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BLACK BELT

WORLD'S LEADING MAGAZINE OF MARTIAL ARTS

POINT MMA

CAN IT BRING MORE KIDS INTO MARTIAL ARTS (and Keep Them Safe)?

***EXCLUSIVE Q&A**

GREG JACKSON

on How the MMA Skill Set Developed So Fast



5 LESSONS TO LEARN FROM THE LIFE OF JHOON RHEE



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Photo by Cory Sorensen

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INTRODUCING POINT MMA

WILLIE JOHNSON Calls It
“Traditional Values With
a Modern Approach,” and
It Just Might Be the Model
for How Our Children
Compete in the Future!

BY ROBERT W. YOUNG
PHOTOGRAPHY BY CORY SORENSEN

The future doesn't belong to the rich. And it doesn't belong to the powerful, either. It belongs to our children. ... Think about those kids, sergeant. All of the things that we do, they watch and learn from. We sacrifice. It isn't fun, and it isn't easy. It's necessary. Not for today, but for tomorrow.
— Donnie Yen, from *Ip Man 3*

There's no shortage of martial artists who were influenced by Bruce Lee. Many would argue that without him, they wouldn't be who they are today. But few can claim that without Lee's influence, they might not be here. As in, might not be alive. Willie Johnson is one of those few.

To many, "The Bam" is best-known for his role on *WMAC Masters*, a TV show that aired in the mid-1990s and boasted a cast populated by real martial artists. However, his martial arts career began long before the short-lived series and, obviously, continued long after its cancellation. In fact, the direction in which Johnson's journey has taken him in recent years puts him in the unique position of perhaps being the person who will change the way our kids practice martial arts.

DOWN

The reason Willie Johnson, 54, is so passionate about the martial arts in general and, specifically, making sure the next generation takes full advantage of them can be traced all the way back to when he was a 6-year-old growing up in Baltimore.

"My dad allowed me to see him do things that most people couldn't even imagine," he said. "I saw people

beat to death and people killed. When you're a kid, that teaches you to bury this stuff inside and not talk about it. Eventually, you learn to walk around with a smile and tell yourself there has to be more to life than what you're seeing." In other words, to look for a way out.

For Johnson, the way out was the martial arts. "I thought training would help me find peace and be able to turn adversity into something positive," he said. "That's why I started reading *Black Belt*. It showed me an outlet that took my mind off that brutal negativity that was going on around me.

"Martial arts magazines allowed me to dream: Maybe if I get \$20 from my mom, buy a bus ticket for New York, and even though I'm a skid kid, I might be able to win a tournament and become famous. When you looked in the magazines back then, that's what happened. You'd win a big tournament, get in *Black Belt* and then get a movie. I wanted to follow the path of Cynthia Rothrock, Keith Hironobu and all of them."

Despite the fact that this is precisely what Johnson managed to do, memories of that raw desperation of childhood still drive him. "I learned how to make the best of the most devastating circumstances and make them stepping-stones to success, but not everyone does that," he said.

UP

To follow in the footsteps of Bruce Lee, Johnson decided to become a martial artist. He started in the Korean arts — specifically, with *kang duk won taekwondo* — which supplemented his boxing, wrestling and "street gymnastics," the term he uses to describe the acrobatics he and his friends did on the street. Then he found a new home in *tien shan pai kung fu*.

Johnson began training under Tony Lin, brother of tien shan pai great Willy Lin, author of *Chinese Grappling: T'ien Shan P'ai Chin-Na*, from Black Belt Books. Later, Johnson was groomed by Dennis Brown, Tayari Casel and others in a mix of martial arts. "Over the years, I studied *wing chun*, *jeet kune do*, *shuai chiao* and *jiu-jitsu*," he said.

Competition became a way of life for Johnson when he was 17. "My first tournament was the All-American Karate Championships at Madison Square Garden," he said. "I won first place in weapons and second in forms."

Subsequent first-place finishes — often in sparring, as well as forms — came at Fred Hamilton's World Martial Arts Championship, the PKA National Karate Championships, the U.S. Open, the Battle of Atlanta and a host of other events. "Probably the most prestigious was the WAKO World Championship," he said.

"Sometimes I would be on a bus for three days to get to a tournament — we were so poor," Johnson recalled. "But I kept on going." And winning. Clearly, he was on his way up in the sport-karate world.

Practitioners of the Chinese martial arts often wear shoes during training, so they don't necessarily want to compete barefoot. That prompted Willie Johnson to craft point-MMA rules that permit martial arts shoes.

