

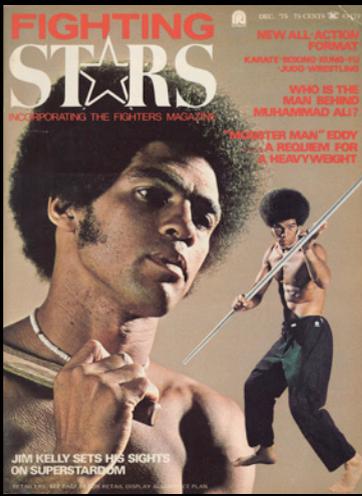
# Jim Kelly

Martial Artist  
and Co-Star of the  
Bruce Lee Movie  
Enter the Dragon

— A VINTAGE INTERVIEW —



by Lou Gaul



Originally published as “Beating a Path Toward Superstardom: Jim Kelly Kicks His Way Into Your Heart — Whether You Like It or Not” in the December 1975 issue of *Fighting Stars* magazine.

(Cover Photo by Ed Ikuta)

“After this year, I will be the number one black star, and in three years, I’ll be the number one world-wide box office champion — black or white.”

One doesn’t interview Jim Kelly — it’s more like a confrontation with the writer firing questions and Kelly kicking and punching back answers.

Kelly is arrogant, charming, aggressive, witty and blunt — simultaneously. He knows his physical capabilities and is convinced that he’ll become America’s reigning motion picture star. Seemingly, he has the equipment to succeed with his plan. At six foot three inches and 180 pounds, Kelly possesses the physical appearance and bold good looks necessary to every champion of the masses. To improve his acting abilities, Kelly studied with hailed instructors Lee Strasberg and Estelle Harmon.

“I used karate as a stepping stone to get on the screen. I used it to get in the front door, and now, I just get better in each film,” Kelly boasts during an interview. The thespian discusses his physical abilities and claims he is “going to make one million dollars from karate movies and then get away from them.” However, Kelly didn’t say what kind of acting he’d attempt when the martial arts movies no longer satisfy him.

Kelly came to national prominence when he co-starred with Bruce Lee and John Saxon in *Enter the Dragon*, Hollywood’s finest and most lavish karate film. It earned a fortune at the box office and secured Lee as a major force in world cinema. Most stars must work at their craft for years before getting a chance to perform on the screen, but Kelly used his physical prowess to jump over any artistic stumbling blocks.

Born in Paris, Kentucky and raised in San Diego, California, Kelly attended the University of Louisville on a football scholarship. During his time at that school, he also played basketball, baseball and track. According to Jim, he began studying the martial arts to stay in shape for football season. But his

karate pursuits soon overshadowed his other physical efforts, and Jim opted to concentrate completely on karate.

In 1971, he won the International Middleweight Karate Championship and opened a “Kelly’s Karate Studio” in Los Angeles.

While teaching and competing in the Los Angeles area, he met Hugh Robertson, a director who was preparing a semi-martial arts film entitled *Melinda*. The filmmaker asked Jim to serve as a technical advisor on the production and eventually gave him a small part in the film.

The *Melinda* role led to *Enter the Dragon*, in which Jim played Williams, a character who, along with Lee and Saxon, participated in a lethal tournament held on the deadly Han Island. It was all a front for a heroin and prostitution syndicate.

