



Episode 523 – How Martial Arts Schools Can Survive COVID-19 |
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Jeremy Lesniak:

Alright, let's get started. So the first thing we're gonna let everybody know is that this is getting recorded, it will get released, you'll have the opportunity to watch it again if you have to leave halfway or anything like that, totally fine. I wanna make sure it's available to as many people as possible. I wanna reiterate that Craig was gracious enough with his time. We're doing this simply to share. There's no sales pitch, right? It seems like every Zoom call, every webinar has a sales pitch built in. We're not doing any of that. So I don't want you to be afraid that at some point, you know, we're gonna try to steal your credit card or anything like that. If you have any questions, you can drop them in the chat and we may answer them now, we may answer them later at the end we'll give an opportunity for audio Q&A if you wanna ask questions and I'm committed to keeping this to an hour. So, I believe you all know me but people watching later might not know me, I'm Jeremy Lesniak. I'm the founder here at whistlekickmartialartsradio and one of the things we've been getting into more and more at whistlekick is providing resources for martial arts schools, school owners, instructors, and today we're gonna talk about something that's pretty heavy which is what I'm calling a second wave of COVID-19 and its effect on martial arts schools, and I'm joined today by Sensei Craig Wharem.

Craig Wharem:

Hey, everyone!

Jeremy Lesniak:



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I'll let Sensei Craig give you a little bit about him because you all may not know him.

Craig Wharem:

Yeah, so I'm the managing director at Karate International at Exeter, New Hampshire. I have the opportunity to run the school that I trained in as a kid and I've been working there for a little over half of my life. Jeremy and I did the math the other day. Teaching... I've been teaching there for a little over half of my life and I just, you know, try to navigate everything. Jeremy has been a huge resource for me. So, when he asked me to help out, I was more than happy to jump in and see what I can do to help everyone.

Jeremy Lesniak:

Yeah, there's a reason that I've invited Sensei Craig to be the person presenting with me today and it's not because he has, you know, 6 PhDs in Education and 400 stripes on his belt. It's because it'll all sum it up with one very simple number. He gave me these numbers, these updated numbers, before we got started. He went into quarantine with a hundred and thirty-seven students. He came out of quarantine with a hundred and thirty-one students. Six. Lost six, which accounts for four and a half percent. I'm sure there are some schools that have fared just as well. Maybe there are even some out there who did a little bit better. The vast majority of schools didn't even come close. Unfortunately, lost a lot of schools. It bums out, and so what we're gonna talk about today are the strategies that he and I put together at the beginning of this because we saw this coming, we strategized together and said, "here's what we're gonna do," and we're gonna unpack all of that for you, as well as talk about what we've already discussed for round 2 and the things that you might consider as we move forward. One of the things that a little bit fortunate for being here in the north-east is that, you know, New Hampshire, Vermont, Maine, we get to watch what's happening in the rest of the country, the rest of the world, and we're behind the curve, which is nice because we can see what's happening and we can account for it and as we saw closures happening in New York and in California, I started reaching out to people and saying, "This is coming, we need to prepare for this." Some of them did, some of them did not. I'll let you in for what happened to those who did not, and I wanna talk about the plan. I wanna talk about the plan Sensei Craig and I put together.

04:10

We put out a couple bonus episodes as this started happening. If you haven't checked those out, you might consider that additional material that you wanna go over. But everything fell under a two-word heading that we're gonna use going forward as well, "Massive Action." So when Sensei Craig and I talked about Massive Action, we talked about the things that could be done that met that and so I'm gonna hand it over to him now to talk about what were some of those things that fell under that heading of Massive Action rather than pull back, or wait, or hide in the corner.

Craig Wharem:

Other than calling you hyperventilating?

Jeremy Lesniak:



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Yes, other than that.

Craig Wharem:

Poor Jeremy was my buddy.

05:00

Every three hours for the first week or two.

Jeremy Lesniak:

There was a lot going on. There was a lot going on and it was an important time.

Craig Wharem:

05:10

The first thing I did that really helped me was I gave myself a chance to breathe, right? So, in Exeter, where I am, schools were closed March 13th. I said, "Okay, alright. Well, I'm gonna 05:23, I'm gonna clean my floor in between every class, I'm gonna just make this happen." And the Monday I did that, it became very clear to me very quickly that that was not gonna be good enough. I had... the day that I normally had thirty to forty students on the mat, I had seven for the day. The entire day was sad so I was like, I called Jeremy that day and he called "Nope, this isn't gonna work." And I was sure I've been and I had an idea and the idea was well, wouldn't it be cool if I could find a way to give every single four to seventeen year-old student I have private training because how on earth am I gonna be able to be on a Zoom chat where everybody's screen is this big and be able to effectively coach them or make them feel seen and I felt like that was gonna be too hard of a struggle to overcome at first when I was trying to learn this. So, what we did was I structured it in a way where I said, "Okay, I'm gonna teach from 9 to 5. Every day 9 to 5 and I am going to put a 20-minute 06:27 in there and every 20 minutes, I will 06:31 somebody new. I may not survive the week, but I'm gonna try it. What ended up happening was we... I talked to Jeremy about how am I gonna book these. We used a service called 06:43 that was pretty simple to set up and people book and it's an app that goes right into my phone where I can see what it is and it tracks things for you, which is super cool. It's free to use, and it's been effective for us.

Jeremy Lesniak:

Let me just jump in for a second, Craig.

Craig Wharem:

Sure.

Jeremy Lesniak:

When we talk about specific things like that, I'm gonna try to drop them in the chat. Like Gabe just asked that question. Half a second after I posted it in there man, that's okay. So, I'm gonna try to supplement that as we're talking to give you those resources. We talk about things that are... have lengths, I'll try to grab those, you know. I've got two monitors here. So, I'll try to flash that out.