TIMELINE

1993 While organizing his annual tournament, Willie Johnson draws inspiration from the first UFC. "I've always been a kung fu competitor, and in kung fu, we punch, kick and take people down," he said. "I thought, *Wouldn't it be nice to be able to do all those things in the same competition? Wouldn't it be nice to have everybody compete together — a full-contact guy, a wrestler, a shuai chiao guy, a kung fu guy?*"

1994 Johnson and his wife Kimberly Johnson plan their next tournament, called Challenge of the Champions. It features divisions for point fighting and for continuous contact, as well as a division that allows throws and takedowns, Johnson said. "Then we got all the people who won those divisions together, and I said, 'OK, we now have one more, which we're calling open fighting. All you guys will go against each other and use striking, kicking, throwing and grappling.' It was incredible." It becomes a permanent and popular feature at their competitions.

2013 Point MMA officially debuts at Dennis Brown's U.S. Capitol Classics in Washington, D.C. "It was a historic fight," Johnson said. "My son Marco was doing his 'kung fu hip-hop' against an opponent named Amari, a *kenpo* stylist from the Black Karate Federation. Joe Corley was the commentator. The audience had never seen anything like it! Marco was hitting him with tornado kicks like in the movies, and they were doing forward rolls and cartwheel kicks. It was mind-blowing."

Standard wear in point MMA includes a T-shirt or rash guard, along with MMA-style shorts, Willie Johnson says. Nevertheless, the rules also allow traditional uniforms. "Seeing style against style is part of the joy of the competition," he says.



Willie Johnson and his wife Kimberly conceptualized point MMA as a way for children to develop “wholesome technical execution” while under the pressures associated with competition. “The same emotions that come up in combat will come up in competition,” he says.

That’s not to say his troubles were over. It’s important to remember that the martial arts experience in this era was radically different from today, Johnson said. “Back in the ’70s when you were training, you fought on the street. Most people didn’t know the benefits of martial arts — all they knew were karate movies. They didn’t know why we were practicing. So we would be picked on all the time. People would come up and say, ‘Let me show you some stuff!’ We’d have to fight on the street to show people we really could hold our own.”

Things weren’t much better in the *dojo*, he added. “I know it sounds like a movie, but drug addicts and alcoholics would walk by and see you practicing and say, ‘Let me see if that really works!’ Before I got with master Brown, I was the student who was sent out to fight those guys. I won’t say I won every fight, but I earned enough respect that everybody in the neighborhood knew to leave ‘Black Bruce Lee’ alone.”

The fact that Johnson endured things no young person should have to is what energized him to give the martial arts a makeover for the sake of our next generation.

FORWARD

“Martial arts should be the one place we can take our kids to get away from situations like that,” Johnson said. “I’m talking about real martial arts schools that are based on traditional values with a modern approach. The kids will learn the principles and values that are missing in our society, and that will make them peaceful warriors who can deal with obstacles. It will give them the tools they need to stand up and be what God wants them to be.”

Problem is, for many kids, traditional martial arts aren’t considered cool. “For a lot of kids these days, they don’t want any traditional kung fu uniforms,” Johnson said. “They don’t want to wear a T-shirt that says Bam’s Kung Fu. That ain’t cool. They want something that says who they are and makes them feel good. They want clothes they can walk the streets with and be proud. They want hoodies they can wear to school.”

And they don’t necessarily want to go shoeless in a dojo, he added. “Who really wants to go barefoot? We are kung fu! We wear shoes. We don’t want to be in bare feet when we fight or when we train.”

Music is another element of our kids’ lives into which the traditional martial arts may not fit. “They’re into hip-hop,” Johnson said. “Music is one of the things that



All the hand techniques one sees in sport karate are permitted in point MMA, Willie Johnson says — as are the punches used in boxing. To score, a strike has to be technically correct and controlled. To foster safety for young martial artists, knockouts are not the goal.

impact our children these days, and to connect with them, you’ve got to go into that culture.”

As important as those elements are, when Johnson delved into his life’s project, there was something much bigger weighing on his mind: preserving the health of our youth. “Many of us parents had no sparring equipment when we started in martial arts,” he said. “In the urban dojo, in the inner cities where people needed the benefits of martial arts training most of all because they were fighting for survival, training was brutal. Often, it was about respect. Back then, you couldn’t be disrespectful because nobody was going to break up the sparring match. It was the same on the street.

“When I opened a school, I did the same type of training in the beginning. That’s why my oldest son Marco became so good at fighting. He was beat up by men. My attitude was, *You’re my son, and I don’t want people to think I gave you this black belt, so you’re going to be a real black belt!* He had no choice but to go through all those things.”

Now, Johnson looks back with regret. “The way we were doing it was wrong — it was abusive,” he said. “The dangers are too great. When I look at my younger kids, I don’t want them — or anyone else — to have to go through that kind of brutality and risk things like concussions.”

