



Episode 106 – Mr. Alex Gillis | whistlekickMartialArtsRadio.com

Jeremy Lesniak:

Hello everyone! It's episode 106 of whistlekick martial arts radio. The only place to hear the best stories from the best martial artists like today's guest, Mr. Alex Gillis. At whistlekick, we make the world's best sparring gear and here on martial arts radio, we bring you the best martial arts podcast. I'd like to personally welcome you. I'm Jeremy Lesniak and I'm whistlekick's founder but I'm also blessed to be your host for martial arts radio. Thank you to the returning listeners and hello and welcome to those of you listening for the first time. If you're new to the show or you're just not familiar with what we make, try checking out our hats. We've got different styles of both baseball caps and winter beanies. Basically, if you're looking for something to cover your head, we have an option. You can find all of our hats at whistlekick.com. If you're interested in our sparring gear, which is really the heart of what we make, you can find that there too or over at Amazon. If you want the show notes, including links and photos, you can find those at whistlekickmartialartsradio.com. Now, if you're not on the newsletter list, now is a really great time. We send out exclusive content and it's the only place to find out about upcoming guest for the show and hey, sometimes we even mail out a coupon. Over the course of this show, we've had a lot of different answers when we ask our guests about their favorite movies and actors but when it comes to martial arts books, there are only a few we've heard of consistently. Joe Hyams's *Zen in the Martial Arts*, Miyamoto Musashi's *The Book of Five Rings* and Alex Gillis's *A Killing Art*. The 1st two authors have passed away. Of course, Musashi's been gone for quite a long time but Mr. Gillis is alive and well so we invited him to come on the show. You can learn a lot about Mr. Gillis from the way he wrote the book and you can learn a lot about the book from our conversation with the man. Thoughtful, thorough and dedicated are words that you can use to describe either. Let's welcome him to the show. Mr. Gillis, welcome to whistlekick martial arts radio.

Alex Gillis:

Hello!

Jeremy Lesniak:

It's a joy to have you on and listeners may not know you by name, some of them might, but quite a few of them are going to recognize you by your major work if we may call it that, the book *A Killing Art* which has been mentioned in the show quite a few times so it's going to be fun to hear some kind of behind the scene stuff. I'm sure as we go through some pieces and we'll talk more about the book towards the end but just as we do with everyone that comes on the show, let's talk about how you got started in the martial arts. Give us some of the how, when and why kind of stuff there.

Alex Gillis:

Sure, yeah, thanks for having me, Jeremy. I started about 35 years ago in Ottawa in Canada in Taekwondo and I trained as a teenager with a pioneer named Park Chung Tak and soon also, [00:03:09] from Vietnam became my instructor so, yeah, it was Taekwondo. It was a traditional style which is the



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non-Olympic type of Taekwondo and right away, I got into the physicality of it, the athleticism and the bit of the politics because Mr. Park, Master Park, at that time was a pioneer. He's part of the first wave of Koreans who started Taekwondo.

Jeremy Lesniak:

So, what was it about martial arts that kind of drew you in?

Alex Gillis:

As a teenager, I mean, I just fell in love with the acrobatics of it, the athleticism, I guess. The power and speed of the movements. I guess unconsciously through the transference into the psychological and emotional state so I lived near the dojang, near the gym and after high school, I'd walk up the street to this, I think, it's 1st or 2nd floor gym and just work my butt off, just trained very hard and met a lot of good people. The martial artists and the level of training was astounding. There was one class where an instructor, I'll never forget it, he had a jog along the canal, Ottawa has a beautiful canal and longest in the world still, and we jogged a good 5 kilometers at quite a pace, came back and the class started at that point. I was only 16, 17 at the time and we could barely lift our legs and arms but he put us through the paces for an hour and a half and that was not the norm, it was an exceptional class but it was expected that you were to do things like that occasionally and I don't know if that's Taekwondo too, maybe other martial arts that although you're not training at explosive speeds, maximum power, you're training to be able to attain almost super human levels of flexibility and execution of power, intention, emotion. It's a really unique sport or practice and I love that as a teenager very active. I love the whole thing.

Jeremy Lesniak:

I think you're describing that same appeal that a lot of us have felt for the martial arts. I like the way you put it in terms of being superhuman. Pushing those boundaries of physicality and what you're able to do and while I never had a run along the canal before a class, certainly I've trained with a number of instructors who kept us guess as to what the warm-up would be or the different elements of the class and I think there's a push there mentally, not just driving you in terms of physical practice but mental practice.

