



Episode 478 — Mr. Stephan Kesting | [whistlekickMartialArtsRadio.com](http://whistlekickMartialArtsRadio.com)



**Jeremy Lesniak:**

Hello, everyone, and welcome! This is whistlekick martial arts radio episode 478 with today's guest, Mr. Stephan Kesting. My name is Jeremy Lesniak, your host on this show, founder of whistlekick and everything we do here at whistlekick is in support of traditional martial arts. If you want to know more about what we do, check out [whistlekick.com](http://whistlekick.com). That's the place to learn all about our projects and our products. It's also the easiest way to find our store. Make sure to use the code `PODCAST15` to save 15% on everything we've got going on over there. Now, the show has a whole separate website, [whistlekickmartialartsradio.com](http://whistlekickmartialartsradio.com). We've got 2 brand new episodes every week and the goal of the show and of whistlekick overall is to connect and educate and entertain traditional martial artists throughout the world. If you want to show your appreciation for what we do, you can do a number of things. You can make a purchase, share an episode, follow us on social media, maybe tell a friend, pick up a book on Amazon, leave a review or support us on Patreon, [Patreon.com/whistlekick](https://Patreon.com/whistlekick). Patreon's a place where we post the most exclusive content and if you're contributing as little as \$5 a month, you're going to get access to even more stuff. If you spend any time in the martial arts section of YouTube, you likely have stumbled on today's guest. He's been doing good work for quite a bit of time now and he's developed quite a following so I'm pretty honored to get the opportunity to talk to him. We had a good conversation and admittedly, it went in directions I wasn't even planning which, I don't know about you, that's my favorite part of the show so without further ado, Stephan, welcome to the show!

**Stephan Kesting:**



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Thank you so much! It's a pleasure to be here even though it's before 6 AM on the West Coast.

**Jeremy Lesniak:**

It's so early and I thank you for the willingness to conduct your schedule in that way. **Stephan Kesting:**

I'm sure everyone listening has got up early to go train at a seminar or get up early to go to work. Why are martial artists except from that?

**Jeremy Lesniak:**

We're certainly not. There have been a number of days I've woken up and been driving to a tournament and realized it's 4 AM.

**Stephan Kesting:**

It's not tomorrow yet.

**Jeremy Lesniak:**

Didn't I just go to bed? Yeah, the things that we do for the things that we love.

**Stephan Kesting:**

I mean, in theory we make the sleep up later. In reality, we never do. In addition to the whole martial arts aspect of my life, I'm also a firefighter so there's fewer choice of when to get up and when to go to sleep because when the emergency comes in, you get out of bed or you get up from the chair and you go. It doesn't matter if you're tired.

**Jeremy Lesniak:**

What kind of firefighting company are you a part of. Here in the northeast, most firefighters are volunteers so I'm used to people having pagers.

**Stephan Kesting:**

No, no. I'm full-time. I've been doing with the LAPD fire department for 21 years and I'm still enjoying it and that's the most important thing. 22, 23 years ago, I was on a super long drive. I was doing martial arts, I've been doing martial arts for something like 35 years but I didn't want to make it my fulltime gig and run a school. That's what I didn't want to do so I was working other jobs and we had this one, I was working as a biologist, actually. We had this 12-hour drive up north due to [04:05] of an area and man, I don't want to do this, what do I want to do with my life and it was actually martial arts that was a big component of figuring out what I wanted to do because martial arts is a real time problem solving. You have a bunch of knowledge and you have a bunch of skills and you and I can go train and it doesn't matter if we're working at spinning hook kick defenses or wrist grab defenses or arm bars on the ground



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or weird inversion from a guard type position in an outside yoke or whatever. We can go practice that and then we can go apply it. hopefully, we're applying it. hopefully, we're doing it against resistance, in forms of sparring, under pressure and we can see how that works or doesn't work, where the shortcomings are, where it fails and I really like that about martial art and so, I was trying to find sort of the job equivalent of that and after much, much, much thinking, I decided that I will be a firefighter. For me, that was firefighting because you can go, you can train pulling ladders against the building, you can train pulling hoses, you can train cutting up cars, you can train in medical stuff, you can train with hazmat stuff and there are ways to train this and there are scenarios that you do but it's still not a real thing and then, along comes the real thing and you can see how you did and you can watch training turn into application. You can watch all this theoretical stuff actually get used in real life. That was sort of the core idea as to why I became a fire fighter or, maybe you can just simplify the whole thing and say I'm a bit of an adrenaline junkie. That would be a more parsimonious explanation, a simpler explanation. Ockham's Razor might say that that's correct so yeah, I'm a full-time firefighter and I still really enjoy it and I hope that when I stop enjoying it, I would leave.

**Jeremy Lesniak:**

What I'm wondering is how was firefighter even in the conversation? It's not a job that, I don't know what the numbers are but it's not a job that I even hear people talk about. I remember when I was a kid, I remember the cliché job of I want to be a policeman, I want to be a firefighter. It happens at a younger age but...

**Stephan Kesting:**

I was never that kid. That would have been as foreign to me. I wanted to be an astronaut more than I wanted to be a firefighter. Being an astronaut was a viable job option more than being on a firefighter. Was never on my radar at all. I would say it was jiu-jitsu that brought me to firefighting because, at the time, I was working as a contractor. I was working but I had some flexibility over my schedule. I'd be training jiu-jitsu during the day and really, there were 2, I paint with a really broad brush. There were 2 kinds of people who have enough time and money to train with jiu-jitsu in the olden days. Number 1 was cops and firefighters and number 2 were criminals so I trained in a club where there was a number of cops and firefighters and in the same class, there would be some people with pretty dodgy money-making method and so, that got me thinking what are these people doing that allows them to train in the middle of the day? Why aren't they chained to a desk? Why aren't they chained to a cubicle? And the answer was some of the probably sold drugs. Most cases, I can take a pretty strong argument that they were doing some pretty bad stuff and the other guys were cops and firefighters. I didn't want to be a cop so if you...

