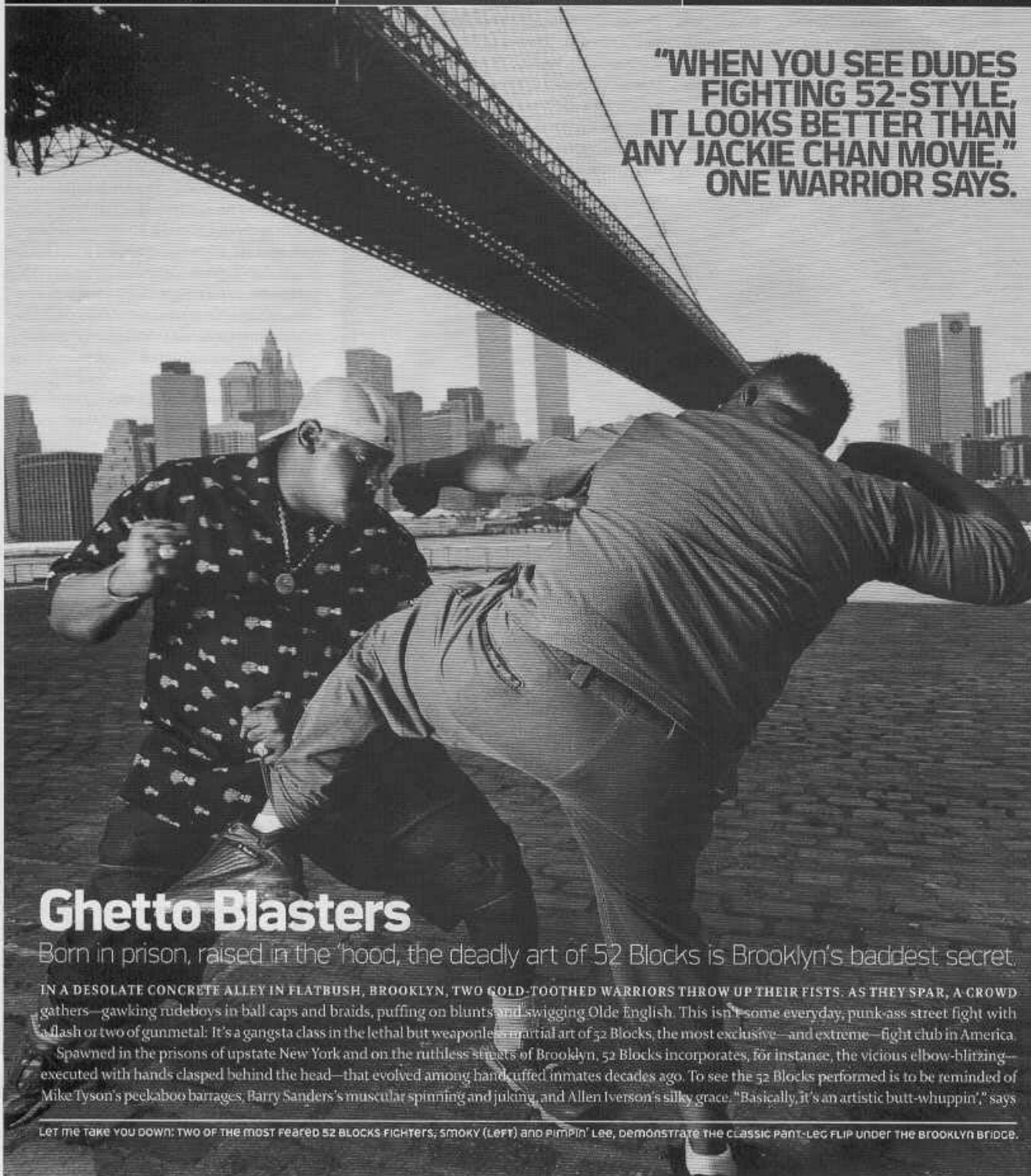


BY DOUGLAS CENTURY  
PHOTOGRAPHS BY MARK PARIS

the blow-by-blow

in the works

"WHEN YOU SEE DUDES  
FIGHTING 52-STYLE,  
IT LOOKS BETTER THAN  
ANY JACKIE CHAN MOVIE."  
ONE WARRIOR SAYS.



## Ghetto Blasters

Born in prison, raised in the 'hood, the deadly art of 52 Blocks is Brooklyn's baddest secret.

