



Episode 518 — Emily Kwok | whistlekickMartialArtsRadio.com



Jeremy Lesniak:

Welcome! You're tuned in to whistlekick martial arts radio episode 518 with today's guest, Emily Kwok. I'm Jeremy Lesniak, host for this show, founder of whistlekick and everything that we're doing here is in support of the traditional martial arts. If you want to see everything we do, check out whistlekick.com. That's the place to learn about all of our projects and our products. It's where you'll find our store and if you make a purchase in the store, use the code `PODCAST15` to save 15% off. Martial arts radio gets its very own website and that is whistlekickmartialartsradio.com. We keep it easy. We do 2 new episodes of this show every single week and the entire purpose, the whole reason we're doing this is to connect, educate, entertain traditional martial artists throughout the world. If you want to support the work that we do, there are a lot of ways you can do that. You can make a purchase, you could share this episode, you could follow us on social media, you could tell a friend about us, you could pick up one of our books on amazon, you could leave a review somewhere. We don't ask for those too often and honestly, we don't get them very often. I would love to see more reviews come in or you could support us on Patreon. Patreon.com/whistlekick. Patreon is a place where we post exclusive content. Stuff you're not going to find anywhere else and you get access to it for as little as \$2 a month and the more you contribute, the more we give you. I had a great conversation with today's guest. We talked about everything from school culture, to women in martial arts, the role of an instructor, it's a wonderful conversation. One I really enjoyed and without trying to do it more injustice by summarizing it, I'm just going to let you listen. Hello, hello!



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Emily Kwok:

How are you doing today?

Jeremy Lesniak:

It's hot here. I know you're over the border but where are you?

Emily Kwok:

I am in New Jersey.

Jeremy Lesniak:

Ok, why did I think you were in Canada?

Emily Kwok:

Because I'm Canadian.

Jeremy Lesniak:

Ok, I'm not completely missing the mark!

Emily Kwok:

Where are you?

Jeremy Lesniak:

I'm in Vermont.

Emily Kwok:

Well, that's almost like Canada.

Jeremy Lesniak:

Which is why I asked because from what I understand, Canadians and Vermonters suffer from the same lack of general awareness among the population for what is there and where things are. I've actually had people on support calls tell me, oh, Vermont, what state is that in?

Emily Kwok:

I was in Vermont, let's see, my husband and I got married in 2008 and we went there, I think, for our first anniversary so maybe like 2009 or so.

Jeremy Lesniak:



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Where did you go?

Emily Kwok:

We went to, god, where was it? We went during the fall and we took our dog and we stayed at this place. It was within driving distance of the Ben and Jerry's ice cream place. I can't remember the name of the town.

Jeremy Lesniak:

You're talking my neck of the woods. I'm 15 minutes away.

Emily Kwok:

We stayed at this place, I don't know if it's still there, called The Paw House Inn because we could bring our dog and they have rooms for dogs.

Jeremy Lesniak:

I've heard of the name. I've been in Vermont long enough, I've heard that name. I don't know if it's still around but yeah, if you were at Ben and Jerry's I'm going to drive by Ben and Jerry's later on my way to the gym.

Emily Kwok:

So jealous and it was so funny when I went to Vermont, I just kept telling Jerry, I feel like I'm back in Canada. It felt very Canadian to me, I hope that's not offensive.

Jeremy Lesniak:

It's not! I love Canada. One of the funny things about being in Vermont, especially Northern Vermont is that Montreal is our closest big city.

Emily Kwok:

Oh, how far is it from you?

Jeremy Lesniak:

2 ½ hours.

Emily Kwok:

That's not bad.

Jeremy Lesniak:

I can get to Montreal faster than I can get to Boston.



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Emily Kwok:

Crazy! I haven't been to Montreal but I heard that it's lovely.

Jeremy Lesniak:

It's an amazing city. It really is, for us around here, it's definitely worth the trip. I don't know if it's worth it to you to come up from Jersey. Jersey is, depending on where you are, 8, 10 hours to here.

Emily Kwok:

I think from New Jersey, you can get to Montreal in about 7 hours actually. It's closer to get to than, I have relatives in Toronto so I sometimes drive up that way but Montreal, I think, would be closer. I haven't gone yet but it's a plan to go because I'm from the West coast, the better coast.

Jeremy Lesniak:

Oh, I see. I see how it is! The guest form where you filled out where we asked you to confirm the date and the time, the number of people who are from California, general west coast time, who seem to refuse to fill that out because I think there's even a note that says we're east coast. They put down PST. It's like ok, I feel like it's a little passive aggressive but ok, that's fine. I can do math.

Emily Kwok:

That's so funny! Thank you for being amenable to the time. I had a last minute dump in my schedule.

Jeremy Lesniak:

No worries. I go on when Lessie tells me. She does all this and sometimes she'll check with me and I vaguely remember an email about you and yeah, hey, we get requests from people from Australia that want to record at a normal time their time and I'm not getting out of bed to record. It's a very small list of people I'm getting out of bed to record that we haven't recorded with yet and I don't think any of them are from Australia so no offense to anyone from Australia but I like my sleep.