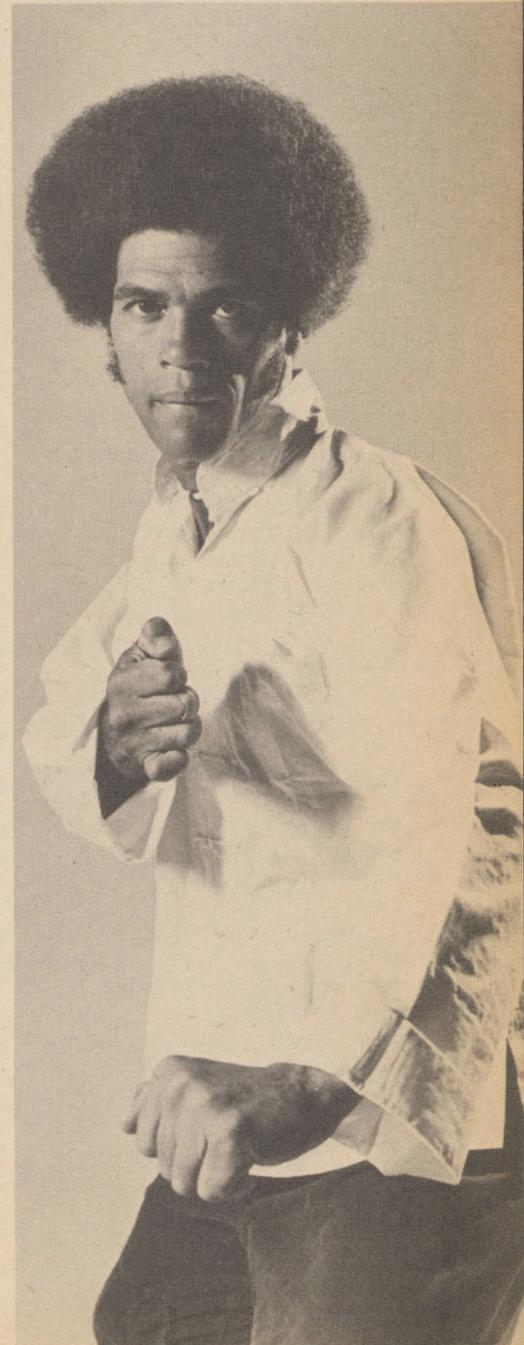
Although Kelly credits *Enter the Dragon* with propelling him into the public eye, he did complain about some aspects of the production. “I was killed within the first sixty minutes of *Enter the Dragon*, and I’m not very happy about that. John Saxon (who holds a brown belt in karate and t’ai chi chuan) was supposed to be killed according to the original script, but he had more screen credits than I did so he stayed alive.” But his early demise in that movie really doesn’t bother him because the entire production “belonged” to Bruce Lee.

“It was Bruce’s movie, and he’s going to look the best because he was the star. Lee even had his own stuntmen who knew exactly what to do when he threw a punch,” Kelly explains, speaking with reverence about the style, grace and memory of Lee.

“Lee had an ego as big as Muhammad Ali’s. Most people couldn’t dig it, but I could appreciate what he had done for himself, his family and his people. Those Chinese (kung-fu) movies have done more (for the Chinese) than Henry Kissinger could ever do,” Kelly opines.

Apparently, Warner Bros. liked Kel-

Photos by Ed Ikuta



ly's screen presence and signed him to headline his own martial arts film. The result was *Black Belt Jones*, a rather disappointing combination of karate and satire which was very similar to a comic book — filled with gaudy sets, overflowing with unbelievable action, spiced with cliches, completely ridiculous and ultimately harmless.

Director Robert Clouse, who did a superb job on *Enter the Dragon*, used



Kelly's physical talents to some degree in *Black Belt Jones*, but the film lacked excitement and cohesion.

But Kelly makes no pretenses about it. "I wasn't interested in a picture with a message — I just wanted to entertain people," he says. He still has one complaint — he staged all of the hand-to-hand bouts and received no screen credit. "It won't happen again!" he recalls angrily. "Now, it's in my contract that I get screen credit."

He also feels the film's stuntmen were "unqualified" for the arduous job. "I split one guy's skull and broke up another guy's face because they were unqualified to fight me. What I do on the screen is not realistic because I do the opposite for the camera of what I believe in. If people use what they see on the screen for street fights, they'll get killed," he warns.

After *Black Belt Jones* laid its egg at the box office, Jim had a small role in *Golden Needles*. He shrugs this one off, saying, "I play an antique shop owner and only have one fight over this acupuncture statue which people are chasing all over the world."

