



Episode 431 – Balancing Teaching and Training | whistlekickMartialArtsRadio.com



Jeremy Lesniak:

Hello everyone, welcome! This is whistlekick martial arts radio episode 431. Today, I'm joined by Sensei Gabriel Siu and we're talking about the challenges of balancing your own training with teaching. It's a great conversation. I know you're going to like it. If my voice is unfamiliar to you, I'm Jeremy Lesniak. I'm your host for whistlekick martial arts radio. I'm the founder of whistlekick and you can see all the stuff that I and the rest of the team are involved in at whistlekick.com. One of the things you'll find over there is our store. We sell uniforms and shirts and hats and sparring equipment and a bunch of other stuff and if you use the code `PODCAST15`, that will save you 15% off everything you buy. It supports the show and it helps us keep going. If you want to find more about the show, that's a separate website, whistlekickmartialartsradio.com. Nice and easy and you can find everything from all the episodes we've done including training, transcripts, photos, videos, links. You name it, right there, all for free. We bring you two shows a week and hopefully, you enjoy them. Hopefully, you learn something and that's kind of the goal with today's episode. In the early days of the show, people would write in. They would have questions and I would simply answer them but now, in an effort to bring those questions and the answers, my opinions back to the audience; when someone writes in with a question, I very often will ask them, hey, would you be willing to come on the show and discuss this? And not everyone says yes but, in this case, that's what happened. Sensei Siu reached out, he's been a listener to this show for a while and he said, I've got this challenge. I'm having a hard time balancing my training with my teaching. What do you think? And so that's what we did. We talked about that today. Dug into some of the



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challenges of that. I offer some feedback, some thoughts on how he might approach that, how I've approached it in the past and it was a good conversation. Even if you're not an instructor yourself, I think you'll get something out of this episode so hang back, take a listen and here we go. Sensei Siu, welcome to whistlekick martial arts radio.

Gabriel Siu:

Thank you, Jeremy. It's an honor to be here.

Jeremy Lesniak:

It's an honor to have you. This is one of those episodes, listeners, where somebody writes in and they say hey, what do you think about this? and I kind of dodge the email and I'm like just come on the show because, see, if I write back to people, if I reply to their emails, that's not content that we get to use on the show. Nobody else gets to see that and I like being a little bit longer form so I thank you for writing in and I think you're the 3rd person that's come on with this kind of Q&A, "live format" so thank you.

Gabriel Siu:

You're welcome. I didn't realize that there hadn't been that many but yeah, thank you for responding to my question and for inviting me on the show. I've really enjoyed listening to the episodes and listening to the podcast and I'm really excited to be here and to talk about this with you.

Jeremy Lesniak:

Well, cool, cool. Yeah, I do and I really try, and as far as I know, I get a lot of email but unless someone is trying to sell me something or being really lame, I reply to everything. I even reply to the hate which is very, very infrequent but I'll still acknowledge because if someone's going to take the time to email me, I'm going to respond to that just like on Facebook on my birthday. Hundreds of people wish you a happy birthday, I'm going to reply back to every single one of them. Most of them are just going to get a thank you with an exclamation point but if somebody writes more than that, I'm going to write back more than that. I mean, there's a bit of a martial arts principle in there, right? You meet someone where they're at. They give you more and you got to give them back more or at least, you have to receive more. There's some balance there.

Gabriel Siu:

Yeah, totally, I get that and it's from a listener's point of view and a customer point of view and a fan point of view, I really appreciate that. It really makes you stand out not only as a person but as a company as well so thank you.

Jeremy Lesniak:



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You're making me cry and I'm not entirely kidding. Before I start weeping on air, because that's not cool, nobody wants to listen to that. You came on to talk about a question so if you would, tell the audience the question that you had written in.

Gabriel Siu:

Sure, the question. A little bit of a background, it's something that I struggled with my entire martial arts career. I recently got my black belt and the thing that I struggled with was how do I balance teaching and training? I'm sure we'll get into more of my story as we go on but the short version is that I have helped teach, really since I was a white belt, and so I've never been just a student.

Jeremy Lesniak:

And is that typical in your school that even someone as a white belt will be teaching?