Emily Kwok:

This is exciting. You guys are from what I understand, you're not strictly jiu-jitsu right?

Jeremy Lesniak:

No, the whole thrust of what we do on this show is attempt to connect martial artists. I believe very strongly that regardless of where you are and what style you practice, we have more that binds us than divides us.

Emily Kwok:



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I agree with you and I think that's probably something that means to me spoken about more because, just like in real life, everybody's trying to figure out how to divide versus come together.

Jeremy Lesniak:

The moment you start drawing lines and cutting people up into groups, that doesn't stop and you end up being in your own box and I just think that that's really silly so that's why we're martial arts radio, not karate radio, taekwondo radio, Japanese martial arts radio. No, we're martial arts radio. I've talked to people about just about everything. There are a handful of arts, if you want to get really specific, that we haven't talk to people from but we've had Sumo practitioners on, and we've gone pretty niche and that's hopefully going to continue and talk to people from all over the world. It's been a lot of fun. I wish I spoke other languages because then we could reach even more people.

Emily Kwok:

Seriously.

Jeremy Lesniak:

How would you feel if we just kept rolling? The recording's going but how do you feel if we just kind of that beginning part stayed in. Listeners tend to like that, that kind of behind the scenes stuff. obviously, you mentioned BJJ so I think we know you're a BJJ practitioner. I don't do research by the way, I know who you are but I don't do research because our listeners don't do research, they listen so we just kind of jump right in with both feet. It's like that first day of training, you show up and they say alright, we're going to learn how to punch or roll or shrimp. What's the first thing that happens in a BJJ class?

Emily Kwok:

What's the first thing that happens in a BJJ class? I feel like there's a few different ways to answer this. Are you curious to know what happens when you physically step on the mat for your first class or are you talking about...

Jeremy Lesniak:

I've got 3 months of BJJ under my belt. A whopping amount of experience. Just enough to know I know nothing and I've grappled a bit. I can hold my own unless someone has actually trained for more than 3 months but when we talk about the first day of class, my mind goes to striking arts because that's what I know and you think of that first class, the first thing people usually learn is how to punch. What the equivalent in Brazilian jiu-jitsu?

Emily Kwok:

I mean, I think, what's interesting about jiu-jitsu is that it's evolved out of judo and out of the newaza so the ground techniques and for those of your listeners who are unfamiliar with judo, it really focuses on



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getting from your feet down to the ground and jujitsu is focused mainly on what you do on the ground. However, depending on the school that you train under in terms of lineage and where your jujitsu is from, you could say, traditionally there has been an emphasis on learning self-defense jujitsu which starts on the feet and this was popularized by the Gracies so if you have an instructor that falls under that line, perhaps you are going to be learning how to safely get from your feet to the ground or how to safely defend yourself or apprehend somebody from your feet before you go to the ground and these movements can be a lot more structured and pattern-like and there can sort of be a system that's put together. If your instructor is focused more on competitive or sport aspect of jujitsu, you might actually just get straight on the ground and once you get straight on the ground, you could be learning sort of what I would call the positional or game-like aspects of jujitsu. Some instructors might go ahead and teach you a submission and while I'm saying all of these, there are some people in the jujitsu umbrella that sort of believe, whether you're doing self-defense or sport, it's all the same. Yes, it is all the same but the manner in which a newcomer is introduced to jujitsu, I think, can sometimes shape their experience and for some people, make or break them immediately so in my school, we tend to a little bit of. Blend and my ultimate goal with a newcomer in my class is to make them feel comfortable with being on the mats, barefoot and getting to the ground so we might teach you how to safely get to the ground or how to safely get to the ground and get back up. Some basic movements that might involve grip-breaking or contact and putting all 4 limbs on the ground because I really believe that what we are ultimately doing is teaching people how to become comfortable with being uncomfortable and, as 2-legged upright creatures, most of us don't spend a lot of time rolling around on the ground in any way so for me, what's important is giving people a little bit of that language to teach them how to feel comfortable and being in a sort of a foreign space if you will and from there, gradually pushing what they can do and what they will learn so they now have a fluency of working on the ground so that's what I would do in my school but I've seen all shades of good things and bad things and things in between that occur so that's my take on it.

Jeremy Lesniak:

It sounds like you spent some time thinking about that. This was just kind of a shot in the dark question so I'm wondering, am I reading that right? Is this something you consider that first day experience for your students?