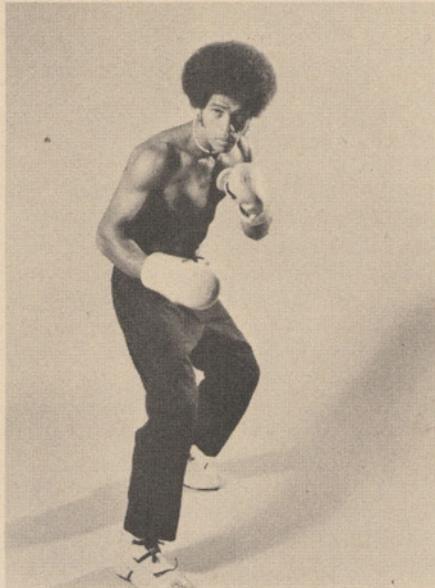
Following that, he signed with Jim Brown and Fred Williamson for *Three the Hard Way*. Despite the film's silly premise (a mad white man plans to wipe out all blacks by putting sickle-cell

anemia in the water supply of three major cities), the action sequences work thanks to Kelly's savage karate techniques and superb timing. How was it working with two screen personalities who are rumored to have egos bigger than the Grand Canyon? Kelly recalls that he had no problems at all.

"People were afraid of the egos clashing, but they (Brown and Williamson) have the ego problems, not me. I learned a lot from them, but I don't want to mention what I learned."

"I don't want to be Jim Brown or Fred Williamson — I just want to be Jim Kelly and to get that FIRST black manly image on the screen that kids can identify with. Some cats go around saying, 'I'm the most beautiful guy in the world.' I don't have to do that."

When pressed for a definition of a "black manly image," Jim refuses to reply, noting that if he gave an answer for publication, "Then everyone would know."



Since his well-guarded secret of black machismo won't be revealed by his words, perhaps Kelly's deeds will give us all a clue. For instance, there's Jim's recent offer to fight Joe Frazier, former heavyweight champ of the world, in "a free-for-all kick boxing bout. His skill is just as deadly as mine," says Kelly, "but I'm a little more deadly."

Kelly has money, a promising career and no broken bones. Why did he challenge Frazier? "I think I'm the baddest dude in the world and no one can beat me. Ali is next. As a matter of fact, I could beat Frazier, Ali and George Foreman all in one night." He does concede, though, that he'd need at least a three minute rest period between each contender.

Despite his star status, Kelly says he still offers personalized lessons to special customers. "I get a minimum of \$100 an hour to teach 'The Jim Kelly Method,' and I only teach guys who are black belts. I teach unorthodox karate combinations of all fighting methods. Belts don't mean a thing to me. I don't even wear my belt."

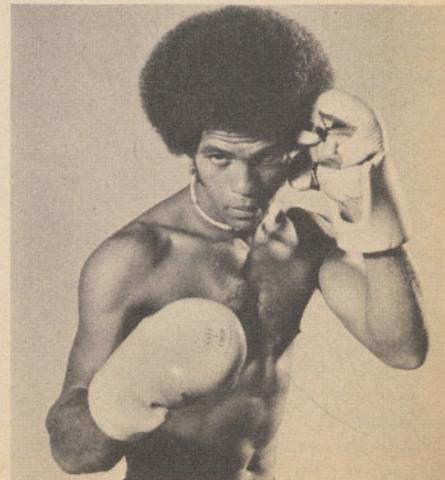
"Also, karate tournaments are a bunch of bull. They're all politics. A handful of non-blacks controlling the tournaments — cliques — judges dominated by cliques. I won the championship (the International Middleweight Karate Championship) because of my strong attitude. I just had to be so much better than the others that I couldn't be stopped. My attitude made the difference."

With his film status as a karate luminary, Kelly also has his share of female admirers, but he says that he gives them very little of his valuable time. "I discipline myself and play (with the opposite sex) only when I have time. I don't waste my time trying to wine and dine women. I have a girlfriend and that's all I need."

