

MAI Editor Bob Sykes talks to martial arts instructor Gary Stringer about his career and influences on his martial art journey.



MASTER GARY STRINGER

OF MODERN COMBATIVE SELF DEFENCE ACADEMY

GARY STRINGER IS AN EXECUTIVE BOARD MEMBER OF THE KODO BUTOKU REMNEI (OLD WAYS MARTIAL VIRTUES FEDERATION), HE IS AN INTERNATIONAL INSTRUCTOR FOR THE WORLD STREET COMBAT SYSTEMS ORGANISATION AND A MEMBER OF THE WORLD ASSOCIATION OF MARTIAL ARTS MASTERS. HE IS A MEMBER OF THE WORLD SOKESHIP COUNCIL - SEISHINRYOKU KAI.

WHILST SERVING AS A POLICE OFFICER HE PROVIDED TRAINING TO THE TACTICAL FIREARMS UNIT OF DERBYSHIRE CONSTABULARY. GARY IS AN INTERNATIONALLY RECOGNISED INSTRUCTOR WHO TEACHES ALL OVER EUROPE AND THE REST OF THE WORLD FOR VARIOUS MARTIAL ARTS ORGANISATIONS.

MAI RECENTLY CAUGHT UP WITH THIS OLD SCHOOL LEGEND IN ORDER TO DISCOVER MORE ABOUT HIS REMARKABLE JOURNEY.

Bob Sykes: I know you have been a martial arts practitioner for many years. Could you begin by telling me a little of when, where and why you originally got involved in the martial arts?

Gary Stringer: I got started in martial arts by accident really. I was friends with a Chinese boy at school and we started to mess about as kids do. Eventually I ended up being taught Chin Na by his dad, although at the time I had no idea that was what I was learning. I would be around 8 or 9 years old at the time. I studied with him until I was around 18 when the family moved away.

At 18 years of age back in the 1970s, how did the scene look to you?

That's a long time ago! At that time it was of course the great Kung Fu revolution with Bruce Lee starting to be the huge influence he had since become. It was an exciting

time as well as the scene was expanding and so much was happening, particularly on the competition scene. Also a lot of clubs were opening up to Karate, Judo and Jiu Jitsu mainly. I remember just about every church hall and community centre was home to a martial arts club of some description, high grades or Black Belts were a rarity though.

Then as now there was the political arguments, I remember particularly between the MAC and AMA. But all I wanted to do was learn as much as I could so never really

got involved and still don't if I can avoid it.

Then there was the practice of people going to a club and trying to close it down if they (another instructor) thought you shouldn't be teaching in their area. Or even sometimes from another style or system.

Back then, how much of an influence do you feel the Kung Fu boom had on how people both perceived and practiced the martial arts?

I think it had a huge impact. You quite often read of people only starting martial arts because of the films. Martial arts cinema has evolved beyond all recognition since then but it still has an influence.

People's perceptions were very much coloured by what they saw on the big screen. I can remember when the film *Hapkido* was on, everyone wanted to practice that, which was difficult as at that time as it was a rare art over here but I think Tae Kwon Do benefited. Obviously there were the other influences whereby people thought they could rip out organs with their bare hands!

But overall I believe the Kung Fu boom is responsible for the rich variety of arts practised in the UK today.





1 Fighters ready



2 Parrying the attackers hands



3 Tying and trapping



6 Taking the head



7 Where the head goes, the body follows!

Have you trained in Jeet Kune Do?

I have been extremely lucky and had the opportunity to train with Guru Inosanto on a few occasions but my main instructor was the late great Larry Hartsell Sifu who was a close personal friend. I was certified under him. I have also had the privilege of training with Rick Young and Rick Faye, the latter was at my academy in October in fact. These days I don't practice so much as I concentrate on my system, but my younger brother, along with myself and Mark Cooper (my No.2) are all certified via the Jun Fan Jeet Kune Do Grappling Association as run by Debra Hartsell.

I don't have the skill, I don't think to promote myself as a JKD instructor alongside the likes of Rick Young, Rick Faye or Terry Barnet to name but three.

I also had the honour of training with Prof Wally Jay of Small Circle Ju Jitsu fame.

What other styles have you trained in and which out of the many do you feel have suited you most?

My earliest influence apart from what I have already mentioned was a man who really set my feet on the path and taught me to be open minded. Paul Baxter, no one famous but a massive influence on me personally. He took me to my first Karate class, I trained in Karate (Shotokan) for a couple

years and also Lau Gar for same amount of time but whilst both are excellent, neither really suited me. I then met and trained with Prof Brian Dossett who really opened my eyes and introduced me to Aiki Jitsu, also Tommy Baldwin who I studied under for many years, often travelling to Millwall to train with him in Ju Jitsu. I obtained my 4th Dan under Baldwin Soke. I also trained with Charles Mack Sensei from whom I learnt Tai Kyoku Ken, a very effective grappling system. Mack Sensei was one of the first if not the



4 Fast Kenpo hand strikes



5 Wedging with a elbow strike



8 Finish

first accidental to hold multiple Dan grades in Karate, Aikido and Judo, all awarded in Japan. I travelled to London often for the day to train with him or Tommy. John Mellon, a life long friend who is now technical director of Small Circle Ju Jitsu, was another knowledgeable martial artist who aided my development. I found that Aiki Jitsu and the Ju Jitsu/Bu Jitsu taught by Tommy Baldwin Soke suited me best of all due to its practicality. I also tried boxing and a little Kick boxing.

I also spent some time with Sifu Nino Bernardo whose Wing Chun is excellent. Myself and John Mellon actually taught a

seminar for him at The Basement when he was based in London.

At what point did you arrive at what you do know?

