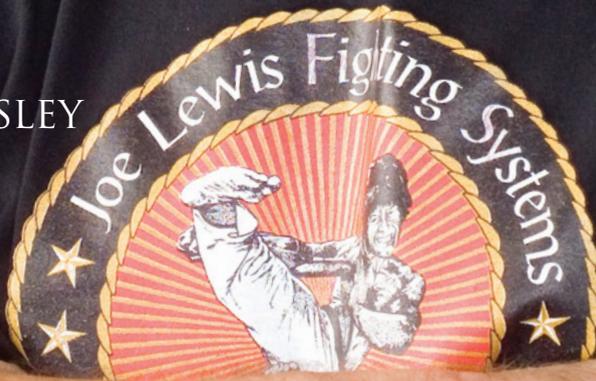


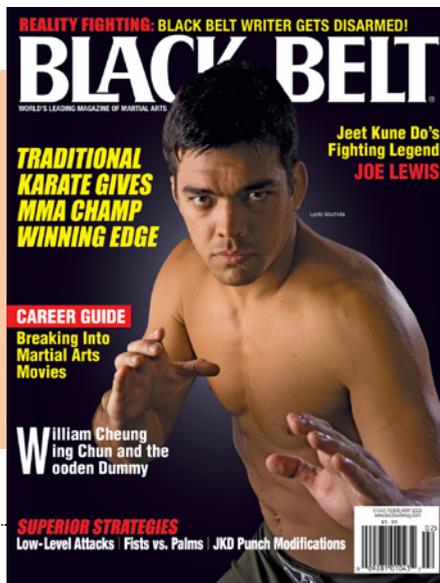
# JOE LEWIS

HOW THE  
BRUCE LEE  
TRAINING  
METHOD  
MADE HIM  
(AND CAN  
MAKE YOU)  
A BETTER  
FIGHTER

BY DR. JERRY BEASLEY



**Editor's Note:** This piece was originally published in the February 2009 issue of *Black Belt* as "The Trainer and the Fighter: Joe Lewis Recalls His Glory Days Training With Bruce Lee and Competing on the Circuit." For more articles about Joe Lewis, [click here](#). For more articles about Bruce Lee, [click here](#). For Bruce Lee books, DVDs, e-books and video downloads, [click here](#).



In the summer of 1968, Joe Lewis sold his karate school to friend and fellow champ Chuck Norris. Following the urging of his teacher, Bruce Lee, Lewis had decided on a new career: offering private self-defense lessons to wealthy clients in Los Angeles. To promote the endeavor, Lewis set up demonstrations at UCLA to prove that *jeet kune do* was superior to classical karate.

The week before a demo was scheduled, Lewis, who'd taken JKD lessons from Lee since 1967, would pore over the details with his teacher. They'd work out a program to showcase self-defense and sparring using Lee's protective gear. The day of the demo, Lewis would drive

to Lee's house to pick him up, then they'd make their way to the UCLA fraternity that was sponsoring that particular event.

Wearing a suit and tie, Lee would take a seat near the stage, and Lewis would begin by announcing that jeet kune do was superior to other arts. The *karateka* would run through a series of JKD strikes and kicks against the focus shields Lee had brought. "He would spend hour after hour

training me to be able to show exactly what he wanted people to see," Lewis recalled.

As part of the demonstration, Lewis would place a phone book against a volunteer's chest and, using a JKD close-quarters punch, send him flying backward.

At the end of the program, Lewis would don gear and spar with a karate black belt. His purpose was to show how JKD made it easier for him to hit his opponent. With

**DIRECT ATTACK:** Joe Lewis (right) faces Perry Gibson. Instead of chambering his fist for the forward-hand strike, Lewis moves the weapon first, making it more difficult for the opponent to identify and evade the technique. He lands the blow before the opponent can react.



PHOTOS BY KAREY MARSHALL

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**INDIRECT ATTACK:** Joe Lewis (right) squares off with Ian Marshall. Lewis fakes a hook kick to draw his opponent's guard down, then follows up with a forward-hand strike to the chin. Lewis says that he and Bruce Lee created this combination for competition.



PHOTOS BY KAREY MARSHALL

the audience invariably impressed, Lewis would introduce his teacher, and Lee would take the stage. "I think Bruce liked the idea that I first demonstrated the skills and then told people that he was America's top teacher," Lewis said.

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"Bruce and I never sparred in demos or in training — the subject never came up," Lewis continued. "The only time I ever saw him spar was when he paired up with Danny Inosanto at the 1967 International Karate Championships in Long Beach, California. Both of them wore full-contact protective gear."