Alex Gillis:

Yeah! Yeah! Perhaps you also know the feeling of seeing physical training could be transferred to emotional or psychological states or even relationships, like just a small example, a lot of people are used to everyday tensions and conflicts, actually, workplaces. Example would be if someone stands too close to you, let's say colleague or a stranger, and we know what makes us comfortable depending on our cultural background but training in the martial arts makes you acutely aware with your surroundings, what people's intentions might be, not just how close they're standing to you but what



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they might do in that space and I found as a youngster, when I was training very quickly that I could transfer the physical stuff to realizing oh, this person's standing very close to me, e's not aggressive or anything in this workplace but I'm actually not scared. I would know if something happened, what I would do and so, a lot of us underestimate that tensions and the way we avoid conflicts and the way we get used to unspoken, I guess, violence, I would put it, or intentions to do something or say something not as verbal or emotional but I think at a very young age, I realized wow! Martial arts is good for me. It's more than just a physical thing.

Jeremy Lesniak:

Sure, absolutely. So that gives us pretty good intro, some context for who you are. Now, of course, I'm sure you had a lot of experiences that could translate into good stories just as I read through your book, just the people you've met, right? As you were doing your research, I'm sure there's incredible experiences but rather than pin you down, I'll let you pick one of your own. If I was to force your hand and say, what is your best martial arts story? How about we hear that?

Alex Gillis:

Best martial arts story...when I was writing the book, I kept on many, many anecdotes and many interviewees that told me about Taekwondo's history and some I couldn't believe. As a journalist, I corroborated them included those that were true. It came on one point where I discovered people that I idolize like General Hong Hi Choi who named Taekwondo. Jhoon Rhee who's called the Father of Taekwondo, a couple of martial arts Hollywood stars whose names ended in Lee, their dad that was involved with the Korean CIA, all these men, the older men, were involved in shenanigans and some really violent espionage missions and other situations and as I got deeper and a couple of anecdotes, a particular, the ones involving Jhoon Rhee and General Hong Hi Choi, I got in these emotional states of, not just disappointments and why am I doing this martial art but also, terror because their disciples were still alive and here I was writing the truth about some of the shenanigans and wars that they were involved in and so, there was one day where this bloody book I was writing, *A Killing Art*, had to be done, had to be given to the publisher and so, I realized I wasn't going to be able to do it because I basically hated my martial arts because of the darker parts of its history and I got in the car and drove into the Ontario backwoods, into a cottage and this is why martial arts training is good. I think as long as you can do this, I just holed up for a week with these extremely dark thoughts in those states in the material and I listened to the taped interviews of Jhoon Rhee, I went through the dilemmas, the legal issues, the ethical issues, what was fair, what wasn't, what would I leave in the book, what would I take out? There were stories of, not Jhoon Rhee, but other men who would beaten up their family members with baseball bats, these were world leaders in Taekwondo and there were situations like that, in that case, the baseball bat scene, I did not include that in the book and so, that week in the woods, in this cottage, I really struggled and finished an entire 2 chapters of that and it's a martial arts story, I think. It's not a street fight. It's not a big competition where I got a gold or anything like that. It's a good example how martial arts training can help you get through a tough time.



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Jeremy Lesniak:

As you were starting to talk about that, I could hear a little bit of a quality of your voice, an expression of that disappointment, the fall from grace of some of those people that you looked up to, I don't know if I want to use the word idolize as it's a pretty strong word, but I think you know where I'm going and I felt some of the same elements as I read through your book and I'm glad, because I almost felt guilty in feeling that, and so, it makes me feel even better that the creator of the book, the one that brought these stories to us, to me, had some of that same conflict. Is that a theme that's popped up for you more? Have you reconciled that differently now? How do you view that, I guess, okay, I think you know what I'm trying to ask. I might not be doing the best job of it.

Alex Gillis:

I have reconciled it. I have realized, when I first started Taekwondo, I looked up to the men who had started it. Some of them lived in Toronto. One of them, Park Chung Soo, was a pioneer instructor. He helped start Taekwondo, lived in Toronto. I looked up to them in a wrong way. I was young and the organization is really in this private continent. I actually can generalize in a lot of North America and the world, Taekwondo, these organizations were run like a cult and so, they were cultish, certainly and so, I looked up to these men and not a mature way. As I developed, I realized, I saw it as I was writing the book, of course, they're human. They made mistakes, they have weaknesses. General Choi, in particular, but also many of his pioneers. They made mistakes and they're human and as I learned more about that, there were dark periods like the one I just mentioned at the cottage but that just went into making me a better martial artist and a better writer and I'm hoping I created a better book because you see how these men, and they're pretty old men, first wave's not women. You can see how they struggle themselves and how they're trying to turn an old martial art into a modern one and make it popular and they succeeded. I mean, Taekwondo is one of the most popular martial arts in the world. I did turn to other instructors who I now look up to but in a different way. People like Grandmaster C.K. Choi who lives in Vancouver in British Columbia, in Canada. He, for me still now, epitomizes a lot of what went right for my martial art, Taekwondo. He faced the gangsters, he faced the Korean CIA officials. He faced potential corruption and so on, not just financially but morally and he came out on top and you get, in terms of the man now, tens of thousands, maybe 50,000 more people look up to. Athletically too, I mean, he was a really incredible martial artist. A world champion, I think, the first Taekwondo champion in the world in the '60s. Competition was in Korea, but he managed to maintain, over many decades from the really '60s to now, an integrity physically in the training and he teaches instructors now and then also, morally, in terms of messages and how you live your life. A very humble guy. He had a deserving entire chapter in this new book that I put out. He's in the end there to show, really, how it's done and I could tell you now that I totally know about him [00:15:35].

