



Episode 444 – Mr. Sean Kanan | whistlekickMartialArtsRadio.com



Jeremy Lesniak:

Hi there, welcome! This is whistlekick martial arts radio episode 444. Today, my guest is Mister Sean Kanan. My name is Jeremy Lesniak. I'm your host for martial arts radio, I'm the founder here at whistlekick and I'm involved from sun up to sun down in things related to the traditional martial arts whether it be this show or our store at whistlekick.com and you can use the code PODCAST15 to get 15% off maybe a new shirt or uniform, all kinds of good stuff over there. We also got a lot on Amazon so check out Amazon too but we also got other things that we do. We've got great social media with awesome content that's constantly growing so check us out, we're @whistlekick all over the place. You might want to also check out what we're doing on YouTube. We've got First Cup, we've got Who'd Win, bunch of stuff so check that out. Let's talk about today's guest. There are quite a few ways you may know today's guest. He's been in movies that you've probably seen. He's been on television. You may recognize him now, you might have recognized him in the past but at its core, he's a martial artist and that's why we had him on the show, because martial arts can lead us in so many different directions and that's why we bring such varied guests on. It's a powerful and dynamic episode and I'm sure you're going to enjoy it. Mr. Kanan, welcome to whistlekick martial arts radio.

Sean Kanan:

Hey, Jeremy, thanks so much for having me on. I appreciate it.



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Jeremy Lesniak:

Hey, it's great to have you here. I've been looking forward to this one and I know we're going to get to some good stuff. I can sense it. I get a sense when I start talking about what the listeners don't know, they don't know, I'm sure they suspect that you and I chat for at least a minute before we kind of hit that go button but they don't know what we say. They don't know why I get these feelings but once in a while, I get these feelings and so I got a feeling today. We're going to start in a really rudimentary well but I feel like we can't really start any other way and it's a martial arts show so how did you start with martial arts?

Sean Kanan:

I grew up in western Pennsylvania in a town called Newcastle, Pennsylvania 30 minutes from Youngstown, Ohio and I think it was probably, Rocky came out in 1976 and I think that's about the time that every kid my age decided they wanted to be a boxer and so, I found a gym in really, not a great area in Youngstown, Ohio and I started doing some boxing there and my parents realized very quickly that the guys who were boxing there were very serious. Doing it as a way of getting out of an economic situation et cetera so they said, look, we found a karate dojo in town. It's obviously much closer, at least you got to do that. I don't want to take karate. I want to box! They got me to go and I was just really smitten with it from the get-go. I loved it so I started when I was about 13. We started with Shotokan and then, my teacher, the late Bill Stoner, joined Fumio Demura's organization, the Japan Karate Federation and then, really, a very serious and interesting series of events took place. Not the least of which was Sensei Demura was Pat Morita's stunt double in all the Karate Kid films and as time went on as I got older and I was later going to school at Boston University and very much wanted to start my acting career and I decided to go from Boston to UCLA. I spoke with Sensei Demura and he said look, they're going to do this open call for Karate Kid 3 for the new bad guy, I think you want to go and so, I went and there were about 2,000 guys wrapped around the studio and there was John Appleton, diminutive guy, not real tall, walking up with this long line of hopefuls with a camera crew and intermittently stopping and asking people to do a quick improv with them. I knew I had to get his attention. I had probably about 2 seconds to do it so he stopped when he saw me and he said do a quick improv with me and he's like, I'd buy it and he sent me inside and once that I got inside the studio, it was like a 3-ring circus. Entertainment Tonight was there, all sorts of media outlets. They had set up a set and there was Ralph Macchio and that was just so surreal. I had been a paying customer for the first two episodes of the first two installments, the Karate Kid and then, the sequel and now, here I am auditioning for the 3rd one and they asked me to do a scene with Ralph. They asked me to kind of intimidate him and back him into a corner and I did that and I went through a couple more little hoops and I felt really good about it and I felt I had a really good chance of getting the role and I found out, within the couple days that I didn't get it and it was really crushing and a couple days later, I got a phone call and it turns out they fired the guy that they had initially hired and they called me back and I drove down Hollywood Boulevard, the studio, I knew I was driving down for something good. They don't call