Gabriel Siu:

No, that is not typical. The story behind my story is that my wife, she is a black belt and she wanted to...she got her black belt like 20-some years ago but her dojo shut down and she had traveled the world as a missionary and gone off to college and done other things but everywhere she went she wanted to teach, she loves to teach, loves the martial arts so when we got married, about 9 and a half years ago, she wanted to start teaching. She wanted to do her dream. She wanted her own school and I'd never done any kind of martial arts before and so, at the age of, I think I was 26, 24, somewhere in there. Anyways, she started teaching and I said, great, I've always wanted to learn and I'd love to teach as well so let's do this and we started with a handful of kids and she kind of resurrected her old curriculum and we made some changes as we went on but me being an adult and married to the black belt, it was only natural that I help teach as well and so, we would work at home and she would help me progress ahead so that I could help teach when we're at the dojo where we teach classes. It was something like I've always enjoyed teaching but the higher in rank that I got, the more I struggled with how do I balance this because I wanted to train. We did a lot of competing and I want it to be good at competitions but I never had the time, I never felt like I had the appropriate amount of time to commit to just my training because I was always helping teach and train other people as well.

Jeremy Lesniak:

Yeah, and of course, the more you learn, the more time it takes to maintain that body of knowledge. Obviously, it takes longer to learn something to develop a skill than it does to maintain it but once you've been training for a few years and you know maybe bunch of forms, a bunch of techniques, maybe some, what in Karate are called Kihon, Taekwondo Kibon, pre-arranged sets and you've got to know all these stuff for you and you want to know it well enough to teach it and you're married to the instructor so you want to own up to kind of honor that relationship, that's a significant amount of time but, of course, you've got family commitments and the time that you're in your dojo, you're teaching,



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you're training and you want to do something once in a while that's not martial arts and there's only so many hours in the day.

Gabriel Siu:

Yeah.

Jeremy Lesniak:

And so, this is a challenge and the reason that I wanted you to come on this is because this is a question that, not only have I heard before, I've had this discussion with people. I've had this struggle myself and I'll dash any hopes of an easy answer right up front. There is no easy solution to this. If there was one, you would have learned about it and probably figured it out by yourself and there wouldn't be a problem because the problem isn't really a problem. The problem is you have multiple things that are important. That are similar enough that they feel like they should go together but they really don't. I don't know about you but I've certainly seen plenty of people who really know certain things but stink at teaching it and on the flipside, I've seen people who're really good at teaching things but can't do it too well. I'm able to teach certain things that I cannot do myself. I've helped people through gymnastics and through martial arts and through so many other things that I've worked on with physical disciplines. Teach people skills that I am not able to do or not very well because the ability to do and the ability to teach are two completely different skillsets.

Gabriel Siu:

Absolutely, absolutely and I feel very blessed to be fairly physically gifted, athletically gifted. I played all the sports. Football, basketball, baseball, volleyball, soccer, everything and I've done fairly well in all of those but coming into martial arts, it's so different than anything else. It's like learning something all over again and, as my wife was teaching me these things, there were certain things as I got good at them, I remember one day she looked at me and she goes wow, you are better at that than I have ever been and will ever be and I think at the time, I was like maybe a purple belt or something which was halfway to black belt and it just, it was humbling. I was honored that she say that but humbling as well to know that I was so good at something that I wasn't, that I felt that I wasn't good at and so, there is always this balance of trying to be good at something but not feeling like I was good enough with learning at home on my own or even in class and then, trying to teach it and trying to keep both as high, trying to keep my knowledge as high as possible so I can teach as well as possible but then trying to keep my own skill as high as possible. I feel like I was never good enough at either to feel adequate.

Jeremy Lesniak:

So when you talk about something not being good enough, we're talking about there's a standard you've identified, a certain level that in your assessment, you're not at so, but, the question is where you're getting that level, that standard from? Is it coming from you? is it coming from someone else?



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Gabriel Siu:

Man, that's a good question. I think I would say that's coming from me. I'm always my own worst critic and I never feel like I'm good enough and that's not necessarily a good thing. In one sense, it's a good thing because I'm always striving to get better but in this case, especially in my color belt, my immediate rank, not a good thing. If I was super down on myself, super hard on myself and it's not healthy, it's not a good thing and so, when I would get depressed with my own performance, that affected the way, that affected my mental commitment to teaching and to our school and it was not a healthy mentality to have but, I think my wife will tell me, you finally started listening to me over these past few months, maybe this past year when she tells me you're good, I finally learned to listen and believe her.

Jeremy Lesniak:

Have you always been like this? Have you always been your own worst critic?

Gabriel Siu:

No. I can't think when I started. Probably, late high school early college years because I...when I was young...I'm trying to think how to word this. I always sought to please my coach, my parents, whoever was the authority over me but I didn't always receive positive feedback from, it wasn't necessarily one source. I had my share of bad coaches and just kind of over the years, it wore on me and I started believing some of the negative criticism and, even, amplifying it to myself and it created a very unhealthy view of myself.