IN A DESOLATE CONCRETE ALLEY IN FLATBUSH, BROOKLYN, TWO GOLD-TOOTHED WARRIORS THROW UP THEIR FISTS. AS THEY SPAR, A CROWD gathers—gawking rudeboys in ball caps and braids, puffing on blunts and swigging Olde English. This isn't some everyday, punk-ass street fight with a dash or two of gunmetal: It's a gangsta class in the lethal but weaponless martial art of 52 Blocks, the most exclusive—and extreme—fight club in America.

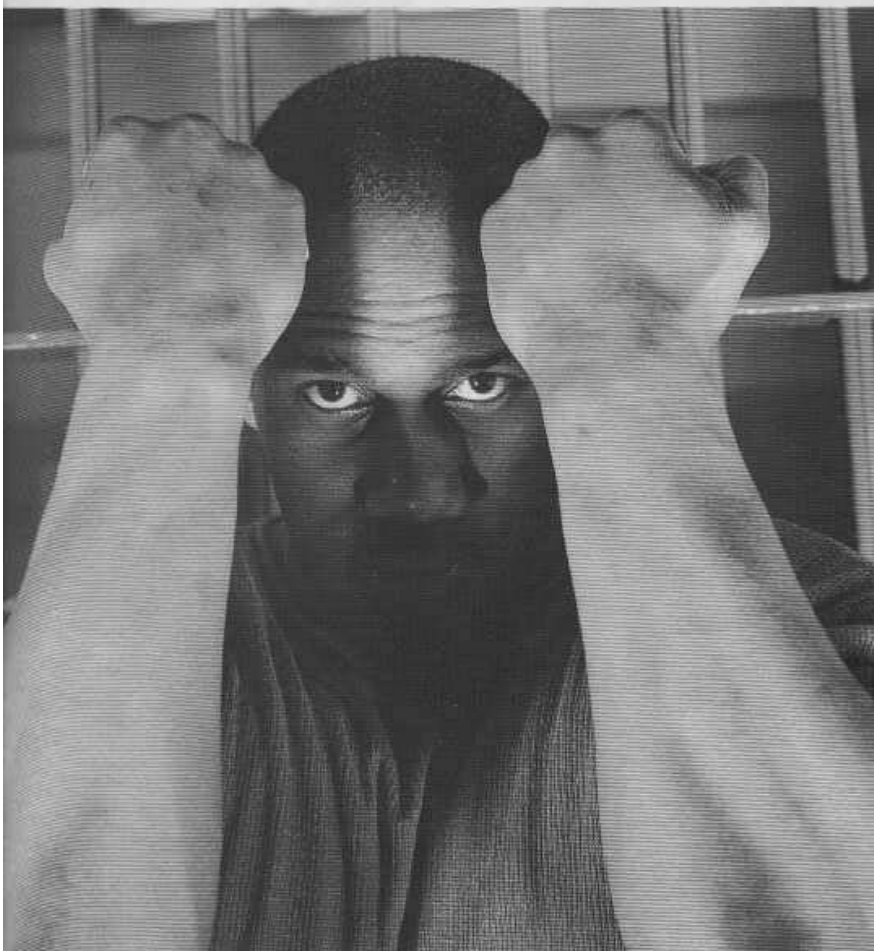
Spawned in the prisons of upstate New York and on the ruthless streets of Brooklyn, 52 Blocks incorporates, for instance, the vicious elbow-blitzing—executed with hands clasped behind the head—that evolved among handcuffed inmates decades ago. To see the 52 Blocks performed is to be reminded of Mike Tyson's peekaboo barrages, Barry Sanders's muscular spinning and juking, and Allen Iverson's silky grace. "Basically, it's an artistic butt-whuppin'," says

LET ME TAKE YOU DOWN: TWO OF THE MOST FEARED 52 BLOCKS FIGHTERS, SMOKY (LEFT) AND PIMPIN' LEE, DEMONSTRATE THE CLASSIC PANT-LEG FLIP UNDER THE BROOKLYN BRIDGE.

Dennis Newsome, 42, a martial-arts scholar and 52 Blocks expert who lives in San Diego. "It's just part of black aesthetics. When we dunk, we don't wanna see no clumsy-ass shit; we wanna see some real ill, behind-the-back, windmillin' jam—something executed with precision and with style."

