



Episode 492 — Mr. Mike Crooks | whistlekickMartialArtsRadio.com



Jeremy Lesniak:

Hey there, you're tuned in to whistlekick martial arts radio and this is episode 492 with my guest, Mr. Mike Crooks. My name is Jeremy Lesniak, show host, whistlekick founder and what are we doing over here? We're supporting the traditional martial arts. If you want to know what I mean by that, all the things that we're doing to support traditional martial arts and artists, go to whistlekick.com. That's our online home, it's also the easiest way to find our products and if you use the code `PODCAST15`, you can save 15% off everything over there. This show has its own website, whistlekickmartialartsradio.com. The show comes out twice a week and the entire purpose behind everything we're doing, we're working hard to connect, educate and entertain the traditional martial artist throughout the world. If you want to help the show, help the world know what we're doing, there are ways you can do that. You can make a purchase, share an episode, follow us on social media, tell a friend, pick up a book at Amazon, leave a review or support the Patreon, Patreon.com/whistlekick, that's the place to go. You can support us monthly with as little as \$2 but if you're willing to do \$5 a month, you're going to get exclusive content. Things that we do only for our supporters. My guest today came through as a referral from a friend. He also trains with another past guest and this was a different kind of episode. Usually, we bring people on to talk about their martial arts stories and sometimes, those guests that come on, they're telling other stories but kind of through the lens of martial arts but rarely do we invite someone on knowing that the story they have to tell isn't so much a martial arts story but a life story that exists because of their martial arts training. Is that vague? Absolutely but I say it this way because I want you to be aware that



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we don't get into the meat of this story right at the beginning and I want you to be patient. This episode's a little different than some of the others we've done but no less important, no less powerful and if you do listen, and if you've listened this far, I'm sure you will, it will be well worth your time so here we go. Mister Crooks, welcome to whistlekick martial arts radio.

Mike Crooks:

Thank you for having me.

Jeremy Lesniak:

Hey, it's a pleasure. It's a joy to have you. you're connected to great friends of, not only the show, of past guests of the show, of friends of mine, there's a lot of intersection going on here. You keep some, as far as I'm concerned, some great company and I know we're going to get into that and how you got there and all that but and I told you I'm going to start this way; listeners know that we're going to start this way so let's start this way. How'd you get started with your training?

Mike Crooks:

Ok, well, my father is a 2nd degree black belt in Judo and so, I was kind of born into it. At 3 or 4 years old, I was brought to class and used to do a lot of running around and then I got serious about it and practicing some sort of martial arts my whole life.

Jeremy Lesniak:

What's kept you in it? You know what I mean? You're talking about the reason you started seems pretty obvious. Everybody who does martial arts start, not everyone sticks around. Everyone leaves. Just about everyone leaves at some point but you didn't leave.

Mike Crooks:

I would just say it's because I love it. I'm actually a 3rd generation martial artist. My father, myself and my son, Jack, makes up 3 generations.

Jeremy Lesniak:

What is it about training that you love?

Mike Crooks:

I love everything about it. I love challenging myself. I love the discipline that karate gives you. I love the workout, I love the exercise. I like using my mind in a martial sense, someone make a move at you and what you can do to protect yourself. It's always going to be different. I just love every aspect of martial arts training.



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Jeremy Lesniak:

Have you had any points in where you stepped away for a little while?

Mike Crooks:

Yes, I did.

Jeremy Lesniak:

Can you tell us about one of those or maybe not the longest one but the one that seems most impactful as we talk about this?

Mike Crooks:

Going through life, my first break was my father getting an injury. He was unable to teach anymore and then, from there, I would say being married and raising a family was the biggest thing but I've always practiced every single day to some degree what I've learned. There's not a day that's gone by that my hands aren't moving or my legs aren't kicking or thinking of a throwing technique or what have you.

Jeremy Lesniak:

We've had a number of guests who have talked about the importance of that daily practice even if it's something small. Why is that important to you?

Mike Crooks:

I think it keeps your mind and body in tune with each other, if you will. If you stop doing something, you get a little rusty so I think it's very important to constantly train to keep yourself a well-oiled machine.