Jeremy Lesniak:

Yeah, and for all the good that sports do and I'm throwing martial arts into that bucket, negative motivation can work but when it's systemic, it doesn't give people good tools to use moving forward especially with children, especially when you're talking to a kid and saying come on, you can go harder, you can do this and I guess that's still kind of positive. When you're telling someone you're not good enough, that go run laps because that was terrible which, let's face it, is kind of the cliché high school football coach and most of us probably even, if you've watched any movies or TV that have had high school football coaches that have had that or maybe you played on a team like that, they all got a baseball cap on, they're always yelling, there's spit in the corner of their mouth. It's a cliché for a reason and some people do well with those tools but there's always a downside.

Gabriel Siu:

Yeah and one of the things I've learned, especially in the last few months, as I've been helping our assistant instructors now, our highest ranks, one of the things I've told them, when you're standing in front of the class, you have this variety of age and/or rank and everyone has different needs and so, one of the things that I've learned to do fairly well, I think, and for me, I'm helping my assistant instructors learn is you have to be the instructor that each student needs whereas on a football team, you can yell



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and scream. I know this example breaks down but you can have one coach running the same thing and everyone's got to keep up. It's much more of a team effort, rather than in the martial arts, it's an individual journey, individual effort and so, it's difficult. I would say, it's more difficult to be a martial arts instructor because you have to be an instructor to each different person rather than just the team as a whole.

Jeremy Lesniak:

Right. If we continue the football analogy, it would be like running blocking drills at the same time that you've got other people doing kicker turns, place kicks and you're running plays and defense and you've got everybody doing slightly or dramatically different drills at the same time. It's chaos but that's the typically martial arts class, isn't it? It tends to happen that way because that's all we've got to do. So, if you can suspend this idea, these standards, that you've applied for yourself, do what you can with what you have where you're at. If we get rid of those standards, if we say that when you're teaching you're going to teach the best you can and you're going to give yourself some time during the week to train on your own, to do things that maybe a balance between things you enjoy and things you know you need to work on. If things shift towards that, what might that look like? Talk about the time commitment that might be there. How many hours are you teaching? How many hours might you be training and there's no right or wrong answer. The instinct here is to, if you ask me this question, I'd be like aww, I don't want to seem like I'm not training enough so I'm going to kind of fudge those numbers a little bit. There's no right or wrong and here's why there's no wrong: because anybody that spend a lot of time teaching, including you knows, you learn a tremendous amount teaching. You learn different aspects of martial arts. It doesn't always, it's hard to learn new material, new things when you're teaching but you refine and you develop and further understand what you already learned so substantially.

Gabriel Siu:

Yeah, and even to continue that, there's been times when I'm trying to show a student a technique or a kick or something and they do it better than I have and I thought oh, I just learned something from you and that's been really cool but I don't keep a strict schedule or strict track of how much training I do outside of class time. I just do as much as I can when I can because I also work and I have those commitments too and sometimes, I come home from work and I'm really tired. I don't want to train but you hit on something interesting, I don't know if you do that intentionally or not but to work on things, either things that I enjoy or the things that I need to work on, and that's also a big part of my training. My personal training is do I just do what I know I'm good at and I enjoy this form or do I do some sparring practice where I hit the bag because I enjoy that, I know I'm good at it or do I really knuckle down and work on me and my flexibility and my hip mobility. I'm terrible at that and for me, stretching and doing these mobility exercises, they hurt and I think part of that is because I'm so inflexible and part of it is just that doing all the other sports, I've not needed to stretch for flexibility before. You need to stretch to warm up, to stretch for power but that's different and so, part of being my own worst critic, I think, is finding the thing that I'm worst at and trying to improve that so I guess that would be one



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benefit of being my own worst critic is that I do tend to work on the things that I'm worst at because I don't want to be bad at the thing especially as an instructor. I don't want to be up in front of my class and say, you need to do this and I can't do it myself and so, my personal training, I would say probably...it's hard to put number on it but I feel like I have a good balance of doing what I'm good at and enjoy and doing what I'm not good at because I want to be good at everything and I want to improve myself in all areas.

