



Episode 467 – Adaptive Martial Arts | whistlekickMartialArtsRadio.com



Jeremy Lesniak:

Hey there, welcome! This is whistlekick martial arts radio and today we're talking about adaptive martial arts. Yes, it's episode 467. I'm Jeremy Lesniak, I'm your host here. I'm the founder here. I do a bunch of things here and you can see everything that I'm doing and the rest of the team's doing at whistlekick.com and one of the things that you'll see over there is a store. We make a bunch of stuff and if you use the code `PODCAST15`, you can save 15% on any of that stuff and if you want to support us, if you want this show to continue, support is kind of important whether that's through a purchase or following us on social media @whistlekick, leaving us a review on Google and Facebook or anywhere else that seems to make sense or you can support the Patreon, patreon.com/whistlekick, and if you do that we're even going to give you original content that other people don't get to see. If you want to see everything going on with this show, there's a whole separate website. It's whistlekickmartialartsradio.com and that's where you'll find links and photos and videos to the bi-weekly episodes. Yes, we do this twice a week. Mondays, an interview; Thursdays, a topic show. Sometimes, like with today with the interviews and it's all under the heading of connecting and inspiring and educating those in the traditional martial arts community. Today's episode is a little different because we have 2 people on in 2 different segments talking about the same subject. Just a couple days ago on episode 466, we had Mr. Jason Davis on who is the founder of the Adaptive Martial Arts Association. A group dedicated to supporting those with specific challenges that still want to involve themselves and benefit from martial arts and it was a wonderful conversation and when we set that up,



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he wanted us to talk to other people in the group and we thought that was a great idea so we're releasing this episode, I recorded all 3 on the same day, it was a marathon day for conversation. I was a little fried and hopefully that doesn't come through but had the opportunity to talk to 2 other people. One, Master Kelly Thomas who will be up first, a martial arts instructor for many, many years. Someone who I've known for quite a few years. Wonderful person who is supportive in instructing adaptive martial artists. Up second is Mrs. Patty Thomas. No, they're not related. I had to ask. An occupational therapist who is an advisor to the adaptive martial arts association. Someone who is helping make sure that the materials that martial arts schools have are adequate and supportive to the end of instructing adaptive martial artists. I learned a ton on this episode and, I think you will too, whether or not you're an instructor; whether or not you are or plan to teach adaptive martial artists. Now, my hope is at least you'll consider it and if you attend a school that doesn't, maybe you'll speak to your school or your instructor because martial arts is for everyone and the benefits are, well, I don't need to tell you about the benefits. You know. If you didn't know, you probably wouldn't be listening to this show so let's start off, here I am with Master Thomas. Master Thomas, welcome to whistlekick martial arts radio.

Kelly Thomas:

Thank you very much, Jeremy.

Jeremy Lesniak:

It's nice to talk to you again. It's been a couple of years.

Kelly Thomas:

It has been a couple of years. It flies by so fast.

Jeremy Lesniak:

It does, it does and the disappointing thing as I'm getting older is I'm realizing time goes faster. That's unfair! It should go the other way, shouldn't it?

Kelly Thomas:

It absolutely should.

Jeremy Lesniak:

What's that famous quote? Youth is wasted on the young.

Kelly Thomas:

It is and I see my young children wasting it all the time.

Jeremy Lesniak:



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We're doing something a little bit different here. Thank you for participating and the audience already knows a lot about what's going on because I've set it up in the intro but we don't quite know what's going on yet because we're in the middle of it. We're in the thick of this and there's a 2nd part of this conversation. I'll be recording with someone else once we're done here and I want to thank you for trusting me in being flexible with some kind of format/concept thing that we don't even know what's going on yet.

Kelly Thomas:

Oh, that's great! We'll just wing it.

Jeremy Lesniak:

Exactly! I love winging it because it requires the least amount of preparation and you never know what you're going to get. Sometimes it's great, sometimes it's not.

Kelly Thomas:

That's right. Martial artists have to be prepared for anything.

Jeremy Lesniak:

We do, we do. What a perfect segue and it almost sounds like I set you up for that one and I didn't intentionally but I love it. We're here today to talk about adaptive martial arts and specifically what an instructor can do, what an instructor shouldn't do and everything around that subject of teaching adaptive, sometimes called disabled, students in a martial arts setting. Before we get there, because you didn't just walk in off the street one day and say I'm going to put on a uniform and a belt and start teaching adaptive martial artists, you've been teaching martial arts for quite a long time. Why don't you give us a few minutes about how you got started and bring us up to today.

Kelly Thomas:

I actually started in taekwondo, international taekwondo, back in 1991. I was 11 years old and my father signed me up for self-defense reasons. Things came up, life gets in the way so I came in and out of martial arts. Took me about 10 years to get to my black belt which I got in 2001. Started my own school about 13 years ago. Received my 6th degree black belt this past March and started the school called Taekwondo KICKS which stands for keep strength, inner confidence, Kinship and Self-defense.

Jeremy Lesniak:

So if I'm doing the math right, we've got 25 years or so of martial arts experience. You've been at this a bit.

Kelly Thomas:



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A little bit, yes.

Jeremy Lesniak:

And one of the things that I know about you that the audience may not know is that you are an incredibly active instructor. Most people who wear the hat of martial arts instructor teach, I would say, 4 to 6 classes a week and there is nothing wrong with that. I am not throwing stones. When I had my own school, I taught 4 and it was overwhelming. How many classes a week do you teach?