Jeremy Lesniak:

And when you look at that daily practice, I think we can wrap our heads around what happens at a class, we're usually there for an hour, maybe an hour and a half, 2-hour long classes back to back. Some of us train 2 or 3 days a week, some more but what is that training when you're not in class look like?

Mike Crooks:

There would be some heavy bag training. I would be practicing some of my forms. I would be constantly thinking of if somebody was to attack me in a certain way, how I'm going to do it. I might work on that technique. Basically, I do a lot of visualization of certain techniques. Will they work, will they not? Every once in a while, I'd grab my son and I'll say hey, throw a straight punch at me, I want to try this. My son is a 6 foot 6 house, if you will.

Jeremy Lesniak:



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That's a big kid. How old is he?

Mike Crooks:

He's 20 now.

Jeremy Lesniak:

So if it works on him, it's probably going to work. Seems like a fair statement. There might be some throws, some judo throw sort of angles that might not work on somebody that tall if you're much shorter but for the most part, yeah, it's nice to have someone big to work on stuff with because, generally, the aggressor's going to be bigger. Just statistically what happens so having that around, having that in-house is pretty convenient. Does he enjoy training with you? Is that as enjoyable for him as it is for you to work together?

Mike Crooks:

Yes, it is. He's really into it. He loves it and he made me feel really great that he loves it as much as he does. He's always practicing, he's always turning the cabinets with a foot.

Jeremy Lesniak:

I can relate to that.

Mike Crooks:

Chasing his sisters around and giving them a little bit of practice.

Jeremy Lesniak:

Everybody uses their training in different ways. You're talking about training home and sounds like there's a little bit of a fitness element. I don't know about you but every time I hit the bag, if I hit the bag for more than 60 seconds, I feel like I can get a workout. I don't just mean training but a physical strength kind of cardiovascular thing going on but we've had a lot of people on the show who have talked about the ways that they have used their martial arts beyond their training. It becomes part of who they are. It sounds like you're hinting at some of that, talking about family legacy and all that. How does your martial art serve as outside of your training?

Mike Crooks:

I remember one thing is I believe that gives you that self-discipline. If you're given a task, I think that the ability to focus that martial arts give you. I think that, in myself, and I'm sure when we get to my story pretty soon but it gave me the self-discipline to do and go through just unimaginable things that most people probably won't be able to handle.



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Jeremy Lesniak:

Can you elaborate? We're going here. Listeners, as you can tell, there's some things that I know that you don't know and I'm always sensitive to that. I don't like to just jump into things. I like to let them kind of come up and we're so close to the brink that I'm going to kind of push you there so I'd make sure that we get there because I suspect that on the other side of this conversation, that gives us a lot more to talk about.

Mike Crooks:

Absolutely. Self-discipline is something that you learn as a martial artist. I see the young kids nowadays and they have to sit a couple of minutes being quiet. I think that's the beginning of the self-discipline because karate is not a team sport. It's an individual sport. I say it as a sport but I'd be one to call it something that you do on your own. You get taught by others and you might have a group that you work out with but basically it is an 'I' sport. It's something that only you can do. People can only take it as far as you're willing to let them go as individuals. It's something only you can do to make yourself better and if I've seem a little distant there for a second, it's because I saw a police cruiser driving by and, like I explained to you earlier, I'm backed up into a field. It's nice and quiet here. It's not nice and quiet at my house with 3 teenagers so, they seem to have gone by. They seem to didn't even notice me here. I'm sorry, where were we?

Jeremy Lesniak:

I just kind of asked you to expand. You're talking about the non-physical benefits of martial arts and how it conditions your psyche.

Mike Crooks:

Mentally, giving you self-confidence. I think a lot of kids nowadays don't have the self-confidence that they use to have. They're not running, jumping over fences, climbing trees. They seem to have a device kind of at all times. Something that when you do something physically, it gives you a little more self-defense, sorry, self-respect.

Jeremy Lesniak:

How do you handle that with your own children?