Smoky, a six-foot, 260-pound security guard and veteran street fighter, says, "When you see two dudes really fighting 52-style, trust me, it looks

reporting and writing my first book, *Street Kingdom: Five Years Inside the Franklin Avenue Posse*, I met and befriended an army of 52 Blockers, including Kawaun (a.k.a. Big K), subsequently arrested and now serving three to six years in a New York state prison for armed robbery. It was Big K—six foot four and 290 pounds—who tutored me, during slap-boxing sessions, in the culture of what he likes to call "our most insidious art of war: the 52."



COOL AND THE GANGSTA: KAWAUN, SERVING THREE TO SIX YEARS FOR ARMED ROBBERY, CALLS THE MOVES "INSIDIOUS."

better than any Jackie Chan movie."

Because 52 Blocks can be used to cripple and maim—anything goes, including eye-gouging and testicle-crushing—it has never been seen in martial-arts competitions and has never been codified in print. Mastered behind bars and performed spontaneously in life-or-death brawls, the regimen has proved maddeningly elusive—almost mystically secret. During the decade I spent in Brooklyn

But the method—although it has acquired a blaxploitative pop-culture sheen—is itself fighting to survive on the street. "Back in the eighties on Rikers Island, there was some honor to takin' the shit into the bathroom and settlin' it with your hands," says Kawaun in a visiting room near his cell. His nose is twisted to one side; knuckles on both fists are scarred with teeth marks. "You know," he adds, "Let's see who has the wickedest 52

skills.' The real era for the 52 was in the seventies. All these cats that grew up in the nineties, they didn't know nothin' about 52 or having real hand skills. All they know about is guns."

Smoky's Flatbush opponent, Tom Roof, one of Brooklyn's most feared knockout artists, estimates that he knows only a few dozen fighters—friends in jail or hustling in Brooklyn—versed in 52 Blocks. Bill Falkner, a Nevada police officer who teaches self-defense workshops to other cops, says he knows about the 52 Blocks, "but I can't speak about it with authority, because it's obviously been so underground. We're trying to view it as a form of counterintelligence—as criminals tend to watch police officers for trends, that's a two-way street. I've seen surveillance tapes out of different prisons, ranging from California to Michigan to Florida."

The style has informed Tyson's early prize-fighting and the Wu-Tang Clan's lyrics ("Fifty-two cops can't withstand my 52 Blocks/ Unless they bust like 52 shots," raps Method Man). And the phrase has become a kind of code within the New York hip-hop scene: How many viewers of James Toback's *Black and White* (which paired Tyson with the unfortunately dreadlocked Brooke Shields) understood this soundtrack lyric, from the Wu-Tang offshoot American Cream Team: "I ain't have to Quickdraw McGraw ya/ I could 52 Block ya/ Switch my stance up southpaw, drop ya?"

In a recent release, "I Remember," the 22-year-old Queens rapper Nature rhymes: "Fifty-two blocks, Cazal frames, bald heads, and heavy chains/ Somehow caught in the game back in '83, before cable TV/ When these so-called thug niggas played in the street/ I used to hear the stories ..."

Dennis Newsome, who taught Mel Gibson a 52 Blocks variation for the first *Lethal Weapon* installment, says, "As a black man, it makes me super-proud, because 52 Blocks is one of the most sophisticated of the martial arts to ever come through this planet."

**T**HE SYSTEM RECALLS CAPOEIRA, A rhythmic West African martial art that, disguised as a dance, survived among Brazil's slaves in the sixteenth century and then emerged in the slums of Rio de Janeiro in the early 1800s. In this country, 52 Blocks is the apotheosis of black-American fighting arts that also date from a slaveholding era, when white masters would pit their toughest black fighters against each other in human cockfights. Corrections officers noticed 52 Blocks in the forties and fifties, mistakenly branding it "prison karate," assuming that black inmates had merely adopted Sino-tactics and given them "soul."