Kelly Thomas:

I average between 25 and 30.

Jeremy Lesniak:

Okay, the reason that I bring that up is not because I gave you the opportunity to brag or to say wow, that's amazing or anything, other than it means you have worked with a lot of students over a lot of hours and if we consider skill and I consider instruction a skill. If we think of skill as being roughly correlated with the experience of time and involvement, I think it's fair to say that you have more teaching experience than the majority of martial arts instructor out there at any age or rank and again, this is not to compare in any kind of negative way. I don't want people to feel hurt if you think I'm pointing at you, because I'm not. I'm simply trying to point out that Master Thomas, you've worked with a lot of students and that give you, as far as I'm concerned, the qualification to talk about what we're going to talk about today. Now, we're here to talk about adaptive martial arts and, I know that your involvement with the adaptive martial arts association is not something that's been going on for years because that organization hasn't been around for years and years. Do you remember your first, what we'll call them, adaptive student and what that was like for you as an instructor?

Kelly Thomas:

Yes, actually, the very first class in the past 25 years that I've been involved in taekwondo and the martial arts, when I was a child, the martial arts was geared towards the 20, 30, 40 year olds and very few kids. Now, when I started teaching again, it had totally seemed to have flopped where it's most kids now. Parents are signing up their children and most of the time, these parents are looking for help and support with their children with ADHD, autism, focus, all of the benefits that the student can receive from any martial art is really speaking to these parents of special needs kids and as an outlet and a support system for them so right from day 1, I had children with ADHD and actually, my first adult student had MS.

Jeremy Lesniak:

What's that like because if you've never been a martial arts instructor, if you've never started your own school, you might not know the fear, the anxiety of getting out there and saying I have to take



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everything I've ever been taught and teach it but when you're talking about someone who's adaptive, now you're adding the complexity of teaching that to someone whose body may not move the same way or have the same capacity as mine.

Kelly Thomas:

Yes, right. I think a lot of it has to do with the fact that I'm a mom. My daughter had to do some occupational therapy when she was an infant so I got to see how you had to change things a little bit to make things work. I myself have fibromyalgia which means that there are certain things that I can't do. My body can't do. Having had a few hip replacements as well so some of it is my own experience of understanding that when somebody asked me to do something that I may have to change a bit but also, back when I first got my black belt, my instructors had said, if you really want to learn how to teach, you teach kids and when you have to teach kids, you need to learn how to speak at their level and their language which may need the changing of the explanations a little bit so that they understand so when working with an adaptive student, I feel it's the same way that you can't necessarily, or I can't necessarily be as strict like with a certain kick. The real name is step behind side piercing kick, right? They're not going to understand that on day 3 or 4 or even a month from now so I changed the name to Thomas the Train kick where you say the caboose comes to engine and the engine kicks and they can see that and they understand that so I think that is one of the first things that I learned is that that I may not be able to use the same terminology that I was taught.

Jeremy Lesniak:

Makes all kinds of sense and it's a battle between the traditional aspects of martial arts and the desire to actually teach in an effective way to the person that you're trying to reach and I don't mean battle in that it's a negative thing but it can be a challenge, it can be a conflict at times and you just gave a great example how the working with that and I would expect you're doing that and it works better and anybody who teaches kids knows, you got to change it.

Kelly Thomas:

You've got to change it because they can only understand so much but I think it's with anybody. I often tell my adult students, often when I teach them a pattern or a kata, I tell them I'm going to teach you like you're 3 years old and take no offense to it but you'll understand it and it makes sense to them and then you add in the real terminology and the real explanation but you just kind of peel back the layers. With adaptive, it may take a little longer to add the other layers, you just wait until they're ready.

Jeremy Lesniak:

So, over the years, as you've had students come in who have needed different words, different movements as you've changed things because I've been to some of your classes. I'm seen them and they're quite the age range. It's the kids, the adults and all over the place and anybody who's taught that



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even among, in theory, having anyone having the same physical capacity, they don't. Everybody's different so how have you started to adjust not just the language but the physical expectations and instruction for people based on their needs.

Kelly Thomas:

What I do, especially when somebody first starts, explain to them that the warm ups that we do are designed to push everybody, everybody do their best and hope that somebody who physically can't do it as well as everyone else doesn't feel frustrated but one of the things that works in my class is 95% of my classes are family-style classes which, like you said, is mixed of ages so I can have a 4 year old all the way up to grandparents in the same class and so, when a special needs person is in there, there's obviously a preschooler who's not doing push-ups correctly. There are grandparents who are having difficulty doing pushups and the fact that I just tell them 15 pushups is the best of your ability, they don't feel as though there's a light on them where everybody's watching them and they can't do the pushups correctly. Well, because nobody's watching anybody. Everybody's doing the best that they can so they feel that they're just a part of the group and we wait until everybody's done and we just move on so I make it a point that I don't comment or correct certain physical abilities or strength. We do our best to help that student. Sometimes, it means they have to hold somebody's hand, sometimes it means that they do need to use their walker or need help getting off of the floor but I'm able to do that because of the support of also my students because they've seen it work since day 1 to make that person feel a part of the group and to realize that they are improving every day.

Jeremy Lesniak:

Let's take an example that I think further takes us down this path in this conversation but it's a temporary one. Let's imagine you have someone that's been in your school for a year or two and they break an arm and they're in a sling, they're in a cast and pushups come up in the warm-up and I would assume you're not going to not do pushups in the warm up until that person's arm has fully healed 6 to 8 weeks later. I'm assuming you're not calling special attention to them based on what you've just expressed but how do you handle that?