Jeremy Lesniak:



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Okay, so clearly, martial arts is a core thread through your life. You've been training for decades. It's become such an important part of you that you put in, I don't even want to speculate how much time and the research to make this book happen but imagine some alternate reality where you never started training in Taekwondo, you never found martial arts at all, what do you think your life would look like now?

Alex Gillis:

Definitely more boring. I'd have fewer friends, that's for sure. I think I would just be, overall, less able, less flexible, less powerful, less aware of myself and my surroundings, less aware of relationships. I come from a particularly violent background, from a very rough part of the city and the martial arts help me come to terms with a lot of violence I saw on a daily basis, heard about and experienced so I would be a very different person if I didn't have Taekwondo. I did a bit of karate and tai chi as well and a couple of different styles of Taekwondo and it all boils down to just arranging your limbs in all directions in the gym, in the park somewhere and then, how hard you do that with the people you train with. Particularly, the friends I trained with every Saturday, all advanced black belts and all very decent people and we've been training together for decades and we all agree this cliché, it's a way of life, applies to all of us easily and we would be diminished people. We would be less than what we are if we weren't doing martial arts.

Jeremy Lesniak:

So, I want to go back a little bit because you mentioned something about that, the violence that you were exposed to when you were younger in the city. Was that at all some of the impetus of you finding martial arts?

Alex Gillis:

Oh yeah! When I was a skinny teenager, my mom just told me, you've got to study something. My mother and uncle told me you got to train, you got to do something to strengthen your body and this is a story you probably heard a dozen of times and it's actually uncanny, the number of martial artists I've interviewed for my book who said that they were bullied, especially Koreans, older Koreans who lived under the Japan occupation up to 1945 but anyway, the number of people that were bullied and come from violent situations, they used martial arts to empower themselves physically, emotionally, psychologically, some even the spirituality of it as well.

Jeremy Lesniak:

So, I'd like you to think about a time in your life where things weren't going so great, whatever that would be, and how your martial arts training helped you overcome, move past, however you want to look at that and tell us about it.

Alex Gillis:



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I've been through a divorce and a couple of other tough times. A terrible illness with a family member and in both cases, I remember feeling, I mean if you've ever been in a traumatic situation that's long term, you know that feeling of numbness and heaviness where you're trying to just get your day going. I remember just getting my sorry ass down to little gyms. Sometimes I just stay in my living room and start light stretching and on the way, as I built up the calisthenics, I'm just throwing my limbs around, my arms around, as you're training you think of things. There's a meditation in the movement. I remember in particular, going to the same spot day after day after day and sometimes I'd miss a few days but always with this feeling of boredom and I can't do this, why am I in this space moving around? What is the point if training? This is a sport for children and so on and of course, if you're in a down state, in a horrible situation, this is actually what happens to your mind, right? And your heart but I remember over time, over months and then, eventually years, realizing oh my god, that the physical movements were manifesting in different emotional states, in different psychological states and I'm actually getting better. Besides the obvious physiological facts that when you move, you're burning certain stress hormones, you're generating other certain happy hormones, just being physically active always helps you with down emotion states, right? so, I remember that really having a mind-blowing experience one day and just realizing the daily meditation through movement just helped me immeasurably. I couldn't even measure it how I would've been or what I would've been if I hadn't been training so regularly doing what I thought for so long as just boring. I mean, obviously, it was important. It was life-giving.

Jeremy Lesniak:

Yeah, the meditative aspects, I think a lot of people in the martial arts underestimate how meditative all aspects of what we do can be when we think about meditation, we think about slow and boring and fixed positions.

Alex Gillis:

Exactly.

Jeremy Lesniak:

It's more than that. Sparring can be meditative.

Alex Gillis:

Yeah!

Jeremy Lesniak:

it's all in your mindset.

Alex Gillis:



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Yeah, at some point, if you just can turn off your mind and let your body move. I've done Taekwondo patterns where I don't think. I've done patterns where I don't need to remember the movements. I just let body instinct take over and the body has it's own memory. In those days, they're not highfaluting mystical mumbo-jumbo states, you're just naturally relaxed and things start popping into your head and all of a sudden, you realize you're unconscious will present solutions to a problem you thought was unsolvable. Oh yes, that's what I'll do, that's the solution so yeah, there's some good stuff that comes out of training and just slowing the mind down but not necessarily slowing the body down.

Jeremy Lesniak:

Now, of course, through the book and through your training in general, I'm sure you've been exposed to a ton of wonderful martial artists but if we were to take out the core people that you would refer to as your instructors, who would you tell us is the most influential in your martial arts career?

