



## STICK FIGHTING

The Dog Brothers are a self-described 'band of sweaty, smelly, psychopaths with sticks'. Founded in Hermosa Beach, California, USA with a credo of 'Higher consciousness through harder contact' they have grown to become an international phenomenon with 'clans' throughout the US, Canada, Switzerland, Italy, Germany, Poland, Spain and the UK. The twice yearly 'Dog Brothers Gatherings of the Pack' are only a small part of this group's dedication to the martial arts.

The early UFC turned down the Dog Brothers for being 'just too extreme' for the Octagon, yet there is much interest in the California based group from various media companies featured on Bravo's 'Ultimate Warriors' and various other programmes worldwide. The group has representatives across the US, Europe and now in the United Kingdom.

# DOG BROTHERS

GRAEME HIGGINS  
INTERVIEW  
BY MATT TUCKER

With much talk of a full length documentary by none other than National Geographic, Matt Tucker interviews real contact stick fighter, and Dog Brothers Martial Arts Trainer, 'Dog' Graeme Higgins.

Following the first Dog Brothers European Gathering in Bern, Switzerland, Graeme talks about the Gathering, the arts behind it and what it feels like to be hit HARD!



**Matt Tucker: Graeme, When did you first get into martial arts?**

Graeme Higgins: My first serious exposure to martial arts must have been when I was about 12 or 13, like a lot of people I started in Judo. It was an art that I loved and it had a huge impact on me, which is still with me today. The fact that the club I was in sparred a lot and the way that you needed to fight to grade, has left a lasting impression that stays with me even now. Unfortunately, I discovered the joys of being a teenager and martial arts fell by the wayside for a while. I played with a bit of Kickboxing and Kung Fu but didn't really start training seriously again until my early 20s when I discovered the joy of Kali through a JKD school in Glasgow.

**MT: How did you get involved in DBMA?**

GH: After a short stint working at the school, a number of the instructors from the school and I were looking for a new home, so to speak. The journey brought two people into my path that changed the way I looked at my training.

The first was Dave Green who without a doubt has had a bigger impact on my training, and my life, than anyone else. I still remember the day I sat in his living room and watched the Dog Brothers tapes for the first time. Dave later started travelling to LA to train with Guro Crafty. He gave me my grounding in DBMA and taught me to functionalise a lot of what I already knew.

The second person was Richard Killick. I only had the chance to train with Richard on a couple of occasions, this was just after he had fought at the DB Gathering. The way he talked about the tribe made me more determined to one day be a part of this.

**MT: How did the Dog Brothers come into existence and why the doggy names on things?**

Marc Denny was reading a Conan the Barbarian comic book wherein Conan is leading a band of warriors into battle saying, "Come on you dog-brothers!" and it hit him. Since then the name has revealed itself to be a more fortuitous metaphor than was known at the time.

GH: The Dog Brothers are a band of sweaty, smelly, psychopaths with sticks. DBMA is the corporation founded by Marc 'Crafty Dog' Denny. It is the vehicle through which the 'Dog Brothers Gatherings of the Pack' are hosted and through which Guro Crafty teaches. In addition to its business purposes (e.g. video production, tax deductibility for medical insurance) it serves to protect Marc from personal liability. DBMA is 'the system of many styles' which has evolved out of the interplay of what we have been taught and our experience. Except for Guro Crafty, DBMA instructors are NOT employees, agents, etc. of DBIMA.

**MT: Where does the name come from?**

GH: It comes from the interplay of a couple of serendipitous events. At 'the Rumble at Ramblas' (May 1988) there were three fighters named Marc/Mark (Denny, Balluff, and Sanden). Naturally, to minimize confusion the search for nicknames was on. Something happened that led to someone calling Marc Denny a 'crafty dog' and Mark Balluff spoke very well in a post fight interview about how the experience led to a feeling of brotherhood. That week Marc Denny was reading a Conan the Barbarian comic book wherein Conan is leading a band of warriors into battle saying, "Come on you dog-brothers!" and it hit him. Since then the name has revealed itself to be a more fortuitous metaphor than was known at the time.