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You know, let's play a little bit of Q&A here, Craig. You mentioned 20 minutes. Why was it 20 minutes that you were doing these lessons?

Craig Wharem:

Because when I did the math out, I figured if I could do at least three kids an hour and I did that at least a 40-hour week, everybody would get probably one and then I would find a way to make it happen for a second one if I had to. A little bit more about my background. I didn't go to college. Literally, out of high school, I was hired full-time to run my karate school. I was not trained in any other thing. I have no fallback planned other than being a karate teacher. So, for me, failing was simply just not an option. So, I was prepared to work. Jeremy looked at me on call and said, "Dude, you're gonna have to work as hard as you're gonna have to to make this work." And so, I got myself in a headspace where I said, "If I could do 20 minutes that's 3 an hour, 3 an hour." And you know, I did the math. And I said, "Alright, that's pretty close. And if I had to use Saturdays, I'll do Saturdays too."

Jeremy Lesniak:

And what I wanna highlight is that... Excuse me... Not only is this idea of trying to reach the majority or even all the students via private lessons because, you know, Karate International is the only school that went this direction. I'm aware of plenty of other schools that said, "We're gonna hit the private lessons side. There's only so much we could do group classes that, you know, when you've got all these little boxes, it's really hard to see what's going on with someone, but a shorter, one-on-one can work really well. Not only is that "Massive Action," but it's also creative. It's an innovative way to deliver our product. What is our product? It's martial arts instruction. So to find those creative ways of how to do that, I think is really important and you said Craig that as we're talking earlier. I know this, that I'm playing interviewer.

Craig Wharem:

Yeah.

Jeremy Lesniak:

It wasn't just one-on-one interviews, right? Or one-on-one instruction that you had some group stuff, some pre-recorded stuff.

Craig Wharem:

Yeah.

Jeremy Lesniak:

You had a really good mix. So, can you talk about that for a second?

Craig Wharem:

Sure. So, the practice was, first thing I thought was private lessons then it became clear again that I'm one dude, and sincerely how long was I able to sustain that, right? 09:44....09:47 people back. So I went,



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"Okay, I have to start pre-recording things, I have to give people drills and stuff like that." A parent of one of my students. Actually, one of my adult students now, he has professional camera equipment so I called him up and said, "Hey, can you come in. I wanna pre-record some videos." We started setting it up where every other Wednesday, he would come in, I cancelled all private lessons for the day. You couldn't sign up that day, and I pre-recorded and we ended up just by having fun and breaking things down like we normally would. We ended up with like over 200 videos, and I would send out two to three a week in a weekly-email so they would practice this specific stuff at home. So, every Monday I'd send him an email that was, "Don't fear to book your private lessons." If, by the way, you go that route with the app, it will message you on your phone. Like my phone is always muted now, but I get apps on my phone, or notifications, and if you set it on the thing and you say "Don't forget to book your privates," your phone is gonna explode with notifications at first because everyone forgets til Monday to book their karate appointments, right?

Jeremy Lesniak:

So, now all of a sudden, I'll look up and like, "Why do I have 75 notifications?"

Craig Wharem:

10:57 ... I pre-recorded and I started sending that out. I did weekly workouts and we started sending that out and I encouraged people to participate in as many things as they wanted. One of my initial ideas, which I ended up having to let go because it just didn't take off and I needed to spend energy elsewhere was on weekend challenges, right? So, I would encourage all the kids, "Go, take your Legos and build your dream dojo, send me pictures, post them to my Facebook, email them to me, I wanna see them, right? Make a family martial arts movie, right? 11:33 make mom and dad do karate with you." I got one video, right? And it was like it was clear that they weren't gonna participate. That one video was hilarious, but it was clear that they weren't gonna participate.

Jeremy Lesniak:

And that's a perfect illustration of... You were so creative, you tried so many different things but there were things that didn't work.

Craig Wharem:

Yeah.

Jeremy Lesniak:

And you threw a bunch of stuff against the wall. You found some of it worked, some of it didn't, some of it worked for some people and not others?

Craig Wharem:

Yeah.

Jeremy Lesniak:



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But by being creative and delivering a lot of different options for people, it gave them the ability to find a sense of normalcy in their life. One of the other pieces, I say the secondary piece to "Massive Action," is as a martial arts school, creating some stability, being a... We talk about being pillars in the community as a martial artist, as a martial arts school. What is a pillar? A pillar is something you could lean on, it doesn't fall over, it's stable, it's reliable, and to carry that mindset forward, and to illustrate that for people who literally are afraid for their lives because then remembering those early days, the media was telling us that we might all die next week? It was a terrifying time and I'm not just... I'm not trying to be flip about this, but it was a very scary time and a lot of people have been looking around saying, "What hasn't changed? What can I, kind of, build my life around?" And for a lot of people, it was martial arts. To say, "Okay, we've got live classes, we've got pre-recorded classes, we're mailing you stuff, we've got private training." Maybe everything else in your life is changing, and maybe even the way we deliver martial arts is changing, but it's still gonna be here. The schools that found a way to deliver have stuck around. The ones that waited, the ones that pulled back, the ones that hid in the corner, did not, or they're not gonna survive round two. What are the things that we want to talk about, Craig, if you could talk about the quality of the videos and the kind of the paradox that they don't have to be.

