

NOTES FROM A STREET FIGHTER

Like scads of martial artists around the world, Willie Johnson got his start because of Bruce Lee. For Johnson, growing up in the Lafayette Projects in Baltimore was an ordeal, and the arts as Lee embodied them represented sanctuary from the thugs and gangbangers that haunted the streets.

After watching *Chinese Connection*, Johnson immediately knew the direction he wanted his life to take. He vowed to become a fighter like Lee, to be a man who shunned the criminal life and helped others learn how to protect themselves.

Johnson quickly built a name for himself in kung fu and won numerous national and international tournaments. He then started cross-training in *chin-na*, Brazilian *jujutsu*,

THE WISDOM OF WILLIE JOHNSON

BY THE EDITORS • PHOTOGRAPHY BY RICK HUSTEAD

Thai boxing, *shuai chiao* and other fighting arts. All the while, he tempered his newfound knowledge with his experience from the streets. The result: A hard-core system of self-defense that mixes arts and shines a spotlight on the workings of the criminal mind.

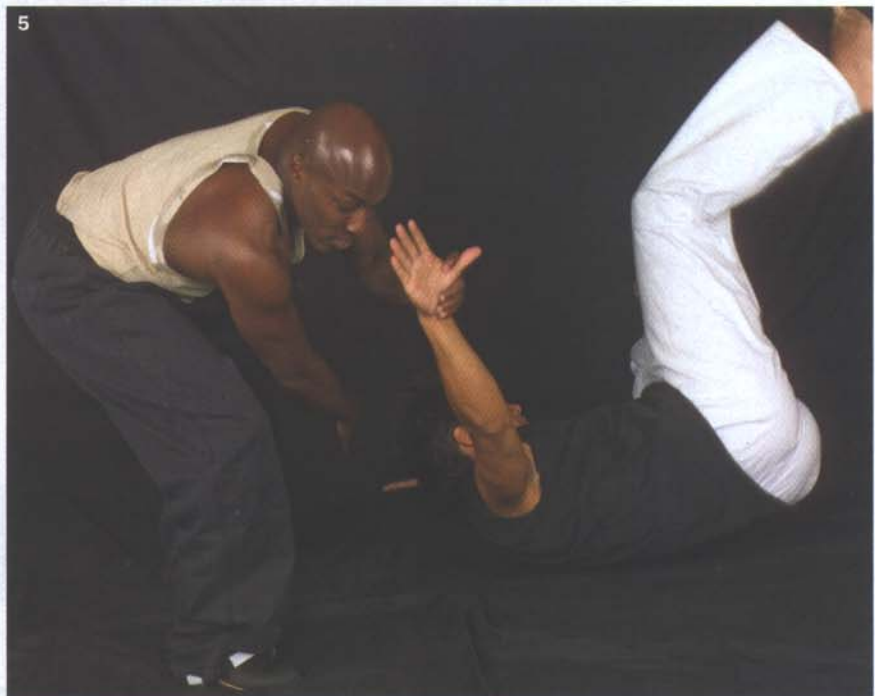
The following gems come from the curriculum the *Black Belt Hall of Fame* member teaches his students at his school in Laurel, Maryland:

- “I believe in overkill,” Johnson says. “The traditional way of doing chin-na is to control your attacker with a joint lock and not go beyond that point because he’ll give up and comply with you. Society says the same thing: ‘Don’t fight ... everything’s going to be OK ... you’ll just make the situation worse if you fight back.’ That’s bull.”

- Whenever you’re forced to defend yourself, don’t worry about being nice. Do everything you can to win—including kicking, punching, clawing and biting.

- The reason for the ferocity is simple: The old way of doing things no longer works. Johnson blames that ineffectiveness on the criminal element’s having been exposed to kickboxing, wrestling and other combat arts for the past half century. That, and the fact that too many people are accustomed to pain from having grown up in a physically abusive environment or because alcohol or an illegal drug is dulling their senses.