**MT: What, if anything, makes DBMA unique amongst the FMA?**

GH: Well, according to some people we are not authentic FMA because of non-Filipino strands in the system! If I have it right, Guro Crafty explains it like this: DBMA is a FMA-

based system with a mission statement of 'Walk as a Warrior for All your days.' The three main FMA systems that DBMA draws upon are Inosanto Blend, Pekiti Tirsia and Lameco. In knife (which we teach in-house only) we also draw upon Sayoc. Following Guro Inosanto's logic of the Majapahit Empire, we also draw upon Krabi Krabong (the Thai military weaponry system of which the ring sport of Muay Thai is an offshoot), Silat (principally Maphilindo, Serak and Bukti Negara) and Burmese Bando. Outside of Southeast Asian arts we also draw upon Brazilian Jiu Jitsu. There are other lesser influences as well such as Jun Fan Gung Fu, Savate and others. If we want to be brief, we just say DBMA is Kali-Silat and others.

Guro Crafty is a student of Guro Inosanto, Grand Tuhon Gaje, the late Punong Guro Edgar Sulite, Tuhon Chris Sayoc and has trained with other FMA masters as well, but he feels that to include something because it is Filipino or to exclude something because it is not Filipino would create cognitive dissonance with the core FMA principle of truth in combat. The Filipinos have always felt free to incorporate things to which they were exposed. If we did not do the same we would be contradicting their example.

Amongst the distinctive features of the system are:

1. DBMA is based upon continuous, vigorous testing in the context of 'Dog Brothers Gatherings of the Pack'. Though most people involved in the system are 'practitioners', the presence of numerous fighters throughout the system makes for well-grounded practical training. People see the results of the training in other members of their group, which helps







them internalize their training in a sound way.

2. Strong emphasis on being able to adapt and improvise with what the environment may offer. Because what we may find to pick up may often require two hands, staff/dos manos is an important part of the system
3. Strong emphasis on using Kali Silat empty handed for real, not just in theory. The DBMA sub-system of 'Kali Tudu' (r) addresses bringing these skills to the laboratory of MMA.
4. A teaching progression that seeks to help people become 'someone to be reckoned with' in short order AND to help them accumulate life-long results.
5. The training methods are designed to produce outstanding health and fitness results. The training methods are suitable for all ages and enable people of different experience levels to work together enjoyably and beneficially.
6. The training progression prepares people to operate for real in 360 degree situations. This is the physical goal of much of the training in the system.
7. By drawing on sources such as Konrad Lorenz, Karl Jung, and the personal experiences of people who have chosen to fight at Gatherings, the system engages fully with the deeper questions of what life is about.
8. The DVDs put out by Dog Brothers Martial Arts are outstanding training aids that complement class training very well. The Dog Brothers Martial Arts Association is very real and Guro Crafty is quite active in it on a daily basis. Via the DBMA Assn, the internet, and regular private training with either Guro Crafty or Guro Lonely, those of us here in the UK can connect to the larger Dog Brothers experience. It gives us the opportunity to draw on the



experience of other group leaders, and share our experiences. Now that the Council of Elders has inaugurated 'Dog Brothers Gatherings of the Pack' in Bern, Switzerland, there is a vehicle for Europeans to become part of the tribe ('Dog' status) without having to incur the expense of travel to California though to become a full Dog Brother one must indeed fight at the DB Gatherings there.

**MT: Please tell us about the 'Dog Brothers Gatherings'.**

GH: The Gatherings are a truly amazing experience. I've only taken part in the European ones so far, and had the honour of taking part in the first stick fights of the day both times. I am always amazed at the attitude of the fighters. A nicer bunch of guys you will never meet. The format itself is pretty simple, you register, turn up, warm up and ask someone to fight.