In their workouts, Lee and Lewis engaged in something that may have been more beneficial than sparring: interaction drills. "They helped me become cognizant of proper distance, timing and rhythm," Lewis said. "Those are the cornerstones of tactical fighting, but few fighters ever

master them. Most instructors have no idea as to the best way to teach students how to use these skills. With rhythm and timing, a fighter can beat a faster or stronger opponent."

Despite the fact that Lee seldom sparred, he encouraged his advanced students to do it. "There is nothing better than freestyle sparring in the practice of any combative art," Lee once said. "In sparring, you should wear suitable protective gear and go all out. Then you can truly learn the correct timing and distance for the delivery of kicks and punches."

Lee was meticulous when it came to teaching his students how to perform those kicks and punches, Lewis said. "Bruce would make sure my hand was in just the right place, my elbow perfectly in line. He had a specific stance that I was to use. I hear people say there's no technique in jeet kune do, but the way Bruce

taught it, there were techniques he expected you to learn."

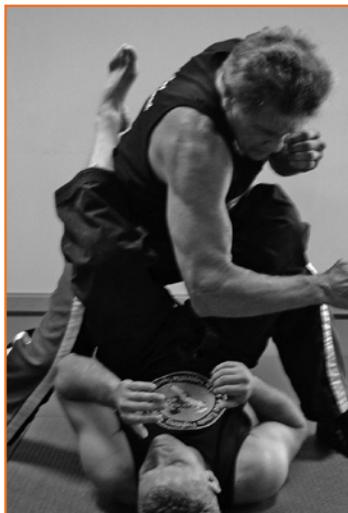
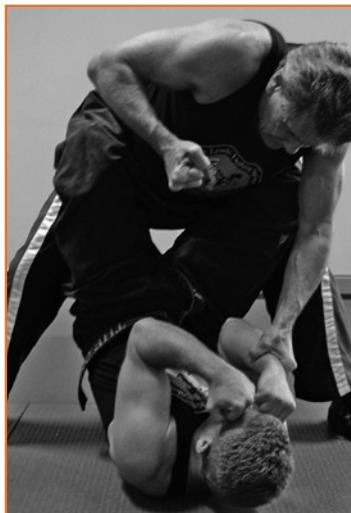
One thing the two martial artists never practiced was *kata*. Lee wanted his students to understand that "creating fancy forms and classical sets to replace sparring is like trying to wrap and tie a pound of water into a manageable shape [in] a paper sack. For something that is static, fixed or dead, there can be a way or a definite path; but not for anything that is moving and living, like jeet kune do."

Sparring, Lee said, "lives in the moment. The highest technique is to have no technique." Once the fighter steps on the mat, he no longer represents a style. He's free to adapt and survive — which is exactly what Lewis strived to do.

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"When Bruce and I worked together, he wouldn't use words like strategy or tactic," Lewis said. "When we would study

**JKD PUNCHING FOR MMA:** Joe Lewis squats in his opponent's open guard. He fires a straight punch, which is less susceptible to entrapment than a typical hook punch. Lewis then redirects his energy so he can effect a raking backfist to the man's face with the same hand.



fight films, he would point out the importance of why a certain principle or strategy was working. For example, when Jack Dempsey, known for his explosiveness, would bridge the gap against an opponent, Bruce would emphasize to me why his trigger squeeze and quickness destroyed his foe's defenses."

Lewis claims that Lee was fond of the concept of relaxed explosiveness. "This principle was one of the keys to why his system worked so well for me," Lewis said. "I had many opponents tell me after I beat them that I was so fast that they never saw me coming. Some were so overwhelmed that they would ask me what technique I used to hit them because they never saw it coming."

The secret of his success was his mastery of the skills Lee taught. Those skills were conveyed for the most part during weekly Wednesday workouts at Lee's house. Being friends, the two spent many weekends socializing, often watching boxing films. "Willie Pep, reputed by many to be pound for pound the best boxer of all time, was the fighter whose footwork Bruce and I would study," Lewis said.

"[Muhammad] Ali was another master of rhythm," Lewis added. The boxer's footwork can be seen in *Return of the Dragon*, he claimed.

Most fighters today would do well to study the footwork of the JKD founder, Lewis said, because the majority of martial artists still fight by attacking straight in and straight upright. "This outdated style of fighting makes you an easy target," he added. "When you move using good foot-

work, called 'rhythm sets,' you can keep an aggressive opponent contained, set him up and make it difficult to get hit. If you get hit, movement allows you to absorb and dissipate the incoming energy."