Alex Gillis:

That's a good question. I'd have to say my instructors, my instructor Lenny [00:23:34] he's my instructor a little bit about 2 years ago, hugely influential. You're with these men and women 2, 3, 4, 5 times a week if you're training like that and no matter what they do or say, you start absorbing everything they're saying and not saying. The other one, I mentioned already, Grandmaster C.K. Choi, his name's Chang Keun Choi. He's a great storyteller too, I don't know how to explain it but I was at a tournament, I guess, this is a good way of explaining it and he was the only Grandmaster left at the end of the day, after a very long day, to be fair, who was still, and he's an older man, and he's still wandering around the rings in the tournament, talking to participants and coaches, parents, giving them advice, to chatting, it was remarkable how much stamina he had, how much he cared about the nitty-gritty. He has a humble, calm way of talking. I know some of his history and another reason I admired him is he's just raw courageous. When he told me the one chapter in my book about buying a hotel in Vancouver in a neighborhood that was known for being extremely rough, one of his students was a police officer and this person said to him, don't go into this neighborhood. Well, Choi bought a hotel. He bought a tavern and it was ran by a man who was terrified of the clientele who was gangsters, basically, drug dealers and Choi bought it for various reasons. I think, at that point, had no choice and had to make some money and he decided to clean it up. He opened the windows, he cleaned it up and for 10 months, as he was trying to get this business going restarted, gained quite an attention from journalists, I think, watching. It's called the Sunrise Hotel. The gangsters and riffraff and others who are just hanging out began challenging him to fights and he told me over a 10-month period, he fought every week and usually there's this pretty one blow and he's always asked his tormentors, do you really want to do this? We don't have to do this. It's almost like a movie scene except he didn't embellish. He just said well, I hit the guy and he fell and then his friends would say, anyone who saw would say, this happened months, he said what did you just do with him? What did you hit him with? My fist and he tried always to reconcile because he's soft-spoken, wears glasses and he's quite humble at just any old time. People end up trusting him and believing in him and because he was always fair, wandering around the establishment



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and he didn't mind who ran out there. He didn't want fighting and drug-dealing and extremely improper behavior. He told me this story and I found it fascinating because he, yet again, a story from him showing how he stood up to people who had failed in their lives or were particularly violent had not controlled that the horrible violence in their lives and the criminality are actually leaders. He stood up to them and he's still trying to look at the good side of them and run a business and still allowed them to hang out in his establishment. It was a metaphor for me, I guess, a symbol of Taekwondo and the martial arts globally. There's just so many stories of people who fight. There are so many movie scenes, you see these sort of things, they're pretty all clichéd now but you rarely hear about how this one person does stand up to folks and does, I guess, does the good thing and in a way remains friends with some of them. He told me about that as well and remained a leader in his Taekwondo community.

Jeremy Lesniak:

That's pretty exceptional and certainly sounds like the type of person any of us would want to model ourselves after and that humility, I think it's so rare that you get to hear the incredible stories of someone who is so humble because those that have a lot of humility don't usually talk about their exploits. It takes someone to talk about them.

Alex Gillis:

That's a good way of putting it. He is not, and at that time, was not associated with any international group or even a national association and he had been offered money and position and so on, including from gangsters, Korean CIA officials, South Korean politicians to be part of groups and he wouldn't get involved if he found there were serious ethical problems with these groups and it's hard for me to explain because he, see, being Korean and new to Canada, he faced certain kinds of racism because he had to make a living, there was that pressure. A lot is hard to explain, even hard for me to understand but I consider him an exceptional person and that he used his martial arts background and his particular superhero powers, various ways to better his life and really continue bettering it for tens and thousands of people over the decades.

Jeremy Lesniak:

So, let's talk about competition. Let's come up a little bit here and I always find it interesting to know what role competition has played with our guests. Were you, are you a competitor?

Alex Gillis:

No, I was never big into competitions. I was never, I went to a few and realized I was no good at it, to be blunt. To be blunt, I didn't have the physical gift and some of that raw aggression that you need in sparring to win. I like watching the finals of certain, I've been to many competitions because in the book, I travelled quite a bit, first edition of the book but generally, I'm not fond of competitions. I'm not fond of UFC, MMA cage fighting. I will watch it, though. I have to admit, I guess, I should confess I do watch a



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lot of the stuff and I'm torn. There's a paradox there to watching mimicked violence or looks like almost real fighting and then being revolted by it at the same time.

Jeremy Lesniak:

I take it almost speaks to two separate parts of our humanity. We can all agree and understand that we haven't evolved away from the need from violence very long ago, in terms of our time on this planet. It's been a blink so we've got but then each have our individual minds were able to form and hone in on what's important and develop our own system of values and yeah, I think there's something physiologically at odds there for a lot of us.

Alex Gillis:

That's a good way of putting it, yeah.

Jeremy Lesniak:

So, let's talk about who you could've trained with. If you had the opportunity to train with anyone, be they alive or dead, who do you think you would've wanted to spend some time around?