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you back to tell you again that you didn't do a good job and I always liked the couple little story of as you're driving down and you look at the Hollywood sign, depending on who you are in your career and what your relationship is with the sign, at any given time, used to change. Sometimes it winks at you and sometimes, it smirks and it was definitely winking that day and I showed up at the studio and there was Robert Mark Kamen who had written the Karate Kid sequel, later went on to write Taken, I mean, he's earned so many big movies, blockbusters. John Appleton and they spoke to me for a few minutes and they threw a couple of basic martial arts drills. They left to go to the adjacent office, came back after a few minutes and they sent me to wardrobe and my life changed.

Jeremy Lesniak:

It's a pretty powerful story. What was that feeling like? What was it in that moment? Obviously, you're driving down Hollywood boulevard, you know something good is coming. I think we can all relate. We've all had experiences where this is going to be something great and it wasn't. It didn't live up to it so here you are, you get to the studio, you get to the set, you walk in, you have that conversation with whomever it is, how did that conversation go?

Sean Kanan:

When I was driving down Hollywood boulevard, it was electric for me. It was, I felt an energy that something was about to change my life and you spend so much time as an actor hearing no, getting rejected and when you feel like you suddenly entered the bull's eye zone of getting a role, it's difficult to wrangle your thought because they start to run away from you. You tend to extrapolate, suggest what it should be and it's exciting and it's a little bit of an intoxicating mental exercise. I have learned to get much better with as I've gotten older sort of stay in the middle path of things but back then, when I wasn't adept at doing it, in retrospect, it really was, it was intoxicating. It was like a crazy feeling to think oh my god, this may just work out.

Jeremy Lesniak:

Was that your first real role in a film?

Sean Kanan:

It was my first real role in film. I had done a really crappy horror film before that but I have done, I think, I did one or two television shows as guest stars and what's kind of interesting, ironic, I don't know, I was doing a show called Werewolf and John J. York was the star of it. John J. York played Mac Scorpio in General Hospital and we would later go on to work together for years. That's kind of ironic but the funny thing was that the co-star in the show was a guy named Mark Sussman and Mark Sussman's best friend at that time happened to be Billy Zabka and so, Billy came to the set and we got to know each other. I mean, I was always just like so jazzed to meet Billy and I mean, Johnny Lawrence the whole thing and in



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a very short amount of time, I sort of then was admitted to the Cobra Kai fraternity so it's interesting how life can work out sometimes.

Jeremy Lesniak:

Yeah, what was that like? Because you talked about seeing Karate Kid and Karate Kid 2 in the theaters and if I'm connecting these dots right, you're pretty much the target demographic. I mean, an interest in martial arts and those films, if you went back to the 2nd one, the 1st one must have resonated for you in some way and then, here fairly quickly after, it flips into now, you're on the other side of the camera. Did you feel any pressure, being that you enjoyed the franchise and now, were part of making it enjoyable for others?

Sean Kanan:

Yeah, I mean, there's a lot of pressure on a multitude of levels. The first one was that I had really just begun my acting career. I had not studied a lot. I was very green. I think the reason I was hired was that I had a specific look that worked. I had the martial arts ability and I had, just an arrogant brashness that comes from not knowing what you don't know and that worked but once we got on the set and I started to internalize what's expected of me, it was challenging. I made a lot of mistakes and there's things I would do very differently now as an older seasoned actor but I also, I guess obviously, did what was needed of me because they were ultimately very happy with what I did and I think the fans enjoyed my interpretation of my parts.

Jeremy Lesniak:

Nice. Now, you've already brought up that you've acted in other things and anyone who checks out your IMDB profile will see that you've been in quite a few things. How did that role in Karate Kid 3 lead to all these other stuff?