Emily Kwok:

Yeah, I've been training jujitsu for 20 years. I've dabbled in Sambo, Muay Thai, a little bit of MMA and boxing sprinkled in between. I largely came to jujitsu sort of without knowing what it was. I was very blind to it and when I started, I was really intrigued by it but the learning conditions for someone like myself as a female 20 years ago were very unkind. Brazilian jujitsu is still, I would say, a fairly new sport to be in North America. It's becoming more gentrified but I wouldn't say it's as common as you hear the word karate or taekwondo or even boxing if you're looking at combative sports and my experience in it was initially as just a practitioner, somebody who loves training and because I didn't have a lot of female



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training partners and people to work with, I started competing and the competitive aspect for me was initially just to find others like myself and it turned into an ambition to just be good at what I was doing. As I wound down from my first round of competitive success, you can say that spanned over a course of a decade, I wanted to have children and move on in different ways in my life and I've started to focus more on teaching and I've been clear with a lot of people to say I believe, from my personal experience and what I've done myself and what I've seen, that there are different roles that we all serve in the community whether you be a student of the art and I think this goes for any discipline. It's not just to jiu-jitsu but whether you're a student of the art, whether you're an athlete and competitor of the art, whether you're an instructor or a teacher and potentially, another category, being a business owner and in jiu-jitsu, because it is a newer martial art that's being introduced to the masses here, you see a lot of influences, business practices, teaching practices, you see a lot of things being pulled in from other disciplines, other institutions, if you will, and we have the tendency, because I think we are a younger sport than, per se, something like karate, a very highly acclaimed athlete who's accomplished in performing jiu-jitsu will then time out of their competitive career or feel like they need to do something else and then they will just go open a school because this is sort of what everyone believes is the most natural thing to do so they go and open a school, only to find that maybe they are not able to build a successful school. They don't have a lot of students or they have a lot of people that quit or there's a lot of infighting or x, x, x. There's so many different variables of things that could work or not work and I really boil this down to us recognizing all the different roles that one can play in their martial arts life and, to be clear about bringing yourself to a level of who it is that you're catering to and who it is that you're working with, so if I'm trying to be an instructor, that is a very different skillset from being a practitioner and when I'm a business owner, combined with an instructor and I am looking at the experience of a new student versus a competitor, I really try to sympathize and cater to their needs and bring myself to their level so that I can understand what they're going through so that they, too, can jump on board and enjoy what it is that we do and get themselves to a place where they might be competitor, they might become an instructor down the line but I give a lot of respect to the fact that these are all very different roles, different skillsets and I think we are more successful when we are conscious about who we are and who we're trying to engage with and I think that is severely lacking in the discipline that I train in. I can't speak for all the other types of martial arts but I would probably think that this is just a life case. The more you know about the framework and the construct that you're operating within and how you fit into it, I think you can have a lot more success if you know who you are versus who you're speaking to and what you hope to achieve.

Jeremy Lesniak:

And with that, you're touching on a subject that we've brought up a few times on this show and that's the idea that the skillset to do and the skillset to teach are so dramatically different and yet, in the martial arts, it is so rare that they are taught separately except when we look at really successful schools, when we talk to school owners who have fulltime programs and multiple students under them with part time or even fulltime positions or multiple schools, they all seem to have this development



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program where they not only do higher ranking students learn martial arts but they learn how to teach martial arts. Is that something you do in your gym?

Emily Kwok:

I would like to think of it as I don't think that a standardized system of teaching somebody how to become a teacher or a leader or X is the way that works most effectively for myself and my school and so, we've built, what I would like to think of as more of a sustainable community. My school, relative to business practices which I think feeds into this conversation, we don't have people who are sold on agreements and sort of pulled into things in a very, how shall I say, in a way where they might not be certain of what they're getting themselves into. When students come to train at our school, I think a lot of them choose to come train at our school. We try to be transparent about the information that we give out and so, when they decide to come, they understand exactly, or they're kind of coming in eyes wide open, if you will and we're very open and honest with that and as that student chooses to become part of our community and works amongst us and befriends us, if it's aligned with their personal path and what they would like to do, they might step up and say I would really be interested in helping the school out in some way or I would love to learn how to teach and I work in consulting outside of jiu-jitsu in sort of a peak performance space so a lot of what we do is work with high performing individuals and help them sort of find their most optimal way of being so that they're not obstructed in being able to perform in the most efficient ways or the most creative ways and we find that that's very much an individual process so one person coming to us and saying they want to become an assistant instructor or become an instructor one day might have very different capabilities and challenges than another so I tend to work with everybody one on one and we really look at sort of what they're hoping to gain out of the experience and try to tailor that to their needs and use their strengths within our community so I don't know if that's a very long-winded way of answering your question but we don't have a clean system, if you will, but rather, more of an, I guess, individual mentorship if that's something that somebody wants.

Jeremy Lesniak:

That makes sense. That makes sense. How did you get started? Now that we've dug in, let's pull back out and rewind the tape. You said you've been training for about 20 years. What was the impetus?

Emily Kwok:

I was about 20 years old. I was in Vancouver, British Columbia where I'm from and I had been very inspired watching some movies about fighting and one of them was not a very great film but inspiring nonetheless. The film Ali that Will Smith starred in about the life of Mohammad Ali and then the following year, another movie came out called Girl Fight and it was about a young girl in Brooklyn who wanted to learn how to box but it was kind of considered sort of inappropriate within her household for a young woman to learn how to box and she manages to join a gym and fight boys and she does