Mike Crooks:

Like I said, my son, he does take martial arts. He'd done scouting. My daughters while they were growing up, they were involved in sports so I think that, in keeping your children going with physical activities, keeps them out of trouble and gives them the respect for themselves that they may earn it by, sorry, losing myself here...by achieving their goals. In martial arts, if you study really hard and you get a



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new rank, that's basically, you achieve your goal and gives you something to strive for. I think that's just excellent.

Jeremy Lesniak:

One of my favorite subjects to bring up with a guest, I'm just, we're going to go there. I know where going to go there. it's around the negative, it's around the downsides, the rocks, the stones that life throws at you from time to time and I find that through having these conversations with martial artists, that those of us who train have this toolkit to utilize that helps us get through tough stuff. We've had guests on the show who've been through pretty much anything you can imagine and multiple people who have said that without their training, things probably would have gone really differently. Do you have stories like that?

Mike Crooks:

I do, I do. Myself, 2 years ago, 2018, had just turned 50 years old. Wasn't feeling well and I was going to a doctor, or actually it was a clinic. I'm sorry. I was feeling dizzy and they were treating me for vertigo and I actually had a karate class one night and did a forward roll and one of our members said do that again and I did it again. She's like I think you really need to go to the hospital. There might be something really wrong with you. My eyes were twitching and I went to the hospital that night and headache like I've never had in my life and I was quickly diagnosed of having brain cancer. I actually had 2 types of cancer. I had esophageal cancer which metastasized in my brain, ended up having 3 brain tumors and yeah, it was quite a shock.

Jeremy Lesniak:

Shock feels like an understatement and there were no symptoms prior to that?

Mike Crooks:

I was a little bit different of a person than I usually am. I was, we'll call it snappy at times, and that was pretty much the only thing, looking back other than being dizzy there for that short period of time before they diagnosed me. That was the only thing that I could find that was different.

Jeremy Lesniak:

So, what happened next?

Mike Crooks:

They told me what was wrong. I was given a less than 5% chance to live a month. That was over 2 years ago now. I said well, I'm not really done yet so they said, so you want to fight and I said absolutely, absolutely. We started moving forward in treatment. Would you like me to tell you what I've been through as far as...



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Jeremy Lesniak:

Yeah!

Mike Crooks:

Ok, the first thing that they did was removed 1 of the tumors from my brain and when I woke up from that surgery, it wasn't expected to go well. They asked me do you know where you are and I answered them and they couldn't believe that I was actually able to talk. The next day, I was up and walking around after a stay in a Boston hospital after 15 days and I went home shortly after that. I started radiation treatment which was quite an awful experience. They actually strap your head to a table and a mask that fits over your head and put gamma radiation into your brain which went absolutely perfect. It could not happen any better than it did. Doctor at the time was just ecstatic with how well it went. After that, I went under heavy chemotherapy for my esophageal cancer and most people with cancer know, they go through chemotherapy, they get extremely sick, they have all kinds of side effects. This is where martial arts came in and self-discipline. I woke up every day, I would eat my breakfast and I would walk 5 miles. Every single day while I was going through treatment.

Jeremy Lesniak:

Wait a second, you're doing this all while you're on chemo? Did you have a different kind of chemo?

Mike Crooks:

No, actually, the chemo that they threw at me was probably one of the most hardcore chemo you could get. I had all kinds of prescription for drugs when I never took any of them. I took them one time and I just walked every single day which basically means I didn't have the nausea that most people have. I have just drive, I guess you can call it, to survive. I had a family and just wasn't ready to give up so 5 miles every single day as I was going through chemo and the tumors in my esophagus got a lot smaller from the chemo and I actually went back into the hospital and they removed my esophagus and when they do that, they take out the esophagus through your side. They don't open you up. They just kind of take it out, little snip here, little snip there and then they stretch the stomach so as far as weight gain, I'm a lot smaller than I used to be. I went from being a 260-pound man to 195-pound man but anyway, the surgery was a complete success and I'm still on chemo but this is a much lighter duty chemo. Like I said, 2 years and still kicking, pun intended.

Jeremy Lesniak:

What about the brain tumors? What's going on with those?