Jeremy Lesniak:

Right and I think that that balance is important. The whole subject here, we're talking about balance here. We're talking about teaching, we're talking about your own training and that struggle of that balance and I think it's important to have, for your own training, things that you really enjoy and things that you need to work on because if you're only working on the things you need to work on, your association with that training time isn't going to be positive. It's going to be neutral, maybe even negative because now you're reinforcing that your martial arts training is exclusively things that you are not so good at and what do we know about most people and the things that they're not good at? They don't generally enjoy them. We can enjoy the process in getting better if there is an endpoint. Imagine that you pick up skateboarding. Skateboarding, I tried for about a minute when I was a kid, wasn't my thing, but anybody out there who's been a skateboarder knows, when you're new to it, it hurts a lot and it hurts all the time. Imagine that the moment you get any competency on a skateboard, you say okay, now, I'm going to work on a unicycle and once you get that, now you're on rollerblades and now you're on a pogo stick, I bet half the people out there don't know what a pogo stick is and that becomes your physical practice is working on these skills that always hurt. How long are you going to continue that?

Gabriel Siu:

Not very long.

Jeremy Lesniak:

That's not fun so if you're balancing it out, if you're doing whatever ratio you need, let's say you're going to train for 20 minutes and you spend 10 minutes working on some things you really enjoy. Maybe you're hitting the bag and then the other 10 minutes, maybe you're working on a form that just doesn't do it for you. Maybe you put 5 minutes in the bag before you work on the form and then, 5 minutes after. You bookend it. You mix it up. There's nothing wrong with that and one of the things that we've talked about, we've not done a formal announcement because we're still kind of figuring it out but you, and I suspect a number of the listeners have caught wind of the 2-minute martial arts programming that we've been doing. You get better at things through frequency more than just trying to lump all that time together. You take that same, let's say you've got 2 hours a week to train on your own and you split it up across 7 days, it's easier to find those smaller blocks of time and if you're working on the same things, let's face it, how often do you want to sit and work on the same thing for an hour? Not too often but if



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you work on it 10 minutes every day, that's a lot more approachable and then, at the end of a few weeks, you go wow, I've really progressed here because just the way the brain learns, the way those neural pathways are conditioned and expand, frequency's a huge component of that. We've talked about that a little bit on the show and think about the things that we do every day. We get pretty good at them.

Gabriel Siu:

Yeah, I'm a big fan of the 2-minute martial arts training. I see those just about every day and it was really cool because a lot of the things that you guys put out on that, I already do and the things that I see that I don't do, I add those to my training and a big part of my personal training, I feel very lucky and blessed to be able to call this part of my training is that as I drive in my truck, I listen to your podcast which is how I've been able to listen to so many so quickly. I just listen to tons as I drive and I don't listen just for the entertainment value but I listen to what I can learn and your self-defense drill, I think you call it Dark Alley, we've taken that. We use that in our class and it's an amazing drill, an amazing tool and so I, not only listen but research and read and watch videos on YouTube and the guys who were putting out good stuff, I take from it and I learn from it and add it to my own training and the times that I do train the areas that are difficult for me like in stretching or on holding a kick, it's hard, my legs are sore afterwards but then, the next time I go, if I see a little bit of improvement, oh my goodness, that's amazing. It gives me that much more motivation to keep doing it and that the hard work that I've been doing isn't useless, isn't fruitless.

Jeremy Lesniak:

Effort is never useless. It might not be the most effective thing that you could do but, at the very least, keeps you from backsliding more. Anything with, I'm sure if we really, really dug, we can come up with a counter example but anything that you do is better than nothing so, try to let go of that. I've talked to a lot of people and I see a lot of people who set these really high expectations for themselves and they're constantly moving the bar up and up and up and they're missing out on the process. They're missing out on the enjoyable part and when you talk to people who've been training a long time and I mean 20, 30, 60 years, they enjoy the process. If you've been training for 60 years, you're probably not at your physical peak. It's pretty unlikely so if your motivation for training is to get better, better, better always and hold these really high standards and keep moving that bar up, eventually, you're going to see your distance from that bar increase and when people do that, they stop training. When people see that they're never going to accomplish the goal they set out, they stop trying. Everyone's goal is different and identifying what that goal is becomes really important. My goal with my training is to just keep enjoying it. There are plenty of skills that I have that have stagnated. There are others that I've learned. In order for me to continue to move forward with everything that I have learned at some point, I will be training 24 hours a day. I have trained in way too many schools. I have learned too many things. There is no way I can continue to get better at all of it. My brain would explode so there goes that goal. There's no way I can hold myself to that standard. So, what's the standard? The standard is I'm going to keep enjoying



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and finding ways to progress at something and I've accepted, I've had to accept years ago that there are aspects of my training that will stagnate. There are things that I do not do as well now that I used to do.