Sean Kanan:

The thing with Karate Kid 3 is that because there was already the 1st 2 films, there was a worldwide audience. I was stepping into a machine that had a built-in fanbase and almost overnight when it began screening, people knew who I was. It opened up avenues for me to get some big auditions, one of which was a show called The Outsiders based on S.E. Hinton's seminal book. Reading the books of S.E. Hinton, That Was Then, This Is Now; Rumble Fish, The Outsiders, Francis Ford Coppola was producing the show and I got the part and it was a big deal. From there, I went to go to a small part in a film with Oliver Stone. It opened up some really nice doors for me and then, much in the way of eventually getting on a soap opera do the same thing because these soap operas have a decade, multi-decade long fanbases so that when you become a character on them, it's an incredible amount of exposure and in the case of The Bold and the Beautiful, which I did, it's in the Guinness World Book of Records, it's the most



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syndicated show in television history more than Baywatch so I was suddenly being shown in a 110 countries.

Jeremy Lesniak:

Now, through all these as you're building your acting resume and building your acting skills, what's going on with your martial arts?

Sean Kanan:

Yeah, martial arts is something that I've always come back to. I have not been in class for years and years and years nonstop but off and on, I studied with different people. I studied Brazilian Jiu Jitsu for a while. I studied Krav Maga for a while. I studied American kickboxing so it's always been something that I've come back to from time to time and the other thing is that it's helped me tremendously indifferent acting jobs that I've had. I worked with Chuck Norris on Walker, Texas Ranger. I got to do a fight scene with Chuck Norris which was just...

Jeremy Lesniak:

That's awesome.

Sean Kanan:

I remember when I was a kid, my dad had met Chuck Norris somewhere and brought me a signed picture from Chuck Norris that Sean, Keep on kicking and I mean, that was my life. I was like, are you kidding me? Chuck Norris and then to grow up and wind up working with Chuck years later was a dream come true.

Jeremy Lesniak:

Absolutely. One of the things that we've heard from past guests who have spent time acting, it seems that the majority of people who do martial arts on film are martial artists who learned how to act and then, you've got these other crop of people who are actors who also know martial arts. Which one are you?

Sean Kanan:

I definitely wouldn't consider myself, I mean, I studied martial arts extensively but there's a big difference between me and somebody like Jean Claude Van Damme. I don't know. You pick a name of a guy who's a world-class martial artist. I had a really good strong foundation in martial arts. There were certain things that I was able to execute very well. There were certain things that were beyond my purview but I came to LA to study acting and I was not like a guy that was a martial artist and like you said, got stuck in a film and had to learn to act. I was out here studying with Roy London who was one of



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the finest acting teachers of all time and I was working vigorously to build myself as a respected actor. I don't know if that answered your question but it's a bit of both, I guess.

Jeremy Lesniak:

It does. It does and that's, I mean, we talked about tangents and that sometimes, the questions don't always lead to a concrete answer. Actually, we didn't talk about that but I'm always prepared for that and listeners know that I'll throw a question out, it doesn't mean that there's an easy way to wrap it up and how you present your vision of yourself, that's what matters the most here. This is your story of your time through the martial arts. One of my favorite sayings is that martial arts is always there for you when you're ready to go back to it and you kind of talked about that. When else or have you had opportunities to use your martial arts in roles beyond Karate Kid?

Sean Kanan:

Yeah, like I said, the role that I did with Chuck Norris.

Jeremy Lesniak:

Oh, right.

Sean Kanan:

I did the film called The Chaos Factor with Fred Ward. I had a great fight scene in that. That was a lot of fun. I think, more than the physical aspect of martial arts, there's certain mental aspects of martial arts, it was called upon when I'm acting. There's discipline and some sort of mind game stuff that I'm able to happen to and that helps me with my acting.

Jeremy Lesniak:

I can see that. I can totally see that. Tell us a story from your time whether it's in a dojo or traveling or on set or something. Tell us a story that the listeners appreciate hearing. I often asked this as your favorite martial arts story but I think I got to use slightly different words as I ask it for you.

Sean Kanan:

It's probably not the answer you want but you deserve better martial arts story than getting the role of the new lead villain in the Cobra Kai from an open call at midnight. I don't think I can pop that on, how big I thought that.

Jeremy Lesniak:

Well then, give us something from in that time. Something working with Ralph Macchio or working with Pat Morita. Give us something that we might not know from watching the film.