**Jeremy Lesniak:**

Process of elimination.



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**Stephan Kesting:**

Process of elimination but it wasn't that, it just opened the possibility to me. There were so many possibilities in the world that you've not considered so exposing yourself to as many of them as you can, opens your mind. That's the same way I started training in Kajukenbo which is one of my main martial arts. I had moved to a new city and I was looking for a club to train at. I knew I didn't want to do Kung Fu that I'd been doing. I was, frankly, sick and tired of kind of the stilted, performative martial arts where you're doing the same form over and over and over, the same kata over and over and over, pretending you're punching somebody in the face and leaping over here and kicking his body, his imaginary body over here and the knee and you're jumping over here and doing a front roll and telling yourself this was all what you were doing. I was tired of that and I was looking for something new but I didn't know what I wanted so I did the right thing. I was pretty smart when I was 18. I did a smart thing when I was 18. I went and visited just about every martial arts club in the city that I was even peripherally interested in and took a class, studied a class, watched a class, asked all the questions, made notes and the next night, I went to a new class and tried another one. When you think of the hundreds and hundreds and thousands of hours that you're potentially going to train, if you stick with it and in my case, tens of thousands of hours now or maybe a hundred thousand hours, I don't know anymore, it's totally worth putting in the front-end work to go try the whole bunch of different schools if somebody's thinking about starting or if somebody's thinking about quitting and starting a new martial arts, totally worth your time to go train in as many different places as you can to experience as much as the peripheral stuff as you can. Maybe you didn't know you're interested in Filipino stick fighting, maybe you didn't know you're interested in Bando, maybe you didn't know you're interested in this jiu-jitsu stuff, maybe you didn't know that you really want to do Thai boxing, maybe you didn't know and it's really only by experiencing it that you can get that gut knowledge of man, this feels good, this feels like a good fit and I like the people who train here and I like that instructor and there are no belt testing fees or whatever it is that you need to frame and so. By making that comparative journey, you may find the right place to train at and you're also increasing your knowledge about the martial arts like man, I never want to train that Filipino stick fighting. It just doesn't appeal to me but now, I know what I'm talking about when I know a little bit of what I'm talking about because I went and tried a class. Man, I hate that jiu-jitsu stuff but here's why I hate it. There's this sense of dread of why would I put on pajamas and why would I roll around in the ground with men? Now, you know that really hurts my shoulder. Now you've got a real reason because you went and experienced it. It's experiential learning that is valuable and will lead you down some rabbit holes that you never knew existed. You have to explore some rabbit holes that you weren't even aware of.

**Jeremy Lesniak:**

The way that you just talked about that tells me that there's another side to that coin, that saying that you dislike something with the experience. It sounds like that's a conversation that's come up, maybe something that irks you. Am I poking at something that's not there?



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**Stephan Kesting:**

I think it's a general point that many, many people have opinions about something that they know nothing about. I think, I come from a science background and in science, you're reasonably comfortable with not knowing the answer to something. I forget who it was who said this but finders get bored with the stuff that they already know and they're looking wistfully at the stuff that they don't because that's where the growth is so they are comfortable in not knowing or rather, they are spurred on with not knowing whereas the person who knows everything, you got to be careful of that person. In any endeavor, in any field, either you've lucked out and let's take another example; let's take white water paddling. Take white water paddling and you've ran into somebody who seems incredibly knowledgeable and it's great! Maybe you have ran into the savant of white water paddling who knows every paddle, knows every boat, knows every river, knows every creek, knows every paddle but at a certain point, you want people to, I respect people more when they admit the limits to their knowledge. When they say stuff like I don't know, let's find out. It was a shock to me, coming from the traditional martial arts, as a teenager, when I started training in JKD with Makoto Kabayama, also known as Nip and yes, he's Japanese and yes, that's a name that he went by at the time. When I started training with him, after the 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> class, I was like look, you can ask me any question you want. I may or may not know the answer, if I don't know the answer, I'll tell you and we'll try and figure it out together so here's a martial arts instructor, a martial arts teacher, admitting right off the bat that he doesn't know everything and that it's possible for him not to know something about the martial arts and this gave me, as opposed to decreasing my respect for him, this hugely increased my respect for him. Because, of course, nobody knows everything about everything. You might have a person who's just a wicked, wicked Chinese food cook. They can cook every type of Chinese food. They can cook Szechuan, they can cook Hongkong style food, whatever, they can cook Cantonese food but you ask them a question about French cuisine, how do you make the reduction of duck tongue pate or whatever it is, I don't know much about French cooking, let's assume there's a thing called duck tongue pate, hopefully the person says I don't know because if they do tell you, here's how to do it, they're probably making it up so I think, in general, I really appreciate people who admit the limits to their knowledge and it's ok not knowing something and sometimes, the worst information that you get is bad information as opposed to people saying I don't know.

**Jeremy Lesniak:**

Just that bit that you talked about as well I believe being the first person in close to 500 episodes to use the term of Ockham's Razor on the show which is something that, I come from a bit of a science background myself so I can really appreciate that mindset and bringing it into the martial arts, I think, gives that open mind a bit of an advantage. I know a bit about your background. I've heard a bit of you on other shows and I've certainly checked out your work but it does seem like you bring this scientific perspective, if not method, into what you do. Am I right?

**Stephan Kesting:**





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I think so. I was wondering about this the other day and I've got a Masters of Science. Ok, so I've got a Master's of Science in Botany and a Bachelor's of Science in Biology so Biology is sort of all-life broad overview of all physical, biological processes and then, Botany gets a bit more specific and I'm going to lose half of your audience here, I apologize, I did a Masters in climate change-related arctic biology so I've mentioned there, I've done it, I've mentioned climate change and to the people clicking off, I apologize.

