



BRUCE LEE
TRAINING RESEARCH

HOW BOXING
INFLUENCED HIS
JEET KUNE DO
TECHNIQUES

Bruce Lee was never a professional boxer — although he did fight throughout high school and was an avid student of boxing during his adult life. Because his *jeet kune do* was greatly influenced by the fighting styles he studied, his interest in boxing leads to a question: Just how good was Lee as a boxer?

His skill and prowess as a martial artist are well-known. The manner in which he took over the direction of his second film and revolutionized the way the fights were presented in the Mandarin pictures is a matter of record. But there's a vocal minority who say Lee wasn't a particularly skilled fighter — that he could choreograph a fight for the screen but that when it came to applying techniques in real fighting situations, he was a wash. To refute these claims, it seems that Lee's skill as a boxer becomes a crucial point.

It's no secret that Lee scrutinized old films of famous boxers, integrating the moves into his own method of fighting. One of his favorite fighters was Muhammad Ali, who in Lee's opinion developed the most intricate patterns of movement. Knowing what Lee thought of Ali gives us a glimpse of how he might have interjected some of Ali's prowess into his fighting, but how does Ali's opinion of Lee fit the man who copied some of the boxer's style? In a brief interview, the question was put to Ali, and this is what he had to say:

"I understand he watched some of my fight films. You know, I don't think he'd use too much of that boxing stuff in real life. I saw him in a karate movie, but I know that stuff is just acting. It's colorful and good showmanship, and if I were a karate man, I'd want to be just like those guys in the movies, tackling 25 guys and making them all scatter. All that action makes you want to fight, but he wouldn't do that in real life. Watching real karate fights is not like what you see in the movies, where a guy jumps in and does some superhuman stunts. That's the movies, not real life."

The mystique of Lee has permeated the martial arts like nothing before or since. Karate champion Joe Lewis, who knew Lee for many years, has a mellow opinion of him.

"In the beginning," Lewis says, "Bruce and I became friends, and we had some differences. Later, we put those differences aside and resumed our friendship. All anyone can say about him is that he was a great theorist and his theories work very well. But then, of course, is the

fact that Bruce never fought in competition, so you can't really tell how he would have done.

"I think he would have made a relatively good fighter because of his speed. He could have been a good featherweight or lightweight, rated one or two in the ranks. But then he would've been obscure because most of the public's interest is focused on the heavier weights."

The best one can do, now that Lee is no longer here to demonstrate his skill, is to build a case through those who knew and worked with him. Two of his associates who are qualified to shed some light on his fighting ability are Dan Inosanto and Richard Bustillo.

Inosanto and Bustillo met Lee in 1966 while he was doing *The Green Hornet* TV series. Once they became friends, Lee introduced them to jeet kune do. They grew under his guidance and soon became instructors. Both men have the highest respect for Lee's fighting ability, but we'll let them speak for themselves.

INOSANTO: We used to go to his house on Wednesdays. We started off there, and we've been at it ever since. About that time, Bruce was beginning to develop his collection of boxing films. He had one of the biggest collections in the country.

BUSTILLO: The way Bruce used to analyze those films — we could only take it for a couple of hours, but Bruce could sit there for eight or 10 hours and still show the same interest and enthusiasm he showed in the first five minutes. He'd go over and over those fight films, and he could imitate any of the fighters he was watching. The Ali shuffle, the Sharkey roll, Sugar Ray's bob and weave, the Brown Bomber's six-inch punch, Kid Gavilan's bolo punch and any others that caught his trained eye.

INOSANTO: Muhammad Ali was probably his favorite fighter, but Bruce took something from everybody. He liked Ali's footwork and admired his outside fighting. He liked Marciano's short punches. He used to study all the knockout punches of Joe Louis.

BUSTILLO: Boxing, Western fencing and wrestling — Bruce Lee studied them all. In each art was a kernel of the truth he was trying to demonstrate. The totality is Bruce's art.

INOSANTO: He had to know the answers. When anyone really searches for the truth as he did, he begins to see all facets. He was able to see all, to see the totality.

BUSTILLO: The deeper he studied, the more involved he got, the more scientific he became. Everything he found out, he always asked himself this question: How or why? If he saw a left lead in a fight film, he'd turn his back to the screen and watch through a mirror. That would show him how the right lead should look — how and when it should be thrown.

INOSANTO: He always asked, "Why is it done this way?" The why led him to more questions and in turn to more answers. Ninety percent of the people in the martial arts don't ask why. If they happen to study with a guy in their neighborhood, they take what he presents as the truth. It's a part of the truth, but it's not the whole truth.

We never questioned our instructor. If he told us to stand on our heads, we'd do it — that's the classical approach. But Bruce Lee was always questioning. It's not that he embraced Western boxing completely. He felt there were many flaws in boxing, too. But he also felt that out of all the arts in the hand range, boxing had more truth than, let's say, karate. Not that karate was all flaws — he saw the truth in karate, too. But he would take the best of everything. He was developing the complete martial art.