Alex Gillis:

I was going to say Bruce Lee because that's just ridiculous. The men I trained with, instructors, trained with Bruce Lee and they told me that Bruce Lee learned from them and I'm going to mention, not just CK Choi who I just mentioned, but also a man named Nam Tae Hi. He was part of the first wave of Taekwondo and helped create Taekwondo. He was an astounding athlete and a third man named Park Jong Soo. I would have wanted to train with them in their heyday. I would have wanted to be with them when they were younger and their legs, their multiple kicks moved like machine gunfire and they were able to jump. People like Jhoon Rhee as well were able to jump and kick things 9, 10 feet in the air. They trained everyday consistently. There's an amazing story they told me which I think is true. I heard so many versions of this story that I think it's true. Bruce Lee met some Taekwondo pioneers. This one, I don't think it was only Jhoon Ree who he trained with but learned from him as well. They learned from each other but he ended up not being able to keep up, to simply, with the speed. If you've seen some of these pioneers, I guess, even if you've seen some of the world champions now and people like that need the speed in which they move and the power of their demonstrations is mind-blowing so I would have wanted to train with the first wave of Koreans. I probably would not be able to keep up whatsoever but wouldn't it be nice just to be in that year in that very hardcore, military environment?

Jeremy Lesniak:

Yeah.

Alex Gillis:



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I probably would've been hospitalized after that and gone back to my regular life.

Jeremy Lesniak:

Right, right. Maybe without full use of your legs.

Alex Gillis:

Yes, something like that.

Jeremy Lesniak:

So, let's talk about movies. Are you much of a martial arts movie guy?

Alex Gillis:

A little bit, yeah.

Jeremy Lesniak:

Any favorites?

Alex Gillis:

It's funny you should ask. I just watched, I just finished watching 2 seasons of Daredevil on Netflix's Marvel Daredevil which is good and so, that's my...I interviewed the main stuntmen, the stunt double for Daredevil for a story, I wrote about him, profiled him and grew to really admire these unsung heroes. A lot of these, almost all the martial arts technique you see in movies are by martial arts stuntmen and stuntwomen. Elektra was in Daredevil as a stunt double and she's phenomenal and I like the style of the movie. It's a new kind of martial arts movie. It's even a superior movie but a lot of non-superior movies are using the style of fighting which is more realistic-looking and way more acrobatic. The double, triple, quadruple kicks in the air with or without ropes. It's quite spectacular to watch and it's a new way of movie-making.

Jeremy Lesniak:

I think as more people have some martial arts experience, we've been able to pick up on things that were, maybe not quite authentic and so, it forces that envelope to get pushed a little bit further, a little further and then, you get people that come in like Tony Jaa who, you look at his actions and it's almost unbelievable that someone possesses that much physical talent. You would swear it's computer graphics or something and it's not so, now the bar's been raised and everybody tries to keep up and we keep moving forward and forward in that way.

Alex Gillis:



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The only way they're keeping up with the movies and each other and competing is by adding tricks, adding acrobatics and then, adding special effects, the computer graphics and all of that but the interesting thing about Daredevil and a couple other movies is that the superheroes, the heroes are getting beaten up now which you didn't see much of, right? To be honest.

Jeremy Lesniak:

Yeah.

Alex Gillis:

The Raid, for example, Redemption, I guess it was called. The heroes take a pummeling and so, as typical viewer, you can relate more because these people are human, right?

Jeremy Lesniak:

Yeah, and I think it makes it that much more impressive when they come out the other side and of course, I don't think we're going to give anything away for anyone who hasn't seen the Daredevil show and if you haven't, sign up for Netflix for a month and chew through the 2 seasons because it's not just some of the best martial arts programming I've seen but it's one of the best shows I've ever seen. The acting is tremendous and the emotion that these characters are able to bring to the storyline are fantastic. I've been a Vincent D'Onofrio fan as Kingpin for a long time and he's the perfect actor for that role but you see Daredevil get the tar beaten out of him almost every episode and he keeps finding a way to come back for more if you want to borrow a tenet from Taekwondo if you persevere.

Alex Gillis:

Yeah and thematically, what that means is the directors of the people who made the series can show the sadistic side of Daredevil. He, himself, a superhero, likes to pummel the bad guys. As difficult to watch that, he keeps punching similar to a ground 'n' pound in a cage, he likes pounding people in the ground and so, thematically, it's pretty complicated as a series and I like that. It's not just the unidimensional, boring superhero movie. By the way, I like superhero movies too.

Jeremy Lesniak:

No, not at all.

Alex Gillis:

The X-men movie was pretty good.

Jeremy Lesniak:

Yeah, without a doubt. How about martial arts movie actors? Is there anybody that stands out for you?



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Alex Gillis:

I have to mention the stuntmen and stuntwomen. Chris Brewster, the stunt double for Daredevil, I spoke to him on the phone and watched a lot of his stuff from Captain America, Daredevil and 150 other movies. This guy can, physically, he's remarkable. He can jump over a standing person, just leapfrog or he can jump over the person, flipping in midair and obviously, he trains a lot. He trains every day in various styles during these things so he and some of these new wave of stuntmen and women in California right now, Hollywood, are really impressive. Currently, they're my favorites.