Craig Wharem:

Yeah, okay. Alright, so. We all have trained in martial arts, we all teach, we all 13:51, we all in some fashion are the person who looks like we're, you know, we're the extra, we're the professional. And I... the first time I did like a video, I'm like, we're doing a 5-minute video, it's gonna be all this stuff. About a minute and a half in, I was like, "Holy cow, 5 minutes is a long time for a pre-recorded video." Like I ran out of things to say and I was like, "What am I... I'm just gonna stand here?" My videos are about 60 seconds. Maybe a little bit longer. It is one quick tutorial, it is explained, it is 14:26, it's broken down a little bit, this little nuance they need, and that's it. And then it always ends with, "We hope to see you guys soon." And what I did was I started uploading it to my members'... I have a "members' only" section to my website. I started uploading them there where I already had a bunch of curriculum videos that no one ever looked at before the pandemic. They were just sitting there gathering cyber-dust. And now, all of a sudden, everyone was like, "Wow! I really wish we knew these videos were here." And I was like, "I've been telling you for years they're there, right?" And then they were like, "This is great!" But they were fun drills. It was "How to do bow staff with a pool noodle." Right? It was, it was 15:10 It was, "Oh, play this game at home." I'm 15:14 part of a Kung Fu set because my background was in Kenpo Karate and Kung Fu and I taught part of a Kung Fu staff set with a partner. My partner and I were holding broomsticks. We were holding real brooms and mops, right? It was... It wasn't trying to make light of the situation but it was trying to make them feel like everything at the dojo is still okay. Mr W. is still okay, because our students look up to us, and for me it was very very important that they saw me laughing, they saw me smiling, they saw me saying "I care about you," because I do that to them every time they're in my school. Every student I walk by, and I talk to them, I pat them on the back, I say, "Hey, how are you doing? How's your dance recital," whatever. Whatever's going on in their life, and I wanted them to still have that because if moms and dads all of a sudden became school teachers, and full-time employed, and trying to figure out how to buy groceries when there's no toilet paper, right? Like they're trying to figure out how all of this is gonna work, mom and dad, they're usual support system were so



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flustered that I had to find a way to provide them that sense of normalcy that they weren't gonna get anywhere else. So my videos, some of them were 16:33 and Jeremy saw that we had plenty of bloopers when we would get punchy towards the end of the day. There are a lot of bloopers that 16:44 because they're for staff eyes, you know. But the key to those videos was to have fun with it and to remember that at the end of the day, we're teaching discipline and it's supposed to be fun and 16:58. So those pre-recorded videos: short, sweet, fun, and exiting.

Jeremy Lesniak:

Yeah.

Craig Wharem:

And you'll get more people to watch them.

Jeremy Lesniak:

There's a concept I wanna hit on here that I think this is a good time to introduce it and it's a concept of value. And, if you think about your martial arts school, if you think of your students, why do they come? Why did they part with the time and the money to be part of the school? It is because in one hundred percent of cases, they value what you provide to them more than they value the time and the money. Everything we do as human beings is based on value exchange. I don't care what it is, if you cannot show me an example then I can't prove to you where the value is. "Oh, but Jeremy, I pay my taxes because they make me." No! Because you value being out of jail more than you value the money. It exists everywhere, in every decision we make, and if you start to look at the decision-makers, whether those be the parents or maybe it's the adult students. If you hone in on that value, what is it they need? Value can shift and through all of this COVID-19... all the COVID, all the Corona Virus stuff. What people have valued has shifted a bit? Are you going to be able to deliver the absolute best martial arts technique instruction via videos and one-on-one Zoom classes? No! If you're delivering the same caliber in this format that you were in person, we need to have a conversation about where you're falling down with your in-person training. I don't think anybody's gonna question that. It is a substitute. It is an inadequate substitute, but it's a substitute, but that doesn't mean you can't deliver value in other ways. Craig talked about funny videos and being creative with the types of instruction. That's how you build value, and what Craig and Karate International did, it not only met some of those needs and maintained value which is evidenced by people not leaving, but there were few things that you guys did that I want you to talk about where I believe, on the other side, your school would be much stronger. We talked about the delegation, the other things you guys kinda did as a teen.

Craig Wharem:

Yeah.

Jeremy Lesniak:

That may or may not apply to all of you depending on how much staff you have but I think the concepts are worth illustrating because culture matters. If you've trained at more than one martial arts school,



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you'll know that culture is not the same at every school, and it's really important. So why don't you go ahead and talk about that.

Craig Wharem:

Sure. So, first, my tagline that I say to everybody is "Karate International is a family and family doesn't end if you stop paying me. I'm always around for you if you need me." That goes to... I have my college kids who don't train with me anymore, they call me all the time and that is important. And the best reference I can give for what I want my school to feel like and I think I'm pretty successful, and Jeremy, you've been there. So, I think you can attest. The cheers, right? Norm walks in to cheers and everyone yells his name and he feels comfortable and he feels happy. I think I'm pretty accurate that the whole school feels that way. I have a competition with my leaders. So, I have five tiers of instructor. Level one, two, three, four, and five because I'm not clever enough to come up with cool names. My competition with my level one and twos is "Be the first person to greet somebody at the door and I don't care how far away you are when you do it." Right? So, they have to beat me. And if I'm in the middle of teaching technique and somebody walks in the door, I will still show [20:52](#). How did we kinda navigate finding that culture in that way here [21:00](#). That was the direction you wanted me to go, right? [21:05](#)

Jeremy Lesniak:

Yeah, you're good. You're good. Keep going.