**Jeremy Lesniak:**

I suspect we're all here to talk about martial arts, listening about martial arts so the fact that this is one of your credentials, I don't think takes anything away and if it does take something away then tough.

**Stephan Kesting:**

But the point that I was trying to make before I distracted myself is what's the real value of a scientific education? I mean, yes, I vaguely remember stuff about the Krebs Cycle and the cellular energy processing and yeah, I can name parts of the cell and yeah, I can come up with interesting factoids about how the eye evolved and things about fossil record and things about arctic plant communities and that's all well and good and I'm on a new trip in the arctic, some of that stuff comes back to me, and I'm like oh yeah, it's a lot different from home over there but aside from the knowledge, what are the underlying principles of a scientific education that are useful everywhere and I think, I haven't made a complete list, but it's things like admitting the limits of your knowledge in a particular field at a particular time, that's super valuable. I also think it's ideas around statistics and that sounds pretty boring but I'll give a real life example. I got this one from my friend Robert [17:58], our youth, presumably some of your audience, has some of the idea they know what an arm bar is.

**Jeremy Lesniak:**

I would imagine.

**Stephan Kesting:**

And you know you can do an arm bar from the guard and the way that the arm bar from the guard is often taught initially or basically there on the guard, hit the bottom and then you pivot 90 degrees and you throw your legs up and you catch the arm bar and you take the guy out? Yay! Alright, so, this is one of those techniques, that basic way of doing the arm bar from the guard is one of those techniques that works really great against white belts. White belts do it to each other all the time, it happens in MMA sometimes, this is the chaos of the movement. Somebody gets excited about punching somebody else and they spin into an arm bar. I've seen it done in self-defense. A friend of mine did it off the hood of our car when some guy rushed him at a party, it works but it could be argued that it's a false signal. It's not really relevant to jiu-jitsu at a higher level because it's really easy to stop. It's something if you're going to the sport or the art, you're doing it and you're doing it all the time but then it stops working. It's



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not really that you need to spend more time doing that particular move. You need to find a different way to achieve the same goal which is bearing the guard and then you go for the arm bar and there are definitely high percentage ways to do that, that working against people but that's kind of an idea of a false positive. That's kind of a statistical concept that I draw out from my scientific education that you can get signals which would seem to indicate that you have something but you don't. It's a false positive and it's an easy trap to fall into. People run into this in, I don't know, when's the last time I've heard false positives? In medical stuff. When people say I've got a bad back, the MRI shows that I've got a herniated disk. Everyone's talked to somebody or everyone's had a hernia that's talked to somebody, the MRI showed that they have a herniated disk. Well, the MRI is a great tool but it has false positives and false negatives. A false positive is think, is that the MRI shows that there's herniation where the disc is bulging but it isn't actually or it isn't as bad a problem as it shows and the false negative is that it really is bulging but it doesn't show up in the MRI and in my long and painful journey as a martial artist for 35 years, took lots of injuries, I had x-rays come back that have been false negatives. I broke my foot pretty good and the initial x-ray didn't show anything, false negative and I've had things come back as false positives and the herniated disc is a good example. I think some of the ideas that I came up with in the scientific education process, it was 7 or 8 years in university and working in the field are totally applicable to life. I think a basic understanding of statistics is one, just as you know one person who smokes until they're a 105 doesn't mean that overall, smoking is good for you. One is not a sample size. Just because you know one person who can make the jump spinning double tornado kick work one time at an MMA fight doesn't mean that you can spend most of your time working on a jump spinning double tornado kick. Let's take a look at, statistically, what the higher percentage techniques are in a fight, in a match, in a MMA fight, in a tournament and you finally find that the bread and butter stuff work most of the time and again, we want to look at a higher level because we want to set yourself up for stuff that's going to keep on working and be effective against other people so you can look at that sort of statistically. What are the top guys doing consistently and that's probably a much better signal than one time, my buddy landed this crazy move and totally flattened the guy, one time that he says he did and we don't really have video proof, right? Pics or it didn't happen.

**Jeremy Lesniak:**

Exactly.

**Stephan Kesting:**

That would be an example of bad data driving your decision.

**Jeremy Lesniak:**

There seems to be a lot of this scientific approach coming into the grappling, BJJ community these days. I know other people who are using these terms, high percentage and even, conducting sort of not quite back of the napkin but some involved study watching videos, watching matches and understanding



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sequences and how the data shows people can or maybe should respond in certain circumstances. Was that something you started bringing to your early days of jiu-jitsu?

**Stephan Kesting:**

No, not really. During the early days, I was a technique collector just like most people are. Dude, it's like there's other ways to do this here from the side, or you can escape from this way, or you can escape from this way.

**Jeremy Lesniak:**

When did it start to shift until then? Because you've taken this mindset further than anyone else I've had a conversation with.

**Stephan Kesting:**

It was a gradual process for me. I don't know if you've had him on the podcast but Eric Halston is a good friend of mine and I'm an instructor under him and he's taught me a ton about grappling and one of his influences is the whole JKD, mixed martial arts in the original sense of mixed martial arts that will train in Indonesian Silat, will train in Filipino Martial arts, will train in Sambo, will train this and will train that, will get as much knowledge as he can with many different fields as he can and that's fantastic and I've learned a lot doing that broad, broad, broad approach but I remember doing a seminar with Eric Halston, I want to say 1993. It could be off by a year or two and he was showing this leg lock and that leg lock and then he stopped and said but the one that works most often is this one and that was the first time somebody had said that to me because they're more than happy to show you Dragon Fist, Monkey Fist, Phoenix Eye Fist, Ox Hand Fist, that other thing. They're happy to show you a hundred different techniques, they're happy to show you how much they know without providing the context, without saying when push comes to shove, this is the one that works and where I think, the emphasis on the stuff that works comes from is anytime you can test it. A friend of mine and a guy that I've had on my podcast, Chris Duffin, one of the world's strongest men. He's deadlifted 800 pounds every day for a month. Sorry, no, he squatted 800 pounds every day for a month. He has deadlifted thousand pounds with multiple reps, he's working on squatting a thousand pounds for multiple reps, 43. He's big but he's not 400 pounds. He's not like The Mountain in Game of Thrones so in his squatting, it's pretty empirical. Either you lifted it or you didn't. Either one weight went down and came up and he passed the benchmarks of what constitutes an acceptable squat or you get crushed under the weight. Now, imagine if we had weight lifting but it was all theoretical and we would practice weightlifting without weight and we would develop a thousand different ways of lifting that imaginary barbell and then we got rewarded by the more creative we got lifting that barbell. I'm going to lift that barbell with the bottom of my feet while doing a handstand because there's no barbell there, there's no way to test. I'm going to do a side plank and hold the barbell with 3 fingers while balancing on my other 2 fingers while moving my head in a circle. I'm just coming up with this on the fly so...yeah, and without weight to keep you honest, you can