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Sean Kanan:

I don't know how interesting this is going to be but I won't censor it. I was a huge Pat Morita fan before the whole Karate Kid movie franchise because I grew up on Happy Days. He was Arnold who ran home and so, for me, when I got on the set and met Pat Morita, I really felt like I knew this guy. It was just an amazing feeling to be sharing the stage with this guy that I would just race home from school during lunchtime when I was in elementary school to go watch Happy Days. Years later, I got to present an award to Henry Winkler and that actually, over the years, met many of the people who starred in Happy Days. Actually about 4 weeks ago, I just presented an award to Marion Ross with [00:20:11] so it's just funny. It's just interesting who you get to meet as your career goes on. You never know who you're going to come into contact with. I don't know. That's the story.

Jeremy Lesniak:

Absolutely. It does, it does. When you think about who you are as a martial artist today, take all the different instructors, the different pieces, the things that you've learned, the various locations, if you had to pick one person out for having the most influence on who you consider yourself to be as a martial artist, who might that person be?

Sean Kanan:

I mean, it would have to be a toss-up between my teacher, William Stoner, and Sensei Demura. Sensei Demura, I was recently inducted in the Masters Hall of Fame about a month and a half ago. It was an incredible honor and Sensei Demura was there. Have you ever met him?

Jeremy Lesniak:

I have not but I was lucky enough that he's on the show a couple years ago.

Sean Kanan:

They made a movie about him, The Real Miyagi, and he, to me, really encapsulates the very best qualities of being a martial artist. He is one of the finest people I know and I think that he's always served as a mentor, as someone who's inspired me probably on some level at certain times in my life, he's watched over me when I didn't think he was so I would say the two of them.

Jeremy Lesniak:

I don't know the former but if you're going to put him on par with Sensei Demura, it says a tremendous amount about him.

Sean Kanan:

Right.



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Jeremy Lesniak:

Sounds like you're pretty fortunate.

Sean Kanan:

I was very, very fortunate, yes.

Jeremy Lesniak:

And now, we ask kind of the opposite of that question. If you could train with someone, if you could add someone into that mix anywhere in time, anywhere in the world, who would you want to train with?

Sean Kanan:

I guess it would be...the couple people that come to mind, I mean obviously, I'd be remiss if I didn't say Bruce Lee. Mas Oyama, [00:23:00] and probably Royce Gracie.

Jeremy Lesniak:

It's quite the list. Let's talk about Bruce Lee for a moment because we pretty much can't get through an episode without talking about Bruce Lee because he's the quintessential martial artist. I mean, 40 years gone and he's still the one that has the most name recognition and visual recognition. As a martial artist and an actor, I mean, he kind of paved the way for that genre of film in the US, what would you hope to gain from training with him?

Sean Kanan:

Bruce was an amazing philosopher, martial artist aside. He wrote a book called *Striking Thoughts* which I think is brilliant. Brilliant insight into life and so, I think, it would be incredible to have a relationship with him, to learn from him. Even if somebody came from a completely different part of the world and culture, I think that would be one of the most interesting parts of being with him. I honestly feel that the physical aspect of martial arts would be a second to that.

Jeremy Lesniak:

Interesting. A very different type of answer than we've had before.

Sean Kanan:

Why? What kind of answers did you get?

Jeremy Lesniak:



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Did you grow up reading his books? People usually talk about, it is the physical and when we've had folks on who respected him as an actor as well, maybe they did some acting, they wanted to talk to him about early on-scene stuff that kind of thing.

Sean Kanan:

Everyone's got their reasons.

Jeremy Lesniak:

Oh totally, totally. Did you grow up reading his books?

Sean Kanan:

Yeah, as I said, one of the books that really had a profound effect on me was Striking Thoughts.

Jeremy Lesniak:

Okay, what's your favorite Bruce Lee movie?

Sean Kanan:

Oh, that's a tough one. I mean probably Enter the Dragon but I like Game of Death a lot too.

Jeremy Lesniak:

Classic. Absolute classics. I have this theory that the first Bruce Lee movie you see is your favorite.