Mike Crooks:

Well, I had a total of 3 and they're completely, they're gone. My doctor actually showed some of his interns the MRIs of my brain and he showed the before and the after and he said tell me what is exactly



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the same about these 2 photos of the MRI? They couldn't answer it. That is the same man which was they couldn't believe it. Usually, there's some kind of scarring or what have you. It couldn't have gone any better than it did.

Jeremy Lesniak:

This sounds pretty much like the perfect set of outcomes.

Mike Crooks:

Everything that I've been through, I consider myself pretty much the luckiest person that ever walked the face of the earth. Everything as far as treatment went, it went better than it should have. A lot of things that people go through when they get cancer such as financial problems or what have you, I seem to have kind of skipped through everything. I consider myself as a very lucky man.

Jeremy Lesniak:

That was kind of an interesting use for words. Better than it should have and I kind of want to ask about that word choice because you get people, we've had a few on the show and I've had friends who have faced cancer and I've had conversations with them. Some of the listeners have been able to hear some of those and in every case that I've seen when there's survival that maybe statistically wouldn't be there, there's a why. There's a really strong why and I'm sure family played a part, I'm sure training played a part but what was the why? What was the why that had you up and walking and facing this and taking control of all of this that happened such that the outcome was, obviously not pleasant, not something that anyone would choose to go through.

Mike Crooks:

Absolutely not.

Jeremy Lesniak:

But there are millions of people out there alive right now who would look at your path through this and say I would do anything to go through it this way.

Mike Crooks:

I think, for myself, the biggest drive was I wasn't ready to leave this earth. I was not ready to leave my family. When you're facing something like this, you're not really worried about yourself as much as you are the people around you. That was my biggest drive that I just didn't want to leave them alone. That's what made me get up every day at 4:30, 5 o'clock in the morning and go for that 5-mile walk.

Jeremy Lesniak:



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How did your family contribute to this? What role did they, I'm speculating here, but I'm guessing that this was an all-hands on deck sort of thing. What were they doing?

Mike Crooks:

Yes, they were. My family was extremely supportive. I'm sure there were times when putting up with Dad can't do this because he's sick or I shouldn't be sick but I definitely wasn't a hundred percent. As I said earlier, didn't have the side effects that most people do but even it going as well as it could have, you still have some side effects. I just wasn't quite the guy I used to be but it definitely was all-hands on deck. The love and support of my family kind of kept it going. They were definitely one of the biggest factors towards me saying hey, I'm not done and I'm going to do whatever it takes no matter how awful or how difficult it's going to be. I'm going to do it for them.

Jeremy Lesniak:

Obviously, 2 years isn't that long if you're still on chemo albeit a lighter dose. There's still some risk and I don't want my words to diminish that cloud overhead and that you're still facing this but it seems like you've gotten past the majority of it, the heart of it such that we could talk about it almost from a past tense and I'm curious about then and now, before and after. What's different in your life, in how you approach your day, in your training? If we were to take a snapshot, say 3 or 4 years ago, versus now and put some things side by side, what would we see?

Mike Crooks:

In my everyday life, I'm much more understanding towards other people and their problems. I'm definitely a lot more of a patient person than I used to be. You cannot cross that forever without getting wet and you start to see the world in a different way. Definitely if you were looking at somebody who might be driving really slowly in front of you and you think, well, maybe they're not feeling well or maybe there's a reason why they're driving so slowly. You're not as impatient as you used to be. You don't jump to conclusions. As far as choices people have made and we all do what we need to do to get through life. I think I've gotten off the beaten path here a little bit.

Jeremy Lesniak:

No, no, I like where you're going. Please continue.

Mike Crooks:

I definitely appreciate things more than I used to. People don't like to think that we have an expiration date. We all do, unfortunately so I try to enjoy life a little bit more than I used to.

Jeremy Lesniak:

What about your training?



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Mike Crooks:

My training? My training is pretty much everything's coming. I go to class 3 times a week. I look forward to it. I plan my day around it. I do have knowledge through my years of martial arts training. I do pass it along to people in my class and I do do some teaching at Karate International and I just look forward to teaching and passing on the knowledge I know. I like to pass on the knowledge that I know to my son. He gets a little bit of a private lesson at home sometimes.

