

My Experience with Gayong

- TIM DOYLE

He lined us up as if for inspection. We had just performed a few basic blocks and kicks for him. Now, he looked us up and down. I was out of breath.

"Do you have any martial arts experience?" he asked each of us as he went down the line.

Everyone had some experience – judo, MMA training and others. Then he came to me.

"You haven't had training have you, Tim?" he asked with a smile.

"Not so much." Was it that obvious?

"That's OK," he said, patting me on the back.

His name was Sheikh Shamsuddin (Guru Sheikh Shamsuddin bin Tan Sri SM Salim), our teacher.

"Call me Sam," he said.

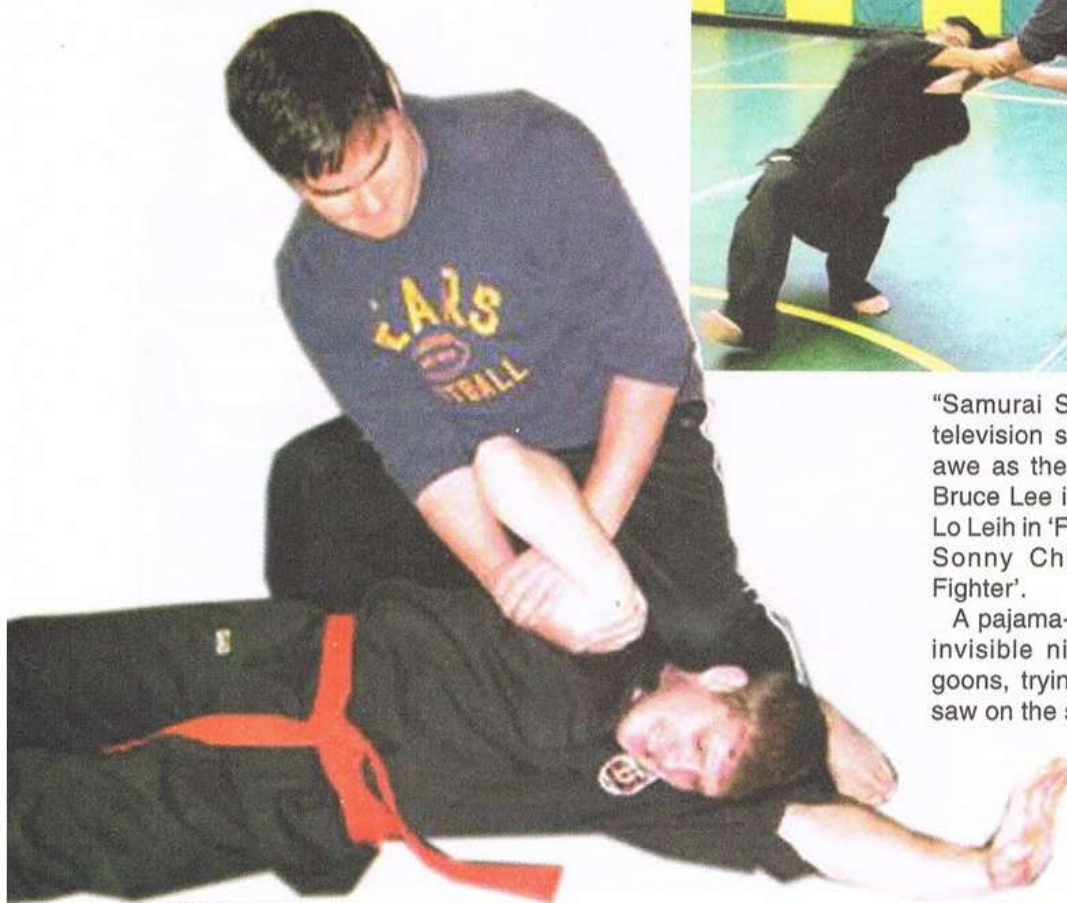
I hadn't had any formal martial arts training, but I wasn't unfamiliar with the concept.

As a kid, I got up early to catch



"Samurai Sunday" on my local television station. I watched in awe as the masters performed: Bruce Lee in 'Enter the Dragon', Lo Leih in 'Five Fingers of Death', Sonny Chiba in 'The Street Fighter'.

A pajama-clad warrior, I'd fight invisible ninjas and syndicate goons, trying to imitate what'd I saw on the screen.



But as years past, I had become a grown up. For too long, I lived on coffee and doughnuts. I needed a change, a renewal. I knew the College of Dupage offered physical education courses, even martial arts.

Could I still learn? I thought. Is it too late for me?

I scanned the course catalog. I saw some martial arts I knew, or at least I had heard of: judo, aikido and karate. But then there was one I didn't recognize: Malay Silat, it was called. "Malaysian martial art... with an emphasis on deception." Sounds cool. "Some weapons training... no uniform required". Now we're talking.

Sam shows us a body-locking technique. I watch carefully but I'm still unsure of what to do. I'm not used to moving in such a way. Perhaps I'm not built for this martial art. Sam pins one of my fellow students, who wisely taps out.

"Now it's your turn, Tim," Sam says, flashing his now-familiar smile. "You must experience the pain to understand what you are doing."

There's an emphasis on safety in this class, and with good reason. This martial art is Silat Seni Gayong, and it is geared toward self-defense. The attacker must suffer to preserve the life of the defender.

I square up against Sam. He is half my size, maybe. But he's all sinew and bone; and he moves effortlessly.

I throw a punch at Sam, as per his request. Almost immediately I regret obliging him. Sam blocks my punch and locks my wrist. Next thing I know, my arm is past my head and my rib cage is exposed. Sam delivers a knee to my floating ribs, but he does so in such a way as to not cause any damage. His next move sends me to the ground. His knee is on my temple. My wrist feels like its going to snap. I tap out. Now I understand.

Or do I? "This is what we call "fruit one", Sam tells us. "Now you practice on each other."

I fumble through the technique. I manage to bring my partner to the ground but somehow it just doesn't feel right.

"Details, Tim," Sam says. He shows me what I did wrong. "Keep practicing." I do.

On the other side of the room are the experienced students. They are all wearing black uniforms and colored belts. I'm nowhere near their level of skill in this martial art.

What am I doing here?

Weeks go by. I keep showing up for class. My kicks are a little stronger. I remember the techniques. Maybe I'm getting the hang of this. Sam shows me another 'detail'. Maybe not. There's much more to learn. Just when I think I understand something there's another detail that I missed. Then there are more techniques to learn. I keep working. My muscles grow accustomed to what I'm asking them to do.



"You're improving, Tim", Sam tells me, slapping me on the back.

I am improving, but I want to be even better. I feel like a kid again.

I sign up for another semester of Silat. Sam gives me a chance to work with some weapons: rubber knives and a thick staff made of rattan called a simbat. Toward the end of the semester Sam tells me I'm going to test.

"Don't be nervous," he says. Too late, I think.

I work with one of the experienced students to prepare. We go over some fruit and pukulan techniques. I'm nervous but I trust in Sam. He wouldn't test me without good reason.

I perform in front of the class. The students with red belts grade my performance. Then, a surprise: they spar with me! First I face one, then another, then another, then two at a time, then three, then four! How long will this go on? Luckily, there are no more red belts in the class. Finally, Sam stops the test. I await the results, breathlessly.

Turns out, I passed. I don't bother to ask by how much. I'm told I need to find a white belt by next week. Great, a belt! But does this mean I have to wear a uniform?

I wait for next week. After that I plan to sign up for the next semester. There's still much to learn, and I can't wait.