Craig Wharem:

[21:08](#), guys. I'm sorry. So, how did we make that happen? So, first. I was very very fortunate and I'm one person from K.I. talking [21:19](#) because I was the guy kinda sitting in the big chair in charge. But there were college kids that I hadn't seen in a while that called me when this happened so what's the dojo doing? And when I said we're gonna do private lessons, they said "I'm in." And they just started showing up and teaching. They were eight of us at some point doing something. And here's how we made it work, we found a way to have lunch with the kids twice a week from 12 to 12:30. What we ended up finding was that Tuesdays and Thursdays were the most popular days because we tracked them. So I get a chart with all sorts of numbers on it, this is how many people attended this day, this is how many, and it does it weekly for me, and so I said okay, these days and all they would do from 12 to 12:30 is log on and eat a sandwich in my face and I would try to talk to them, okay? Little siblings were throwing carrots and it was a mess and it was crazy and I was like, "Holy cow, I used to be a karate teacher. What's happening to me?" But the lunch with the kids was nothing more than to keep them socially connected to the dojo. They weren't in the classroom setting, they weren't just talking to me, they were having a moment where they could spend time with people from class, they were spending time with us. We weren't wearing uniforms. We weren't, you know, "let's start working," We were just like, "Hey! How's it going? How was your day? Who's got their puppy with them? Show me your puppy." Like that's what we would do. I have seen more dogs and cats, by the way, in the past four months, than I've ever seen in my life and I grew up on a farm, okay? It was one of those things were, to me, if my staff and I just taught karate, we weren't gonna survive because the need had shifted. We're at this moment, the students did not need to learn discipline. They needed to learn perseverance. They needed to learn how to endure



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challenge. I'm gonna assume that everyone on this call has gone through a black belt test. We've learned endurance, folks. Life has just given us all the black belt tests, right? And it ain't over yet, okay? I think I love that you keep calling it round two, Jeremy, because I feel like round one's done and I'm like sitting in the bucket and my corner coach keeps telling me to get up, right? That's what it feels like.

Jeremy Lesniak:

The difference is, if we're gonna talk about this, there's no time in between rounds on this.

Craig Wharem:

Yeah.

Jeremy Lesniak:

There's no break to spit in the bucket. You hear the bell, it's the end of round one, and it's the beginning of round two. I like the lunge because it's creative, it's different, and that creativity is really crucial. And I want you to take a moment, talk about camp because I think that's a great illustration of the stability, that need for normalcy not just for the students individually, but the presentation of the school and the confidence in the school has in remaining.

Craig Wharem:

So every year, to give you background, every year Karate International, on Father's Day weekend, has done a weekend slip-away camp. For twenty years, we went to Lake Winnepesaukee, we sleep in cabins, it is my favorite weekend of the year and it's every kids... It is the biggest event. If you're a professional wrestling fan, it's our Wrestle Mania. They get a special logo every year, they get it in January, we hype it up, it is a huge deal. And every year I have, there are 70+ people there. It's so much fun and I was in denial. I was like, "Nope, camp's gonna happen. No... No... I'm not... No..." Right? Until eventually, the place called me and they were like, "Yeah, Craig. No. It's just not gonna happen this year." And I was like beside myself and I called Jeremy. I was like "No, there's no way that this camp can't happen." And we played out with a couple ideas and then we came up with the K.I. 21st Annual Weekend Camp at Home: Family Edition, and we did a virtual Zoom weekend camp. Okay? So here's what it looks like. First, I was very fortunate. Again, a lot of things. I just have a vast network of people that I've met over the years. I was able to get John Cena's dad, John Cena Sr., to come to my school, give a talk, hold the WWE Championship [25:47](#) on Zoom. Like, it was a wild time. As a kid who grew up loving WWE, I got to hold one of those [25:55](#) and that was maybe the coolest experience in my adult life. So, he came on and he talked and I had to kick it off and from now on, every year weekend camp, we're gonna have somebody kick camp off. So, that's so much fun. And then, two of my guys who have been kind spearheading this whole effort with me [26:10](#) and they got every single kid. We ended up having twenty-two participants building blanket forts in their living room for forty-five minutes, and they had a contest on who had the best blanket fort. And then, we did a virtual campfire. Like Jeremy, at my school, I've got two monitors. So, I set up one monitor. I put on YouTube, I put on virtual campfire, and I shared the screen so the kids could all see the campfire, and then we just told stories. One of my counselors every year at camp sings campfire songs. He Zoomed in with them in singing campfire songs. And then we let it go for the night.



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We said, "Alright, we'll see you in the morning." We taught at 9, 11, 1, 3, 5, and 6:30 and the first one was they will learn hip-hop dance or doing kickboxing. They were doing one or the other. And then, the next section was, a friend of mine whom I met who runs a school in Exeter, California. Again, I'm in Exeter, New Hampshire. So, the one 27:13. We had cross-country 27:15 from Exeter to Exeter, which is pretty cool. He talked for a while. And then, I taught 27:21 and two of my other guys taught 27:23. And then, at three, somebody else taught, at five, you know 27:27 all day. And then we did it two more times on Sunday. We had, 9 A.M. and 11 A.M., and we ended at noon. In between that, 27:37 the pre-recorded videos, I pre-recorded a bunch of challenges. A lip-syncing challenge, I pre-recorded a fighting scene challenge. We taught a stunt to fight class. By the way, the lip-sync battles were fantastic. I encouraged parent participation in all of this. By the way, that's huge. And the last challenge that we really did that I felt like people took ownership on was the culinary 28:03 challenge, and what that was was I watched 28:07 America right before I did the videos for camp and I challenged them to go grab a whole bunch of stuff from the kitchen, a pot, scratchless spoon, a piece of green fruit, and an orange vegetable, and record themselves doing one of their 28:24 holding all of those things without dropping 'em, and it was so much fun and the kids were like running through the kitchen like ripping the kitchen. And all of their parents were like, "What is happening?" And they laughed because the kid was so excited. So, in an event that, in my mind, as I was getting closer. I was like, "This is crazy. This is nuts. Like why would... How did we get to a virtual camp?" It went remarkably well. I didn't have any error. Everyone loved it, and it was a great event. One of the things that we do that I would encourage you to do in some fashion is we went above and beyond in a specific way. We offer 29:06 seminars at weekend camp and I wasn't gonna let that go. We still did it, but two of my staff members drove around and personally delivered those weapons to the kids' house while the kid was asleep. So the kid woke up and it was like Christmas morning. It was weekend camp morning. There was a bag that said K.I. Weekend Camp, there was a weapon, and there was an autographed picture of John Cena that his dad brought photocopies of that the kids could have and it was a surprise. We didn't really tell them, we let them pick a weapon, we told the parents, "Don't worry about it, we'll figure it out." And we delivered it as a surprise, and it was that personal touch, I think, that kinda went above and beyond for people and made it something where people like people are asking me if we're gonna do it again, you know?