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amazing and it was a great feel good film so I watched these 2 films. I got intrigued with this idea of boxing and I had been working out at a community center quite regularly. I would say 4 or 5 days a week, I would be in the gym 2 or 3 hours a day and I didn't find that I was getting the gains that I wanted in terms of my strength and in my appearance so I decided I would try something new and I looked up a boxing gym in the area and through a good friend of mine, I should say, to an old contact who later became a very good friend of mine, was sent to a boxing gym and within 2 months of my boxing life, I kept injuring my knee because it wasn't handling the torqueing of the angles very well and I found that I was really uncoordinated so I dropped boxing because it just wasn't fitting my body very well and he encouraged me to come with him to a Russian Sambo class and when I picked up Sambo, I was fascinated with it and Sambo, for anyone that's listening that doesn't know what it is, is similar to Brazilian jujitsu that it's a grappling sport but there's a lot of emphasis placed on leg attacks and I tried sambo out for a month but the instructor at the time and the student base, it was a very patriarchal individual who wasn't excited about me performing and sparring with his student base which is a bunch of teenage boys and I found myself feeling really limited by the leadership in the class and one of my peers was a Canadian male who said you might enjoy training jujitsu. It is really similar to sambo but you'll find that the culture's a bit different so they'll allow you to train with everybody and spar so I went with him to a jujitsu class and I never looked back. It was a very intriguing art to me. I've never seen anything like it before and there was one girl in the class at the time and I was really inspired watching her fight men. They were sparring. I said I want to learn how to do that so I started and then I gobbled up every opportunity in class there was around so I could learn as much as I could, as quickly as I could. This was 1999, 2000, in Vancouver. There wasn't a lot of jujitsu, I mean, there wasn't a lot of jujitsu in America, let alone a city but a smaller city like Vancouver so that's how I got started.

Jeremy Lesniak:

That's great. One of the things that we've been talking about in the show, really, since the inception is this disparity, this gender disparity within the martial arts that there are so many more men and obviously, there are exceptions and if I'm getting my timing right, when this is going to come out, there's an episode that will come out ahead of this where we talk about that gender gap and how we address that. Do you have some thoughts on that?

Emily Kwok:

That's a very large question.

Jeremy Lesniak:

We can narrow it down and you can feel free to narrow it down where you want. What you pose is a scenario, this idea that, in this first instance, in Sambo, you were the only female in the class and that, not only wasn't a great environment, but it was actively not a great environment. The instructor wasn't so keen on it and when you found BJJ, there was one other woman which felt, just the way you describe



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it, what I heard was that felt very welcoming and yet, what I also hear in that is there was only one other woman.

Emily Kwok:

And it actually drove the first few years of my career because I never started doing martial arts for the sake of competing or teaching or if you'd ask me 20 years ago that I would have world championship titles and a school, I would have laughed at your face because that certainly was not the intention but, I think, what happened was I was so desperate to find other people like me meaning females to test myself against and to train with that I started competing and I would find any opportunity or venue to meet more women and that generally tended to be competitions because within your pool at your school, you would know the one or 2 ladies if there were any and I would say that in jiu-jitsu, we don't have a lot of women that practice compared to men. It's grown a lot. When I had first started competing at a high level, the divisions were very small and you were lucky if you had 1 or 2 fights with someone your size and your belt level. A lot of the times, they would combine divisions because there just wasn't enough representation and jiu-jitsu is a very hard art to learn because there is so much emphasis, not only placed on the theory, but in the practice and really, I thought that's where most of us are drawn to it. You must have a partner in order to practice jiu-jitsu and in order to sharpen your skills to get any better at it, it's the live act of fighting so you must grapple another person. There are no forms, there are no drills and exercises that will allow you to be a more competent fighter like you can do these things in your off time but really, in live time, that's when you want to sharpen your skill set but the difficulty in that is that if you are generally, always the smaller person and the weaker person, you get pounced on a lot and beat up and not a lot of women want to be in that situation. Not a lot of women are raised to roughhouse or believe that combat or fighting is acceptable in the first place so, to come to the mat and to open yourself up to combat, I think is a high barrier of entry already and then, once you're there if your initial experiences are very unpleasant and you get hurt, you don't really want to go back. Not to mention, when I started, hygiene was not a thing. Maybe the men in your gym don't smell that good and maybe they're a hundred pounds bigger than you. Maybe they're hitting on you. It can get very messy for females and so, because of that, I think the terrain has been especially rocky for women to get traction and build. We're not at a place in the sport where there are more female leaders and there are more athletes and instructors. Still not equal representation with men and I really believe that a big part of women being "equalized" in the space also has to do with good men backing us up and I think that we need more diversity in representation at the top so if you have 20 different instructors and every single one of them is a man, it's very hard as a man, I think, sometimes to understand or to sympathize what it is to be a woman or to be that smaller, weaker individual so they might tend to lead the class, not always but they might tend to lead the class in ways that are most understandable and beneficial for them, for people like them. I think if we want to see more growth for women, if we have opportunities where we, too, are at the head of the room, we can sympathize with people that are more like us and therefore, with more diverse representation, create more room for other people to thrive and grow, not just more of the majority. I think this really works on a lot of levels, not just in jiu-jitsu or martial arts and,



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in my experience, it hasn't been easy getting to a place where I sort of carved out my own niche or my own market and I have had resistance and I have had a lot of instances where people didn't want me in the room or people didn't want to give me space to grow and in those situations, I think, what I tended to do was just look the other way and decide that I will just go create space for myself and hopefully, people will decide to come join me on my side of the room and eventually, we will be big enough in representation that they can't ignore us. There isn't always a good or easy solution to getting ahead but I think that those of us who are underrepresented, the few of us that manage to get to a place where we might have a platform can and should try to create a platform to just create more space for people like us.