Jeremy Lesniak:

They're definitely unsung heroes. You do get some people that develop some skill, either for a role or for their career. We've talked about Jason Statham in the show quite a bit who, despite not having a lot of what we would call traditional martial arts background, you watch any of his movies and he pulls it off very, very well. He does have physical gifts there.

Alex Gillis:

He's like Charlie Cox, who plays Daredevil in that series. Charlie Cox is not a martial artist, he's not a boxer but he's a great mimic. These actors are great mimics and their stunt doubles work with them very closely. During the fight, the superhero's dropping his non-punching hand and the stunt double will say, as Chris Brewster told me, you got to raise that hand, you're dropping it but they're great athletes too, those actors, they're astounding athletes.

Jeremy Lesniak:

Yeah and we've talked about some of the other stunt people that have been involved in some of the movies. When we do a movie profile, you're talking before the recording that you would listen to the Billy Jack episode we did and, of course, I forget the gentleman's name now, but the Hapkido instructor that trained Tom Laughlin had to step in in that famous scene, that foot to the face scene and we've talked about Fumio Demura and his involvement in the original Karate Kid movie and it's interesting that some of these stunt people that are, I think, so often today, seen as just kind of background. Clearly, a very important element to the movie but earlier in martial arts films, they were, not only martial artists, but martial artists that people knew and how much fun would that be now if we had more of that. The martial artists have learned how to act and become actors, first and foremost, and martial artists second. I mean, we're seeing almost, I think, a rollback in a way. You get people like Donnie Yen and Daniel Wu who are just exceptional martial artists who also happen to be actors.

Alex Gillis:

Yeah, which is rare, let's face it. To have the physical talent as well as the wherewithal to show it on screen. A lot of them have to slow down their techniques as they move too quickly, right? But then also just to plain act, it's a whole skill set right there and then, the relations onscreen, a lot of martial artists



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have egos. I'm sorry to say but they're extremely difficult to work with and I'm talking about the older men, really, and so, if you have that kind of talent, usually you have that ego to with it, usually with some kind of massive insecurity. That's what I found anyway in my Taekwondo interviews and so, yeah, for them to actually work with others and pull off a great scene, requires a whole other skillset as well.

Jeremy Lesniak:

Sure and you're not bringing up anything that we haven't talked about in the show. There's certainly a lot of ego that rolls through our world. So, let's talk about books. I want to spend some time talking about A Killing Art but before we jump into that because that's going to be, I'm sure we're going to wander a bit with that, are there any other martial arts books that you're particularly fond of?

Alex Gillis:

There's a thin one called The Thin Flute. I haven't looked at it in a while, I think that's what it's called. I'm looking at my shelf right now. There's a four, five hundred year old one, Musashi, is how I'm pronouncing his name. I've read that one. Lot of businesses use that now. Essentially, those. I read more comic books than martial arts books, to be honest. I'm working on a graphic novel right now, really into comic books yeah.

Jeremy Lesniak:

That's kind of cool.

Alex Gillis:

I don't really read a lot of old martial arts books that aren't heavily corroborated. There are so many stories, right?

Jeremy Lesniak:

Now, I've heard you, I think you mentioned a couple times, you're a journalist? Is that by trade?

Alex Gillis:

Yeah, by trade.

Jeremy Lesniak:

Okay, so, that your BS meter probably goes up a lot sooner than a lot of us.

Alex Gillis:

My Spidey sense.

Jeremy Lesniak:



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Yeah, probably makes it hard to read some of those books when you know the legends have been skewed a bit as they were passed down.

Alex Gillis:

Yeah, that's a good word, legends.

Jeremy Lesniak:

Alright, so let's talk about A Killing Art. Why? I think that's the first question because I'm sure you knew going in, it's quite the undertaking or did you? Am I putting words in your mouth?

Alex Gillis:

Writing a book is an undertaking. It's like a big fat relationship. Why write about Taekwondo? Put yourself in my situation. I was a black belt, a new black belt and I suddenly started hearing from an instructor these astounding tales. They were astounding. The man who started Taekwondo, which I thought was a thousand-year old martial art, he actually lived in Toronto, the city I lived in. The man who ran my gym, the dojang, used to be his right hand man and apparently, had tried to kidnap and kill him. The Korean CIA, Korean gangsters have started Olympic Taekwondo and they had got Taekwondo in the Olympics apparently. I heard these stories as a young black belt and thought it can't be true. I guess, as a journalist, I wanted to find out that they were true and then, when I found out some of them were true, I thought I have to write about this. There were a lot of things online, on the internet, people gossiped a lot. As I got into research; first of all, as magazine articles because that's how the book started, a couple of magazine pieces. I realized, even the grandmasters and masters, didn't know the whole story of their own martial art. So, as a journalist, I could write something that everyone would want to read and so, it was a 7-year project off and on. As I liked to joke, The Killing Art almost killed me. The effort I put into it, the amount of work I put into it, but I think now, a lot of people, I still get about a letter a week, yeah, a letter a week. On Facebook, on email, from a reader with over the top praise and it's been 8 or 9 years now since the book's been out so the readership out there, they tend to be the people are training and don't know much about the history or black belts and middle managements and organizations and people running dozens of gyms in the industry and they suddenly find out more about the industry and it deepens their own training, the awareness of themselves and those of the martial art. The business side of it which is always, for some reason, murky and odd. Just the kickbacks alone are bizarre so I think people learn a lot from reading A Killing Art in general.