"I get fan mail, and I find that many of the girls enjoy my screen portrayals and the guys identify with me. My fans usually say they like my attitude, and of course, they like my karate. I've even had a few girls come and ask if they can marry me. I always say, 'Not right now.'"

Talking to Jim Kelly is an experience. It's still too early to forecast how successful Jim will become, but he will tell you that beyond a doubt, he's going to be the biggest superstar ever. And in his own words, he should be an original.

"I could count the number of movies I've been to in my lifetime on my fingers," Kelly reveals, "because I couldn't find anyone to identify with." Obviously, those days are now over for Jim Kelly. He's finally found the perfect identity figure — Jim Kelly.



## HOT POTATO

**BONUS:  
MOVIE REVIEW!**

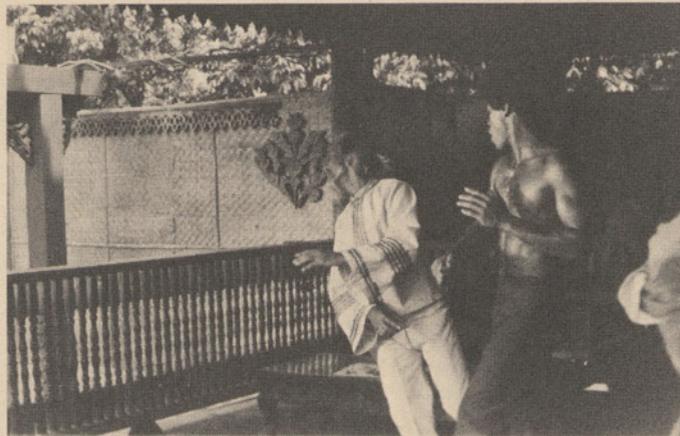
Readers have often written in to ask, "How are the karate pictures made? Is there some secret formula? How do 'they' get it all together enough to get it all up there on the screen?"

No producers have it figured out better than Fred Weintraub and Paul Heller. Among their many hits are *Enter The Dragon*, *Black Belt Jones*, *Golden Needles* and now, *Hot Potato*. Bruce Lee brought them a blockbuster at the box office with *Enter The Dragon*. His style and the formula of the kung-fu feature have been widely imitated for over two years. But in all of the above films a co-star was Jim Kelly, a karate star in his own right. His style, his approach to the karate film and his technique of fighting are his own. True, they show the influence of Lee; whose doesn't?

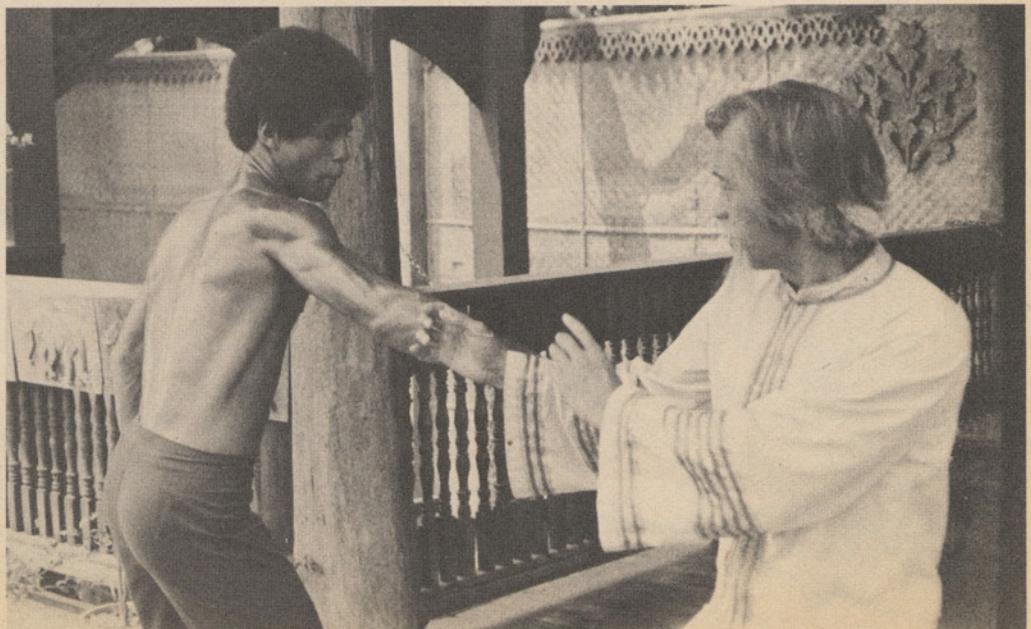
Well, to answer the readers' questions, here's how you bring in a karate movie. You get an ace martial arts choreographer, in this case black belt Pat Johnson, to stage the fight scenes. But please note that Jim Kelly did stage his own fights. You get Oscar Williams to write and direct. He did *Black Belt Jones*, and is himself a martial artist. And for good measure you go to some exotic and glamorous location in Asia, in this case Thailand. You have lots of action, suspense, kidnappings, double-crossings, ambushes, a real bad-assed dude to portray all the evil of the world, some well-meaning Americans stumbling around and the hero and his few stalwart friends overcoming thousands of obstacles. Throw in some sex scenes, or the promise of a handy bed about to become actively utilitarian and start the cameras.