His concerns for kids are amplified when he considers the final factor in what’s perceived as cool in the 21st century: Whether we’ll admit it or not, many kids nowadays think MMA is cooler than the traditional arts. For Johnson, that was the missing link.

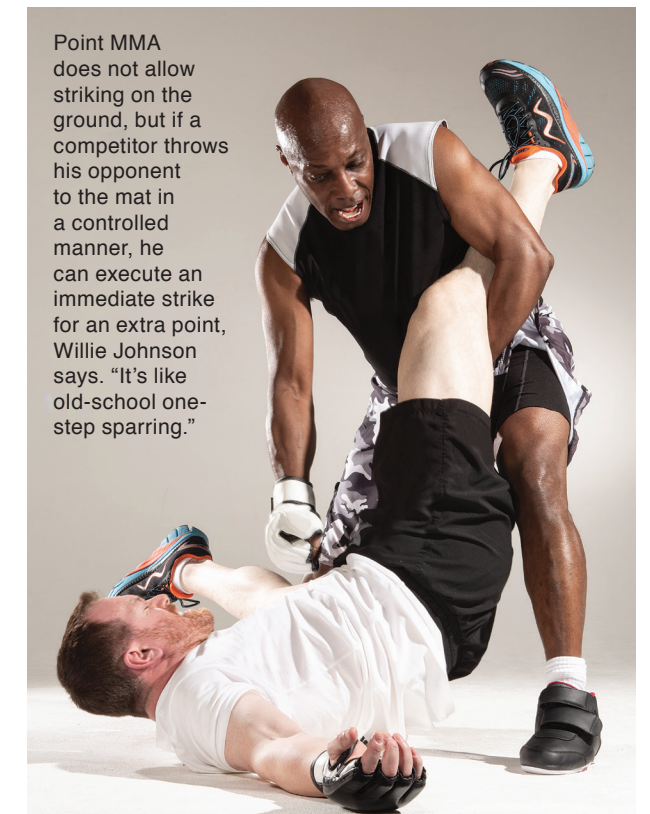
SAFELY

“I said let’s come up with a form of MMA where we can challenge kids emotionally because at the end of the day, if you have control of your emotions, you can do anything,” he explained. “In a fight, if you can’t control your emotions when a guy’s hitting you, you’re going to lose.

“I said let’s come up with a form of MMA where we can challenge kids physically at the same time, so my wife Kimberly and I designed it to bring about wholesome technical execution while students are under the pressures of striking, kicking and grappling — fighting in all ranges and levels — in a nonthreatening manner. That way, the same emotions that come up in combat will come up in competition.”

To keep the concept — which later was dubbed “point MMA” — cool, Johnson stayed in touch with his roots. “Coming from the street, everything we do always has a little swagger and a little rhythm to it,” he said. “Everything in point MMA goes back to the culture of the street. Michael Jai White said in an interview that the music of hip-hop is the music of martial arts in America. That swagger, that whole culture of kung fu movies and hip-hop appealed to me, and it appeals to kids now.”

In point-MMA matches, all the major hand and foot techniques of sport karate are allowed, and they can



Point MMA does not allow striking on the ground, but if a competitor throws his opponent to the mat in a controlled manner, he can execute an immediate strike for an extra point, Willie Johnson says. “It’s like old-school one-step sparring.”

RULES ON POINT

- **Hand strikes:** one point
- **Kicks:** two points
- **Takedowns:** two points
- **Ground control:** three points

“For ground control, you have to hold a ground position like the mount, side mount or knee to belly for five seconds,” Willie Johnson said. “You can do transitional moves, but we don’t allow you to hold the guard because that’s like stalling. And we don’t allow you to take the back. You can transition from the back or from the guard to something else, but if it’s seen

as stalling, you get a warning. After two warnings, the other person is awarded a point.”

- **Submissions:** not allowed
- **Striking on the ground:** not allowed

► **Bad sportsmanship:** not allowed
“You see it in point fighting and other sporting events,” Johnson said. “Parents are like, ‘Kill him!’ We don’t allow that in point MMA. My wife will go off if people do anything to create bad energy around any child at a tournament.”



Point MMA regulations permit three control positions one sees in grappling: the “knee to belly” (left), the side mount (center) and the mount (right). The guard is not allowed to be held because it can be a stalling tactic.

be delivered to the same targets permitted in point fighting. “That’s how we kept it safe,” Johnson said. “However, we took it one step beyond [point fighting] and decided to allow boxing punches, too. That keeps people from being stuck with just the backfist, reverse punch and ridgehand.

“A technique has got to be correct to be scored. A judge has to know if it’s a round kick or a side kick, a reverse punch or a cross. You can also use throws, but in point MMA, a throw is not a brutal technique intended to destroy the opponent. It has to be a controlled throw.”