- “The beauty of kung fu is that it’s not about your force,” Johnson says. “It’s about using your opponent’s force against him. It’s also about leverage—just like in *aikido*, when your opponent pushes, you pull, and when he pulls, you push. The second he pushes or pulls too much or too little, you have your opening. These principles have been an important part of



The opponent sneaks up on Willie Johnson and grabs him around the neck (1). Johnson immediately seizes the man’s forearm with both hands to break the choke and twists his body so he’s facing his attacker (2). The movement releases Johnson’s head from the lock, after which he traps the man’s extended arm (3). The kung fu stylist then fires a knee thrust into his ribs (4) and flips him to the ground (5).



kung fu since the beginning.”

- Martial arts are external tools to help you deal with street situations, he says. “If they cannot enhance your natural instincts, they will cause you to malfunction under pressure.”

- “In the martial arts, they say it’s important to focus on the physical and mental aspects because if you have them together, you’ll be OK,” Johnson says. “But what about the spiritual? It goes back to the traditional arts—if you have the physical, mental and spiritual, you can walk into a room, feel the negativity and walk out. If you have only the physical and mental, you can’t feel the negativity. You will have to see it, then do something to get out of the situation. That’s when you need self-defense techniques.”

- To beat a determined and skilled adversary, weaken him using the divide-and-conquer principle, he says. “If he tries to choke you or get you in a head lock, bite him, poke him in the eye or hit him in a vulnerable spot like the throat. Then he won’t be able to put 100 percent into one thing. His focus will be divided, and that will allow you to do your technique.”

- The ground is a dangerous place to be in a fight, he says. “Do everything possible to keep from rolling around there because there’s so much more to



Willie Johnson (left) assumes a casual but prepared stance in front of the aggressor (1). As the opponent punches, Johnson moves away at a 45-degree angle and parries the blow (2). He then sweeps the punching arm downward and blasts him with an elbow strike (3). Next, he grabs the back of the man’s neck and yanks him into a knee thrust to the abdomen (4). Johnson follows up with a dropping elbow to the spine (5) and a head-twist takedown (6-7).



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The attacker surprises Willie Johnson and catches him in a bear hug (1). Because his arms are free, Johnson can use his hands to box the man's ears (2). The pain causes the assailant to release Johnson, who immediately digs his thumbs into the pressure points that lie behind the earlobes (3). While the opponent is stunned by the pain, Johnson steps behind his right leg (4) and executes a hip throw (5).



be aware of. If your opponent ends up wrestling you onto the ground, redirect his focus. Grab a rock and smack him, or grab his head and scrape his face against the concrete.”

- Don't approach a street conflict as a win-lose situation, he says. "Self-defense is a gray area. It's there; it can happen. We don't want to be taken as a victim, and we don't want to approach it from an egotistical standpoint with a competition mind-set. We want to come out feeling good and knowing we were able to get out alive.”

- Competitors and noncompetitors alike undergo the same stresses and fears in difficult situations, and learning how to overcome those feelings plays an important role in preparing for the street. "Many competitors say they never feel fear before competition, but we all do before any situation that puts us under pressure," Johnson says. "The key is to learn how to control it. You should realize that feelings are only feelings, not facts. What you feel at one particular second

will change the next second. Once you get through it, you can have more control the next time.”

- In self-defense, you have to worry about two classes of opponents. "There's the unconscious criminal, the attacker most martial arts schools train you for," he says. "He's the guy who has had too much to drink or who just had a fight with his wife and wants to take his frustration out on someone else.”

- And there's the conscious criminal, the guy who's had a hard life. "He wants



to use your karate techniques,” Johnson says. “The thing that determines who’s best is not technique; it’s the one who survives the encounter. I know a friend who was in a street encounter and got shot 15 times—face, head, everything—but he made it to the hospital before he collapsed. He had the will to live.”

