I know and that's great and you can't, one of my favorite sayings is you cannot progress without change so, unless I'm willing to change the way I'm doing things, I'm not going to grow as a martial artist so I've got to be willing to operate in that place where I don't know things or at least, don't know them super well and the place where I find the most benefit is when I'm doing something completely foreign.

**Daniel Hart:**

I think it speaks volumes to you as a martial artist and we study very different styles but I know that there are some martial artists that lack the humility to put on that imaginary white belt again. They're in their comfort zone and their own sense of what is right but I think humility is one of the best things that martial artists can have because you're always a student and that speaks volumes.

**Jeremy Lesniak:**

Yeah, I don't...I'll agree with you. I don't know if I fully agree with that word choice, humility. I know where you're going because I don't know if it's always, I mean, for some, absolutely and I know some people that their unwillingness to train other things definitely can come from a place of ego but I think for a lot of them, it comes from their fear of having that white belt feeling again. That oh my god, I don't know what I'm doing because it's scary and the more time you spend in a position of authority, of knowledge, the harder it is, I think, to go back and so, that kind of wraps back around to what I'm saying earlier, rank is not a big deal to me. I don't define myself by how many stripes I put in my belt. Anybody that spends time with me training knows that I can do some things and I can do some of those things pretty well.

**Daniel Hart:**

Something you said earlier in the interview, too, is that I did my black belt, I can do anything and I can hear that that attitude extends to I can be a white belt again. I can do this. I'm not intimidated by this, let's do it, let's have some fun. Yeah, that's great and it sounds like a really well-rounded goal to have to be able to attack each of those things.

**Jeremy Lesniak:**



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I just like to learn, right? I'm a nerd. I mean, there's the common thread for this whole episode. These episodes have threads as we start to unravel who a person is and clearly, mine is I'm a nerd. I'm a martial arts nerd and I'm okay with that.

**Daniel Hart:**

I also use that word to describe myself so I totally get what you're saying. So, as we round this down here, come to the close here, is there anything that you would like to say to all your listeners. We've heard you talk to other people but you haven't necessarily given us your voice. We've been hearing other people's parting advice. What is something that you would add here for all our listeners?

**Jeremy Lesniak:**

I'll answer the question you're meaning to ask but before, I think I want to kind of explain why. I've done enough of these to recognize that I am far more comfortable in this moment now at the end than I was in the beginning, right? And for most of the guests, there is some progression. I didn't expect to have that. I figured I'd be good to go right from the go, right? As soon as we started, I mean, how many hours have we done this? I mean, people that listen to the show, how many hours have I been in your ears? This should be old hat but it's a completely different thing so here we go! I'm uncomfortable, I'm a white belt in these situations. First time I've ever been interviewed on my own show. It's not my show right now. It's your show right now. I'm just here and so, I've been a little afraid through this. I was afraid getting going with it. There was talk of this happening not with you, in fact, it didn't even go as far as me reaching out to someone to interview me but there was talk about this being episode 50 and so, I kicked it 50 episodes down the line.

**Daniel Hart:**

It's pretty wild. I feel like you just started it and we're recording episode 100. It's pretty wild.

**Jeremy Lesniak:**

Yeah, it's been over a year. This is going to come out in July of 2016 and the first episode came out the beginning of April 2015 so it's at 15 months. It's a long time.

**Daniel Hart:**

Time flies when you're having fun.

**Jeremy Lesniak:**

It does! It does and I don't know if I answered the thing that I was posing. I think my train of thought may have ran away but I appreciate what it's like more now to be on the other side, to be the guest and I'm guessing that this is going to make me a better interviewer, not that I've been the interviewee and I appreciate everyone willingness to listen and hopefully, you have made it to this point at the end where



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I think I'm doing a better job than I did in the beginning. So, advice. You know, it's funny. I always have these quick thoughts when I'm talking to guests. I'm good at responding. I'm good at playing the straight man in a comedy duo. I'm not the guy in the front with my words, usually, so coming up with something to say is a little bit of a challenge but I think for me, it comes back to time and recognizing time that we have a finite amount of it. Earlier today, Facebook was suggesting to me this post that I posted about a year or two ago about time as this is still in my head and what I was writing was that if we knew the exact moment we were going to die, even if it was we're going to die in like 110, I don't think people would take their lives for granted. I don't think we would kick the can down the road quite so much because the moment death becomes real, people do things really differently. You see that in somebody's [01:10:19] so and so has cancer and we're looking at 3 to 5 years. I mean, that's a much longer diagnosis than a lot of people have and yet, it still changes their life in the way they approach time.

**Daniel Hart:**

Absolutely.

**Jeremy Lesniak:**

And as you might imagine, running this company is busy. I mean, I haven't given up the rest of my life. I mean I still train, I still have friends and family and travel and do all these other things and it's required me to take a better look at the way I handle time and making sure that my, the way I use my time, because that's all we have. I mean, you go to a job, you're trading time for what? It's a time-vac. If you say, well no, there's a skill there. you invested time to acquire that skill. It's just time. It's all time and I try to make sure that, at any moment, the time that I'm investing in whatever I'm doing meets my goals whether that's growing this business, practicing martial arts, building friendships. If I'm not okay looking back and saying, I just spent 10 hours that I never get back with someone I don't like, I've messed up. I don't do that. I didn't know this when I developed this personal practice but Bruce Lee did the same thing. He would completely eschew social norms and just be completely rude and say no because I don't get this time back with this person working with me so, to boil that off into a nugget that you can put on to Pinterest, make sure your time is invested in a way that supports your goals.

**Daniel Hart:**

Thank you for listening to episode 100 of whistlekick martial arts radio and thank you to Sensei Jeremy for letting me sit here on this side of the desk. It is really an honor. If you like the show, be sure that you're subscribing or using one of the free apps. They're available on both iOS and Android. For those of you kind enough to leave us a review, remember that we randomly check out the different podcast review sites and if we find your review and mention it on the air, be sure to email us for a free box of whistlekick stuff. Those reviews are a lot more important than you may think. We'd love to get your feedback on our show. If you know someone that will be great to interview on the show, please fill out



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