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Lewis said that Lee helped him better understand how to conceptualize the facets of fighting, including ring strategy. "Without strategy, a fighter has no way to anchor his concentration of focus and has nothing on which to base [the] timing [of] his trigger squeeze," Lewis said. "He's left without any idea as to how he might best set up his opponent or what tactics would work best against him."

To clarify, he offered an example: "Anyone fighting a taller opponent must know three basic tactics: how to move on the outside; how to fight him from the pocket; and how to line him up, walk him to the ropes and turn him. I work a great deal [on] teaching the cardinal rules of strategy that I learned over many years. Movement and turning — a couple of things I learned from Bruce — are some of the best tricks I've used in competition."

Lewis was the first to teach such principles to sport-karate competitors. It all started when other fighters began ridiculing Lewis for listing Lee, whom they identified as merely a kung fu practitioner, as his teacher.

Rewind to 1967. Lewis had just signed on as an official student of Lee's, and Lee was ringside at an exhibition match pitting Lewis against top-rated Japanese stylist Tony Tulleners. "Bruce sat in the front row behind my corner and coached me be-

tween rounds," Lewis said. "That night, I used a double side kick that Bruce and I had drilled on."

After Lewis won, Lee said, "That's the broken-rhythm principle I taught you." The fighter went on to win the internationals and the Jhoon Rhee Nationals that year.

By the end of 1968, Lewis had mastered the principles of jeet kune do as they applied to sport fighting. At the U.S. Karate Championships in Dallas, Lewis, undefeated in his 10 most recent title fights, prepared to enter the ring. To quell the complaints he often heard about the "kung fu guy" who never competed, Lewis told the promoter that he wanted to give a JKD seminar before the bout so his opponents would know why he was sold on Lee. Lewis then demonstrated the principle of independent motion and the five angles of attack.

"I taught jeet kune do principles, either directly or through others, to many of the top fighters from the '60s and '70s," Lewis said. "Steve 'Nasty' Anderson came from our system. Before he started cleaning house with all the top black belts, he'd won 70 straight brown-belt titles. We knew before we made him a black belt that he was going to be great. He was a master of timing and distancing, two key principles which Bruce encouraged me to perfect."

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The JKD principles he learned from Lee still work in the ring, Lewis said. "The problem today is that many instructors never field-test the material they teach.

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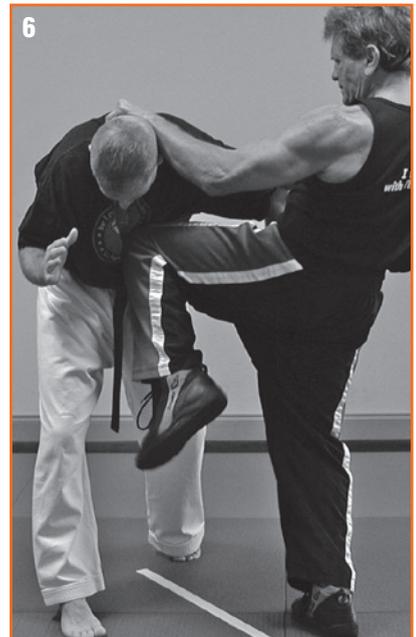
Most of what's being taught was created on someone's desktop or in someone's mind but was never tested. I was Bruce Lee's test tube. In 1968, during the peak of our training relationship, I won 11 straight championships."

Lewis contends that the theories Lee advocated, including putting one's power side forward, worked for all three original full-contact champs: Jeff Smith, Bill Wallace and himself. "I won my first kickboxing fight using Bruce Lee's JKD material with my power side forward," Lewis said. "Jeff and Bill are both left-handed and based their entire fighting careers on putting their power side — their left side — forward."

One JKD technique remains Lewis' favorite: the lead-hand punch. He



**HEAD-RHYTHM SEQUENCE:** Joe Lewis (left) and his student prepare to begin a sparring drill (1). The student opens with a forward-hand strike (2), and Lewis counters with a simulated forward-hand strike, which the student slips to the inside to avoid (3). The martial artists reposition themselves (4), after which Lewis simulates a rear-hand strike that causes his partner to slip to the outside (5). Lewis responds by presenting his focus mitt for a lead 45-degree strike (6), a rear-hand strike (7) and a rear-leg kick (8).