Gabriel Siu:

Yeah and I know I've...as I train myself to be better so I can teach better, as I have learned how to teach more, to cater my teaching to whoever my student is, I've learned that everyone's standard is different including my own and so, I can't fold a 9-year old yellow belt to the same standard that I have. Everyone's goal is different. Everyone's abilities are different and like you said, when somebody sees the distance from that ability to that bar increase, they quit and one of the things that I've heard a lot of people on your show say was that one of the main goals of martial arts class needs to be fun, enjoyment because they can be the best student there is but if they don't enjoy it, they're not going to come back and I know, for you, as long as you've been in the martial art, you've seen this and I've seen this in different sports arena that I've been in, you have a guy who's really good, maybe even one of the best on the team, but he doesn't enjoy it so he quits. For somebody like me, it's like I would give anything to be half as good as him because I love it when it does. For myself, I've learned to make it fun. Not only in class for my students and for everyone else but for myself as well, I have 3 young kids. Right now, they're 3, 5 and 7 and one of the things that we do is we taught out of our garage for 4 years and we've been at a different location now for our classes for about a year and a half and our garage is still set up as our dojo. We train at home and occasionally, we teach classes at our house and we'll just have kata parties in our garage where they take turns doing katas or sparring or wrestling around on the ground and I'll call that groundwork for Karate and we have fun as a family. We get in there and we make it fun and it's half being a good dad and half disguising Karate work as fun.

Jeremy Lesniak:

And to me that's the key. One of the things that I do, in my role with whistlekick, I have the opportunity to travel around and sometimes, I'll visit schools. I'm often invited to teach. I don't know these people. I don't know their background. I don't always know what their skills are. My goal is to have fun because it doesn't matter what you're teaching. Doesn't matter how revolutionary it is, doesn't matter how skilled a teacher you are. If the people you are teaching are not enjoying their time, they will not internalize that information. Think back to the academic classes that you've had, you learned the most from the teacher you've enjoyed.

Gabriel Siu:

Absolutely.

Jeremy Lesniak:

So, I will, whenever I'm teaching, I build a foundation of fun. If it's fun, they'll learn or, I should say, if it's fun, they might learn so I make sure that I have fun because if you're having fun, they will probably have



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fun. If you're not having fun, they will probably take advantage of that to create their own fun because they're children. You have seen that. So, where's the fun? If we look at this notion of balancing your own personal training through the perspective of fun, how does that change things for you?

Gabriel Siu:

I never really thought of it like that before you asked it just now.

Jeremy Lesniak:

That's my job.

Gabriel Siu:

Thank you and you're good at it, I appreciate it but I think that was a big part of why I was so discouraged as a kid because even though, I was good at what I did, my main sports were baseball and football, I was always one of the better kids on the team but I wasn't, even though I enjoyed it, I didn't always have fun and like I said before, due to either my coaches or the other authority figures around me who I would talk about, talk to them about my sports and that carried over into being an instructor and my wife will tell you, the first few years that I was teaching, I was not an enjoyable instructor and she very graciously would talk to me afterwards and say, hey, why did you say it like that to this little girl? She's 5. She can't even tie her own shoes yet. If X is our standard for yellow belt or next rank, she's not going to perform like a 13-year old at a yellow belt level. If she needs a little bit more help, great. We don't want to discourage her to where she never comes back and it took me a few years and I feel like a lot of covering by my wife for me to learn that and to not scare away kids. I don't think I scared away any from our school but I remember the day that we had this, that one conversation and it changed my mentality about that. It's like a 5-year old girl isn't going to have perfect form and just because I taught her these 4 techniques one time doesn't mean she's going to remember them perfectly for the rest of her life. I need to make it fun and have realistic expectations and that's what I have grown in over the years and I've had a lot more fun these past 2 years and consequently, everyone else around me had a lot more fun, made things more enjoyable for everyone as I learned to have fun and to make it fun for everyone else so that was, thank you for asking that question. That was very insightful.

Jeremy Lesniak:

Of course, it's pretty clear. When you're disciplining a 5-year old or setting a standard for them that's a little bit too high, it's clear where that's coming from. That's more on behavior and very, very few martial arts instructors are taught how to be martial arts instructors. We're taught how to be martial artists. We have to figure out the instruction part and where do we get that? We get it from the people that we learn from. Not all those people are great instructors. Not all those people want to be better instructors so we've got to experiment. This is where I think learning from multiple people and taking what works and taking what you want to use in your own instruction style. The way I teach kids is



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different than the way I teach adults, is different from the way I teach a mixed group, the way I'm going to teach Taekwondo class is different from the way that I teach a Karate class and if I had my own consistent school? The way I would teach that would be dramatically different than when I visit because the goals are different.