Kelly Thomas:

That's actually happened quite a few times.

Jeremy Lesniak:

I had a feeling.

Kelly Thomas:

Yeah, I mean it's like oh yeah, I broke my arm. I can't do pushups, I guess. I understand that so instead, do extra crunches or do jumping jacks or do something else. We've learned several different ab



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exercises so just do or march in place. As long as the student is doing something, I'm not running a pushup class so I kind of look at what am I actually trying to teach here. What is my main goal? Doing the perfect pushup is not one so as long as they're trying and doing their best and doing something, we just run with it.

Jeremy Lesniak:

That makes sense to me and that's what I would expect. Now, of course, when you take something a little more permanent; let's take an example and I'll let you choose one based on what you've worked with but when someone comes into your class and I think at this point, we can kind of, let's say split, because you have some folks who are adaptive who aren't as extreme with their needs as others. Right? I mean you've got some who's, maybe there's an issue with one leg but both arms work and the other leg works just fine and then you may have somebody else who can't stand without the aid of some kind of hardware, wheelchair or crutches or some kind of heavy duty braces and their needs are going to be traumatically different and they might need to be in a separate class. So, lets continue to work down this spectrum and have someone who can participate in a standard class but with some adjustments, how do you handle that?

Kelly Thomas:

So, the person can be in the regular family class?

Jeremy Lesniak:

Yeah.

Kelly Thomas:

We just have them do the best that they can. I do still believe in traditional patterns and stuff like that so sometimes it takes them longer to learn their pattern. I've also gone ahead as taekwondo as we tend to promote students every 3 months. I've kept with the traditional belt but have added a few mini-hops between the belts either because of age for the young kids or ability so that they still get to go to promotional testing, still get to celebrate their advancement, their work but they're only going up instead of from yellow to high yellow, they're going from yellow to medium yellow and then maybe in 3 months, they get to the high yellow. So, they still see the progression, they still see a celebration but it may be slower and it usually is and so we just, if they need help, we do that. We got some mats and we just support them in whatever they need if they were in the regular class.

Jeremy Lesniak:

It sounds like it's pretty flexible and that, not only is that how you do it but probably how it has to be done?

Kelly Thomas:



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Yes and I think that it has a lot to do in the fact that I do teach family style classes. You have to be flexible and just as kind of understand where my concept is. My students and I often kind of joke this is the Christmas season where we're kind of the island of misfit toys when we come together because it's all different ages, all different whatever and whenever I teach, my main reason for teaching is to increase a student's self-confidence and self-worth. The martial art piece is, the taekwondo is just a tool for me to do that and I do, I am strict on learning certain techniques and stuff like that to a certain point when we get to a certain rank but I realized that I'm not turning out these grand championship competitors or whatever. That's not my goal and that's not the goal of the students that I teach so it allows me to be more flexible and understanding when a student can't do a turning kick. They have to step around and then pick up their foot but that person, to do just understand that concept of physically turning their body and then picking up a leg is a lot of work and it took months for them to get that so they still deserve the respect and the celebration of all of that hard work. Just because they can't necessarily do a 360-jump turning kick which is difficult, that technique that they just did by stepping and kicking was just as hard for them as it is for somebody who is fit to learn to do a jumping 360 turning kick.

Jeremy Lesniak:

And I think, and this comes from me being heavily involved in the martial arts but not so much as an instructor but it seems like this is one of the reasons that martial arts makes so much sense for the adaptive community is that it can be so flexible and so individualized. Do you agree?

Kelly Thomas:

I do agree. I actually had many therapists, counselors encourage their patients or the patient's families to seek out martial arts as a way to support them. The martial arts is unique because, even though it's thought of as an individual sport, you're still part of the team. You still get, and especially adaptive students who oftentimes may feel not included in things, it gives them a sense of belonging to a group but as the instructor, I teach the individuals in the group. Every person is doing what they can do. It's not like being on the soccer team where everybody has to be doing the same drill at the same time. Everybody can go at their own speed. I can take care of each person by themselves but they feel like they're part of the community.

Jeremy Lesniak:

That makes sense. Now, let's look at the other side of kind of that split when you have someone who maybe, their individual needs are going to exceed what can be handled in a standard class setting. First off, how do you know?

Kelly Thomas:



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How do you know usually is meeting the person or having them come do a class and watching and I make an assessment about...ok, so I have 15, 20 people in class. It's an hour class so I can only spend so many minutes per student if you want to look at student minutes per class. If I feel that this person, in order to accomplish their goals, needs more than a couple of minutes of my time, then I would definitely suggest that person go to an adaptive class where everything can be slowed down and more like, also depends how good their gross motor skills are. Sometimes verbal, I do work with some kids that are non-verbal which can be a challenge in a large class. When I look at what can I do and if I'm capable of giving them what they need or what they're looking for in a regular class, I say that's great. If it's more than that then I definitely suggest that they can do an adaptive class where I can slow everything down.

Jeremy Lesniak:

That makes sense. Do you have any kind of limits on the number of people that you would have in an adaptive class? You talked about that metric of student minutes which is something that I haven't thought of before but it makes all kinds of sense so are you monitoring that as a number?