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develop a thousand different ways of doing something, be very, very creative and it would end up looking like interpretative dance and then you put a real barbell on there and you would get crushed. One after the other, it would take the top 100 creative interpretative dance weightlifters but 500 pounds on them and they would just get driven to the ground and this is essentially what happened in the UFC. You had really well-meaning, really hard training people coming out who would practice their Kenpō, who would practice their monkey style kung fu, who would practice their wing chun, who would practice their, whatever, tai chi, but they had never pressure tested it against real pressure. They pressure tested it, if at all, within the confines of their own martial art. There were taichi guys who had done push hands. There were wing chun guys, they would have done sticking hands with other sticking, with other wing chun guys. They would have stayed under the constraints of their martial arts and then, all of a sudden, they're under that 500 pound dumbbell and, I'm not making fun of them, but that's how they've been taught, but they got crushed. There's that ability to test, the ability to try and do something to somebody who's resisting pretty much full force or has the option of pretty much, if you and I are doing jiu-jitsu and we're doing a fairly hard sparring session, not that every sparring session would use force, you really don't want me to choke you and I really don't want you to choke me but I really want to do choke you and it would be great if you could choke me. We are strongly incentivized to provide resistance, provide real world feedback. In that case, if I think of something, this amazing, inverting, rolling through the leg back take that I'm trying to do on you but it's not a good idea. It doesn't work and I'm going to get crushed. I'm going to be that theoretical interpretative dance weightlifter who just also had a 500 pound-barbell put on his shoulders now trying to do some crazy lift. There's only one way to lift. I mean, there's subtle variation. Your knees can be 2 inches further out on the side, your body can be 10 degree more vertical or 10 degrees more bent over but nobody's doing a 10,000-pound squat with one leg. Nobody. The ability of the martial arts to provide real world feedback, especially if it's being tested, is what I really love about it and once that starts happening, you're starting to do statistics on your own. You're starting to apply, you're keeping track. Initially, it might be hey, this side mount escape worked on Bobby twice but it didn't work on guard but it did on ready every single time I do it. That's kind of beginning to build a statistical distribution of what works and what doesn't. Now, if you start seeing that escape on a world champion on another world champion, that's like a whopping data point. Ok, not only had I managed to pull it off on my level here at the recreational club, but I'm doing the same thing that Leandro Lo is doing. I'm doing the same thing that Marcelo Garcia did 10 years ago. I'm doing the same thing that Keenan Cornelius just did at European so even if people aren't formally looking at it statistically, they're kind of doing it informally. They're kind of tracking what works and what's not because nobody wants to be crushed by that 500-pound barbell suddenly appearing over their body and their theoretical knowledge hitting the bricks of cold cruel reality.

### **Jeremy Lesniak:**

It's a pretty good mindset and I think it's one that I like the way you kind of tied it up a bit at the end there. This idea that we all do this instinctively because I could imagine some people listening and



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thinking I don't do that, I don't have any data, I don't know, because we have people who are grapplers and non-grapplers listening to this show. Should I have my left foot forward?

**Stephan Kesting:**

The same thing would work in a striking context.

**Jeremy Lesniak:**

Exactly.

**Stephan Kesting:**

The same thing would work in a, I mean, Filipino martial arts. It's dangerous sometimes. That's the unfortunate part. Say you're just doing stick fighting and you're just doing drills by yourself and you're jumping around waving that stick in the air, the odds of you catastrophically injuring yourself are fairly low. It's true, you could hit your head on a stick, that's true. I have hit myself in the groin doing wild kung fu style spinning as a kid, that was not a good day but overall, the odds of catastrophically injuring yourself are pretty low. Now, you got to test it Dog Brothers style, for those of you who don't know, it's a group of Filipino Martial arts minimalists who are doing full contact stick fighting while wearing fencing helmets and maybe little batting gloves. Back when I used to do it, they would be a little bit more. It would be hockey gloves, maybe elbow pads, fencing masks, some guys would wear a knee pad and you were really trying to club the other guy with your stick. Some would take it further and done a hardwood stick but that provided, it gets far. 3 rounds, 4 rounds, 2 minutes but in those 8 minutes, you'd get so much information to calibrate the rest of your training. So yeah, all this is well and good. All this spinning stuff is all well and good but when this push comes to shove, what do people revert to? They revert to clubbing attack coming from the upper right hand quadrant. They revert to some kind of backhand and they revert to some wild stabbing motion. There's more to it than that but those are the other things you see most often. That's the job of a cross and a hook of boxing and then there's subtleties in deploying those fewer movement but it really strips everything away. There's actually, I don't know if you saw this, there's an insane video of, historically, European martial arts where guys put on armor and they clash with each other with swords and they have rules and points. Well, there's an insane group of Germans, of course they're Germans, who started doing this with sharp swords. I don't know how often they do it but they've got essentially wearing gauntlet and helmets with a ton of neck protection and sharp swords. Except they also include sword and shield, 2-handed sword and axe and shield and yes, they get some pretty bad cuts. I don't know what kind of, it sure looks like they're going all out. The difference is when one guy falls to the ground, the other guy doesn't spear him in the throat and they're mainly slashed. I don't think they do stabs but it's like knowing you're going to be shot in the morning focuses the mind wonderfully. Knowing that there's a stick whistling towards your head or an arm bar coming your way or, in the case of the crazy Germans, a very sharp axe swinging to your thigh



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would also sharpen the mind wonderfully and very quickly, you would leave out some of the more esoteric aspects of your martial arts. It would simplify your technique considerably.