Gabriel Siu:

Yeah, that's fascinating that you bring up the difference between visiting someone's school or group or seminar or whatever versus having your own because having your own, you've run a school for a few years in the past and you're with them class after class after class. They know you but when you go to visit, those people don't necessarily know you and a story that I took from a substitute public school teacher many years ago is he learned that, as a substitute, the teacher when they come back, they're going to re-teach everything that you teach anyway so don't stress as a substitute. Just go in there and have fun and he said, when he goes into these schools, even some in pretty rough areas, he wore glasses some of the time so when the students came in, he would stand behind his desk with his glasses on with a very stern look on his face and they would march in and, of course, they don't know him as a substitute so they have a little bit more respect for him than their own teacher at first and so, at the beginning of class, he's a little bit more strict, a little bit more harsh but then, by the end of class, by the end of the day, he's got his guitar out, he's singing, they're laughing, they're playing games together all while in between that teaching the material he's supposed to but to be able to have fun, they're going to enjoy the time they're going to learn more. Like you said, they have a better propensity to learn when they have fun then if they don't, then if it's all just material and expectations of learning.

Jeremy Lesniak:

So, I think you have this unique opportunity because you have enough awareness of who you are and you have enough context for what it's like to teach and to learn across multiple things that you can kind of go back and, I'm going to be a bit, warm, fuzzy-playing psychotherapist for a moment to heal some of the wounds that you experienced from your time in sports. The opportunity to not pass on that same weight to the students that you're teaching and in doing so, you have the opportunity to see and enjoy what it's like in another way and as you do that, and you're already doing that but be aware of that. As you're doing that, try to step out of yourself and if you had a student who is exactly like you, same time availability, same family commitment, same everything and they came to you and said I want private instruction, how would you teach them? Because that's the secret for you, for your own personal training. what are you going to do? What reasonable standard are you going to set? Most people would treat other people better than they treat themselves. We're just quiet about it. All the negative self-talk that we experience, it's incredibly rare people treat anyone that poorly. So, how do you move forward from that? how do you say, okay, Sensei Gabe, this is you talking to you, this is how much time I have available across a week. I do better with a fixed schedule or maybe I do better when I have this kind of impromptu 10 minutes that I can grab. What should I do? What if you sat down once a week with your instructor/wife at the table and you guys spent 5 minutes coming up with what student Gabe was going



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to work on for the week? I think that there's a lot of ways that if you look at this a little bit more formally, the way that you would handle anyone else's instruction, I think this becomes a little bit simpler. Not easy, but simpler. You know what you need to work on, you know what you want to work on and I think you know how to balance the two. I think the challenge here is that because you have full control, it's overwhelming. People don't like to make the wrong choice so people will instinctively make no choice when they are unsure of a clear path and I think that that's part of what's going on here because you could train 0 minutes a week or 20 hours and neglect sleep and family and everything else, there's a lot of room in between.

Gabriel Siu:

That's a really good way to look at things. Thank you for that. I never really considered things from that perspective before but as you've picked up from the stories I told, I have grown a lot and I've seen the growth, I've seen the problems that I've had, especially the worst of it, the thick of it was about 4 years ago or so in my color belt ranks, I was really down on myself. There's even times I just wanted to quit and of course, that didn't make my wife happy at all and we struggled through that and she knows me better. My wife knows me better than anyone else in the world. She knows that I'm my own worst critic. She knows that I will work on my own to improve the things I need to and so, a lot of her advice to me back in those days were listen to me, let me encourage you and believe me. Believe the encouragement that you're getting from me and from all these other people and psychologically, mentally, it was a mental problem. It wasn't a physical problem or a time problem necessarily although there was a time for about 8 months to a year where I was working so much, I physically didn't have time to train but to be able to allow myself to be encouraged and to allow someone else to change my mind, I think, is a way that I hadn't allowed someone, especially specifically my wife, Jenny, hadn't allowed her into my life and my martial arts training that way before and so that was a tough period and then we kind of, I was working a little bit less to be able to train more and I got a little bit better at things and especially over these last 6 months or so, things have really improved for me as a practitioner, as a student and as an instructor. It's been really neat to see that improvement. To see that growth from that time wherein I was a white and yellow belt and oh, this is just something fun to do to the time where it's like whoa, this is getting serious but I don't have time to commit the training that I want to up to now where things are very serious. We have a pretty big school by most standards, training 3 to 4 days a week and travelling 4 or 5 times a year for tournaments and things are just incredible now.

Jeremy Lesniak:

Awesome. We've talked a bit about some kind of more psychological ways to look at this but as we wind down here, let's look at some practical ways. Let's assume that outside of your wife, you're the highest ranking student in the school?