Jeremy Lesniak:

If we were to pull your kids into a room and talk to them about Dad before and after and there was no way you could find out what they were going to say, what do you think they would say about how you've changed?

Mike Crooks:

They'll probably say that Dad's a little more calmer. Definitely more understanding. I think they would say that my thought process might be a little bit slower than I used to be. You can't have brain surgery and radiation then chemotherapy without having it. It kind of goes hand in hand so I would say that would probably be the biggest things that they would say but definitely calmer and more understanding.

Jeremy Lesniak:

I'm going to ask a question and I have no idea how you're going to answer this back but I can see it going either way but I'm inspired to ask it just with the way you're talking about it because most people, when they talk about cancer, they talk about it like a 4-letter word. It's the worst thing that's ever happened and you've spoken of the negative aspects very...with a lot of compassion to yourself and you've almost talked more about how other people have had it worse and it could have been so much worse for you and here are these good things that have come out of it. Obviously, no one's going to choose this but would you say you're better off?

Mike Crooks:

I am. I am better off. I think a lot of people, one of the things that I didn't realize is how many friends I had. How much people, I won't say how much, how many people really cared about me and that they pretty much came out of the woodwork when this went out. It kind of had a, I don't want to paint a false picture, but a fan club of people who are that were in my life at one time whether it was high school or relationships I've had in the past who have been extremely supportive to me and just most people don't get to see that in their life and I got to and it was a big eye-opener that if you think about it, picking a pebble and throwing it in the pond and the ripple effect, the effect that you have as a person on everybody else is just amazing. You get quite thoughtful and philosophical, if you will, when something like this happens to you and just having, just knowing that there's been so many people who are there for you is just amazing. Feeling of pride that, like I said, most people don't ever get to experience.



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Jeremy Lesniak:

I knew I was kind of taking a gamble in asking that question because if you said no, of course not, why would you ever ask me if I was ever happy I've had cancer, you're a jerk and then, you clam up and the interview is basically done and we just stretch it out and the listeners are just listening thinking man, Jeremy is the worst.

Mike Crooks:

No, not at all.

Jeremy Lesniak:

I'm glad I got that one right because it's something that I know I'm not going to be able to fully understand that. I haven't been through it. We've all been through our stuff, we've all taken our lumps and it's unfair to compare the worst occurrences of my life to the worst occurrences to someone else's life. The bad stuff that we all face is the bad stuff that we all face. The worst thing, relatively, is the worst thing so I think we can, in a small sense, have some understanding of what that can be like for others but just the way you're talking about this, I think it highlights a pretty fundamental principle of our martial arts training in that it's from the lumps we take, it's from our training partners' missed shots that land or leave a bruise or a cracked rib or when you break and it doesn't go quite right. Those are the times when we learn the most. We learn when things go wrong so much more than when they go right.

Mike Crooks:

Absolutely, absolutely. I agree with that 100%. It's kind of funny when you say, I had somebody miss, well, actually it was my mistake. I made a move into an elbow a couple weeks ago and had quite the shiner for it but I see where you're going with that and yeah, absolutely. Part of learning is failing or having something bad happen. You learn a lot faster. Touching the hot stove than reading the manual that if you touch that hot stove, you're going to hurt yourself.

Jeremy Lesniak:

Is there anything that you have to be careful of now? I mean, do you say not spar or wear 3 helmets if you do kind of a thing? Any restrictions?

Mike Crooks:

No, not really. I do have some additional parts that I did not have before this. I have, what they call, a shunt which is a drain in my brain that runs from my head all the way to my stomach. If I take a shot on that, it kind of ouches a little bit. I do have a port on my left chest where they put the chemo in. If that gets hit, that hurts as well. I keep those 2 places pretty well protected, always got my hands up and it happens from time to time. It's not anything that's ever going to stop me and those are the only 2 things and nutritionally, I have to feed my body a lot more thoughtfully than I did before because my stomach



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is so much smaller than it used to be so I have to make sure I put in a plan of nutrition. Basically, it's the only way that I can describe it. I'm kind of like a woodstove. If you want more heat out of it, you got to put more fuel into it, you got to put more wood into it, more logs so basically, when I know I have class coming, I make sure, nutritionally, I'm ready to go. It's been a couple of times that I kind of learned the hard way when you have this done, you couldn't have sugar spikes. I learned to deal with those and basically, I pretty much got it down now but I never really have any issues.