Jeremy Lesniak:

Every martial arts school has its own culture and that culture is usually, if not intentionally, accidentally, instilled by the owners or the leaders or the people at the top. You sound like a really thoughtful person and you talked about some of those challenges that women have when they join martial arts, these ideas that sometimes it's a boys' club and sometimes, you're getting hit on and so on. Are there things you've consciously done within your school to make it more accommodating to women?

Emily Kwok:

Yeah, that's an interesting question and how it's phrased because in Brazilian jiu-jitsu, there is, I think right now with women, quite a movement towards catering to women by offering women's only classes and so, you'll find in a lot of academies, you'll have, either, if there is no female with enough experience, maybe the head instructor who is a male, will offer a women's only class so that the women population in their school can get together and train together or maybe, you're fortunate enough to have an advanced female who is capable of teaching that class themselves so there is a big movement to have women-safe sort of spaces, women-led seminars, which I do a lot or camps which I do a lot of. Females together from different areas and opportunities to train together. In my school, I actually, even though I've had women's-only classes in other places in my career, in my school now, I currently do not have a women's only class and I'm 50% owner in my school and I share that ownership with a male and I'm sort of 50% the head instructor. I feel, at this point, and I've had some debates with people on this, where my level of inclusion is sort of leading from the front, if you will. I think that most people, when they show up and they want to participate and do something that they're not familiar with or have no clue what they're getting themselves into, they usually show up and I think look for somebody like them so they go, if they're someone like me, maybe I'm more likely to try this because I don't think women really do this sort of thing or I don't think people over the age of 50 do this sort of thing so when you find likeness and representation, I think you're more likely to give it a try and in my school, I feel that being half the owner, half the head instructor and having the student respect and following, if you will, for me, that creates reason enough alone, I feel, for other women to come in and say oh, look, this is an appropriate space for me because there's a woman that's leading the culture of the school or there's a woman that's leading all the drills and men are listening to her. I've heard from some other people that



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they think that that's maybe a little bit too forward thinking, that maybe we need to come from a place where we allow women to be closer together because it's still very intimidating and that very may well be the case. I'm not going to push back on that and for some schools and some spaces, I think it's the right call and it's the right thing to do to have female-based classes so that they're catering strictly to the female population but in my school, I sort of feel that I can set the standard by saying I own and direct everything that goes on here so you better believe it. I'm thinking about your interests as well.

Jeremy Lesniak:

I'm just getting the vibe that this school is an extreme passion, seems such a cliché word to use but I don't have anything better coming to mind, it really seems like, even though you alluded to work you do outside of the school so clearly, it's not your only source of income, this is something that you spend a lot of time, a lot of energy on and I'm going to guess that everybody around you in that school, all your students can pick up on that because it's coming through here.

Emily Kwok:

Yeah, we have a very, I think we're really fortunate that we built a really incredible community at my school. I really like to think, my school is kind of like an ode to everything I've never had, if you will. In 20 years of living in Vancouver, New York and Tokyo and having both positive and negative experiences being a part of other schools, I've taught in many schools. I've been a student in many schools and I recognize how important it is, it's kind of like the job that you go to everyday. That environment that you spend so many hours in shape so much of who you are and the energy that you bring to your craft and when I started doing jiu-jitsu, it was really fun and it was intriguing and it made me really feel alive and I feel like so many of us train what we train because of those reasons and I've had so many experiences in my martial arts career where I didn't feel that way. I was made through the culture of the school to feel otherwise that it was a very oppressive place or that I couldn't have fun or that it wasn't for me and moments where I almost quit and so, because of that, when I opened up my school with my business partner 10 years ago, I think both of us really wanted to make sure that this space was kept free of that type of negativity and that the culture wasn't going to be top down and when I say top down, I mean that in jiu-jitsu, it's very common for the head instructor or the owner of the school to sort of almost be a cult of personality and I don't really think it's a very sustainable or always healthy way the structure or the culture and it sounds like it happens in a lot of different disciplines and I personally have seen things implode multiple times because of that and I also, for a business perspective, I also think it's very hard to sustain a business that way because as human beings, everyone is, I would hope, trying to constantly better themselves and evolve and improve upon their skill set and sometimes, the teacher needs to be the students but when the teacher is always placed in the position of always having to be the teacher all the time, sometimes that takes us away from being a student and that playfulness and that curiosity that might actually teach something to the greater community is lost and I've seen and met a lot of instructors who've lost their passion for being the leader because they've had to only lead for so long and in my school, I value the culture that we all bring and that we all create by learning to



