

Al Novak's East Wind Gung Fu Club

I was a student in the early seventies at the East Wind Gung Fu Club in Niles, California for about seven years under Sifu Alex Novak ("the gentle mountain" as his Chinese friends called him). Al Novak was one of the very, very few westerners at that time ever to be taught by the Chinese, and was even recognized in mainland China. By the way, Al Novak was a high degree (12th?) black belt in Shotokan Karate before he met Jimmy Lee and started learning Wing Chun, and he told me that the Chinese systems were superior to the Japanese. It had something to do with Japanese systems tend to block and then attack, while Chinese systems will block and attack at the same time.

I possibly did meet some of James Yim Lee's students on trips with Mr. Novak to San Francisco's Chinatown, but I don't remember, and probably didn't know who they were at the time. Jimmy Lee had died of cancer before I started studying under Al Novak, but a picture of him and Bruce Lee was prominently displayed at the front of the club where we paid respects before starting each club meeting.

I was about 18-25 years old when I studied under Mr. Novak. At the time I didn't know how fortunate I was, but looking back now I can see it was the "real thing." All this Ultimate Fighting stuff you see today cannot be compared to the things I saw back then. These fellows do little more than kick and punch and a little wrestling -- they do virtually nothing with their hands like I saw Al Novak do (his speed was like a propeller - you couldn't even see what he did - four of five things in a row with his hands - you would be dead in about five seconds). I once asked him what was more deadly, hands or feet. He said it was about 80% hands and 20% feet. In fact, in Wing Chun which he taught us, there were no kicks above the groin. What you see in tournaments and on TV is just sport. You never see the real Chinese fighting techniques because they are deadly and could never be in a sport. The Chinese martial arts movies are pure fantasy.

Even if you are Chinese it takes a long time before you are let in on the most effective techniques. They weed out the hot-heads and those who are proud, and those who want to prove that they are the best - they may not kick them out of their clubs, but they will never teach them the most advanced knowledge.

Fremont, Calif. is where I lived, and where he lived - the same house for more than 30 years. The club was in Niles, right next to Fremont, and that's where we trained. Training was slow to start in order to weed out those with no patience. After a few years he would start to teach you something. I wasn't there long enough to get to the most effective techniques - he said "you are either a 1-year man or a 10-year man." He taught us Shaolin Sil Lum internal/external system combined with Wing Chun. He also knew a lot of very effective jiu jitsu. No Jeet Kune Do - that was just something Bruce Lee made up - it was not really a system (though possibly a pre-cursor to mixed

martial arts or MMA). I don't think the Chinese masters were happy with that. I believe Bruce Lee was trained in Wing Chun originally.

Regular endurance training and practice was done outside the actual club. When we came to club it was to learn techniques and be corrected. You had to be prepared to be slapped around (but never seriously hurt). I saw a lot of people come and go because they were impatient or couldn't take it or endure. You really had to have a passion to learn it.

Again, what he taught, if you stuck around long enough, was nothing like what you see on TV or MMA. The club had a hard wood floor because he didn't teach how to take falls or any groundwork. It was very effective street fighting using 80% hands, and 20% feet no higher than the groin. He taught Sil Lum hand and weapon forms which he learned from James Yim Lee and T.Y.Wong in Chinatown. The hand techniques were Wing Chun and Jiu Jitsu. The twice weekly club meetings consisted of group warm-ups going through different strikes, then working on forms, then pairs working on hand techniques. He would take members two at a time for bare handed sparring which he would supervise. All the techniques were soft but very fast like a bull whip - to see him use his hands was like watching an airplane propeller - you couldn't see what he was doing. I don't think the MMA champs today would have had much of a chance in a street fight with him. Little brute force, just incredible speed and accuracy.

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