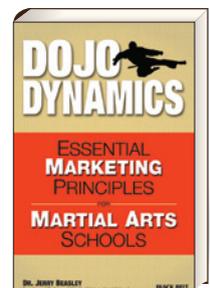


**FOOT-RHYTHM SEQUENCE:** Joe Lewis (right) faces his foe (1). Lewis initiates with a forward-hand strike, which the man slips (2). Lewis changes his position as his opponent punches (3), after which he counters with a 45-degree strike that comes up from under the opponent's punching arm (4). The jeet kune do stylist finishes with a rear-hand strike to the face (5) and a knee thrust to the torso (6).

trained intensively with Lee for nine months to polish it before he tried it in competition. Back in the 1960s, the lead hand was seldom used in karate competition because it was thought to have insufficient power to effect a "killing blow." Lewis' secret entailed retracting his hand as though he was doing a backfist, which prompted referees to label it a back-knuckle strike. "Actually, it's more like a fencing thrust using the fist," Lewis said.

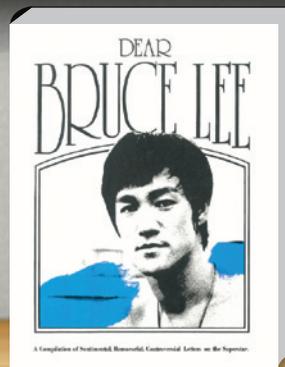
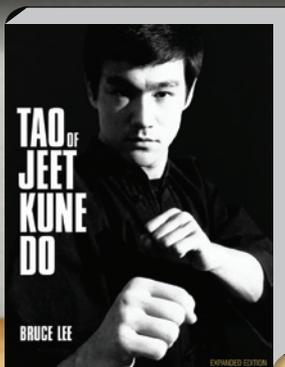
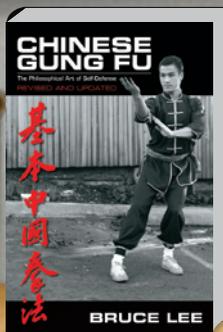
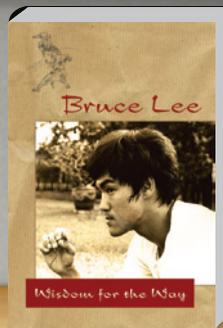
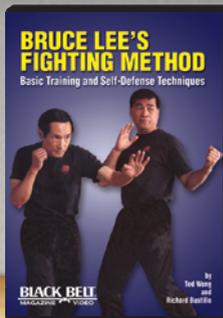
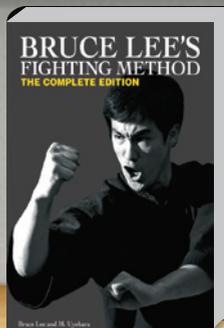
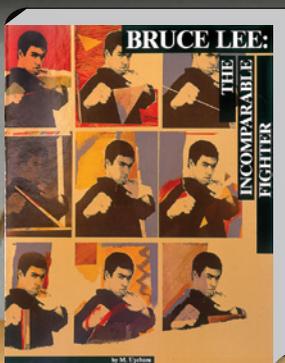
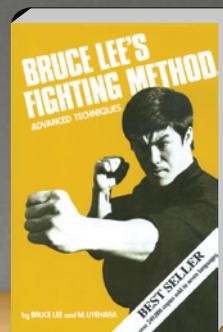
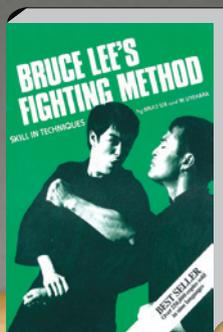
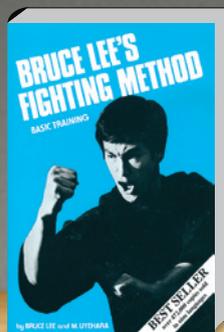
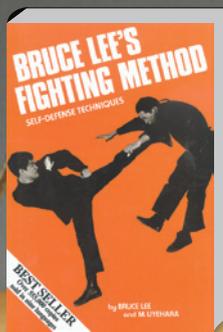
Lewis contends that the lead-hand strike, done the way Lee intended it, is a viable technique for the 21<sup>st</sup> century, whether you're sparring in a ring, battling in a cage or defending your life on the street. Like most of the moves Lee taught, it can give you the edge you need to win no matter where you fight. ✂

*Dr. Jerry Beasley was inducted into the 2000 Black Belt Hall of Fame as Instructor of the Year. A professor at Radford University in Virginia, he has written books about jeet kune do and classical karate. He is also the author of **Dojo Dynamics: Essential Marketing Principles for Martial Arts Schools**, which is available by [clicking here](#).*



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