**Jeremy Lesniak:**

I'm just trying to imagine the mindset of someone who steps in to do that. I understand pressure testing. I understand grappling and going hard and I've certainly taken my lumps over the years but I can't envision stepping in and holding a shield while I know someone with a sharp axe is going to swing it at me.

**Stephan Kesting:**

I think that takes us to status, probably. I think, yes, there are people who lack, who have a much higher threshold that they need to meet in order to get excited. We've all met them. They're adrenaline junkies. Some people get excited and 10/10 adrenaline making a left-hand turn across traffic, they're driving and they're like oh my god, I have to turn left and there's a coming and there's a car behind me and aaaahhh!! They're at a 10 out of 10 excitement level turning left into traffic and other people have to hurl themselves off a cliff in a wing suit and fly down 10 feet from the rock to get to the same level of excitement so clearly, some people need higher levels of stimulation, higher levels of danger to feel the equivalent of being alive. I'm not at a full 10/10 level although I would love to fly a wingsuit one day but I don't want to fly close to a cliff. I'm not full-on crazy, I think, but I'm probably more on the side of crazy, I think, if you see some of the things I've done for my recreation or my job really. We get excited when there's a fire and we're kind of yeah, there's a fire! It's kind of a crappy attitude because somebody's entire life is burning up but the actual activity is fun and I suppose it's better we're looking forward to it rather than fear and loathing. I've just gone down my own rabbit hole here.

**Jeremy Lesniak:**

I don't think it would work without that. I think there's something to be said, yeah, certainly you're cognizant of the fact that someone's life is being dramatically, maybe even irreparably, changed.

**Stephan Kesting:**

But we're going to do everything we can to fix it and if it's going to do that, we might as well we be trying to have fun. I mean some see MMA fighters claiming that they love going in the octagon, that it's the most exciting thing, that it's the most fun thing; you're right. If you had to choose between being petrified and if you had to fight in an MMA fight at Mandalay Bay and there forty thousand people in the audience and there's millions watching on TV and you can choose between 1 or 2 mindsets of I'm happy and excited to be here versus I'm absolutely petrified to be here, which of those mindsets can make you perform better?

**Jeremy Lesniak:**



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The excited one.

**Stephan Kesting:**

Obviously, the excited to be here. So, yeah, back to the Germans. I'm guessing is that some just have a very, very high threshold for excitement but then, ok, this is a tangent but it's not as big a tangent. My mother went to Swiss high schools in the 50s and early 60s. There were still teachers there who had dueling scars. Dueling scars came from, there were various German, we'd almost call them fraternities, in the, I want to say late 1800s, early 1900s, certainly by the early 1900s and we would be in a fraternity, a dueling society and we would fence with live blade and it's fascinating because the rules were very, very strict. You couldn't lunge. Basically, you and I would be standing with our arms outstretched with the blade just able to touch your face, essentially. I'm not allowed to step forward, I'm not allowed to step back, neither are you. I'm not allowed to lunge, you're not allowed to lunge so it's very different from the type of fencing that we're used to seeing at the Olympics. No footwork, we're wearing a ton of protection on our necks so we don't die. We're wearing protection, I believe, on our wrist and we got this weird ass helmet that protects our eyes or wear goggles with no shield or theirs weird helmets I saw that basically protect the eyes and the nose. What does that leave exposed? It leaves exposed the ear, the scalp and the cheek and the point was they compete to try and cut the cheek but if you got cut, this was a sign of honor because now you have this big prominent scar on your cheek that will be sewed up and for the rest of your life, people would know that you're a man, you're a member of this dueling societies and some of her teachers had these facial scars, some of the older teachers and so, it's a very strong social component there as well. I'm sure, again, being German, they were pretty drunk at the time throughout this, well-lubricated in any case, but there's a very strong social payoff. If Conor McGregor walks into a nightclub, you think he'll have any problem meeting women? I would argue zero. Yes, he's an amazing fighter; yes, he gets amazing payoff from fighting; yes, he gets money but there's also social status. You think he'd have any difficulty making friends? Forget women, this is a family show. He wants to chat with some guy, you think the guy would like to chat if Conor McGregor came up to just about any random dude just saying hey, I'm Conor McGregor, even to a guy who claimed to hate Conor McGregor the day before and I'm not a big fan. I'm impressed by his fighting ability but I'm not a big fan of the man but if he came up to me on the street and introduced himself, just that social, if I'm truly honest with myself, I probably wouldn't lead with hey, man, I really don't like your behavior in public. It's probably not what I would lead with. There's a certain amount of social mystique that gets accumulated by doing these things so back to the Germans, you'd be forever known as the badass who fought with sharp axes in the backwoods of Heidelberg. Similarly, the facial scar, you'd be forever known as the badass who used to duel in college. There's a strong social component and a strong social status component. One of my friends, the world champion in base jumping, that's a pretty good opener at a party. Hey, did you know that Jamie is a world champion base jumper? That's going to start a lot of conversation but I think we can really separate high level martial arts performance from the social status and it helps explain why some people stay with abusive instructors, it helps explain why some people stay with delusional instructors. It helps explain those videos that we've all seen and love to watch of