It's a great thing to see so many groups turn up to this kind of event with the right attitude and it's a testament to Marc (Crafty Dog), Eric (Top Dog), Arlan (Salty Dog) and Ben (Lonely Dog) that they could put this kind of event on and set the tone so that everyone is 'friends at the end of the day'.

**MT: What are the rules?**

GH: Rules are part of a different mindset. You're not there to compete; you're not there to destroy the other guy. You're there to push him to his limit and make him better through it and likewise he is there to do the same to you. Given the circumstances, there are too many ways that you can cause lasting damage to the other guy to legislate against specific things. So at the beginning Marc gives a talk. The essential part is no judges, no referees, no trophies. One rule only: Be friends at the end of the day. Our goal is that everyone leaves with the IQ with which he came and our goal is that no one spends the night in the hospital. However, only you are responsible for you, so protect yourself at all times. No suing anyone for no reason, no how, no way. This puts the onus on you to tap if you feel out of your depth, but there's a code that your partner shouldn't take a shot that will seriously damage you.

**MT: How did you prepare for the Euro Gathering?**

GH: Lots of cardio and a good diet. Also about 3 months before it we started sparring sessions and had a couple of 'sparring days' where we turned the intensity up a bit. I had been sparring minimal armour with Dave and my students for a long time, so the main things I worked on was fitness and the mental issues of fighting someone I hadn't trained with or trained.





**MT: How does it feel to be hit with a rattan stick?**

GH: It hurts, but you only feel the first one.

**MT: How does it feel to hit someone else?**

GH: I've been doing it that long I don't think about it anymore. I actually had more problems punching someone after their mask came off than hitting them with a stick beforehand. It's strange how you can turn off your mind's inhibitors if you do something long enough.

**MT: Live traditional drum music is played at all the Dog Brothers Gatherings. How does this help the fighters?....**

GH: It makes a BIG difference. I fought with and without them at both gatherings and prefer with. It's part of the ritual space of the Gathering and gets you in the right mindset.

**MT: The sticks DBMA use seem much larger than the usual used in FMA. Do the fighters have a choice regarding the weight/size of the weapon and is there a stick that would be considered too big for RCSF?....**

GH: Stick size and equipment is up to the fighters. At the last gathering I asked a fighter to change gloves (they were biker gloves that had metal inlays in the wrist which I wasn't comfortable with) and gave one of my training

partners what he described as a 'dose of sanity' when I talked him out of fighting with a guy who had 1" 3/4 dia sticks.

**MT: What do you make of claims that DBMA over-emphasises/relies on grappling?**

GH: It's a tricky subject. A lot of people say the head gear makes a difference (with regards to closing to grappling)...and it can. This does mean that you will see grappling happen occasionally because the head gear allows it.

I think the level of difference attributed to the fencing masks is sometimes thrown out of proportion. Not all fencing masks are the same and some of the ones used offer hardly any protection at all. I also have closed to grappling and have seen people close in ways that would have worked without head gear. Guro Crafty has and teaches very good science in this regard.

The other side is that I see fighters at the Gatherings who train specifically to stay on their feet, and they are very good at it. Without people trying to take them down, they wouldn't have the skill they currently do.

The debate could go on forever, but because we are not keeping score, each person is free to make of it what they will.

**MT: You are the first person to be given 'Dog' status in Scotland. What is a 'Dog'?**

GH: To put it in doggie terms, you're getting your butt sniffed. It means that you are a member of the tribe. It might be the start of the journey to becoming a Dog Brother or it might not. The fact that I'm also the 1st guy from the UK to become a Dog and be allowed to teach DBMA makes it an even bigger adventure (I should point out that Dog Kris Dunnage is the first UK member of the tribe but he is not involved with DBMA-which brings me to a point that Guro Crafty always wants to have quite clear: There is a difference between 'the Dog Brothers' and 'Dog Brothers Martial Arts' and one does not need to be involved with DBMA to be part of the DBs or vice versa).

