The Point: Environment

by Bill Handren

"....and if there is a second attacker, you're done, once you go down with the first"..... Bradley J. Steiner

I am sort of amused. The Gracie Brothers brought their brand of jujitsu to the United States about twenty years ago and the martial arts world accepted it as the supreme fighting system. Sorry, but the thinking is flawed.

I first learned of the argument about which is better, grappling or karate, from an episode of "Ozzie and Harriet" almost fifty years ago. Ricky Nelson was a student of Bruce Tegner. David Nelson, his brother, was a wrestler. Ricky and David argued about which is the better martial art. The answer was obvious. What does an inferior boxer do when he is being overwhelmed? Simple, he goes into a clinch and ties up the superior boxer's hands. So, match a striker and grappler in the ring and who will win? Easy, the grappler will win. Why? Because, unless you are handicapped and block with your face, it is very hard to be beaten with a single strike. The grappler will take a shot or two and once he grabs his opponent, the fight is his.

So, the grappler reigns supreme - as long as it is in the ring or on the mat. Outside of the ring or dojo, grappling becomes dubious, even suicidal if your art is focused on going to the mat. Fighting is not a fair contest. The object of an assault is to hurt the other guy and there are no rules in violence.

First, the opponent may be armed. Assuming the mount while the opponent is shoving a blade in your spine or leg isn't a very clever tactic. Second, the opponent's friends or passersby may use your head as a football while you are applying ground fighting techniques. The goal of ground fighting should be to escape and get back up as fast possible.

The Gracie Brothers didn't defeat all comers because their art is superior. Rather, they won because the tactic is superior as long as the environment is one which favors the grappler. The street does not. That's not to say standing grappling techniques aren't a very good thing to learn. Throws, trips and reaps are some of the most street effective movements one can learn. Few things cause more trauma than being slammed to the concrete. I'm saying that an art whose emphasis is going to the ground is one I would run, not walk away from.

This is one of the problems when one studies an art and doesn't see the bigger picture. I started in taekwondo. I thought kicking would be a devastating way to deal with an opponent. Yet, after a few years, I saw the flaw in my thinking. Kicking is slower, balance is precarious, kicking above the hip plane is weak and having the leg grabbed is disastrous. Yet my former art stressed throwing the foot to where the opponent naturally kept his hands. It is almost like playing catch.

But, taekwondo looked soooooo devastating. And, yes, I throw several hundred high kicks every workout and can make them work - I just think I would be choosing a very risky movement in place of a more practical one. Donn Draeger, in writing about muay thai many years ago, wrote the Thai boxer would be quickly undone if grappling were allowed against high kicks.

This is one of the bad things about contests. If I pit a Corvette against a rickety four wheel drive truck, the outcome of the race will depend on the terrain. An asphalt track; the Corvette will win easily. A muddy back road and the Corvette will end up being towed to the garage by the truck. The winner will be determined by which is best suited for the particular environment. Your choice of vehicles must be determined by how you intend to use it.

I have a book on boxing as a street art. The author went to great lengths to discredit karate until I read the last chapter. There, he described "special" street techniques which read like a list from Goju kata. In a book on muay thai, a different author shows "self-defense" techniques in the last chapter which again could have been taken from our kata.

There is a lesson here and that lesson is be very careful about what is currently in vogue. Right now MMA is very popular and it would seem logical that an art which embraces all elements of combat is superior. But those elements are sport combat, and that is a very different thing. A few years back, I watched a documentary about what was being taught to the military. I was stunned to see the instructor applying an arm bar against his downed opponent. Doesn't he know the enemy has two arms and carries a blade? Yet, contest has influenced even the most martial of all organizations.

Contest does improve competitors. I regard boxing's hand techniques as far superior to karate's - in the ring and with the hands padded. Boxing is a discipline honed in competition and tested in a more realistic setting. But, when looked at from a street perspective, flaws emerge. A simple lead hand grab will pretty much tilt things in the karateka's favor. Easy to say perhaps, but any karateka who doesn't take what he or she studies and then apply it to defending against

other disciplines, is asleep at the wheel. Of course, you may have no idea what the other person is skilled in, but some fair judgments can be quickly made by how the opponent presents himself.

You will hear many complaints that kata has little resemblance to sparring, but it was never designed with this in mind. And to approach it from a competition standpoint just confuses the subject. Take the simple appearing age tsuki from Seiunchin, only do it at grappling range. Grab your partner's hair with the rear hand, twist your torso to torque the other elbow into your partner's ribs and drive the fist straight up into his throat while pulling his head down. It isn't as sophisticated as the boxer's uppercut, but was designed not only as a clinch breaker, but an absolutely ruthless fight ender.

Over the years, many have left karate for other arts. They feel their karate isn't as effective as, say, MMA or jujitsu. I have come close many times. But then, I see something which disturbs me about the new art and in turn come to understand why the kata techniques are done the way they are. And that is when I smile.