There are various theories about the origin of the

term 52 Blocks, but most blitzers say it refers to the genre's fluid, free-form fighting patterns, deployed with the unpredictability of a shuffled pack of 52 cards. Indeed, the most helpful analogue may be the three-card-monte hustle: Fifty-two is a violent art of deception that hypnotizes opponents with flashy technique before delivering a devastating, unexpected strike. Favored moves include lunging for your opponent's pant cuff and dumping him on his back; catching his fist in midair and planting a humiliating kiss on the knuckles before throwing it back in his face; or ducking to deliver a straight-arm punch that seems to start back in Mississippi



Though Judah was born in 1978 and is too young to have observed 52 masters in their prime, he learned a few moves from his uncle. "Back in the day, dudes was shootin' a fair one, man, puttin' heads to sleep," Judah says. He pauses and, in a hushed tone, drops the name of the most feared 52 Blocks fighter of all time: "Mother Dear—he was a homo but he was knockin' muthafuckas out."

The name *Mother Dear* hardly inspires terror in the uninitiated. But to anyone who knows the history of the 52 Blocks—anyone who grew up in Brooklyn in the seventies—the name is as ominous as Vlad the Impaler. Tom Roof and Pimpin'



[inmates] at the same time. And this ain't like kung fu in the movies, where they all stand around in a circle and run in one at a time. They all had 52 skills, and Mother Dear knocked 'em all out. Man, the cat was ill. He made some people do some hard time—made 'em suffer."

No slouch himself, Newsome says that when L.A. Sheriff's Office sergeant Art Fransen saw him with Gibson on the *Lethal Weapon* set, Fransen suggested he teach 52 Blocks to the force. Newsome says, "I told him, 'I ain't teachin' you shit. You know why? I know how you gonna twist it.' It's common knowledge in the black and Mexican



HIT-HOP: OTHER TECHNIQUES INCLUDE THE STRAIGHT-ARM PUNCH (LEFT AND CENTER) AND KISSING AN OPPONENT'S KNUCKLES BEFORE THROWING THEM BACK IN HIS FACE (RIGHT).

and gather deadly momentum as it arcs overhead.

Newsome, who has traced the movement's oral history, says, "I want to be real emphatic: Before black people knew about any of those Asian martial arts, we were fighting this way." He adds, "One of the reasons it stayed so secret is that when you go to the joint, everyone's separated by ethnicity. White boys stay with white boys, Mexicans stay with Mexicans, blacks stay with blacks. You don't teach your enemy your art, because if you teach him, when a riot breaks out, he's gonna use the art against you."

Tyson's friend and fellow Brooklyn scrapper Zab Judah, the undefeated International Boxing Federation junior welterweight champion, reports, "Yeah, Mike will still slip in a little 52. You can't really get away with too much of it in boxing, 'cause most of it's illegal, but it can help you out, blocking with the elbows and shoulders." A trained eye can see Tyson in his heyday—knocking out Biggs and Berbick and Bruno—employing various gangsta locks (classic 52 immobilization techniques), clever 52 footwork, as well as surreptitious elbow shots to the solar plexus and collarbone.

Lee (another Brooklyn hustler whose every tooth is capped in gold) claim to have seen Mother Dear's fistic fury on Rikers Island around 1978. "The faggot would come down the tier shouting, 'Dicks

community what they do to us—illegal abuses, choke-outs—all my life, I've known it."

Fransen recalls, "I just thought it looked pretty."

Newsome makes his living teaching capoeira

## ALTHOUGH IT NOW HAS A BLAXPLOITATIVE HIPSTER SHEEN, THE METHOD ITSELF IS FIGHTING TO SURVIVE ON THE STREET.

on the gate! I wanna see all dicks on the gate!" Tom says. "And if you didn't actually have your dick on the gate, he was knockin' your ass out, takin' that shit by force." Roof describes Mother Dear, who died in prison, as a slight, effeminate East New York hoodlum who directed his amorous advances at the most massive, "thugged-out niggas and murderers." According to Roof, Mother Dear "really acted like a bitch. But there was a man in there too, and when you made him mad, that's when the man came out."

Newsome agrees. "Mother Dear had a fight one time that was so famous, we heard about it out here in San Diego," he says. "He whipped eight

workshops in San Diego but will instruct a handful of young African-American pupils, by invitation only, in the 52 Blocks. Asked how a true 52 Blocks stylist—young and in top physical condition—would fare in a no-holds-barred competition with an Asian martial artist, Newsome says without hesitation, "Man, he'd tear that shit up."

But on the streets of Brooklyn, the aging badasses would like to see the 52 Blocks find a following beyond knowing hipsters. "Word, if they really made a fuckin' movie about how dudes was fightin' with 52 Blocks back in the day," Tom Roof says, "you'd have all these young muthafuckas lined up around the block payin' to see that shit." ■