Jeremy Lesniak:

I wanna unpack that for a second because that little bit right there, the delivery, it illustrates everything were talking about. And then, one more concept I'm gonna throw at you is Massive Action because on a normal year, are you going to drive around everyone's home and deliver things? No.

Craig Wharem:

Absolutely not.

Jeremy Lesniak:

But this is a time to go above and beyond. Two, it's creative. The fact that you found a way to give kids the feeling of Christmas morning, related to the martial arts school, related to this camp. That's huge. And then, here's the new concept. I believe this firmly, if anybody sits down and talks to me about



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business, we'll probably get to some point where I'll tell you the negative can be turned into the positive if you're willing to look at it creatively enough. So, what was the negative? The negative was they couldn't come out. What's the positive there? We can go to them. It wasn't just, "Okay, hey. Here you go. Here's your weapon. Sorry we don't get to see you in person, you know. I'll see you on Zoom." No! It was, "Let's make this even better." It's a surprise, they're waking up to it, it's a picture of John Cena, right? It's all this stuff put together. So, the kid's gonna look at that, in this case, the kid's gonna look at that and not feel like they're missing out. They're gonna feel like it's actually better because in that moment, that part of it is.

Craig Wharem:

The biggest thing that I wanted was how am I gonna make this different, right? How am I gonna make it exciting? Because no one's excited to be on a computer for an entire weekend, right? No one's excited to sit down and Zoom all weekend long. And, it's important to know too. I went through a bunch of drafts, right? My first draft of what the camp looked like was twenty-four classes. It was structured like it would be for regular camp. In twenty-four classes, you can bake this and this, you can do this and this... I looked at it and I was like, "I'm out of my mind." Like I can't possibly deliver that. What I could do was simplify it and over-deliver, which is what I chose to do and it paid off. It paid off in a way where, like I said, there were kids were kinda flaky and on the fence. They're done and they wanna have summer, and now, those kids signed up for more Zooms than anyone else. They want to participate. It kinda re-sparked them. And, ultimately, the two driving forces that I have is [32:28](#) about my school do I say, "Wouldn't it be cool if I instantly try to implement whatever's following that? Wouldn't it be cool if I did private [32:38](#). Yeah, okay. So why don't I just do it? Why am I limiting myself saying I can't? Wouldn't it be cool if we did a virtual weekend camp? Well, let's just do it. Let's just figure it out." We're at that point where we prepare now. We're preparing now for a second wave. We always prepare for the worst, right? We're always prepare to be punched in the face and hope for the best that we don't. So, I'm preparing for it. I'm preparing the rest of my 2020 events virtually. I will find a way because there's no... It's not like there's a light at the end of the tunnel. We're not gonna be told in September, "Okay, all is free and clear. Let's go!" Right? There's no way. So we have to be ready for whatever that is. As for thinking outside the box, have you guys a lot of you have guest instructors? I love guest instructors. I love having them at my school. I love having energy. I love it, like, shout out to free training day with Jeremy. I love that event because so many different teachers have different energies, and knowledge, and skills. If you aren't playing with that for whatever reason, I suggest you do because before I called Jeremy if he can come teach at my school [33:56](#). What do you want me to do? Do you want me to just drive down? Jeremy showed up and taught at the virtual camp from his living room, right? We're no longer limited by distance.

Jeremy Lesniak:

Right.

Craig Wharem:

We...



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Jeremy Lesniak:

And that's one of the things that is going to persist is that people's comfort with this technology will remain.

Craig Wharem:

Yeah.

Jeremy Lesniak:

The idea of having someone on the other side of the country teach a class. You could Zoom up to a big T.V. That would've been weird before, would've been goofy, would've seemed like a [34:33](#). Not anymore. So there's a negative being flipped into a positive.

Craig Wharem:

Yeah. And if nothing else, to be completely honest with you, I taught two classes the entire virtual camp weekend. I had guests for almost everything else because I felt like, frankly, they were tired of seeing my face on the Zoom, right? To make it special, it needed to be something other than this, right? And in that time, the kids were excited. They were excited to see... They all know Sensei Jeremy, they love Sensei Jeremy anyway, but they were excited to see them again. It's one of those things that reinvigorates us as teachers to... I'll be honest with you, I've been in my own school for four months, and man, did I feel like I was alone on an island. But the martial arts community as a whole can band together and help get each other through this because we're only as strong as the other who do this, right? The tide rises all ships, and that's the thing is, in a moment where we're trying to teach our students to reach out and ask for help, band together, we can all do that too. And if we do that, we will see our way through it [35:54](#).

Jeremy Lesniak:

Let's talk about the storm. Let's start talking about what's coming. Is that...?

Craig Wharem:

I feel like I'm giving you wonderful segues. [36:04](#)

Jeremy Lesniak:

You are. You are. This is why we make a good team, man.

Craig Wharem:

[36:08](#)

Jeremy Lesniak:

Earlier it was Batman and Robin, but nobody ever wants to be Robin.

Craig Wharem:

And I have Jason Momoa hair, I just left his abs at the office.