Kelly, still in his *Black Belt Jones* character, accomplishes a one-man karate victory over a band of kidnapers. He waits for his next assignment, watches his girl do a striptease in his car and then meets with the senator whose daughter has been kidnaped in far-off Thailand. So it's off to Bangkok for everyone. There's a double he rescues, then there are numerous fights, ambushes, a return to get the real daughter of the senator. And finally all is set to rights.

So that's that. Now let's all get back to work.

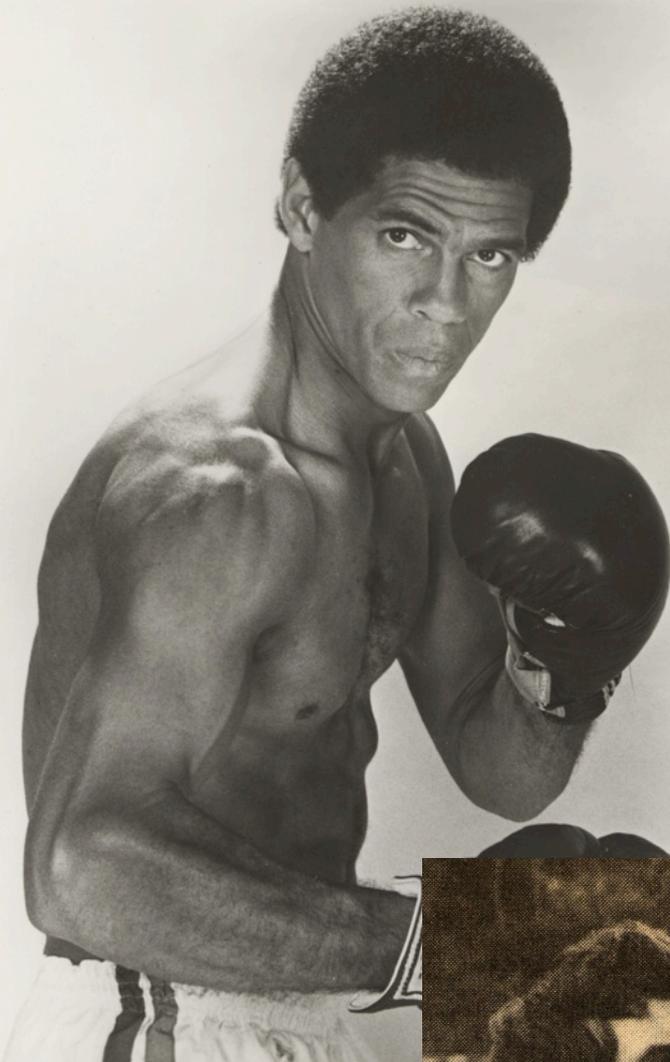


During a lull between scenes, Jim Kelly squats with Irene Tsu, planning their eventual escape from the jungles of Thailand (above). At left and below, Kelly deals out proper martial punishment to a heavy who had the nerve to contest him.