**MT: Do you have to fight at a gathering to benefit from DBMA?....**

GH: Not at all, there are two ways to look at training in DBMA; as a fighter and as a practitioner. It's important to point out that following one path doesn't mean you can't follow another. You can start down the practitioner route and decide you want to fight, or start with the desire to fight in a gathering but just enjoy the training. Dog Brothers Martial Arts' mission statement 'Walk as a warrior for all your days' is at the heart of this. I still want to be training in my



60s, but I doubt I'll be fighting.

**MT: Can you tell us a little bit about the empty hands and self defence side of DBMA?**

GH: Like everything else in the system, these are evolving, Marc (Guro Crafty) is constantly refining and testing things. It's interesting how little changes to the way you train can make a big difference. He helps you bring real insight into what you are doing and why. DBMA is designed to get you to be 'someone to be reckoned with' in short order, while simultaneously laying the foundation for deeper growth over time. The footwork matrix and the idioms of movement are designed to be what he calls 'consistent across categories' and the teaching progression is designed to culminate in the ability to operate in what DBMA calls '360 degree situations'.

As part of the empty hands, Marc teaches what he calls 'Kali Tudo' - how to truly use Kali-Silat in the context of MMA. He makes the point that by actually hitting people with sticks we are grounding these movements in our bodies in the adrenal state and preparing ourselves to use these same movements empty handed.

Also DBMA is big on fulfilling the FMA promise of being able to 'adapt and improvise' with items that one might spontaneously find in the environment in a moment of trouble. For example, many items that we pick up may require two hands. Therefore in DBMA

staff/dos manos is an important area of the system. An added benefit is that this material is very good for the health of the spine and hips and cultivates striking power with the stick, with punches and with kicks too.

**MT: Knife Defence, how does DBMA cover this difficult subject?**

GH: Recently Marc has gone public with what he calls the 'Kali Fence' and the 'Dog Catcher'. Marc speaks highly of Geoff Thompson here in the UK in his articulation of the concept of the Fence. Marc's preferred fence he calls the 'Kali Fence' to give credit to the art - it is very interesting because it treats empty hand strikes and common knife strikes the same.

Speaking candidly concerning knife defence, for a long time I was having doubts with regards to how much of what I had been taught before was 'art' and how much was 'martial' when it came to knife defence. Looking back though, the material has a LOT of merit, the drawback was in the way I was training it.

One rule only: Be friends at the end of the day. Our goal is that everyone leaves with the IQ with which he came and our goal is that no one spends the night in the hospital. However, only you are responsible for you, so protect yourself at all times. No suing anyone for no reason, no how, no way.

With the Dog Catcher Marc has given me a new belief in the material. It's amazing how when Marc shows how aggro the forward pressure of real knife attacks can really be (he teaches many prison guards and police in the US and Mexico) and then connects it with DBMA concepts such as 'the triangle from the third dimension' and how to really use triangular footwork with certain other things, things change. The difference in what can be achieved against hard, realistic attacks is considerable.

**MT: You are hosting a special seminar with Guru Benjamin 'Lonely Dog' Rittiner. Can you tell us about this event?**

GH: Yes, we are planning regular seminars with Guru Benjamin. The first is going to be in Glasgow on the 25th and 26th of November. It'll be the first time that Benjamin has taught in the UK. The man is an amazing martial artist and teacher and I hope this is the first of many times I get him to the UK. We are also planning other Seminars in London for early 2007.

**MT: How can people get involved with DBMA?**

GH: They can get in touch with

ou, Matt, in London and South East, myself in Glasgow or the UK's other active Group Leader Colin Stewart in Bristol. Alternatively, pay a visit to the main associations website below.



**DBMA**

Main association website

Web: [dogbrothers.co.uk](http://dogbrothers.co.uk)

To contact Graeme Higgins

Web: [combative.co.uk](http://combative.co.uk)

If any readers would like to get involved in DBMA please contact Apprentice Instructor Matt Tucker

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