Sean Kanan:

That's probably a really good theory.

Jeremy Lesniak:

It's held up pretty well across the show. Most people see Enter the Dragon first but for the people that don't say Enter the Dragon, it's usually because they didn't see Enter the Dragon first as their favorite. Lets switch gears a little bit here. So, we all go through rough stuff and I feel that martial artists have a little bit more in their toolbox to address a difficult time in their life. Tell us about a time in life when things weren't going so well and how you were able to reflect and use your martial arts in some way to get through it.

Sean Kanan:

Off the top of my head, they said before acting is a very, very difficult profession. The business of acting is very difficult. Acting is a whole different set of challenges but the business of acting is emotionally very difficult. It can be financially very difficult and psychologically battering and I remember also when I began studying karate, there were these moments I had of object frustration, just thinking I wasn't going



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to be able to do something, I was never going to be able to be good at this. I would start that negative hate and I think that in times when I experienced difficulty in my acting career, I have sort of harkened back to times maybe when I was having difficulty as a martial artist and realized that with diligence and practice and tenacity, achievement comes. Not always but usually and I think it's kind of helped me stay in the game. There's no truer statement for most actors than acting is a marathon, not a 50-yard dash. There's a lot of people that out of the box, they just hit it and just ascend in an upper trajectory like a burning star but for most of us, it's in bits and starts, it comes the long haul and over the course of that long haul, there are certainly moments of frustration and all of those sort of feelings that I've had to do my best to contend with in the way that it doesn't become debilitating and I think martial arts has helped me with that quite a bit.

Jeremy Lesniak:

I can see that. What would your life look like without martial arts? Would you still become an actor, you think?

Sean Kanan:

Oh, I definitely don't think I would have gotten the part in Karate Kid 3 and if I haven't gotten that part, I still would've been an actor. I'd like to think I still would've been a successful actor but it gave me such a turbo shot of adrenaline in the beginning of my career. It's difficult to imagine. I guess, I can't overestimate the advantage that that gave me very early on.

Jeremy Lesniak:

I see that. One of the more polarizing questions that we ask, not in any kind of dramatic fashion but just, we get one way or another is about martial arts movies. So, here you are. You're kind of uniquely qualified to look at them and I wonder if, because of your experience on-camera, you look at martial arts films a little bit differently. Do you enjoy them or avoid them?

Sean Kanan:

Oh no, I enjoy them. I think traditionally, martial arts films fall in a couple different categories. They're certainly the exploitation films where yes, there's great martial arts but the acting is so bad that it becomes difficult to watch and over time, but actually with Bruce Lee, who I thought happen to be quite a good actor, you have martial arts films where there's fantastic martial arts but there's acting to support the story which makes it more compelling. Sometimes, I love just zoning out sometimes and watching crazy martial arts. One of my favorite martial arts movies was The Five Deadly Venoms. You know that one?

Jeremy Lesniak:

I do, I do. I haven't seen it in a while.



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Sean Kanan:

Sometimes, I love watching that sort of Kung Fu theater stuff and another time, it's one of the reasons I really love the Karate Kid. The karate in the Karate Kid up until the final fight scene was basic then you get into the stuff where Master Darryl Vidal did at the end and even through a certain extent, the stuff that Zabka did, it was much more sophisticated but it's not in hierarchy of complexity of martial arts films, it doesn't rank very high but the message is so compelling that it has a visceral effect on the viewer much in the same way that Rocky does. Much in the combination of music and watching this young kid overcome his obstacles every single time, to this day, when I see it and then, when he's at that final fight, I get that feeling in my stomach so, I guess, there's different martial arts films I like for different reasons.

Jeremy Lesniak:

If you could construct your own film and the one criteria I'll stipulate is it has to involve martial arts in some way but if you had a, let's say, a crazy budget and unlimited access, who would be in your perfect movie?

Sean Kanan:

Oh boy, that's a tough one. Without even knowing what the script is or anything like that, that's a tough one. I can tell you some actors I really love.

Jeremy Lesniak:

Sure!