- To increase your chance of survival, he says, conceive of self-defense as a continuum from safety to battle. One: If the intuition you’ve developed through your martial arts training tells you a potentially dangerous situation or person is near, just leave. Two: If you get into a bad situation, running is your first line of defense. Three: If you have to fight, use whatever you can find

to ensure victory. A stick or a stone is preferred to your hands and feet. Four: If your improvised weapon fails, resort to your hands and feet and do whatever it takes to survive.

- There’s a great difference between a street mind-set and a training or competition mind-set, Johnson says. “In competition, you prepare for a certain event or situation so you can reach your goal. You know you want to win, so you focus on training to win.” Instructors and coaches constantly tell their students to think of their opponent as a less-skilled, less-conditioned and less-confident person.

- “On the street, however, you should never underestimate your attacker,” he continues. “If you have that mentality of arrogance, the competition mind-set, you can provoke him because he’ll view it as a challenge. A popular saying on the streets is, ‘You may know martial arts, but I know how to get crazy.’”

- Although common “street sense” holds that the last thing you want to



to sell drugs and doesn’t care about the consequences because by the time you catch him, he’s already made thousands of dollars,” Johnson says. “When he goes to jail, all his friends are right there. He knows the possible consequences of every action but doesn’t care. There are so many things he’s willing to die for.”

- When deciding how to respond to these two types of attackers, remember that a conscious criminal won’t step back if you show confidence or strong technique. “A street attacker wants you to try

18 Commandments of Combat

1. Be aware of your surroundings at all times.
2. Be conscious of your body language and attitude.
3. Be confident in everything you do, but don’t present a challenge or threat.
4. Never underestimate your opponent.
5. Use conversation as a psychological weapon to create openings.
6. Be prepared mentally and physically to fight at a moment’s notice.
7. Use distractions to create an advantage.
8. Once the fight begins, keep your moves simple.
9. Disorient the assailant by doing something that’s unexpected or disgusting.
10. Stay balanced. Keep your weight centered over your feet.
11. Don’t hesitate to use “dirty” techniques.
12. Never lose sight of your opponent.
13. Strike his vital areas: knees, eyes, groin, throat and nose.
14. Shout when you strike; it will amplify the shock factor.
15. Use any weapon, whether conventional or makeshift, to subdue him.
16. Use all your strength when you strike.
17. Fight as if your life depends on it—because it might.
18. Never stop trying to improve your skills. —Willie Johnson

do is underestimate anyone, that's exactly what happens when an instructor teaches his students they're better than the average attacker. "You feel fear when you sense danger, and people say, 'Stand up to him; don't run from him.'" Johnson says. "That's not learning how to control your fear. That's learning how to run away from your fear. The martial arts aren't supposed to make us arrogant and make us want to fight to prove that we're big and bad. They're supposed to teach us how to redirect the attacker's negative mind-set into something positive."

- "Say you're waiting for a bus, and a person walks up to you," he says. "The first thing a martial artist does is wait for the other guy to attack, then try to rake his eyes out or kill him. But why not do this: When you sense some negativity, look over and begin to change the situation. Take control by asking, 'Excuse me, sir, but do you have the time?' When you call him 'sir,' you're talking to him in a positive manner. Think about what that does to him emotionally. He thinks, 'What should I do now?' You just threw him completely off. You don't always have to be violent or physical. The martial arts are supposed to take a bad person and turn him into a good person, but everybody seems to have forgotten that."

- "If you're not in harmony with your opponent, it's just force meeting force, and the strongest person will win," Johnson says. "But if you're in tune with what's going on, you can be the weakest person and still come out on top."

- Always add to your arsenal, Johnson says. "Whatever you've learned—kicking, sparring, forms, grappling or weapons—don't throw it out. If something doesn't work right now, just stow it away because one day it's going to work again. Your inner warrior allows you to tap into everything you've ever done, seen or heard, including your intuitive and instinctive combat skills." ❧

For more information about Willie Johnson, visit <http://www.blackbeltmag.com> and click on Community, then Black Belt Authors.