Jeremy Lesniak:

Do you spar any differently being that you have additional pain points?

Mike Crooks:

Other than keeping my hands up a little bit more and ready to defend those areas if need be, if I see a strike coming that way, I always let people know it's there. Everybody in my class knows it's there but other than that, no, it hasn't really affected me that much at all.

Jeremy Lesniak:

There's a group of martial artists I train with, some of them I've known for, we'll say my whole life, people I started training with and we do some fairly advanced sparring and of course, almost everybody's got something. Everybody's got a bad knee or this elbow, I banged it at work, just whatever it is and so, we're kind of joking around one day, maybe we should put some tape, like some red electrical tape on our gi over these areas and we started kind of doing the math and realizing we need something more economical because some of us were going to be held together with electrical tape if we mark out all of those spots. If you've ever seen people wear the muscle tape, Kinesio tape, and they just cover their whole body with it? That's kind of what I was imagining would happen. Just the idea of you pointing out just brought that to mind. I thought it was funny.

Mike Crooks:

We actually do do that at karate school. If someone hurt their knee or whatever, they put a red X with some tape on the knee or the elbow or the shoulder and it kind of let everybody know. We're a tight-knit group so everybody knows so and so hurt their shoulder so we always say hey, how's your shoulder doing today or what have you.

Jeremy Lesniak:

And what's coming? If we look out to the future, what are you seeing for you and for life and for health and for training and for family? Anything that you want to look out towards and talk about?

Mike Crooks:



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As far as my training is to continue and to never stop. As far as my family goes, I'm just looking forward to spending as much time as I humanly can with them. I'm looking forward to seeing my daughters graduate from high school. I know that, like I said before, I probably will have some kind of expiration date. I'm hoping that will go as long as I possibly can. The worst thing that you could ever do if you have an illness like this is go on the internet. Don't ever do that because I've read what I could expect as long as longevity goes and it's frightening so getting back to it, I would like to see my daughters be married, my son be married. I would like to, hopefully, meet my grandchildren one day. That's the biggest thing and grow old with my wife.

Jeremy Lesniak:

Sounds great, sounds like a good plan.

Mike Crooks:

Yeah, and just experience life. I am looking forward to the future. It's not something that's guaranteed for everybody but I just think that moving ahead is all we can look forward to doing.

Jeremy Lesniak:

One of the things I always ask the guest is to choose the way that we go out. Parting words, wisdom, final thoughts, whatever that would be but how do you want to close up your episode of the show?

Mike Crooks:

There's so many things that I would like to say. The number one thing is enjoy your life to your fullest. If you love doing martial arts, give it your all and whatever you do, whatever sport or whatever it is that makes you happy, enjoy it. Give it your all. If you have somebody in your life that you love, make sure you tell them and definitely, one word of advice that I can give you is that tomorrow is not guaranteed for everybody so enjoy everything and buy life insurance.

Jeremy Lesniak:

At the top of the show, I told you that this was a different sort of episode and now that you've heard it, you can see what I mean. Here we have a man reminding us not to waste time, not to take things for granted, being on the edge of everything and finding a way to pull it back. It was a powerful story and one that hopefully you can't tell but I can tell, I was challenged in bringing the story to you and having this conversation. It hit me hard and as we talked about it, it hit me even harder but it was important and here you have it, so Mr. Crooks, thank you for coming on the show. Thank you for your time and I look forward to the next time I'm down in your area so we can have a chat, just the 2 of us. Check out whistlekickmartialartsradio.com for the show notes, the photos, the videos, the links, social media, all that. Sign up for the newsletter while you're there too. If you're up for supporting us and the work that we're doing, you have some options. Visit the store, whistlekick.com, use the code `PODCAST15` to save



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