Sean Kanan:

Robert Downey's one of my favorite actors and he's quite an accomplished martial artist himself. I love Nicolas Cage. He's just crazy and bombastic and sporadically good and sporadically not in the scenery but I love him. I don't know. That's a tough one. I'd have to think about that one. I don't really know. I don't think I have a great answer for that one.

Jeremy Lesniak:

That's alright, that's alright. What's coming down the road? What's in the future for you so if you look out 5 years, 10 years, what are you looking for?

Sean Kanan:

In the immediate future, I just finished the film called Colonials which is a sci-fi film and I actually got to do martial arts in that albeit not a lot but I had a fight scene in that and then, I have a film coming out with Steven Seagal and DMX called Beyond the Law that gets released on December 6th and beyond that, I published two books. I'm working on my third. My third book is an autobiographical inspirational,



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motivational, philosophical book which I'm very impassioned by. I'm doing a lot of motivational speaking now. I really, for me, inspiring other people is really one of my profound passions whether I'm having an opportunity talking to a bunch of kids about bullying in high school or just sitting down one to one with somebody and trying to help them work through stuff so I hope that I will continue to be someone that is always seeking my highest self and believe me, I'm human. I stumble frequently. Trying to inspire other people, continuing to grow as an actor, continuing to be a good husband and good father. Seeing exciting parts of the world and having new adventures.

Jeremy Lesniak:

Awesome, awesome stuff! Where does that passion for inspiring others come from?

Sean Kanan:

There's a feeling I get when I see certain things that impassions me and inspires me. It might sound corny but when I meet military people and I see their commitment. I just got back from Washington, DC and there's so much divisiveness going on in our government but I had the opportunity to go up and lobby on Capitol Hill and I saw congressional staff from both sides of the aisle and just the thought that, as Americans, we still have the ability to enter into a congressional office and sort of say our piece, that really inspired me. It really inspired me to believe in our governmental system with all of its flaws and all of its shortcomings and aspects of it that are indeed broken, it still inspires me. As cinema inspires me, there's so many moments, like I said, Rocky and Karate Kid that still sort of inspires me and the feeling that I get when I feel like that, I've learned that I'm able to transmute that to other people through my experience and some of what I've learned and the mistakes I've made, the path I've walked and I guess, on some level, it's selfish because it makes me feel good. It really is true that giving is better than getting and I enjoy giving to others.

Jeremy Lesniak:

I can relate to that, absolutely. Cool! Now, if people want to find you online, if they want to see what you got going on, where would they go?

Sean Kanan:

The best way to keep up with me, I hope everyone would follow me on Twitter, it's @seankanan or on Instagram, @seankanan.

Jeremy Lesniak:

Keeping it straightforward. Cool! Well, we ask everybody to send us out in kind of the same way but of course, everyone chooses a different path. What parting words, what wisdom would you offer up to the people listening today?

Sean Kanan:



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I would say that we all have an inner masterpiece which is meant to be shared to the world and that inner masterpiece is our authentic selves, our best self and by continuing to strive, to lead your best life and to help other people, it allows that masterpiece to be revealed and in revealing that masterpiece, it helps the whole world. It helps others. I think that's kind of my message.

Jeremy Lesniak:

I love speaking with martial arts actors, whether they be actors who learned martial arts or martial artists who start acting, it's that toolkit that we have, those resources we have available to us as martial artists and hearing how they're able to take that side of themselves and use it to become other people temporarily in a way that brings us joy and I just find that so compelling. Mr. Kanan, I really appreciate your time today, your stories, your openness. Thank you and I hope we talk again soon. If you want to see everything from this episode, from photos to links and more, head to whistlekickmartialartsradio.com episode 444. You can see everything that we talked about. You can check out other episodes while you're there, sign up for the newsletter. You might also follow us on social media, @whistlekick. Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, Instagram. My email address, jeremy@whistlekick.com. The best way to support us, head to whistlekick.com, make a purchase in the store, PODCAST15 gets you 15% off. If you want to email me, jeremy@whistlekick.com, I love hearing from everyone. That's all I've got for you. Until next time, train hard, smile and have a great day!