Kelly Thomas:

In the future, yes. Right now, the class size is small. I think we usually have 6 or 7 but I certainly wouldn't want any more than 10, I believe, but it also depends because the longer a student is in that class, your hope is that they become more independent and stronger so the longer that they're in the class, the less time they're going to need from me and now, their job is to be a leader or an example or a helper so it kind of comes around full circle but it's definitely something that I'm needing to be aware of because there are some times when you have to stop class to take time to work with one person and everyone needs to expect that and understand it and parents have to understand it so that makes it a little safer and easier to do in an adaptive class where I say ok, we're going to stop and I'm going to deal, when I work with this one little thing and everybody is ok with it because they understand how important it is.

Jeremy Lesniak:

That makes sense and so, what else? Because I don't know what other questions to ask. If we kind of flip it and put it all under the heading of what don't I know so I can't ask the questions about it. What things would you want other school owners and instructors to know about teaching adaptive students?

Kelly Thomas:

Oh boy! That put me on the spot!

Jeremy Lesniak:

I'm good at that.

Kelly Thomas:



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Yes, I know! I think the big thing, and I'll be, I catch myself doing this at the same time. Sometimes you hear from a parent, somebody calls wanting to do class and the person walks in and immediately goes to my head oh, can I help this person? You've heard people say that when you see a handicapped person, you don't necessarily mean to but everybody kind of shies away. One of my students had an accident, was in a wheelchair. She's not in a wheelchair all the time but she's the one that said it's funny. You get into a wheelchair and nobody will make eye contact with you so when you first have an adaptive person come in, often times, I get scared and I get nervous. What if I say something wrong? What if I do something wrong? What if I offend this person and I just kind of take a deep breath and introduce myself and just always do the best that I can. Have I made mistakes? Yes, but I think the biggest reason, and I could be wrong, I think the biggest reason adaptive people come to a martial art or the families are looking for a martial art has to do a lot with inclusion and just coming up and saying hello and welcome them to the group is something that doesn't happen very open and to treat them as part of the group even though I work with that a somewhat non-verbal, when I call their name, they're supposed to try to say yes ma'am and they do because that's martial arts. You're supposed to say yes, ma'am. So you know they're doing the best they can and you just let them do that but you don't want to necessarily allow them to do nothing so it's really trying to find that fine line of how much to push to get them to excel and not to break them but it's the same with teaching any student. Every student has that point so I think every student, whether it's a special needs student or not, comes into the martial arts with a special need. Whether it's an emotional need, whether it's a confidence need and to try to figure out what that need is and to address it, and again by pushing them just enough to excel and not humiliating them or not deflating them is a job so looking at adaptive students is just like looking at any other student. Just that their needs can be more visual and obvious.

Jeremy Lesniak:

It's funny. You're connecting some dots for me that I hadn't considered until just now. One of the things that I've said on the show in talking to people is that everyone comes into martial arts looking for something. Everybody has something in their lives that missing or lacking and hoping that martial arts will fill it, otherwise they wouldn't go. They would spend the time, they wouldn't spend the money to look at everyone is having that lack, that missing puzzle piece. It puts everybody on the same page and I think it makes our job as instructors, I'm putting myself in that bucket, it makes the instructor's job, maybe not easier but simpler because you can work from that place of what is this person looking for and teaching to that and within those capacities regards to whether they're considered adaptive or not.

Kelly Thomas:

Yes, I agree and in fact, for homework when they test the first time, regardless of their age or whatever, for me, they have to write a paper or draw a picture when they're young, to say why they're starting taekwondo so they've been in taekwondo for about 3 months, it's like why did you start? What are you looking for and you'll get various answers that mom made me or whatever and some more thought out reasons but I tell when I sign the work, why do you walk into the door is one reason and usually the



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reason you stay will change but it's always important to remember why you started because I think a lot of people when they first look into the martial arts are looking for a blanket, general reason like for fitness or for self-defense or whatever. Anyone who's been in the martial arts long enough knows there's a deeper thing there and once you can get them to admit what their broad reason is, you can usually kind of pick what their true or inner meaning, the reason for coming to class.

Jeremy Lesniak:

Great, yeah. It makes all kind of sense. Is there anything else you want people to know? I'm out of questions.

Kelly Thomas:

You're out of questions.

Jeremy Lesniak:

I'm out of questions. You don't agree? You've answered everything I wanted to know and I'm trying to speculate what others listening might want to know but you're doing a great job checking boxes so...

Kelly Thomas:

Oh, thank you! I guess when I teach, I'm often reminded that the best advice that my instructor gave me was to teach from the heart. You can't go wrong if you teach from the heart. The students, whether they're adaptive or non-adaptive, I mean this is going to sound really corny but it's the holiday season, why not? Everybody just wants to be loved and accepted and supported and to me, as an instructor in this society now which is not as supportive and loving as we all wish it would be, that really becomes more of our responsibility is to have a loving, supportive environment for our students and opening it up to adaptive, special needs students and really see that what they do for the day is miraculous and appreciate that. A lot of the things that we take for granted, these people, these students have to work extra hard to do what we find to do very simple. Just walking and to appreciate that and support them and helps to, maybe knock us down a peg when we see what other people are doing and struggling with and I think, like you said, put us all in the same page, put us all in the same level.