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Jeremy Lesniak:

Alright, let's talk about exactly what's coming. We know where we're at, we know where we've been. It could be worse, it could be better, we're seeing a lot of variety depending on where you are in the world as to what restrictions are being placed. And of course, we have to work within what those restrictions are, but there's one hard and fast... I'm gonna call it rule that we all have to be aware of. Whatever you did in round one will not work in round two. People are exhausted. It doesn't take long to social media to see that everyone is scared, and they're tired, and they're stressed. And so if we go back to this principle that your martial arts school needs to be a beacon of stability and presents normalcy into their lives, if you are not helping to compensate for that stress, that negativity that the world is cramming down their throat right now, you are missing an opportunity. I'm not gonna say definitively your school won't survive. I don't know that. But I can tell you that the opportunity here is to increase the value proposition with your students and their families by delivering to them more of what they need right now. I'm gonna call it Zoom fatigue. How many of us took a look at what they're doing today and say, "Oh, great! Another Zoom class?" I did, and I'm hosting it.

Craig Wharem:

Jeremy, it makes you feel better, this is my twelfth of the day.

Jeremy Lesniak:

We're all sick of Zoom classes. We're sick of it, but it works, it's cheap, and we're gonna have to keep doing it but it doesn't mean this is it. You need to give other stuff. This is where the creativity comes in. If you're gonna run the same playbook you did before, you're making it into the playoffs. That's what this is. We've seen some [38:32](#). You've gotta go back, you've gotta take a look at what works, what didn't work. Some of you know about my rule about making 15% incremental improvement. This is a time for at least that. You've got to take a hard and fast look, okay. If I put in 20 hours into running this school before, I'm going to need to put in more. I'm looking at 25 or 30 now. If in that 20 hours, I did A, B, and C, and my students loved A, they liked B, and meh... they kinda tolerated C, C is out. Dump it. It doesn't mean that you put all that time back into A, it means that you come up with D, E, F, G, and however many other fingers you have and you throw stuff at the wall and you see what sticks. Will A lunge? Group? Work? What about a book club? What about... Craig, you and I brainstormed about 30 other things the other day.

Craig Wharem:

Oh, we did. And we... [39:35](#). We talked about this the other day, he and I, and we're starting our book club in about two weeks. I have two parents willing to help. One's a librarian, one's a former high school English teacher. So, they said they would love to help. The thing is, you would have to have, and I was already toying with the idea of having, I'd call them "off-hour clubs." I love schools. I love them. I think that there are certain things that they do very very well... I mean, like, elementary, middle, and high schools, [40:10](#). I love martial arts schools too, obviously, but I looked at what they did and I said, "What can I do to make my school seem like school?" And so, I looked at clubs. I've got two groups of teenagers



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that play Dungeons and Dragons once a week. I've got the lunch groups. I'm starting the book club. I've got a teen who wants to literally sit and play guitar, I think, but she'll have other kids play with her. I have started doing and Jeremy just 40:40 the other day on our phone call and I like it. I have started deputizing people to help me because I'm one dude and I can only do so much and if you ever see me play guitar, you'll know that I can't, right? So, I start to find... I deputize people. I say, "Hey, you know what? You're a librarian. Can you give a reading list and would you help me do a book club?" "Hey, Jeremy. You know way more about stuff than I do. Would you please talk to me on the phone while I breathe into a brown paper bag, right?" I find ways to deputize people to help me because we're in a world now that martial arts schools that never had to survive in. In our memory, we've never had to fight through a pandemic, so there's no road map. So, as far as round two goes and preparing for it, my advice would be a couple of things. Find one voice, maybe two, that you trust wholeheartedly and silence the rest of the business pages you're on telling you all the things that won't work for your school because if I approached any of you and you kinda knew me 41:56 "I'm doing all private lessons, and that's it." You probably would've said, "I don't think that's gonna work." Because I didn't think it was gonna work, and it worked. I had to silence voices because there were so many telling me what I should do that I couldn't make a decision. So, I picked Jeremy and I picked the owner of Karate International because I don't own it. The owner is John English. I picked John and they were my two sounding boards, and that was it. And after that, I just made decisions. I would ask my team help once in a while and their opinions, but for the most part what I say was what we're gonna do. And the other thing is, just try to have fun. And it's the same thing when I teach, when I go and I teach the structure development to people and I try to help them become better teachers. Martial arts is supposed to be fun. Yes, we're stressed that our schools may close. I'm doing okay, but I'm also aware that I could wake up tomorrow and have a bunch of people say, "You know what? We're done. We have Zoom fatigue." Right? It's real and I know it's coming and if I don't do something about it. So, I'm stressed about making sure the school's gonna stay open, and can I keep my team? Can I keep my livelihood? I wanna make sure that I'm meeting the expectations obviously, of the owner. I wanna make sure I'm meeting that the expectations of the students. And, eventually, it just doesn't become fun and it's easy to be fatigued, and then if you're in Zoom all day, you're like, "Holy cow, this is not what I signed up for."

Jeremy Lesniak:

Right.

Craig Wharem:

And it can become very easy to lose that passion that we all clearly have because we're on a call at 9:15 at night, trying to figure out how to get through this.

Jeremy Lesniak:

Yeah.

Craig Wharem:

Right?



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Jeremy Lesniak:

One of the things, moving forward, I'm gonna encourage everyone to do, I mean, on top of everything else that Craig just talked about is broaden the definition of what a martial arts instructor is. If a martial arts instructor is someone who kicks, or he teaches kicks, and punches, and forms, and fighting. There are always so many ways you can combine those ingredients without being there in person. But if like me, you define a martial arts instructor is someone who is fostering the personal growth of the students that attend their classes that becomes a much broader set of ingredients to work with. What is personal development? Personal growth? Think about all the things that are in there. How do you work with that? Would it make sense for there to be a mom's group? Or a men's group under the umbrella of your school. Maybe you have a licensed therapist who's willing to donate their time, or maybe you just have somebody who's been in a number of groups like that before and wants to run them. The future of martial arts instruction is broadening that definition. If any of you caught the episode that we released on martialartsradio a couple weeks ago about the coming opportunity in teaching home-school students. A lot of the information there dovetails into what we're talking about today because everybody's kind of a home-school student right now, right? Our roles as instructors are responding to the needs of the student, but also the people around them, the families, the parents. Craig talked about Virtual Camp at Home Family Edition. We picked those words. We talked about the words and the importance of "Family Edition" because it set the tone that those offerings weren't just going to be for the student. It was a week for that entire family. How do we get the others involved? Yeah, maybe because we're hoping that they'll enroll down the line but also because... Let's put ourselves in the place of the parent who is trying to get their work done, trying to get their house work done, trying to deal with kids. A lot of families don't have all the kids enrolled in martial arts, but maybe we can get the parent thirty minutes a time because the kid who's not normally training is now in class doing something that's easily approachable, or has been sent off to a scavenger hunt, or something. If you think about... We were talking... You hit this, I wanna hit this point again. If you think about what schools, what public schools, private schools, non-martial arts schools typically provide. Think about the things that aren't being provided right now. The social component is massive. I'm seeing some stuff coming out talking about concerns about children's socialization and if you have kids, you're probably seeing some changes. What else is there? There's meals stuff. Whether it's... You're finding a way to work with the community to get meals provided, or just eating meals together. Think about happens in a typically day of school. They're not doing the same thing over again. They're not doing martial arts, martial arts, martial arts, martial arts. Nor are they doing math, math, math, math, math. There's variety in there. So, finding variety is key. We're good at giving them movement. We're good at giving them structure. It's time to give them some of those other things.

Craig Wharem:

And, two quick points to that. One of the things, the first thing I did to try to project confidence to everybody was I sat down and I did a video just like this so it's just me sitting on a stool and I said, "Guys, I'm sorry we're all going through this right now. We'll get through this together. I have said, for years, Karate International's a family. I've talked the talked, now it's time to walk the walk. I am here for you in



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anything you need. I love you guys, and I am here for you always." And then, I said, "I'm excited to see you at the grand reopening when we're allowed to have you all back." And ever since then, all we've done is talk about the grand reopening. We're so excited, we're gonna have a huge raffle. Kids can earn raffle tickets by posting videos to Facebook. If no one does that, no one gets those tickets. Participate in two private lessons a week. Participate in a weekly theme. We had tropical week, we had crazy outfit week, we had crazy hair week, we had fun fact week, we had animal week. I ran out of weeks at one point. And I was like, "What's this week's theme?" And somebody said, "Wildcard." And I went, "Deal!" Because that meant that it was gonna be whatever the instructor wanted it to be. We started to make weekly things, and it was fun. The kids had fun. We even had a week dress up as your hero, right? Some kids dressed up as mom or dad. Some kids dressed up as a doctor or a nurse right now because of everything going on. One kid dressed up as me and I think it's just because he was trying to get a stripe. But it's something where if we can find ways to make it fun because we participated. On pajama week, you better believe I was teaching in pajamas with my belt on, right? I was for sure participating. Crazy hair? This thing goes down to my back. So, it was like all over the place. It was wild, right. But when the kids see you having fun too, it makes them smile. And if you make them smile, they're gonna wanna come back. And making a kid smile right now is the most valuable thing we could do as leaders of the community. The other thing I did, something you could do, I have a great relationship with the P.E. teachers in my school district. The minute school closed, I called them or texted them because some of them I'm friends with and I said, "Hey, how can I help you?" You're teaching, they're teaching just like we are. P.E. teachers have to teach on Zoom or different elementary school apps. They're pre-recording videos too. I jumped ahead and just pre-recorded some videos. "Hey, this is Mr. Wharem from Karate International. I wanted to let you guys to know that right now, things are crazy. I'm thinking of you. If I can help at all, let me know. I'm thinking of all the students at school. Here's a couple of drills you could try at home if you too want to get your white belts someday." You know what? The parents sent them out... Or the teachers sent them to the parents and the kids, and they said that all the kids were so excited to see something different, and they were excited to see me because they look forward to seeing me every year. But some schools didn't get to see me. But it's about being that leader in the community that we always want to be, but sometimes we go, "I'm just a martial arts teacher... Like...Oh, yeah. I have this... I'm just a karate teacher, I'm just a kickboxing teacher, I'm just a Kung Fu teacher." Well, you're more than that, right? You're a leader. How many of us do this because we looked up to our teachers? You're that person to them. So, they're watching going, "How is Mr. W gonna do this?" And I wake up every day thinking, "How is Mr. W gonna do this?" You know? But we find a way and if you can do that, I think that helps get through round two and moving forward.

Jeremy Lesniak:

Yeah. Let's move on to questions and so... I've got a question. Eric popped a question in the chat, and I'm gonna read that and I'm gonna respond to that. Craig and I'll respond to that. But if anybody else has questions, the best place to put 'em is in the chat because then I can read them instead of us playing the audio game and who's gonna unmute and everything. So Eric wrote in, "COVID-19 has definitely impacted the memberships of lots of schools. I believe it has also shown some students may not have



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been ready or able to deal with the challenges. What advice would you give to students and instructors that may want to leave their school and train elsewhere?" This is a tough time for that, right?

Craig Wharem:

Yeah.

Jeremy Lesniak:

I don't know, I mean. We've been... Everything we've talked about this evening, and everything I've seen discussed online has been around student retention. None of it has been around recruiting. I cannot imagine trying to bring in new students right now, but the longer this goes on, the more important that's gonna be because the're will 51:59 and we'll have to figure out a strategy for bringing in new students. I'm gonna be honest. That part of this question is beyond the scope of what we're talking about today because the strategies that you're going to use to bring in new students at this time are very very different than the strategies you're gonna use to keep students. Usually, the gap between them is not this big. When I work with my clients, whether they're martial arts schools or not, generally we're focused on retaining students and that tends to spider out and it'll bring in new students or new clients. Some of that will continue to happen but we're talking about a daunting thing, joining a martial arts school at a time that's already daunting in a format that is weird. Right? It's tough. So we're not going there. But I wanna talk about if instructors want to leave. If this is at all financially related. If you... If you are... Let's say it's a situation like Sensei Craig. You don't own the school, but you train in the school. It is your principal source of income. This is not the time to leave. This is not the time to jump ship, you're not gonna to replace that income. Don't try. If the school closes, you do what you gotta do and...