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the guy forming chi balls and then knocking his students over from 25 feet away or taking that chi ball and bouncing it off another wall and then, hitting the student with a ricochet and it just goes flying with little old aikido master pushing 12 people in a row. What's really causing those people to fall over? I would argue it's from the element of social pressure. It can be pretty hard to resist if all of your friends are in the dojo and that's your entire social network and this is what you've spent years working towards. You really, really want to get your 12<sup>th</sup> degree blackbelt in yellow bamboo or whatever it is that when the master comes running at you and makes the special hands signal and everyone's watching, everyone that you know is watching and you spent \$10,000 getting that belt, you know what's expected of you in that moment and that's you fall over and walk around like a fish on dry land so the social aspect of martial arts are incredibly important. It can be positive, it can be negative. I'm pretty confident of my self-defense abilities right now. I am getting older but against the average person, I think I would do alright in most circumstances. It's a statistical thing. 90% of the time, I think I would do alright so, there are different ways to work on health and fitness. I could lift weights and I could do cardio when I do those things but ultimately, one of the things that keeps bringing me back to martial arts, it keeps me doing podcasts like this, it keeps hanging on, going to seminars and teaching and training especially is this super strong social component. In our first conversation, when you're looking for a club and you're going from club to club to club to see where you want to train at, it's really important that you think that there's potential connection with people that you like those people. If you're a tattooed, steroid-using meathead, you probably want to find another club that has a whole bunch of people with facial tattoos and pitbulls and you can all talk about your steroid regiment together and that's great. You've found your home. If you're an ophthalmologist, you just want to train a little bit and not have your fingers broken, then you probably want to go to a different club because, first of all, you're not going to get hurt and second of all, you'll have more in common with those people. I think the social aspect of martial art, both positive and negative isn't talked about often enough.

**Jeremy Lesniak:**

I agree and I want to unpack that last thing you brought up a little bit because I'm seeing one side of me agreeing and another side disagreeing. Absolutely, we need to be in places where we feel we belong, we can share things in common with the people we're training with but I can also see some value in training with people who have a different background, who look at the world differently.

**Stephan Kesting:**

Ok, yes, I'm not going to disagree with you there and I think some of that is inevitable. I think what you're talking about is the whole siloing where if I believe that climate change is a thing, I'm only ever going to talk to other people who believe climate change is a thing and if I believe that archaeopteryx is a fake fossil, I'm only ever going to talk to other people who think that archaeopteryx is a fake fossil and thus, we're only going to be talking to our own kind and we will only just get deeper and deeper into our own beliefs as opposed to occasionally interacting with other people who have different beliefs and this is true in terms of belief level, it's true in the martial arts level as well. I'm putting words from that.





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**Jeremy Lesniak:**

Absolutely, no, you're right.

**Stephan Kesting:**

I 100% agree. On a very microlevel of that is if you've just been training strict, old school Brazilian jiu-jitsu for 10 years and then you go and train with somebody coming out of one of the shoot wrestling systems, they will leglock you silly and you'll go oh, I totally forgot about protecting my legs when I'm on guard. If you're just in judo, you're really good in judo, you're going to have a very specific style of newaza, of groundwork, which works in a judo context or it just needs to survive in essentially 3 or 5 seconds and you get back up but it's not a viable strategy in a real fight. It's not also a viable strategy in a match but those are kind of micro examples of training with people and I agree. I'm talking more about style of training. So many people go, various clubs have various feelings. There are hardcore competition clubs but there are where it's ok to go out there and bang and just punch other guys in the head as hard as you can. Maybe you're an ophthalmologist wandering in there and Mr. Biker Wannabe and MMA fighter goes oh, fresh meat, that's a setup for disaster so I'm pro-meeting other people. I'm pro-trying martial arts stylistically, running into people you wouldn't have met otherwise but I think, in terms of other folk, in my best defense, the story about how firefighting came on my radar. I didn't go to a club that was just full of professional biologists doing consulting work. This club, there are firefighters here, there are cops here, there are criminals here.

**Jeremy Lesniak:**

That would be a very interesting martial arts group.

**Stephan Kesting:**

I mean, of course, I'm exaggerating a little bit. There are other unemployed or whatever but there really seemed to be the 2 major cliques and by interacting with training partners, by trying to rip each other's heads off, my first training session ever, I was paired up with this firefighter who was built up like a dump truck, just muscle on muscle; he triangle choked me and I leg locked him and we trained together continuously for the next 10 to 15 years so still one of my best friends and so that opened up the doors for me, not only, in the physical context but also in a life context where I managed to find a job that I didn't hate doing.

**Jeremy Lesniak:**

It sounds like what you're talking about, it's not so much the backgrounds of people but the why, the rules of engagement. Just making sure you're all there for the same reasons.

**Stephan Kesting:**



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I'm mainly talking about safety. Like I said, if we're doing theoretical, I'm going to draw a somewhat imaginary line between theoretical martial arts and applied martial arts. I realize there's a crossover and I realize that people who spend 90% of the time doing theoretical martial arts can do 10% of applied and people spend almost all their time doing applied and go explore some other stuff once in a while too, I get it. It's not absolutely a hard dichotomy but let's divide the world I'm talking into applied versus theoretical martial arts. If it's just theoretical martial art and we're all doing, pick something I've done, Hung gar Kung fu. We never ever spar it and we never ever pressure test it and we're just there to learn the forms and the breathing technique and the stances and the drills. The odds of getting hurt are pretty low. Man, I stayed too long in the horse stance, my adductors are all flared up or whatever or I'm snapping this punch out too hard and I begin to bug my ac joint but, again, the most severe of the damages is brain damage. That's a huge disadvantage at a striking martial arts. In order to test it, you're essentially incurring brain damage. PTE is a real thing and many small concussions is a big deal and not small sub concussive trauma is also a big deal so unfortunately, strikers sacrifice their brains, grapplers sacrifice their bodies and I am confident that they'll have better orthopedic techniques in the future. I would rather sacrifice my body than my brain but if we're doing theoretical martial arts, the odds of a catastrophic injury are reasonably low but it doesn't really matter that, let's say you're standing beside the other guy and you're in Hung Gar class and doing Tiger Crane form and the guy beside you is just an absolute fanatic. In his off month, he takes more steroids than most bodybuilders take on his lifetime. He shaved his head, he owns 4 pitbulls, he drives a mustang, it doesn't matter. What's he going to do? He might swing a punch wide probably and it would hit your shoulder. It's not a dangerous thing unless he starts you guys get into a conflict but in general, the training itself isn't that much more dangerous because it's a misalignment in purpose but it's when you start field testing stuff, you start pressure testing stuff, you start actually hitting other people, when you start actually grappling with them, you start actually throwing them, you actually start swinging sharply towards them, trusting that they're only going to swing with a slash and they're not going to stab you into the belly, that trust becomes super important. You can make an argument that a sparring session is a trust exercise. Forget all these corporate training trust exercises where you're like close your eyes and fall back and we will catch you and yay, we are all a big, happy group now. The ultimate trust exercise is applied martial arts.