Jeremy Lesniak:

That was some great conversation and I've been fortunate enough to work with some of Master Thomas's students who watch her teach not in these adaptive classes but it's pretty clear to me that she's a wonderful choice for the local class and a great example of how a passionate martial arts instructor can reach a new demographic but really, there's no downside to this and I think that's my favorite thing about is that we're opening martial arts to a whole new group of people who benefit tremendously and everybody wins in that exchange and that's my favorite thing to do in business. How do we find ways where everybody wins? My 2nd conversation, as I said in the intro, is with Mrs. Patty



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Thomas, an occupational therapist who works with the adaptive martial arts association and advises them and helps provide the materials that instructors will need. She's coming at this from a completely different angle. She is not a martial artist which I think is an asset in this case because let's face it, martial arts can often be a closed group of people. Very much rooted in tradition to the point of fear of change and I think that that's the number one thing holding programs like this back. We got into some great stuff, I came away with a much better understanding of what is needed and how to operate in these settings and I hope you do as well. Here we go! Mrs. Thomas, welcome to whistlekick martial arts radio.

Patty Thomas:

Thank you, Jeremy. I'm excited to be here.

Jeremy Lesniak:

I'm excited to have you here. You hold the distinction that you are one of the very few non-martial artists to ever come on the show.

Patty Thomas:

Wow, interesting!

Jeremy Lesniak:

Let's see...there's definitely one other. You might be only the 2nd.

Patty Thomas:

I keep contemplating if I'm going to just end up studying somewhere.

Jeremy Lesniak:

You can probably guess by my opinion on the subject and I bet everybody else listening right now saying you should, you should! But of course, it's not why you're here. We didn't bring you on to try and intervene. This is not non-martial artist intervention radio. This is a subject episode. We're talking about adaptive martial arts and you're affiliated with the organization that we've been talking about this week so why don't you talk about how you got started in your profession and how you got started with the organization.

Patty Thomas:

Ok, sure! I'm an occupational therapist. I've always known pretty much my adult life that I like 2 things. One is to solve problems and the other is to help people and help make things accessible to people so if you combine those two, pretty much end up with occupational therapy. I'm really lucky to be able to say that I love my profession and have been practicing for my 24th year of practice. I've been in Vermont



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since 2000. Prior to this, I was in Massachusetts. I graduated from Boston University and then, relocated with my family to Vermont for a more quiet kind of lifestyle.

Jeremy Lesniak:

And what is an occupational therapist do? Let's do that because I'm aware that I know what that is but everyone listening may not.

Patty Thomas:

It's actually a really challenging question to answer and it's part of the course of study when you're in college for occupational therapy because we actually do a wide range of things but if you're going to put it in 1 sentence, sort of in a nutshell, occupational therapists help people with any kind of challenge due to disability, illness, accident, access what they need to be doing on a regular basis so if there's a reason they cannot access something due to a disability or impairment of some sort, we, as the occupational therapist can be supportive, usually as part of the team to help support what it is that they want to do.

Jeremy Lesniak:

Can you give a couple common examples of what your job entails?

Patty Thomas:

Ok, sure. I'm actually a school-based occupational therapist so I help students who are unable to access public education for some reason by making accommodations and adaptations helping them access their education. In the medical field, an occupational therapist might help a person who has had a stroke become better able to care for themselves and return home. Those are 2 really concrete easy example but we run the gamut for everything that we do from driver rehab to hand therapy to visual rehabilitation, helping people make accommodations in public arena. Pardon my dog. That will be edited out.

Jeremy Lesniak:

It's quite alright. No, no. It's fine. I think that gives us a good starting point here so when we look at this organization of adaptive martial arts, and we can even have a broader conversation because I'm not going to pretend that there aren't instructors out there working with martial artists who have needs and responding to those needs. I know of some.

Patty Thomas:

There are so many of those. Yes.

Jeremy Lesniak:

I'm friends with some. I've had some on the show.



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Patty Thomas:

Good!

Jeremy Lesniak:

And it's wonderful work and I fully support it and that's why we're doing, why we're having this conversation, why we're putting these resources into this because I want more martial arts schools to offer these programs so how did you get linked up with this group? How did you meet Jason?

Patty Thomas:

Jason and I live in the same small town in Vermont and known him for a long time. I didn't necessarily know his personal story with how helpful marital arts has been for him. He was looking to really raise the AMAA to a higher level and was hoping to get professionals on to consult. PTs and OTs and other professionals who might be able to weigh in and sort of raise the level of professionalism of the organization and what we have to offer in the local class. So he asked me to join and he and I had a conversation about it and that was about 3 years ago and we've been going strong since.

Jeremy Lesniak:

Oh, great. Now, when you look at what's going on, when you look at the idea of taking someone who has some kind of challenge and we can...it runs the gamut. It's pretty broad from something that could be temporary, I suppose, to something that is full-time and possibly going to get worse and we're all looking at this from a perspective of wanting to help the student. The instructor wants to convey as much as they can and I can imagine that there could be some circumstances where the instructor gets really excited and maybe isn't quite sure how to reach that student and how to convey that information in a way that, not only is effective, but appropriate and there's concerns about what language do people use and how much is too much and how much is not enough and how do you balance all these things with being respectful. It's a big undertaking.

Patty Thomas:

It sure is. It can feel that way but it doesn't have to be that way. I guess I'd first start by saying, for me, as we've stated, I'm not a martial artist but in my observations of the local class of children with disabilities who are participating, my observation has been that martial arts, while it is sort of a nice community and a group activity, it's also a very individualized sport which is why it can be so beneficial to people with disabilities because you are individualizing for almost, I'm going to take a leap and say that people who are instructing for martial arts, are individualizing for each of their students. I don't think you'd ever stand in front of a group and everybody's going to do exactly the same thing with the exact same result at every class.

Jeremy Lesniak:



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Right, right. The good ones anyway. The good ones will.