Craig Wharem:

Yeah.

Jeremy Lesniak:

Maybe you're driving for Uber, or maybe you're starting up your own private Zoom martial arts school. I don't know. I don't know what that looks like, but I think... Bottomline, if we go back to some of these principles we've laid out today, we're looking for stability, we're looking for normalcy. This is not the time to try to change. Do you have anything to disagree with, or add on there?

Craig Wharem:

No. I think that that was right. I mean, I'm the type of person who when I get a question, I like to ask more just so I can understand better but I'm gonna give a general answer and then if I hit the nail on the head, feel free to reach out to me one-on-one and I'll try to answer better. So, if you're in a situation where you're like me, right? I was very very fortunate. John English, the owner of the school said, "You know what, Craig? You've been here and you've been working for me for 15 years. Just do it. I trust you." And he handed me the reigns of the school and he has not set foot in since because I told him to just kinda get out of my way, right? There couldn't be too many cooks in the kitchen. By the way, I have the coolest job in the world because I can tell my boss to get out of my way, which is pretty cool. But,



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what I would say is that right now, we're living in unprecedented times and no one has the road map for success on this. As much as I'm sitting here, and I'm giving you as much input, tomorrow I may make a decision that changes all these things. I'm not gonna sit here and say comfortably that my way is the best way. I would say take it one step at a time, and try to empathize with everyone, right? We're all going through this for the first time together. That goes for [55:08](#) being an instructor, working for somebody who's trying to figure it out. That goes for being a student. One of my teachers, I haven't... I've trained with once. Okay. Sorry, Eric. I just saw your follow up. I haven't seen my Kung Fu teacher for months. Really, I saw him once and I just kinda said, "You know what? It is what it is right now. It is this" I think, Eric, if there's other ways to incentivize employees too. Obviously, we wanna pay them. If they're paid employees, we gotta find a way to pay them. If we have to lay 'em off, we have to lay 'em off. And we try to find a way to coordinate that in some way and reconcile, and say, "Listen, right now, this is what we're at. I'm gonna have to furlough you, but we can..." And I think that's a longer conversation that either Jeremy, or I, or the three of us can have. But there are certainly ways that we can find to keep an employee or an instructor invested, and one of the biggest ways is just to sit them down and say, "Look, this is new to all of us. We're working it out. We're fighting through this. I'm doing the best I can, I need you to communicate with me." And just listen with an open heart, listen to hear what they say, and then go from there. That's pretty much of what I've done. Most of my team right now are volunteers that came back from college and had nothing as they say, "Nothing better to do than to help teach kids karate." And I'm always like, "Wow, thanks. I'm such a priority guys." They jump in and they help and I know that any moment could say, "I'm done." And we just have to find a way. But, I think, for sure, Eric, there's a larger conversation we can have that could help with that. Right, Jeremy? Is that...

Jeremy Lesniak:

Yeah. I think that's a good place to end that. I mean... Eric's follow up, you [57:00](#) listening later wouldn't now. And just the last bit, I think the owner was not prepared. None of us were prepared. But as martial artists, we have to adapt. We have to find ways through. I mean, that's the common thread in just about black belt test I've ever seen is that it's finding a way through. Finding a way to prove that your limits are not as clearly defined as you think they are, and that's what we're gonna have to do moving forward. This round two could turn into round twelve. We don't know what this looks like, and if you want to continue to teach martial arts, if you want your contribution to the world to include that. It's going to require throwing stuff against a wall, rapid iteration, finding out what works, what doesn't work, doing more of what works, finding the balance, and being willing to stumble and be humble about it, let the students know, "Hey, we're figuring this stuff out. The playbook's gone!" If you're a football fan, recalling audibles on every single play from hear on.

Craig Wharem:

That was the first major point I made. When the schools closed on March 13th, I shut the school down for a week and I told parents and I was very honest to say, "Guys, there's no playbook for this. No one's ever had to deal with this before. I need a week to figure out what I'm gonna do and to breathe," And I was very honest in that way. I said, "I need to set things up for you so it's a success" And I still [58:38](#). They're like, "Hey, when are we gonna do this?" I haven't done a belt test since March, you know? I had



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to think about it. i haven't done a belt test since I couldn't have people in person. And I had some kids graduating, going off to college soon who haven't earned their black belts yet. They were supposed to test this summer. And I said, "Guys, I can't. You gotta be six feet apart. You can't fight. What are we gonna do?" And they all said, "No, we wanna just... We want to earn it when we can earn it." And they want... You know... That's the testament to them, but it's also just being honest, not going, getting frustrated. I don't know what to do, I don't know what to expect. Hey guys, we're just working it the best we can. You know?

Jeremy Lesniak:

Yeah.

Craig Wharem:

At the end of the day, we're martial artists, and we'll get through it.

Jeremy Lesniak:

Exactly. Alright, I'm not seeing any other questions come in. So, let's do this. If anybody has follow up, maybe you're watching this later or listening to this later, if there's stuff that you wanna ask, the easiest thing to do is to email me because that's gonna go out over all to whistlekick channels so you can email me. If it's a question that is most appropriate for Sensei Craig to answer, I will forward them over to you.

Craig Wharem:

59:49

Jeremy Lesniak:

And... We'll get through all this stuff together. I can't commit that Craig and I will answer every single question in tons of depth and draw lesson plans for you, and critique all your videos, but we can answer your questions. We can offer some advice, we can offer some support through this because that's what we're all doing, right/ We're leaning on each other.