Photos courtesy of Sequoia Pictures

**BONUS  
PHOTOS!**



Jim Kelly promo shot from later in his career.

*Black Belt Photo*

Cool cats Bob Wall and Jim Kelly, who both appeared in *Enter the Dragon* (1973) with Bruce Lee.

*Black Belt Photo; originally published in the May 1978 issue of Fighting Stars.*



## DISCLAIMER

BLACK BELT COMMUNICATIONS, an Active Interest Media Publication, as publisher, does not endorse and makes no representation, warranty or guarantee concerning the safety or effectiveness of either the products and services advertised in this magazine or the martial arts or other techniques discussed or illustrated in this document. The publisher expressly disclaims any and all liability relating to the manufacture, sale or use of such products and services and the application of the techniques discussed or illustrated in this document. The purchase or use of some of the products, services or techniques advertised or discussed in this document may be illegal in some areas of the United States or other countries. Therefore, you should check federal, state, and local laws prior to your purchase or use of these products, services or techniques. The publisher makes no representation or warranty concerning the legality of the purchase or use of these products, services and techniques in the United States or elsewhere. Because of the nature of some of the products, services and techniques advertised or discussed in this document, you should consult a physician before using these products or services or applying these techniques. Specific self-defense responses illustrated in this document may not be justified in any particular situation in view of all of the circumstances or under applicable federal, state or local law. Neither Black Belt Communications nor the author makes any representation or warranty regarding the legality or appropriateness of any technique mentioned or depicted in this document. You may be injured if you apply or train in the techniques illustrated in this document and neither Black Belt Communications nor the author is responsible for any such injury that may result. It is essential that you consult a physician regarding whether or not to attempt any technique described in this document.

**BONUS  
PHOTOS!**

Jim Kelly (right) gets his kicks in  
*Three the Hard Way* (1974).

*Black Belt Photo*



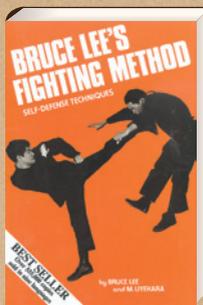
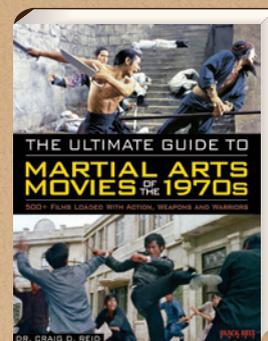
Jim Kelly (center) in a  
fight scene from *Black  
Belt Jones* (1974).

*Photo Courtesy of  
Warner Bros. Inc.*

## THE ULTIMATE GUIDE TO MARTIAL ARTS MOVIES OF THE 1970S

by Dr. Craig D. Reid

Dive into the decade that brought martial arts cinema to the masses in this epic full-color book by Dr. Craig D. Reid, one of America's most respected martial arts film historians and critics! This dynamic guide launches into "martialologies" of 500-plus films loaded with action, weapons and warriors! Each entry is filled with humor and contains a concise plot summary, behind-the-scenes reel (and real) history, fight statistics, insights into martial arts choreography and styles, and other surprising factoids about each title. The book includes a complete index listing more than 2,000 actors and movies by all their English variations, as well as an index for movies by country of origin. 288 pgs. (ISBN-13: 978-0-89750-192-7) **Book Code 497 — NOW ONLY \$4.99 SAVE 81%**

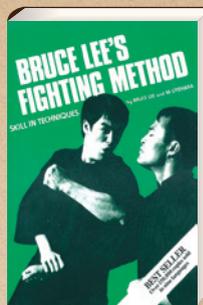


### BRUCE LEE'S FIGHTING METHOD VOLUME 1: SELF-DEFENSE TECHNIQUES

by Bruce Lee and M. Uyehara

How to survive attacks on the street, defenses against surprise attacks, armed and unarmed assailants and one attacker or many are among the topics covered. 128 pgs. (ISBN-13: 978-0-89750-050-0)