Patty Thomas:

There we go and so when it comes to having a student with a challenge, whatever that might be. You can call it a disability and maybe labeled as such or not but all learners are different. It's just the matter of the levels of accommodation that's going to be necessary for the particular student to progress in your program.

Jeremy Lesniak:

And when someone says I think I want to do this, I think I want to open my doors to adaptive students and maybe they're not sure what they if they want to offer separate classes or classer for, or include adaptive students in generalized classes. This was something that Master Thomas and I talked about in the previous segment and I'd like your feedback on this too. How do we know? How do we know if we meet someone, if we meet a potential student, how do we know if they're going to be more successful in a class with everyone or in a class that is specifically for adaptive students?

Patty Thomas:

That's interesting to think about. I think when it comes to working with a person who has challenges, it's important to have a conversation with them or their people if they happen to be non-verbal or their adults if they happen to be minors and find out in other areas of their life, what works for them? So, if you find that you have a student, let's say for example, a student with autism and that student is in general able access the everyday programming in their school with typical aged peers, then chances are they might do the same in your program and be in with the general class. If they're a person who maybe needs a smaller group in the rest of their lives, then they might do that as well. I'm so sorry.

Jeremy Lesniak:

Don't worry about it. We've had far worse.

Patty Thomas:

If there's a student who needs more intensive accommodations and adaptations in other areas, what have they done at school? Have they participated in other sports and what were the accommodations that were necessary? One of the things that's important is to include the family and help. They know their child best or their adult best and just have a conversation and set a plan and don't hesitate to do trial and error. Try. I always like to go with the expression we use in education called least restrictive environment so try a child in a general class. Sometimes, they might need one or two separate lessons or individualized or small group lessons and then could end up going, maybe a mixture of both but I would say individualize their programs as best they can.

Jeremy Lesniak:



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One of the things that's coming to mind as you're talking about these conversations, I would imagine that in having adaptive students, whether that's in a generalized class or in a separate class, there's likely going to be a need for conversation before or after class with either the student or, as you termed it, their people and I think a lot of martial arts schools don't have a lot of dialogues because life is busy. You run class to class to class and you don't have time to have even a 5-minute conversation with every student after the class but the needs of the adaptive student require more outside of class time.

Patty Thomas:

That could be true. I think usually if you know the right questions to ask, that might be something that you could, once you get used to having students with differences, I think part of it is the comfort level. Really, Jeremy, once you start getting used to having students with disabilities, your comfort level, and I can't speak for all people but I know myself when I first started working with people with disabilities. It's a little bit, at times, uncomfortable because we're afraid of what we don't understand. We can be and we're afraid for them and we're afraid for the other person that we don't understand. It's uncomfortable. We think we don't ever want to be blind or we don't want to have to use a wheelchair to get around and so that can be intimidating but we're all people first and if you just strike the conversation, you'll find that we're more alike than we are different and sometimes just having that conversation once or twice and three times then you get more comfortable. You get better versed on the topic. You get better versed in the community and it becomes easier as you go along.

Jeremy Lesniak:

Now, I would expect that the number 1 thing that is going to hold someone back from offering adaptive students a place in their school would be fear and not fear of anything really negative but almost fear that they're going to do a poor job, fear that they're going to harm the student or inadvertently say or do something that comes across as disrespectful so how do we bridge that gap? How do we give them the knowledge to make sure that they feel comfortable giving it a try.

Patty Thomas:

I think first, like I said, conversations with the student and their family. For me, I don't know if instructors will feel comfortable for this but for me, when I encounter a person who has a condition or a difference in the way they work and learn that I'm not experienced, I'll often say I'm not, I haven't worked with a child with this but I'm going to learn and we can learn together and I need you to let me know what's working and what isn't. That's first and foremost one way to become more comfortable. There are resources, there are so many resources available for people to become better with all. I think I speak for all people, we say we all do better at what we do and doing a little bit of research or just reaching out, asking for help. There's a lot of help available.

Jeremy Lesniak:



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Now, I would imagine that there's tremendous value, I'm thinking of this from a perspective of the martial arts instructor. Anyone who's ever taught anything knows that the moment you start teaching something, it becomes an educational opportunity for you. To be able to do something, to be able to teach it is another but I would imagine that being able to teach it to someone who moves very differently or learns very differently is that much more of a challenge and a wonderful opportunity to better understand the things you are teaching.

Patty Thomas:

Right, for sure.

Jeremy Lesniak:

So, I'm not sure how, you mentioned resources. Are these resources that you can mention or that we can link in the show notes? Maybe you can send us some stuff?

Patty Thomas:

So, first, let's talk about the adaptive martial arts association and so that is our mission is to provide resources for schools and dojos and teachers of martial arts and families to be able to approach this and not have to have that fear and know that there are resources and people behind them. People who have tried it and done it. You can reach out to the adaptive martial arts association, we have a therapeutic consulting staff and we will often help folks with broad general questions. We can point them in the direction for specific questions about specific students. Understandably, we can't give specific therapeutic advice for a given student that they're teaching but in broad terms, we can tell them things that are known to work in certain different types of these people with different disabilities. The other thing is, the research, there are research articles out there that support martial arts for all kinds of different learners especially for people with developmental disabilities, physical disabilities. Another up and coming area that's becoming very well-researched is folks with PTSD and training in the martial arts, autism spectrum disorder which we all know is on the rise. It's unlikely that you would have any area of the United States anyway where you don't have potential students that are falling into that diagnoses and there's, depending on what the person brings with them, there's also agencies and organizations that can give you broad terms, not specific with martial arts, but how best to work with persons with cerebral palsy, or how best to work with a person with visual impairment so if you go to the adaptive martial arts website, there are links and resources and you can reach out to us directly.