Gabriel Siu:



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Yes.

Jeremy Lesniak:

Who's the next highest? What age and rank are they?

Gabriel Siu:

There's 2 guys. One is 14 and one is 12 and they are both 2nd degree red belts so they're pretty high.

Jeremy Lesniak:

Old enough and high enough rank that they can start to put together some teaching. Right? Depending on the culture of the school, not all schools are going to be able to handle this but depending on the culture of the school, I don't think there's anything wrong with you jumping in while they teach especially if you give them some parameters of things that you want to work on. We talk on this show a lot about the white belt mentality. What better way to exemplify that into, say, hey, teach these stuff. I want to train.

Gabriel Siu:

Yeah, that's a really good idea.

Jeremy Lesniak:

And, of course, they're going to fall on their face but they get the benefit of learning those things. Again, if you've taught it, you know you're going to learn it that much better through teaching it so make them teach the things that you stink at the most and maybe, they're not going to be able to do high rank forms or things like that but I'm sure there are things that you want to work on and what's really fun about different people teaching is that they all teach differently. So, as you already said, sometimes you teach someone something that they find something different in it and you learn from them. There's no reason not to continue that and what I really like about that, for the schools that are willing to do it, is that completely changes the culture. It stops being this very top-down hierarchy and it becomes this more collaborative process and the irony of that is that everyone gets better much faster.

Gabriel Siu:

Yeah, that's a really good idea because they help us teach a lot. Being a fairly young school, we've called on our oldest and highest ranks for a few years now and we'll give them a few students here and there and even sometimes, we'll give them a big group of students and I'll kind of step back and watch them and help them if they need it but to totally flip things around and stand on the other side of the room, that would be completely different.

Jeremy Lesniak:



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Yeah, other things that you can do: training at another school. That doesn't help with the time constraint stuff but working on things that are completely different somehow improves the other stuff. I don't always understand how but sometimes when I'm training my Kenpo stuff, it makes my Taekwondo better. I don't know why. It just does. Probably because the human body is the human body and I'm thinking about okay, I'm in this class and I've got to move in this way which reinforces how not to move slightly when I'm back in a different class. I think that one is more for the mental and the emotional side than it's the physical side but there's still value.

Gabriel Siu:

Yeah.

Jeremy Lesniak:

And then, of course, you've got video. It doesn't solve the time problem, it doesn't solve the, necessarily, the motivation, the fun problem but you're a good enough teacher to watch yourself and critique yourself and to anyone out there, if you have a routine of self-practice, individualized practice and you are not routinely videoing what you're doing and checking it? I think you're missing out because most of us are our own worst critics but if you do it in a positive way, do a form, video it, look at it, wow, look at all these things that I can work on but also, look at all these things I did well.

Gabriel Siu:

You're absolutely right. I try to get as much video, especially from tournaments, as possible. I can go back and analyze and I can critique myself and especially in the last year, as I've taken video of myself and watched it, I'll think to myself, well, I felt pretty good about that, this wasn't good but that was good. I'll go back and watch and it was completely different. It looks completely different from how it felt and that's incredibly valuable. Even just, it was the other night, I was working on my newest form and my wife took video of me. I wanted to see what that particular sequence look like and watching it showed me that okay, my sequence was okay but what I need to work on was my stances and my transition in my lower body. I would have never caught that had it not been for video so yeah, that's an incredibly good piece of advice.

Jeremy Lesniak:

Cool and the last thing, before we start to sign off because I'm going to flip this on you, I've given you a bunch of ideas. So, now, I'm stepping into the class, putting you in front of the room. If I came to you with the same challenge and I said, I spend so much of my time teaching, I've got work commitments, I've got family commitments and I'm struggling to find ways to balance my own teaching with my time instructing, do you have any ideas? What would you tell me?

Gabriel Siu:



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That may be the most difficult question you've asked me, by far.

Jeremy Lesniak:

That's why it's all at the end.

Gabriel Siu:

The thing that popped into my head immediately was as you're teaching, do it with your students. Don't just stand up at the front and bark orders but to get in there, stand in the middle of the room and say if you're showing them something new, well, do it like this or hey, let's all do this together because that's one of the things that I have to do.

Jeremy Lesniak:

Do you do that?

Gabriel Siu:

I do, yeah.