**Jeremy Lesniak:**

You have a lot going on and I didn't realize that you had fulltime job on top of all this so when I add that new information to everything that you're doing, you're a busy guy and I know what it's like to be a busy guy and do all this stuff that we're doing, podcast and whatnot so I guess the question is why? Why have you chosen to be so busy?

**Stephan Kesting:**

You only get one crack at life. We'll all go on a long eternal nap, eventually and so you might as well try and get it all in. I think, for me anyway, being a part of life is to experience it as much as I can and so, what are the experiences that I like having? Yes, I put out a ton of YouTube videos. Generally speaking, I



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enjoy that process. I enjoy the filming process. I put out a fair number of podcasts. Not as many as you but a fair number and I really enjoy talking to those people and making connections that way so I don't think I'm just wildly, if you had a German accent and I was lying on a couch and you would ask me that same question, you'd clearly be probing like what are you running from, Stephan, by trying to fill up your life? I'm not trying to get into it but I don't think I'm running from anything. I'm running towards something and that's to experience as many good experiences as possible and to fill my cup. I really do enjoy most of what I do. With the firefighting, 99 days out of 100, I'm really looking forward to going to work. I enjoy it. It meets physical needs, it meets intellectual needs, it meets social needs, if you have a good meal, all levels of Maslow's Hierarchy are getting checked off. Not all but many of the levels of Maslow's Hierarchy are getting checked off. Had a good day at work, again, martial arts fills many of those needs. I am also, once in a while, not as often as I would like, I get away into the wilderness and that's sort of the 3 big boxes of my life. Stuff in the wilderness, obviously the fire department is a large amount of time but you know what? There are 168 hours in a week. Even if you work for a 40-hour week and then we account for a couple of hours to shower and to eat, it still leaves another, say 56 hours to sleep if we're all getting 5 to 6 hours of sleep every night, but it still leaves an awful lot of hours but I think most people leave an awful lot of hours on the table. Well, I watched Peaky Blinders the first episode, it wasn't really that good but maybe the second episode will get better and the first season wasn't that good but I watched everything else on Netflix so now, I watched season 2. Screw that. If there's going to be, if I'm going to watch something, that's pretty rare but it better be worth it or I'm walking out. I think one of the most liberating things with time management is walking out of a movie halfway and stop watching a TV series halfway and just throwing out your TV in general. A 168 hours a week, you have something to do with a 40-hour workweek and sleeping, say, 56 hours a week, lets add that up, that roughly equals a hundred, there still is 68 hours a week. There's leaves a 2<sup>nd</sup> fulltime job to achieve what you want to achieve, to do what you want to do. Now, I recognize that people with kids, this is much harder. I'm sure, because I've listened to people talk like this and I've been yelling at a podcast player or the radio like what about kids? And I get it. I'm there. I've got a couple of teenagers. I'm in chauffeur years, it really means you got to do some creative scheduling and you really got to cut out the unessential stuff. I would purely love a super well-organized office where I do my video editing. I'd love to have all my books in, preferably, alphabetical order and when 2 books have the same title, I'd prefer to have them arranged by size or something. I'd like to have all my recording equipment, video camera equipment neatly shelved away. Let's just say it's not because in the free hours that is life, when you're focusing on the most important things first, for me, I would actually far rather train than spend 2 hours organizing my office. If you're a practitioner of Zen minimalism, maybe you'd enjoy organizing your office more. There's a lot of hours in week is the long way of saying that.

### **Jeremy Lesniak:**

One of the sayings that I'm prone to is your actions, your activities, reflect your priorities because we all have the same number of hours and it doesn't mean that if I do something that someone else chooses



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not to do, they're wrong or I'm wrong, it just means that this is a priority to me, it's not to you or vice versa and that's ok. It's ok to look at the world differently.

**Stephan Kesting:**

I think it was the getting things done book which divides tasks into 4 quadrants: the urgent, the not urgent, the important and the not important quadrants. You can have things that are urgent but not important, you can have things that are urgent and important. You have an arterial neck bleed, that is both urgent and important. You better do something about it right now. The fact that social media is built around things that seem urgent but are actually unimportant but if your phone is continuously popping up with notifications, you have a new email! Your Tiktok video just got another like or whatever, these are things that are urgent. They're popping up on your phone, for god's sake, there's a notification and everything, it even makes a sound. Urgent, not important. Then there are things that are not urgent but important. You're slowly going into more and more debt, it's important but it's not urgent. The credit card company is going hey, you should really cut back on your spending. They're happy that you're spending. Not urgent, you could probably go another couple years before you totally max out that card and they will give you another raise, what do you call when they extend your credit limit? Or arterial heart disease. It's not urgent but it's important until all of a sudden, it is urgent and then of course, there's not important and not urgent things. I would argue that not having my books lined up in perfect alphabetical and chronological size order is neither urgent or important then it teaches the important things that you are left with what you are calling the priorities.