Jeremy Lesniak:

And we're certainly going to link that. Now, you and I talked a little bit about this before we started recording and I just heard you kind of almost babble some words and I want to talk about the language component because I think this is such a big deal for us who are not adaptive because we don't want to screw it up, we don't want to hurt anyone's feelings.



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Patty Thomas:

Nobody wants to hurt anybody's feelings but here's my question, Jeremy, who is the they who decides what any minority group wants to be called? Who are they that made that decision and is there a whole group that's allowed to speak for the whole population and so, I think you run into that when talking about any minority group but I do know that in general, wanting this person for this language and part of the reason for that is because people don't necessarily want to be identified or identify others by their disability. So, if you say a disabled person then the first thing that you're talking about is they're not able. I've heard this and I don't know if this is true but I love this story that there is not, in some languages, there is not a translation for the word disability because you can only have a disability if you are comparing one to others. Everybody's able but some are disabled or unable, right? And so, there's no translation for it and so, people are just respected for what their abilities are so if your ability is that you can be in a chair that happens to have wheels and still engage in upper extremity exercises that are martial arts, then you are a martial artist. You don't happen to be standing up while you do it, that doesn't mean that you are disabled or unable.

Jeremy Lesniak:

Right, we did a whole episode on how do you define someone as or as not a martial artist and I take the very broad approach that if you have done some martial arts and got something out of it and hope that someday you'll do it again, if you're not currently, you're a martial artist. It's not any physical standard, it's not any mental standard, it's not any time standard; it's this thing that you do martial arts to you.

Patty Thomas:

And going back to your question about differently abled people, people with challenges, people with disabilities, I, as I have said to you in an earlier conversation, I do fumble at times because who knows what the right word is. In some populations, in some circles, some people with varying diagnoses want their diagnoses to be the first thing they say. An autistic person might be politically correct or might be comfortable with someone whereas people with autism might be, I think if you can ask the person and their family what they prefer but if you're not sure, nobody's ever going to be offended if you say the student with challenges or the student who learns differently or sometimes you can say adaptive martial arts, the adaptive student is sometimes ok but if you use the person first and then ask after, you use the person's preferred language first and then ask after if there's a different preference they would like.

Jeremy Lesniak:

And I would imagine that if you're teaching from a place with compassion, and in the previous segment we talked with master Thomas and talked about kind of leading with love, if you're doing that, going to be using their name far, far more than you are their diagnoses.

Patty Thomas:



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Or label.

Jeremy Lesniak:

Yeah, their label so it matters because it's a barrier that we, as instructors, might put up but I think it matters far more to us as that barrier and it doesn't have to be there. So, let's talk about the physical concern. There is the language so now, the physical concern. We talked about having those conversations with the person or with their people but still translating that knowledge into a class and into an individualized program for that student can be really challenging or can be really scary because, if they've never done martial arts before, it's entirely possible that there are things come up that you don't even realize that the student will excel at that and could handle it at a much higher level than we'd imagine or the opposite end of that spectrum there that oh, this particular motor pattern isn't something that comes up often and they're having a tougher time with it than we had expected so how might we handle those sort of things?

Patty Thomas:

Again, I think you approach each person individually. You would take probably whatever your very basic intro course is and have the person who's engaged in the adaptive programming in front of you, now you've already had a conversation hopefully with at least the student and hopefully with the family and you try and you see and if you see that things are too challenging, I think you would lighten up. I think you would make the adjustments based on your observations and anything that you don't get in front of people teaching without a whole lot of experience and know-how so I think you have to, sort of in a case by case basis, see how the student can do and watch for what the challenges are and adjust accordingly.

Jeremy Lesniak:

Makes sense and I don't want to make the audience think that I'm beating the dead horse but I'm kind of intentionally asking questions that lead back to this very similar answer because I want to make sure people come away with that; that if we're having the conversations, if you're willing to come from a good place, that's going to come through. I think we've all had exchanges with people in and out of the martial arts, if it's coming from a good place, they're much more tolerant. How many of us as martial artists have been punched in the face when we shouldn't have been? When the control wasn't there and it hurts but you shake it off because the person kind of hurt you? We let these things go because we recognize people's intent so if we focus on the good intent, I think it's going to happen and I think when you were talking about working with a child with a diagnosis that you are not experienced with, it sounds like that's what you are doing. You're being honest in saying I don't have experience with this but I'm going to learn. I'm saying that right, right?

Patty Thomas:



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Yeah, you learn and introduce the topic and provide the lesson and model the movements and see if the person can do the movements and if it looks right or feels right, then chances are it's right and if it's challenging, then you step back a little bit and you try it a little bit differently then you ask them what is a way that you could do this because it's got to be a back and forth too and I wouldn't necessarily want to toss one thing in here, Jeremy, one thing is a lot of times when you're teaching a person any kind of teaching, visuals and watching is sometimes way better than talking and words. Do this, mirror me, copy this and then, make a movement. It's sometimes a lot more powerful and poignant. Put your right arm here then put the left leg here, just mirroring and modeling and then, looking for comfort in the learner and if the learner looks comfortable and feels safe, then I would say continue with the teaching and if they don't, back up a little bit and maybe figure out what the interference is. Now, I'm not sure if my expectations are high as a therapist but that's what I do and I don't know if that expectation would be too high for a teacher but that's where I say, it is a little bit more of a team approach where you're going to have to talk with the learner, you're going to have to talk, I think if you're going to have a person who is significantly involved, you'd probably want to have a conversation with their parent or with their, maybe even, if they have therapist, physician then you want to make sure that you're keeping them safe so if you have somebody who's significantly involved, then you'd probably want to double check and make sure that they're safe to be participating in such a sport. It's no different than when children participate in special Olympic or unified sports. You just need to have a, you don't have to every time, but sometimes you need to have a doctor's release or if it's safe for you and once you have that, then you know you can proceed.