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lead amongst each other and to support each other in that journey so at my school, there isn't a singular figurehead but rather, I think I structure the culture in such a way where everyone is asked to contribute and lead and we really do have a community of people that contribute to everybody's growth and outside of me being the head instructor and teaching a handful of classes, I make room to make sure that my students that want to be leaders as well are given the opportunities to lead and then, I reinforce that by also being a student in their class so that the rest of the population can see that I believe in their abilities and that I trust that they're going to do a great job and I think from doing this sort of thing, we bring a different kind of life to the school or the environment that we create and I think cultivating that culture within someone's school is everything. Through all of the closures that have happened as a result of the pandemic, I feel that our schools in a very good place to survive because people have aligned themselves with wanting to be here for that reason. I don't think that most of our students are there because it's just the place to train down the block. I have a lot of students that have chosen to come train with us because they want to be there for what we've cultivated and what we've helped create so it's very important to me because I think that this is humanity. This is how we learn to be better people and I want to be surrounded by good people no matter what it is that I'm doing so I'm very honored to be able to have that space with 250 students that share it with me.

Jeremy Lesniak:

I want to go back and make sure I heard you correctly because if I did, this is a big deal. You give your students opportunities to teach and you are not afraid to step in as a student in those classes. Did I hear that correctly?

Emily Kwok:

Yeah, yeah.

Jeremy Lesniak:

Can we talk about that because that's massive! That's something that so few instructors have the, I'm going to call it what it is, the self-esteem to do that and the willingness to support the students and the realization that your job, I'd rather hear your words than my own so I'll shut up now. Talk about that, please.

Emily Kwok:

Yeah, I think, it's funny how when we think about martial arts or combat, we think, especially with what we see today like in the UFC, it's very easy for us to artificially believe that strength is seen through prowess and defeat of another human being. I really think that true strength and for those of us who train in a martial art is built internally and that strength is built through vulnerability and showing that you're always ready to receive and interpret and process and evolve and there's nothing better, I think, than to teach that to your students, to teach that to your community which is that you are never above



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learning and you are never above learning from anyone and that you're not perfect and you don't know everything. One of the unique things about jiu-jitsu is I think it evolves so quickly and people can kind of take their own flavor or their own twist on their movement and make it work for them and then teach it because maybe it will work for others and it's not restricted to a particular style and I think, quite frankly as an instructor, it would be virtually impossible for one person to become an expert in all of these different styles or variations of so that they could then control that information and teach it to their students and so, I am a big fan of sort of saying I know what I'm good at, you have your interest area and you know what you're good at and there's things that you know how to do that I don't know how to do so what better way to demonstrate a positive culture for learning than for the instructors to participate in other people's classes or more specifically, the leadership of the school to say I'm going to participate in this person's class so within our ranking systems, in jiu-jitsu you have a white belt, blue belt a purple belt, a brown belt and a black belt and various degrees of the black belt. On average, it can take anyone, someone, somewhere at 6 to 10 years to achieve the rank of black belt. I have teaching at our school, mostly black belts but we do also have some brown belts and they're very good brown belts so it's not unlikely to see me instead of teaching the class, taking the class that is being led by one of our brown belts or other black belts because they're teaching me something that I don't know and I'm also very thoughtful to question them on their technique. One, to put them in a place of critical thinking and understanding what it is that they're actually doing and also 2, to show the students that once again, I don't know everything and it's important to have a dialogue and to feel that it's ok to question and it's ok to be curious about things that you don't know because I think that so much of our culture, not just in martial arts but as humans in general, as we get older and we become better at doing things, there's sort of a false construct of being an expert and never having to question or look back at what it is you're doing. I think it's one of the more negative aspects of what happens as we mature and get older so what better way to challenge that than to break it apart and be the person doing it.

Jeremy Lesniak:

Couldn't agree more. So many of us end up where you are now and unfortunately, I don't think it's the majority but it's still a good chunk and I would say that that group is growing, this realization that as the head instructor or senior rank or whatever it is in a school, doesn't have to know everything. Their responsibility is not to be a book of knowledge, really, it's to guide and it's to be the one who fosters the growth of the others. How did you come to this? Did you come to this because it's modeled positively or negatively as you came up through?

Emily Kwok:

I think that most of my martial arts career, I constantly looked for leadership. I made the mistake of feeling like my technical instructors were also guides or leaders in other aspects of my life and, for me, jiu-jitsu has not only been something that my body has been able to learn but it's been something that my mind and my soul has been able to be invested in and I feel like I have grown so much as a human being because of it and much to what I was saying before about the different roles that we play, I would