**Jeremy Lesniak:**

If people want to find you, I know you've got a ton of stuff going on, let's hear it. There might be people that might be new to your endeavors.

**Stephan Kesting:**

The gateway for a lot of people is my YouTube channel so if you go to [YouTube.com/stephankesting](http://YouTube.com/stephankesting) or just search my name on YouTube, you should find the roughly, I don't know, probably a thousand videos by now covering, I've got a couple of channels there. I've got the original Stephan Kesting channel which is mostly jiu-jitsu, mostly grappling and judo. It's the man-hugging sport. I've got a second channel called self-defense tutorials where I'm going a little bit more into the striking, the weapons and the myth busting. The examples of the things that I think are completely ridiculous and sort of the mistakes that are easy to make if you're just starting out. The YouTube is a good one. If people want to get an introduction to Brazilian jiu-jitsu, I've got a whole bunch of resources for that. The one that I would recommend is I've got a short book out there called A Roadmap for BJJ and that is a look at the underlying positions of jiu-jitsu. When people look at jiu-jitsu, initially, or any kind of grappling for that matter, they don't see positions, they just see a wild jumble of arms and legs and oh my god is that guy's head doing there and I see a hand grabbing something, not really sure if that's a sleeve or a leg or a



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lapel. It's very confusing but if you start looking at it and start breaking it down by position, you can explain 80 or 90% is happening on average. Conversely, if you're on a mat, if you're rolling around on the ground, there's tremendous power in knowing I'm on the bottom of side control. I don't know what to do but I know where I am or alternately, now that I know where I am, I know what to do whereas before, you're just being smooshed on the bottom and there is no answer to being smooshed on the bottom. There are answers to side control and one other thing, this is kind of an interesting one, this is a little bit different from the centered pitch that you get, I'm only here, I'm only alive, I'm only training, I'm only producing instructional because 5 years ago, I had a kidney transplant so my brother gave me his kidney so what I started doing is I've got an open offer to anyone who has signed their organ donor card in the States or eligible to be an organ donor, if they get in touch with me or the person who's helping me through support of [grapplearts.com](http://grapplearts.com) and can essentially, send me a photo of your driver's license with the little organ donor box checked off and you can cover up your address, I don't need to know your address, I don't need to know your driver's license, send that there. We'll give you one of any one of my instructional. Some of the instructional go up to about \$100. You go to [grapplearts.com/online](http://grapplearts.com/online) or [grapplearts.com](http://grapplearts.com) and look at the instructional videos. I'll give you the online form of any one of those for being an organ donor so that's really something I really started pushing the last 6 months. Sadly, there's a caveat that if you're one of them, there are people contacting us every few months going, I'm still an organ donor, can I get a new one? It took us a little while to figure this out but the answer is no.

**Jeremy Lesniak:**

How about 1 per organ?

**Stephan Kesting:**

Whoa!

**Jeremy Lesniak:**

Yeah, that seems reasonable.

**Stephan Kesting:**

No, then you get everything. If you've actually given a kidney or given a lobe of your liver. Yes, I'll give you everything but if you've just signed up in the event of your death that they can harvest you, that sounds pretty cool but I'll put it in context. I'll end on a high cheery note. When I was 23, my 21-year old brother died in a motorcycle accident and it was horrific. I wasn't there. My parents were right there and it was not fast, it was painful and so they were incredibly traumatized but they allowed him to become an organ donor posthumously and his body, he and my parents' decisions, saved a couple of lives. My parents got to meet those people. One kid got his heart and I think his lungs went to somebody else. They stayed in touch with the kid who had received my brother's heart and obviously, they're devastated. Obviously, there's a whole that can never be filled but knowing that it saved somebody





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else's life, really helped them heal with the trauma. It took them, I don't know, 10 out of 10 in the grief scale to a few years later, 7 out of 10, a 6 out of 10 because there was at least some purpose so I saw it helped people directly. It helped me too. I never got into meeting that kid. I was not in the same city, I would have been happy too but yeah, it provided some level of solace to me knowing that it wasn't all in vain so if you die, if you sign your organ donor card and you die in a dump truck accident tomorrow, you're dead. That doesn't change but who's left? Your family's left and your family will probably be helped knowing that some of you lives on and that it helped some other family not lose somebody. That's why I'm so passionate about the organ donor program. Hasn't come and bit me in the ass yet so I'm going to keep on doing it so yeah, so many people unconsciously opt out or they never opt in. It's so easy to do. You check a box and you talk to your family. Look, I feel pretty strongly about when I die, should I die, that I get my death some kind of purpose so yeah, I'm pretty happy with that program and I should probably slipped it in earlier before, at the beginning of the podcast somehow. Next time! I think you're the very first podcast on which I've pitched this.

**Jeremy Lesniak:**

Well, thank you and this is normally the point where I would ask the guest to kind of send us out but I think that what you've just said is far more powerful than anything can tack on so I think we should just leave it there.

**Stephan Kesting:**

Alright, hard cut, thank you so much!

**Jeremy Lesniak:**

I had a great time talking with Stephan and I hope you had a good time listening. Certainly got the wheels turning and I've got some stuff to think about. So, thank you for coming on the show, sir, really appreciated your time and your openness. If you want more, head over to [whistlekickmartialartsradio.com](http://whistlekickmartialartsradio.com). There you can find videos, social media, links and pictures and more, not just for this episode but for everyone we've ever made. If you're willing to support us with what we do, you have a number of options like making a purchase at [whistlekick.com](http://whistlekick.com) with the code `PODCAST15` to save 15% or leaving a review, buying a book, helping us with our Patreon, [Patreon.com/whistlekick](https://Patreon.com/whistlekick) and of course, we want your guest suggestions. If you have an idea for a great guest for martial arts radio, I want to hear it. You can let us know via social media or you can email me directly, [jeremy@whistlekick.com](mailto:jeremy@whistlekick.com). Until next time, train hard, smile and have a great day!