Jeremy Lesniak:

That makes all kinds of sense and of course, the thing I'm going to throw in: start from a place of fun. I would imagine if you deal with that with the student population you're working with, if you're not having fun with the exercises or the drills or whatever you're working with them, they're going to tune out.

Patty Thomas:

Master Thomas is somewhat new with our local class. We just started this fall and that is something that she has brought to our program that she has been amazing and significant is that our students want to come back every week because they have fun and because she's willing to have fun with them. They have developed an even bigger respect for her.

Jeremy Lesniak:

Totally. Anything else? Anything else that the people listening might not know or questions I might not be thinking to ask?

Patty Thomas:



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I don't know that I touched on the...I talked a little bit about the research but the research supports all kinds of individual activities, movements this good and martial arts is individualized and it's great for so many reasons. I'm sure that probably all of you could speak to even as well as if not better than I could that the concentration, require the coordination, confidence building, the physical benefits of movement and exercise and breath support, organ health from being standing up and weight bearing, the discipline involved, the increased focus and concentration has been well-researched that all of these things are good and they all fall with the scope of martial arts. It's almost like you can go get everything you need by, see I'm convincing myself to start training in martial arts, but it's just is such a valuable resource and a thing that's so great about martial arts is that you could be beside, you could be your 1st or 2nd class or you could be next to somebody much higher in rank and you both could still be learning and you could be learning from each other and I think that's fabulous and I just want to throw out another. We have a local class; this was an incidental benefit that nobody even thought about or necessarily counted on and I just observed it at one of the Saturday morning classes with there's several students there. Several students all, this was not an integrated class, so this is all learners with challenges and students with disabilities and their parents got to stand on the sideline and watch their child participate in a sport and there's something, a sort of camaraderie among these group of parents and it was something that several of them had never had the opportunity before because when you have a child who has a significant difference in how they learn and participate in life, you can't put them in the little league team or the soccer team or the boy scout club or you name it and so, having an individualized program that is also a group learning experience, that was one thing that was just amazing and parents were really very notably, noticeably enjoying their time in the sidelines watching their child learn and participate.

Jeremy Lesniak:

That's wonderful. I haven't even thought of it in that way.

Patty Thomas:

We didn't either and it's not just, and I also want to toss in, it's not just parents and children. I often make the reference to children because I'm a pediatric occupational therapist but if it was adult learners, I'm sure it would be the same.

Jeremy Lesniak:

Right, right. Here's a group of people and here's an opportunity and this is why we're doing this. We're trying to lend some support to an organization that's doing wonderful things but it's all under the heading of it's an opportunity for martial arts and martial artists. It's an opportunity for us to reach more people and help more people and by extension, help the world in a way that a lot of other aspects of life, a lot of other professions, a lot of other pursuits don't have the opportunity to do.

Patty Thomas:



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There is a phenomena about working with people who have different ways of learning and when it's all said and done and everybody walks away to find out who got more out of it, and often times it's the people who were the helpers that are definitely the ones that are just very fulfilled and better off for it.

Jeremy Lesniak:

And one more time, if people want to learn more about the organization, where would they go?

Patty Thomas:

Sure, it's the adaptive martial arts association. We have a website that's [adaptivemartialarts](http://adaptivemartialarts.org), all one word, .org. We do have a national directory that links students with differences in learning to dojos and senseis and instructors who are willing to take on adaptive students. Websites and our organization is ever-evolving and looking to improve our support but we already have a good, pretty good list of resources and supports on the website and there is an opportunity to join the AMAA as a member or make a donation to help us with our mission.

Jeremy Lesniak:

Awesome. I really appreciate your time.

Patty Thomas:

Thank you. It's been a pleasure, Jeremy and thank you for having us on.

Jeremy Lesniak:

Two wonderful conversations with 2 wonderful people helping a wonderful organization. I don't know what else to say. I hope that you will go and check out the website. I hope you will consider making a contribution. I hope that, if nothing more, you've learned something. Martial arts is for everyone. the tools that we have available for us as martial artists, the personal growth, the physical growth, there is so much there and most of you already know this so I'm asking for your help in spreading this message and bringing this idea to the schools around you. Let's open martial arts up to more people. Go ahead, check out the show notes, whistlekickmartialartsradio.com episode 467. We've got links. Of course, it's adaptivemartialarts.org and you could find that link right there in case it's inconvenient for you to write it down. If you go to whistlekick.com, you're going to see everything that we're working on all at once. Use the code `PODCAST15` to save 15% in the store and help us out in some way that makes sense to you whether that's Patreon or sharing an episode or social media which is [@whistlekick](https://twitter.com/whistlekick) all over the place. If you want to suggest a guest, we'd love to hear those suggestions. If you want to email me, it's jeremy@whistlekick.com. Until next time, train hard, smile and have a great day!