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mistake that my instructor, my technical instructors, were then also leaders when that usually was not the case and I found out much later in my career that it was a mistake in my own perception and my judgement that I was almost setting myself up for failure by believing to some degree that this technical instructor was on a pedestal or some sort of deity or a god, if you will, that they will have some sort of message, secret, about life that they can tell me when in reality they were just humans that were very, very well-versed at executing this particular art and I learned this when I had a pretty disappointing performance at a tournament that I had traveled far away to and when I had returned, I had felt like, I had to go to the tournament by myself due to some personal complications on my coaches' end and when I returned, one of my very, very good friends who happens to work in sort of the, I guess you can say peak performance realm sort of psychological realm had asked me what had happened when I competed and where did I feel like I went wrong and I was just so emotionally distraught over this idea that I tried to do everything right, I trained and I put everything into it and there was some complications on my coaches' end and they couldn't make it and I just felt a bit lost that I said I don't know what I did wrong, why didn't they give me more guidance, why hadn't they been there for me in more moments of need, they never called before I competed or after I competed to see how I did and I just felt very, I hit quite a low point relative to I believed in this person that they were going to be there for me in my moment of need as I was going to go out there and represent them and then they weren't there and my friend said to me, he said this might sound a little bit harsh but you might need to look at who you are and think about the fact that you are an evolved person and you are a much better leader for yourself than the leader that you look to. You have to realize I have done this plenty of times in my own career that your teacher is a human who happens to be really good at doing this particular set of things but that doesn't necessarily qualify them to be a life coach or to know what to do with themselves and they certainly don't know what to do with you so sometimes, when we look at our coaches or the people that we look up to, that it might be better to look at them as tools in our toolbox versus looking at them as our entire tool box and I think that that really struck me very deeply because after that, I started thinking very differently about leadership and how I would not necessarily think that or leadership and how I would think that I can look within myself to find the things that I need and not necessarily, unfairly, rely on people for things that I'm looking for and I think once I started doing that, I started being able to see more success in my own performance and more happiness in my own practice because I didn't put these unfair pressures on people that probably weren't asking for them.

Jeremy Lesniak:

That's heavy stuff. How do you feel now talking about how you were feeling then and what you had to do to get here? How does that feel in retrospect?

Emily Kwok:

Clarifying, I went through a period, I should mention, when I was doing that, when I was in that reflective period, I have just come out of a time where I had given up on myself and, if you would call it a rebirth, it was constantly looking for external reasons to make myself feel better about my own practice



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and in that moment, somebody had helped me see through my thinking process and as a result, unveiled a different way of thinking about my career and my decision-making process and so, before that, I had thought that I had needed to see a sports psychologist or do something because I didn't feel that I was being very successful on the competition circuit and I wasn't really as happy as I thought I would be and it's all a learning process. Someone said regarding me once that I tend to always question how to do things better and I think that that's probably true. Not to say that I'm not satisfied but to say that is there a way that I can do this better, think about this better, how can I make this more efficient. Is this process the best process? I think that that's, looking back, it's very clarifying for me to have had that conversation because I think it's made me a much more, I feel like my self-view is a lot more self-critical and complete because I'm not looking for external reasons why things aren't happening and I've been able to take more ownership of myself and my own decision making patterns and I think that's a really positive thing. I don't think we always view ourselves very clearly. In that same conversation, I remember saying to my friend that I just wish that I could perform for the team like I did in 2007 when I won the Worlds. I wish that I could go back to who I was then because that athlete would have been the type of athlete that deserved coaching or the one that the team rallied behind because I was still fairly new athlete with this new coach and this new team and he had said that is precisely what is wrong with your thinking. Even though you might have won in that year and with that particular performance, you also have to acknowledge that that was in the past and everything and every bit of who you are today is so much more than who you were back then and you do yourself much better by focusing on the present moment and understanding that you've grown so much and taking that and moving forward than trying to relate to somebody who was you earlier in life. You're a much more evolved person today than you were then so think forward and live with present versus compare yourself to some past version of yourself and this individual, I think, has largely been so much of that leader or that sage or that guide that I was looking for but this person was also not the head instructor of the school and learning to have these different types of individuals in my life that contributed to my overall success really came together then and since then, I think I try to look at all the different people in my life and ask myself if they deserve the pressure that I'm always putting on them and I think that that moment was incredibly clarifying so yeah, that's what I have to say about that.

Jeremy Lesniak:

There's a lot there. We could have a Dr. Phil on the couch kind of session out of all that, couldn't we, but we're not going to do that. It's funny. Sometimes, we have episodes that do really go in that direction and I get some feedback from people sometimes saying maybe you need to have a separate podcast called martial arts therapy.

Emily Kwok:

Isn't that why so many people do it? We all look for a way to resolve our problems and what better way to resolve our psychological problems than to make physical combat.



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Jeremy Lesniak:

I think that that's pretty important. I think that, even simulated, friendly, "safe" combat allows us to get into something pretty primal, something pretty innate to humanity that most of us don't get to express otherwise. I think it's pretty helpful.

Emily Kwok:

I do think that what ends up happening, really, is that martial arts allow us to make physical sense of otherwise ethereal problems that are floating up in our head and we can't train out a lot of the problems in our head but if we make them real somehow, then maybe we can start flexing that muscle and I think that that's why so many of us are drawn to it and also the humility, the fact that martial arts, being combative, always brings you back down to your knees so no matter how good you get at something, you always have to remember that you are human and you are going to fail sometimes but that you're going to have to go back up on your own and figure it out and I think it's for that reason that so many of us who start martial arts usually fall in love with it and in many ways, change disciplines because we're constantly seeking more ways to feed our souls, if you will, so I think once a martial artist, you're kind of always a martial artist. I think that's why they say mind, body and soul.