Actually, I didn't think too highly of boxing before I met Bruce. I'd boxed some at the Y, but I didn't appreciate the art. Bruce had been the interschool boxing champion while he was in high school in Hong Kong. Out of 15 schools, he was No. 1. He knew how effective boxing could be.

BUSTILLO: There's a good reason why most people don't have any regard for boxing today — because today's fighters are all



Richard Bustillo (left) / Photo by Rick Husted

courage and guts. There's no skill and class. There's no scientific moves, clever punches, plan of attack or strategy. Today, the guy who opens the fastest and hits the hardest is the guy who wins. Probably, Ali is one of the very few real scientific boxers left.

INOSANTO: Most people aren't aware of it, but Bruce was very into boxing. Scientific boxing. He taught boxing at his school. Even with this interest in boxing, however, he never went to the fights. But he did watch the fights on TV whenever he could.

His theory of training was through self-discovery. He'd spar with anybody he could. All his technique was derived through self-discovery. He used to call it "discovering the source of your ignorance." Anybody who would visit him, he'd spar with them — with or without the gloves.

BUSTILLO: Bruce would probably have gone to the boxing gyms around here, but as I said, he liked scientific boxing. The majority of the guys at the gyms are not schooled; they're not aware of what they should be looking for when sparring or what they should be trying to accomplish. Bruce had the interest, the dedication, the ready-willing-and-able attitude to be a top world contender.

INOSANTO: People ask, "Why, if he had this interest in boxing, didn't he become a professional fighter?" Boxing was not a totality — just as wrestling and karate are not totalities. For Bruce to have gone into professional boxing would be like asking a chess champion to participate in a checkers tournament. It's a different realm. Boxing wasn't his game. Although he was an excellent boxer and he felt there was a lot of merit in it, there were still some things wrong with the



art. There's more slugging, and you've got to push more with your gloves. Boxing, he felt, was over-daring, whereas he found karate to be overprotective.

BUSTILLO: That's how he developed jeet kune do. He put all the arts together. Kicking distance, he taught, comes first. You have the longest reach with your feet. Close the kicking range, and you're in hand distance. That's where the boxing comes in. All the moves that are used in boxing would be good in JKD, along with the hand, arm and elbow moves that are used in *gung fu*. After hand range, wrestling or judo comes in.

INOSANTO: And that's important. It is easier to train a boxer to kick — or at least to counter a kick — than it is to train a *karateka* to box. Within six months, a boxer would do well against most people schooled in karate.

Wrestlers are in tremendous condition. Professional wrestling is a show, but don't underestimate the skill of the professional wrestler. They're in tremendous condition — they have to be to put on a show like that. And those holds are not fake; they're real. I'd put my money on a professional wrestler against someone schooled in karate. There are a lot of weaknesses in karate. Bruce felt that there are a lot of talented people in karate; what we're trying to say is that a lot of them are not aware of the different kinds of fighting conditions they might come up against. They've never been exposed to what it's like.

BUSTILLO: That's why Bruce was something new and different in the martial arts. He always wanted to know everything, to incorporate different elements into his fighting style. I like to say he was like Jonathan Livingston Seagull; he always wanted to go one step more in finding out about the martial arts. The two vehicles of Bruce Lee were his training and reading. The walls of his office were filled with books on the martial arts.

INOSANTO: Getting back to the original question, there's no doubt in my mind that if Bruce Lee had gone into pro boxing, he could easily have ranked in the top three in the lightweight division or junior-welterweight division. When he first came to Los Angeles, he weighed about 150 pounds on a 5-foot-7-inch frame. When he went back to Hong Kong, he was down to 126, and he packed almost unbelievable power behind that weight. But Bruce was first a martial artist, and he went out of his way to prove that he really had a method of fighting, that it was as disciplined and more scientific than the older, classical arts. Jeet kune do is a very elusive term because it is more than boxing. We use the feet, the hands and grappling. Bruce said: "There's a beauty in everything. The name is insignificant. Why don't they just give one name to all the arts and call it 'fighting'? The human name for anything is the most corrupt form. Jeet kune do is just a name, and if you do not like that name, then let it be dropped."

So there you have it from two of the Little Dragon's closest associates. Lee sought the truth in creating a truly effective fighting form. He studied and mastered all the arts, and he had a special regard for boxing because of the truth that boxing presented in a total fighting scheme. And he was a good boxer, maybe even a great boxer. A high-school boxing champion, he continued to study the art and develop his skills. And he combined his knowledge and talent into a new and comprehensive fighting art.

But it's interesting to speculate on this: If Lee had gone into the ring professionally, what would have happened? One can imagine that initially his presence would have brought more respect and consideration for the lighter weight classifications; that as an attraction, he would have rivaled Ali; and that his influence would have brought a rebirth to a more scientific form of boxing.

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