

SPECIAL
BRUCE LEE
ISSUE



ROOTS

ON THE FENCE

BY MARK JACOBS

Every martial arts fan knows that iconic scene in which Bruce Lee squares off with Chuck Norris at the Colosseum in *Return of the Dragon*. Like a pair of modern-day gladiators, the two legends battle until Lee finishes off the evil Norris—it was, after all, Lee’s movie.

As a martial artist, you might have looked for evidence of *wing chun* in Lee’s technique or hunted for boxing influences. The next time you watch, try this: Absorb the action while searching for fencing-inspired movements.

“I SEE FENCING everywhere in that scene,” said Ramon Martinez, a New York-based master of classical and historical European fencing. “His footwork is very buoyant and catlike, just like in fencing. He’s leading with the dominant hand, using lunges and feints. There’s a part where he parries an attack and

counterattacks right from the parry without giving his opponent a chance to step back. That’s a pure parry riposte—it’s applied fencing theory.”

It’s no secret that Lee studied fencing techniques and referenced European masters in *Tao of Jeet Kune Do*. Martinez became personally aware of this connection when he met Dan Inosanto back in the 1990s.

“I had a student in my fencing class who was also a *jeet kune do* practitioner,” Martinez said. “He told me Dan Inosanto was teaching a seminar in the area and I should come down and meet him. Dan told me that Bruce actually based a lot of his theories on fencing. I got curious and picked up a copy of *Tao of Jeet Kune Do*, and I could see a lot of what he was talking about was right from the classical French foil school of fencing theory.”

Inosanto became curious about Mar-

tinez’s fencing ability and began taking private lessons in the techniques of the Italian and Spanish rapier. During those lessons, Inosanto related how Lee had told him he’d never be a complete martial artist until he learned fencing. Inosanto said Lee found fencing to be one of the most efficient martial arts.

ACCORDING TO MARTINEZ, classical Western fencing theory has been analyzed and distilled during centuries of practical application. By one account, 30,000 French noblemen died while participating in fencing duels in the 17th and 18th centuries. Although a gruesome number, it does provide for a lot of empirical evidence about what works and doesn’t work in a fight. Using the scientific method, fencing masters in the Age of Enlightenment began studying sword fighting like any other field of knowledge, attempting to define what

works and why. They stripped fencing down to its essential elements, simplifying it along the way—much as Lee did with jeet kune do centuries later.

A number of fencing influences can be spotted in *Tao of Jeet Kune Do*, Martinez said. Example: The JKD stop-hit is inspired by fencing's stop-thrust.

duel because we'll both get killed."

Instead, Martinez said you should attack the attacking arm, such as thrusting into the opponent's oncoming wrist. Or you can simultaneously avoid his attack while countering—for example, by stepping away from a saber aimed at your leg and cutting his arm.

an opponent's strikes forcefully, Lee advocated the fencing notion of redirecting the energy. The way Lee would lead with his strong side and use his rear hand to trap his foe was also heavily influenced by the theory of rapier and dagger fencing, Martinez said. Moving your attacking hand before you move

“WHILE MANY OF HIS CONTEMPORARIES TALKED ABOUT BLOCKING AN OPPONENT'S STRIKES FORCEFULLY, LEE ADVOCATED THE FENCING NOTION OF REDIRECTING THE ENERGY.”

“The stop-thrust comes directly from Italian rapier fencing,” Martinez said. “It’s a counteroffensive action and can be done at the beginning of your opponent’s attack, the middle of their attack or the end of their attack. It’s very sophisticated and takes a lot of timing to accomplish. Most people don’t understand it and do it wrong. In fencing, I’ll see people just lunge forward simultaneously with their opponent. But I’m not going to attack you like that in a real

“You can apply the theory to empty hands, as well,” he said. “There’s a technique I’ve seen in photos where someone would attack Bruce with a punch, and he’d step back and simultaneously extend his own fist so the opponent runs into it.”

LEE ADVOCATED the use of other bits of fencing theory, including the concept of parrying an attack. While many of his contemporaries talked about blocking

your body is yet another innovation pulled from fencing.

“Fencers tend to make things more conservative, to get away from ideas of power and speed,” Martinez said. “Instead, they focus on timing. I see a lot of that in what Bruce Lee was doing. I tell all my fencing students that to expand their own knowledge about what they’re doing, they should read *Tao of Jeet Kune Do*.” ✂

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JULY 2012 Display until June 26, 2012
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