Jeremy Lesniak:

Absolutely. Now, if we look out into the future, I'll even let you pick the time period, could be a year, could be 50 years, doesn't matter to me, what are you hoping for? What are your goals, what are you working for, what's coming?

Emily Kwok:

As a martial artist?

Jeremy Lesniak:

Yeah, lets at least loosely connect it to martial arts. Doesn't have to be strictly what would happen in the mats or in the school.

Emily Kwok:

I think, it's a good question. I mean, you're talking the real long run. I think that I would hope for a more inclusive space so that everybody felt that it was welcoming or a place that they could belong in so that they could explore all of these dimensions of the self. I think about trying to, on a very micro level, create the kind of culture within my school, within my camps, within my brand, if you will, that would allow people to feel that there's always going to be a space for them to explore this and I would like to see the greater jiu-jitsu community bleed into MMA and other martial arts communities. I would love to see a time and a place where we didn't have negative leadership and where people could really feel free to explore and practice being better versions of themselves. That's a very ambitious goal. I mean, I can



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practice that on a small scale right now but I think when I look at the long run, I would love to be able to contribute that type of influence to the greater culture if that were my legacy if that's what I would look at it as. I think that so many of us in martial arts who are given a platform to become leaders, I think there's a lot of people that don't learn how to be leaders and don't understand what to do with power and do the wrong things with their power and as a result, I feel that sometimes, the martial arts are not what they should be so I would love to see a time where we're a little bit more conscious and responsible for the people that we serve and the growth that we all hope to achieve from it and call ourselves out on it. that's what I would love to see, just a healthier space for us to continue practicing.

Jeremy Lesniak:

Great stuff, great stuff. Now, what if people want to find you, they want to maybe come visit, follow you on social media, check out the website, anything like that?

Emily Kwok:

I have a school in Princeton, New Jersey that people are welcome to check out. It's www.princetonbjj.com. I am on Facebook although I'm not always on social media doing jiu-jitsu things so I just keep a friends list that's far too long so just message me and I'm on Instagram as [@emilykwokbjj](https://www.instagram.com/emilykwokbjj) so people can reach me those 3 ways and keep up with whatever is happening in my world.

Jeremy Lesniak:

And you've done nothing but give great advice today but I'm going to ask you for a little bit more so what would you tell the people listening today, how would you send us out?

Emily Kwok:

What would I tell people listening today relative to why they should listen to this or why they should practice?

Jeremy Lesniak:

No, just some closing thoughts. It's been a great episode. It's been a wonderful conversation and by conversation I mean you talked and I listened which makes my job really easy so just, yeah, how would you want to wrap this up?

Emily Kwok:

Yeah, that's good. It's really open ended but there have been a lot of thoughts floating through my mind and I think that one of the themes that's been really prevalent for me that I wish was more prevalent for others and I think we need to do this as martial artists but I think more importantly we just need to do this as humans is something that we sort of open the conversation with is that I think we do a lot better in life if we learned to look at what we had more in common with people doing things in a different



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discipline or a different way than if we continue to look for reasons to separate or to create hierarchy amongst what we do. I think tolerance and perspective is something that we all need to practice more of and I don't think we can grow as humans if we don't do these things. We've gotten to a place where we make a lot of rash and instinctive decisions that might be serving the self very well but they're not really serving each other very well and by each other, I don't even mean just your family nucleus but it could extend beyond to your neighborhood or your town or your state or your country and I wish that we all had a little bit more patience and tolerance to filter through the decisions that we're making for ourselves and the way that we think about ourselves and how we fit into this world and to take a different perspective and sort of see how things might look from the other side and to not necessarily try to isolate everyone and sort of cordon them off and write them off because they don't agree with us but rather, empathize with what they're thinking and feeling and see if there's a way that we can find some common ground so that we can actually make some progress. That's something that I've been thinking about a lot and I think that it relates so much to our practice as martial artists is if we get too stuck in doing things a very particular way, it will work well for us to a certain point but then, at some point, everyone else will have figured out what you're doing and by changing your perspective, trying new things, learning new methods, you might actually learn to be a much better fighter and a much better training partner and a much better individual within your community so that's what I'd like to say.

Jeremy Lesniak:

I had a great time with this one and I think that that comes through. Hopefully, you had as much fun listening to it and I hope our guest had a good time as well. I got the sense that she did so, Ma'am, thanks for joining me. If you want to see everything from this show, photos and links and all that, go to whistlekickmartialartsradio.com, you can find that stuff for this and every single episode that we've ever done and if you're willing to support the work we do here at whistlekick, you could go to the store and make a purchase. Use the code `PODCAST15` and get 15% off. You can also share the episode, leave a review somewhere, Facebook, Google, those are the two biggies, Apple podcast is another good one. You can tell a friend or you can contribute to the Patreon. Patreon.com/whistlekick, that's the place for that and I hope if you see somebody wearing something with whistlekick on it out in the world, you'll introduce yourself. If you have guest suggestions, let me know or other feedback, you can email me, jeremy@whistlekick.com. Until next time, train hard, smile, and have a great day!