Jeremy Lesniak:

So you're knocking out all these repetitions and you got to, again, that's something else you got to balance, right? Because you can't observe in the same way when you're doing but modelling behavior is how most people learn especially children. They want to imitate, they mimic so to get out there on the floor with them and to do it and to do it, maybe you're not going to go as fast as you can because then they're going to prioritize the speed over other things but there are, we've done some episodes where talking about drills and things you can think about and focus on, say, forms or basics. You can always think about something else. You can work on your stances while you're teaching something really simple. You don't even have to talk about it. You just do it.

Gabriel Siu:

One other thing we teach especially to the newer students is don't just practice here in the dojo. When you go home, practice things at home and one of the ways you can do that is when you're working on a kata stance, take an entire day and just move around in that stance. Do your slide steps or your turning, whatever, in that stance and especially the kids will say, it will confuse your parents and they might think it's funny but it's a good way to practice. Just walk up and down the hallway in a good kata stance or if you're, a lot of our students are homeschooled or even if they're not, if they're doing homework, sit in a horse stance while you're reading or watching a movie or something. Work on your leg strength and if anyone has done this, I think they know that when you're thinking about something else other than the pain and the stress you're putting on your own body, you tend to last longer and do more than you thought you could.



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Jeremy Lesniak:

And it's funny you bring that up because you bring up flexibility a couple times so first off, stretching should never hurt. If it hurts, you're probably pushing too hard but secondly, people who get the best results when stretching do it the most often and do it while they're doing something else and the most proto-typical example I can give you is watching TV. If TV is at all part of your life, get on the floor, work on your stretching while you're watching TV and the average American home is something like 3 or 4 hours of TV a night. I'm going to guess that you don't have that much time so you're probably not watching that much TV but even if it was 30 minutes a day, you've got a family and that can become a family routine. Hey, we're going to watch such and such show, everybody stretch while we do it because we all need more flexibility. We all benefit from it. It's great stuff so finding those opportunities to comingle regular life with training, I think, is pretty great.

Gabriel Siu:

Yes, yes, it is.

Jeremy Lesniak:

So, how're you feeling?

Gabriel Siu:

Good. Man, I'm not sure, I feel better about certain things after having talked to you and worse about certain things after talking to you but good. I feel like, like I keep saying especially these last 6 months through a year, I have a much more honest and much more balanced view of teaching and training and of being hard on learning and technique versus having fun and so, I have learned a lot. I've gotten a lot better at that, at least, I think I have. I don't know, you should ask my students but this has been a very valuable conversation.

Jeremy Lesniak:

Good and here's the interesting piece about this: this conversation will be available for you to listen again so I would say, digest the thing that we've talked about, think about it, listen to it, talk to your wife. I suspect there would be people who will chime in probably on the Facebook group. We don't talk about it that often so listeners, whistlekick martial arts radio behind the scenes, I think you and Jenny are in there. I think I've seen you guys comment. I'm suspecting that when this episode goes up which should be next week, other people would chime in and say, I struggle with this too. I like those ideas, here's something that I do. So, we get a conversation out of it so listeners, please, let's get some conversation going on this one and help each other out. Cool. Thanks for coming on. Thanks for being so open about a challenge you were having. We didn't have to blur your face out or stay anonymous.

Gabriel Siu:



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No, thank you for having me on. It's been great to talk about this with someone who's across country and someone who, for you, you've had a lot of experience with this yourself and talking to other people about it so I very much appreciate your perspective on it.

Jeremy Lesniak:

Cool. I'm glad we got the chance to talk and I'm sure we'll talk some more.

Gabriel Siu:

Yeah, I look forward to it.

Jeremy Lesniak:

We only have 24 hours in a day and we all spend them differently but when you have a lot of things that are really important to you, or even just a few, like family, martial arts teaching and martial arts training plus a job, food, sleep, there isn't really a lot of time left over and that's a challenge that we talked about today and it's a challenge that so many of us face. What I hope you get out of this episode, what I hope Sensei Siu takes away from this episode is that there is no right answer and as long as your priorities are lined up and you're addressing them in importance, you're not wrong so thank you so much, sir, coming on this show, talking to me and giving me the opportunity to offer my thoughts. If you want to see some photos or transcript, more context for this episode and maybe learn a little bit about Sensei Siu, head on over to whistlekickmartialartsradio.com. While you're there sign up for the newsletter, start following us on social media, we're @whistlekick all over the place and don't forget, whistlekick.com and the code PODCAST15, get yourself a new shirt or maybe a hat or some comfy sweatpants, a new uniform, there's a bunch over there so check it out. I appreciate the support that everyone shows to the company, to me personally, means the world. If you want to email me directly, Jeremy@whistlekick.com, I read every single email I get. That's all I've got for you today. Until next time, train hard, smile and have a great day.