I can remember how I first got involved in teaching. I was working at a foundry and doing door work at a weekend. A few of the guys at the foundry saw me practicing one lunch time and asked me to teach them. I would be around 25 at the time. I started teaching a small group in the back room of a local pub, which let's say was a little 'rough' on occasion.

Over the next few years I developed the system we teach now. There were other influences, my experience on the doors where the reality of violence is soon brought home to you. It happens quickly and usually from nowhere. I read everything I could get my hands on and in particular *Tao of Jeet Kune Do* of course but also anything written by Bruce Tegner, his way of looking at the martial arts set me thinking.

We went through many incarnations over the next few years as we developed our syllabus.

By the time I was 30 I had got to a place where I was reasonably happy with what I had and by this time had several clubs around Derby. I had also taught up and down the UK on courses. I continued to learn off

➤ Gary receiving mainstream recognition at the MAI Black Belt Awards



anyone I could and I still do.

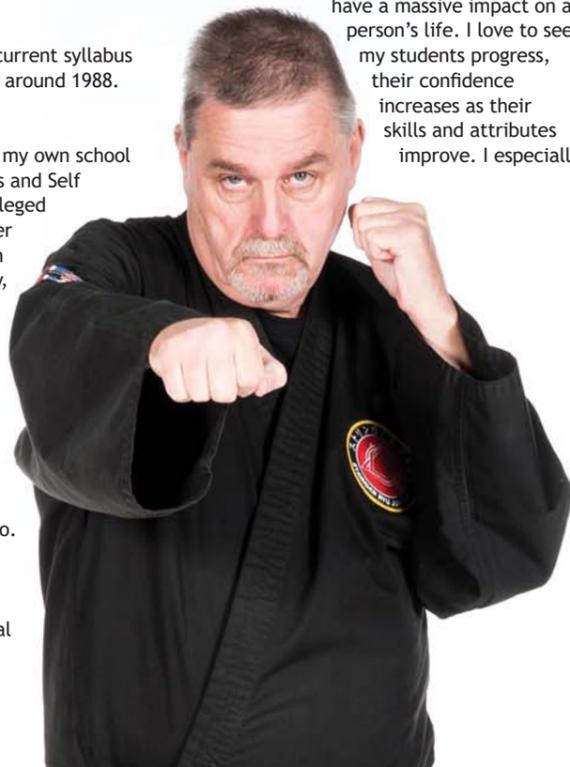
We have been teaching our current syllabus in one form or another since around 1988.

Where do you teach?

I am very very lucky to have my own school in Derby, Modern Combatives and Self Defence Academy. I am privileged to be invited to teach all over the world and have taught in the US, Germany, Sicily, Italy, Ireland and other places. I am scheduled to teach in Washington DC next year at a big event there and at the Kodosai in England in October. In between I will travel up and down the country teaching seminars. As I say, I am very lucky and people seem to like what I do.

What is it that you enjoy most about what you do?

The fact that you as a martial arts teacher/instructor can



have a massive impact on a person's life. I love to see my students progress, their confidence increases as their skills and attributes improve. I especially

like to see kids progress and change, they are like sponges and just soak up knowledge. I have a fantastic team of instructors who assist at the academy, they all share my vision and passion for the martial arts. If I can give you a couple of examples of why I love what I do?

Many years ago whilst serving in the Police I was lucky enough to be given the chance to run an initiative in the Derby area aimed at teaching women and girls self defence and personal safety. It was called Hands Off! It ran for a couple years during which time we reached around 10,000 women and girls. Anyway, one of the students on one of the courses was attacked some years later. She happened to be in the next office to me where I was working as a Domestic Violence Detective, she was giving a statement when she heard my voice and asked the officer if it was me.

After she had finished her statement the lady came to see me and said, "I need to thank you for what you taught me. I had thought I had forgotten everything but when it

happened tonight - I could hear your voice in my head! I just did what you taught me and got away. You saved me."

The second example is one of my instructor team who is also a serving police officer who was attacked by three assailants whilst off duty. Despite sustaining a broken jaw he still managed to fight his attackers off and identify them later leading to their arrest and incarceration.

He said I saved his life! I don't know about either case but when you get feedback like that it's incredible and reinforces why you do what you do.

If I played some small part in their survival then I have made a difference and you can't ask for anymore than that, can you?

Not in a million years! What would you say is the most important lesson that you have learned via your many years spent training in the martial arts?

That's a hard one. Martial arts teaches you so many lessons. I think the most important lesson I have learned is that every art/system has value. Old or new, modern or traditional, there is something in every art or system of use, you just to have to keep an open mind to discover what that is for you, if that makes sense?

Also remember that your journey never ends, there is always something more to learn, someone to learn from whether it's another teacher or one of your own students.

Finally, treat everyone with respect and you will be respected in return.

➤ Gary pictured with MAI's Bob Sykes and Kevin Stringer



➤ Gary and Kevin Stringer in action



Finally, Gary! Where do you find your inspiration to keep training?

It's not easy! Seriously, I can't imagine my life without martial arts. As you know, Bob, many years ago I was very ill, diagnosed with chronic rheumatoid disease and told basically my martial arts days were over. I wasn't having any of that!

Tenacity is a trait all long term martial artists possess, that and in my case being either too stubborn or too stupid to stop! But here I am, still going and hopefully able to share what I have learned a few years yet. Now and again things happen such as receiving an MAI award for example which boost you and you realise someone

has taken notice. Thank you. But my every day inspiration are my students, I owe everything to them as every instructor does, for without them I wouldn't have travelled to the places I have or met the people I have and formed the friendships I have all over the globe. I just love

to train and teach and I am so lucky to be involved in an industry that's packed with so many talented individuals who are all willing to share what they know.