Jeremy Lesniak:

Have you experienced much push back or anger among some of the older set?

Alex Gillis:



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I've expected a way more. I expected way more people to be in my face but I can remember one person, an American, challenging me online and even then, not directly. It was on some forum and he used his real name and almost all the criticisms, little that there was, was anonymous. I didn't go looking, there could be a mountain of criticism there. Most of them were anonymous and I didn't pay it any mind because usually, the criticisms weren't based on anything I wrote in the book anyway so what they thought was in the book. The main criticism of me and my book was how dare you. How dare you write a book? Who are you to write about Taekwondo? Who are you to write about these great men and these great pioneers, dead or alive? It was that kind of attitude. As a journalist, when you hear criticism like that, you just get happy because you know you're onto something. People can't address the content of the questions, stuff you're raising and instead, start attacking you personally then you know you're on to something, right?

Jeremy Lesniak:

Did you set out to write the kind of behind the scenes tell-all that this became?

Alex Gillis:

I did, yeah. That was the purpose. From the start, the purpose was to show both why I loved Taekwondo, why everyone that does it loves it and then, the darker side as well. I wanted to show that, how should I put this? I want to show that it was a killing art. It was an art developed in the military, practiced by police officers, soldiers, spies, gangsters, street fighters and then, from there, it quickly jumped into civilian gyms and so, initially in the '50s and '60s, it was a brutal martial art. They took bits and pieces of different martial arts, mainly karate, and they put together a Korean version of karate and added a whole bunch of jumping and athleticism and breaking techniques. They Korean-ized it and it was hardcore and they used it in the Vietnam war. The Koreans sent hundreds of thousands of soldiers to Vietnam and they also sent hundreds of black belts to train Vietnamese and American and other soldiers because of that hand to hand and jungle combat and so on and so, the martial art got created in these hardcore, horrible situations, on the street, on the jungles, and I wanted to go back to some of those scenarios and to show people, first of all, Taekwondo's not what you see on television and the Olympics. People bouncing around, doing these light kicks. Interestingly, by the way, it's the aggression. Many of the martial artists in the pics are astounding martial artists in other martial arts as well. They're just doing the martial art that they're supposed to be doing in the Olympics. They're capable of much more as well. So one purpose of the book, just to get back to the point, is to show the darker streak, in terms of the movements, the development, how it started and then, the men, a small group of geniuses and animals, the barroom brawlers, the generals who created it to show what they were. They were bullied and they were bullies. They led hundreds and thousands of men and some of them wouldn't be anybody. They were drinkers and playboys and they're going to whorehouses and geisha houses and it was a work hard, play hard, I guess, culture for some of these men and I wanted to show how the martial art also came from them. It wasn't now what we're seeing usually which is doing martial arts mainly with the kids at the malls and above shops and basements. It wasn't full of spiritual mumbo-



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jumbo about improving your soul and your heart and all these ancient stuff taken from, I don't know what, ancient Chinese manuals. It was created by guys who wanted to fight and defend themselves and defend their nation and empower their nation. It was very clear, there's a very clear goal from the start, Taekwondo, I think, as there was for karate decades before in Japan. I wanted to show that, the empowerment, both the darker and the lighter sides of it and how that, the empowerment, the history and the people, still now, is in the movements, the techniques. That our history would empower us now as we're training now. I had an overall goal in the whole book. I guess its theme is around empowerment.

Jeremy Lesniak:

Was there ever a point in your research where you talk to someone or you bump into a story that made you want to stop? Did you uncover anything, if it's something that's not in the book or even if it is, you don't have to say what it was, but there's some things that you uncover that were godawful. I don't know any other way to put it but was there anything that made you so upset that you considered stopping?

Alex Gillis:

I never considered stopping except once, maybe twice, and I told you about that in a cottage for a week and that was mainly because of, honestly, just terror of how much more prop I would find and terror at what some of the reactions would be when people read what I wrote so I had to be careful. I decided what to include in the book and what not to. The second thing, I think I considered, certainly putting the book online is when I began, because I'm an investigative journalist, I'm good at finding out things and I started discovering things with family dynamics among some of the main players and some of them, some of the scenes were just revolting and I couldn't write about them. They weren't directly relevant to the book but they were. When a martial artist practices his martial art on his family members full on, it turns your stomach. That could've gone in the book to show what kind of man that person was but I drew a line there, at one point and said, I'm not going to put that in, I'm not going to give in to it. I alluded to it in a few parts of the book, wrote in a couple of things that I found about the whole project here is to get the book done and to give people a glimpse of the true history of Taekwondo, the truth. It's not to get into the nitty-gritty of family abuse so, yeah, I kept going.