**Book Code 402—NOW ONLY 99¢ SAVE 90%**



### BRUCE LEE'S FIGHTING METHOD VOLUME 3: SKILL IN TECHNIQUES

by Bruce Lee and M. Uyehara

The legendary Bruce Lee demonstrates simple, effective methods for developing your martial arts techniques in body movement, hand techniques, kicking and more! 128 pgs. (ISBN: 978-0-89750-052-4)

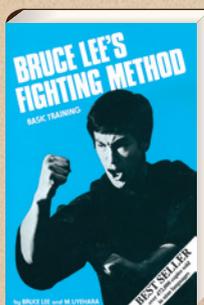
**Book Code 404—NOW ONLY 99¢ SAVE 90%**

### BRUCE LEE'S FIGHTING METHOD VOLUME 2: BASIC TRAINING

by Bruce Lee and M. Uyehara

The originator of *jeet kune do* covers the fighting man's exercise system, the on-guard position, footwork, power training, speed training, the nontelegraphic punch and training in awareness. 128 pgs. (ISBN-13: 978-0-89750-051-7)

**Book Code 403—NOW ONLY 99¢ SAVE 90%**

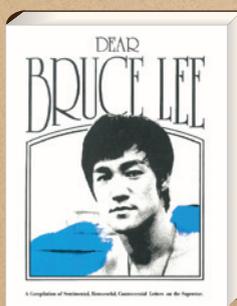
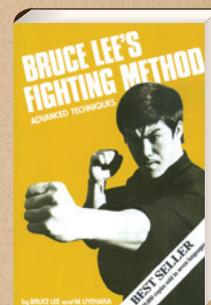


### BRUCE LEE'S FIGHTING METHOD VOLUME 4: ADVANCED TECHNIQUES

by Bruce Lee and M. Uyehara

This book presents the advanced techniques. Chapters include hand techniques, attacks with kicks, counters and tactics. 128 pgs. (ISBN: 978-0-89750-053-1)

**Book Code 405—NOW ONLY 99¢ SAVE 90%**

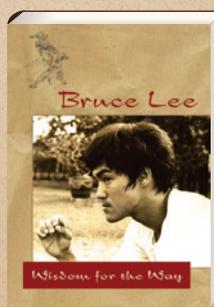


### DEAR BRUCE LEE

by Ohara Publications Inc.

Read about how Bruce Lee's life, his art and his untimely death affected and influenced his worldwide legion of fans. Learn about his art *jeet kune do* through his personal replies to letters he received in 1967. Illustrated with photos of Lee. 96 pgs. (ISBN-13: 978-0-89750-069-2)

**Book Code 407—NOW ONLY \$4.99 SAVE 69%**



### BRUCE LEE: WISDOM FOR THE WAY

by Bruce Lee

*Bruce Lee: Wisdom for the Way* pulls from many of Bruce Lee's sources—quotes, pictures, sketches—to create a visually comprehensive reference of the master.

144 pgs. (ISBN: 978-0-89750-185-9)  
**Book Code 491—Retail \$15.95**

### BLACK BELT: THE FIRST 100 ISSUES

*Black Belt: The First 100 Issues (Covers and Highlights 1961-1972)* celebrates the genesis of one of the longest-running and most influential sports magazines ever in a large-format, softcover, color coffee-table book. As a commemorative compilation of *Black Belt* magazine's industry-defining material, it features the cover art and content highlights of the first 100 issues. Cover photographs and illustrations include such martial arts luminaries as Bruce Lee, Chuck Norris, Mas Oyama, Joe Lewis and Gene LeBell, as well as celebrity practitioners like Sean Connery and Toshiro Mifune. 208 pgs. (ISBN-13: 978-0-89750-173-6) **Book Code 499—NOW ONLY \$4.99 SAVE 83%**