One of point MMA’s main concepts is “no knockout, no tapout,” Johnson said. “You can’t knock a person out, and you can’t grapple to submit a person. I don’t believe you should give a child that sort of ability — just like you don’t want a child carrying a gun. Their emotions are not developed enough because they haven’t lived long enough. I don’t agree with giving young kids those sorts of tools for combat.”

To further enhance safety, Johnson’s new martial sport requires protective gear, including foot pads, hand pads, groin protectors, shinguards and headgear. “We recommend boxing-style headgear, as well as a chest protector,” Johnson says. “You can use the typical foam hand pads, but some people use open-hand designs like they see in MMA. That allows their fingers to be loose and mobile.”

Also to keep things MMA-like, competitors are permitted to wear MMA shorts and a rash guard, he said. “But it’s OK for people to come in with their style of uniform, too. I want the taekwondo guy to come in with a taekwondo uniform. Seeing style against style is part of the joy of the competition.”

So far, the extra effort to maximize safety has paid off. “It’s been really safe for the kids because we don’t allow

hard contact,” Johnson said. “We make sure the center ref controls everything. He breaks them up when he sees anger building. Even the judges on the side — when they see something getting wild, they stop it.”

PROUDLY

Point MMA also allows adults, but Johnson admits that his focus is youth — for all the aforementioned reasons. And he’s confident his formula will lead to a better martial arts future for America.

“I went around to everybody — people like Michael Jai White, Anthony Pettis, Michael DePasquale Jr., Dan Severn, Frank Mir, Tokey Hill — and asked them what they thought about point MMA,” Johnson said. “They said this is the wave of the future for our youth. Nobody’s kids should be in the ring or the cage, getting beat up like an adult. It’s irresponsible. I have nothing against any adult who wants to do that, but kids and even teenagers aren’t mature enough to make that decision.”

Johnson thinks the masses, once they know, will agree with him. That’s why he believes point MMA could become part of every sport-karate competition. Even better, he said, would be for it to make it into communities across the country.

Point MMA is Willie Johnson’s way of giving back to the arts that have given him so much. His aim, with this unique combination of mixed martial arts, sport karate, hip-hop and fashion, is to spread a positive lifestyle among the young people who need it most. “Isn’t that what martial arts is supposed to be — a way of life?” he said. “This is a way of life for the next generation.” ✕

Willie Johnson’s website is pointmma.com.



A variety of takedowns are allowed in point MMA as long as they’re executed with control, Willie Johnson says. The message for young martial artists is that the goal is not to injure the other person.



The cartwheel kick is one of the more exotic techniques one occasionally sees in point-MMA competition.

THE FITNESS FACTOR

► Part of the plan for spreading point MMA is an entity called Krazy Athletic. “Along with competition comes a fitness component called Krazy Athletic,” Willie Johnson said. “We realized that most martial artists are not in shape, but one thing we can say, no matter how much you may dislike it, is that UFC fighters are in the best shape. We wanted to fix that.”

Johnson scrutinized the training and competition methods used in MMA, CrossFit and obstacle racing, all extremely popular physical pursuits. “We’ve always done some of the things

they do in our point-MMA training, so we decided to create a curriculum that makes it a part of every class,” he said. “We have ‘warrior obstacles.’ We do competitions with burpees, push-ups, squat kicks, tire flips, battle ropes, medicine-ball slams — how many can you do in a minute? — things like that.

“This helps us be competitive from a marketing and sports perspective without getting away from our foundation in the martial arts. When you go to a point-MMA tournament, you’ll see a Krazy Athletic competition, too. It really motivates kids to get in shape.”

TESTIMONIAL FROM A MASTER

► “Point MMA is a fresh way to approach martial arts training,” said Dennis Brown, *Black Belt*’s 1998 Kung Fu Artist of the Year. “Ever since Bruce Lee, martial artists have been trying to duplicate his concept of bringing the many pugilistic styles together into one system of art. Point MMA is an innovative style that is, I believe, that answer.

“For those who like the excitement of MMA and boxing, it is a chance to experience that thrill without the trauma of the possible knockout. For those who are excited by the strategy of grappling and wrestling and the thrill of ground-

control arts but are worried about the possible long-range damage of fighting to the tapout, point MMA is that bridge.

“It is a way to train for a full-contact fight without the worry of not being able to go to work the next day. It gives you the chance to train and fight like [people do in] full-contact continuous sparring but with ‘no knockouts, no tapouts.’

“It’s what Bruce Lee was looking for in his quest to bring all the arts together. It’s like America, a melting pot where everyone has a shot. I’ve endorsed professor [Willie Johnson’s] effort from the beginning, and I am excited still.”