Jeremy Lesniak:

I'm glad you did.

Alex Gillis:

Thanks!

Jeremy Lesniak:



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So, you've mentioned that there's a second edition coming out. Tell us a little bit about that.

Alex Gillis:

Yeah, it's out on August this year. I've revised, I've updated every page, every chapter and I've added new sections including a fun little bit of Taekwondo in Russia and in the '90s during the coup d'état. I added a chapter about this... I consider a great man, C.K. Choi, in Vancouver, B.C. and then I updated everything else in terms of recent trends in Taekwondo, in terms of transparency, money, power dynamics, mergers. The leaders of Taekwondo are always talking about the merging the various factions and coming to terms with their ugly, past histories. I updated that as well.

Jeremy Lesniak:

So, for those of us that have read it, it's worth reading again because there's that much more that new stuff, it sounds like.

Alex Gillis:

I think it's worth reading again, yeah. I mean, most readers have contacted me and say they've read it 2 or 3 times anyway.

Jeremy Lesniak:

There's a lot in there. I mean, I certainly felt that as I finished it up to say, I could use this, I could read this again, certainly and it's kind of back on the list in my Kindle to read again but I think I'm going to wait for the second edition.

Alex Gillis:

However, I mean, you yourself know so much about martial arts, you probably don't need to read this revised version. The main reader for this book was for a younger generation. People who haven't read the book. They don't know much about, I mean, most people don't even know who created Taekwondo and who named it. Most martial artists doing Taekwondo don't know that. It's basics like that or where it's from so I wrote it mainly for them.

Jeremy Lesniak:

And for people that haven't read the book or have missed the episodes where we've talked about it, if I asked you to sum up the book in just a couple sentences, how would you describe it?

Alex Gillis:

I re-wrote the book so that anyone who doesn't do martial art would love it as well. It's lighter to read now. It reads like a spy novel and it opens up in 1938 Korea during a poker game that goes horribly wrong and we follow this man as he starts creating Taekwondo and then, meets the nemesis of his life



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and the two of them just have a go with each other from, pretty much, the whole book as they're both turning Taekwondo as one of the hottest martial arts in the world so it's a rollicking, good read.

Jeremy Lesniak:

Anyone that's listened to the show has probably heard me recommend it so definitely it should be on your reading list. There are some rather dry martial arts books out there, this is not one of them. I rarely endorse things on the show but just having you on the show, hopefully, is seen as an endorsement to the listeners and so, I'll be just that explicit and say if you haven't read *A Killing Art*, you really should and now's your opportunity to tell people where they can get it.

Alex Gillis:

Thanks Jeremy. It's available, it will be available in August in every bookstore and online as well. Anywhere in north America and pretty much, every part of the world, I think, at this point.

Jeremy Lesniak:

Cool. So, if anyone wants to reach you, email you, something like that, maybe they've got some feedback, they want to tell you they love the book or they want to send you some hate mail with their name, not anonymous, of course, how would someone reach you?

Alex Gillis:

Yeah, that's the best hate mail. Yeah, akillingart.com, please email me.

Jeremy Lesniak:

And of course, we'll link that on the show notes as well as links to the other things that we've talked about today so head on over there, whistlekickmartialartsradio.com if you're new to the show.

Alex Gillis:

Thanks Jeremy! Thanks for the opportunity. It's a great show.

Jeremy Lesniak:

Absolutely. Appreciate you being here and any parting words of wisdom for the people listening?

Alex Gillis:

Yeah, laugh at yourself.

Jeremy Lesniak:

Thank you for listening to episode 106 to whistlekick martial arts radio and thank you to Mr. Gillis. Over at whistlekickmartialartsradio.com, you can find links to Mr. Gillis's website as well as places to buy the



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book. If you know someone that would be a great interview for the show, please fill out the form at whistlekickmartialartsradio.com or if you want to shoot us a message with a suggestion for a Thursday show or some other feedback, there's a place to do that too. You can follow us on social media. We're on Facebook, Twitter, Pinterest, YouTube and Instagram and our username is always whistlekick. If you like the show, please be sure you're subscribing or using one of our free apps. They're available on both iOS and Android. For those of you kind enough to leave us a review, remember, we 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 your free pack of whistlekick stuff including a t-shirt and other great things and remember the products you can find at whistlekick.com or on Amazon like our hats and our sparring gear. If you're a school owner or team coach, you should check out wholesale.whistlekick.com for our discounted wholesale program. We'll be back soon but until next time, train hard, smile and have a great day!