

the **CrossFit** JOURNAL ARTICLES

Surviving in Brazilian Jiu-Jitsu

Becca Borawski



Jimmy Tang at the North American BJJ Tournament in September 2007.

Navigating the landscape of martial arts training can sometimes be a daunting and mysterious task. Following up on last month's article on how to choose a Brazilian jiu-jitsu (BJJ) academy, I asked a few more questions of a panel of experts in the art. This second article in a three-part series addresses how to survive in Brazilian jiu-jitsu once you've got started—meaning how to navigate everything from ringworm and cauliflower ear, to what to wear underneath your gi and how not to annoy your teammates.

This month's panel of experts

- *Jimmy Tang* has been training in Brazilian jiu-jitsu, both with and without the traditional gi, for six and

a half years. A frequent tournament competitor, Jimmy earned his brown belt from Jean Jacques Machado in 2006.

- *Felicia Oh* earned her black belt from Jean Jacques Machado in four and a half years and has been training for seven. She teaches BJJ and is a certified CrossFit trainer at Big John McCarthy's Ultimate Training Academy in California. In 2007 she was the FILA World Grappling Champion and Pan-Am Champion in both gi and no-gi divisions.
- *Kenny Florian* is a mixed martial arts (MMA) fighter, Ultimate Fighter contestant, and top contender in the 155-pound weight division in the UFC. He has

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been training BJJ for approximately eleven years and earned his black belt in five and a half years, from Roberta Maia of Gracie Barra.

- *Valerie Worthington* has been training for nine years. She earned her purple belt from Carlson Gracie and Carlson Gracie, Jr. Currently she trains under Johnny Ramirez and John Ouano at New Breed Academy. In 2007 she won the gold in her weight division at the World Grappling Games in Antalya, Turkey.

Check your ego

One very situation commonly experienced by people new to BJJ is for them to come back from their first class with a tale of a higher-ranking belt being inexplicably hard on them and telling the newcomer to relax. The newcomer is frequently confused and often mistakes his or her own uncontrollable aggression with having one-upped the higher belt.

“People who are just getting started in BJJ are generally awkward and inefficient in their movements,” says Valerie. “Unlike more experienced practitioners, who move smoothly, gracefully, and efficiently, white belts tend to use a higher ratio of muscle and energy to technique. This translates into jerky, ineffective movements and sometimes feels like the person is flailing around uncontrollably. This ‘flailing’ can be made considerably worse if beginners do not like to tap and will do anything to avoid having to—including flailing around so much that they hit their partner or otherwise causes pain or potential injury.”

It is essential when beginning training in BJJ to be patient and understand that you do not know what you are doing. More than most other martial arts, ego needs to be tossed aside in BJJ. A large part of the learning process is being submitted by higher-ranking belts. Newcomers need to understand that reckless abandon is neither a safe situation, for them or their training partners, nor conducive to learning.

Says Kenny, “Relaxation, technique, and leverage are the keys. Ego can lead to slower learning because you are thinking about winning or losing instead of getting better and understanding skills.” Felicia Oh elaborates: “Work on BJJ, not your ego. Don’t worry about tapping. Learn to do it early and often and you’ll avoid some unnecessary injuries.”

“BJJ is apt to be unlike anything you’ve ever tried before,” Valerie adds. “Put your ego in your pocket in every way. It will be difficult, but it will be unbelievably worth it.”

Nuisances

Although not an injury, one of the more unavoidable ailments that can curtail training in BJJ is ringworm. Early on it may appear as just a red bump or an itchy spot, but it will quickly grow into the telltale ring, and it is highly contagious. Jimmy advises, “Put some Lamisil or any anti-fungal on it three times a day or when it gets really itchy. You probably got it because you didn’t shower quickly after training and you scratched yourself. Or you had a cut, didn’t cover it, and trained. To protect yourself, shower as soon as possible after training and if you have a cut or an abrasion on your skin, cover it up.” A commonly suggested preventative measure is to take acidophilus or eat yogurt on a daily basis. Once ringworm is contracted, the best measure to prevent further outbreaks is to stay off the mats.

Valerie adds this etiquette advice when it comes to ringworm, “I would implore [a new person] to 1) shower immediately after training—every time! 2) pitch in to clean the mats on a regular basis, and 3) wash his gi and/or rash guard and shorts after every training session. Insisting on training with ringworm is rude and inconsiderate.”

Another common occurrence once you’ve begun grappling is to one day realize a burning sensation in your ears and possibly the beginnings of a swelling. This swelling can grow into a fluid filled sac, which can be painful and unsightly. Over time this sac will harden into a permanent disfigurement, known as “cauliflower ear,” which is common in a variety of martial arts where trauma is inflicted on the ears. “For the most part cauliflower ear doesn’t just suddenly appear,” says Jimmy. “It usually comes after your ear is sore from training. If you notice your ears getting sore, take a break. If it does blow up, go to an ENT (ear, nose, and throat) medical specialist and have them drain it for you.”

“After draining the ear,” suggests Valerie, “get some SAM splint, which is a spongy material backed by a thin layer of bendable metal. Pinch a piece of SAM splint around the affected ear as tightly as you can stand it. This will keep the ear from filling back up with fluid.”

“The next step,” Valerie says, “is to get headgear and wear it. It’s not attractive, and it’s not comfortable for



Felicia Oh at the No-Gi Mundials in December 2007.

Felicia Oh's Top 5 BJJ Etiquette Tips

1. When rolling, get out of the way of higher belts.
2. If you're new, don't walk in and start teaching others.
3. Be nice and people will be nice back.
4. Don't be a spaz. Communicate with your training partners.
5. Wash your gi after every use. Don't be the "stinker" in class.

you or your training partner. But if you do not consider cauliflower ear to be a badge of honor, as many grapplers do, you must protect your ears while training to keep it from coming back."

Attire

Another area of concern for students new to Brazilian jiu-jitsu is proper wardrobe. The preferences for clothing run the gamut in both gi and no-gi training, so a new student should be observant of what other students in the academy are wearing. Says Jimmy, "For me, I think it's kind of rude not to wear anything under your shirt. No one wants a sweaty chest on their face. I like wearing a rash guard because it wicks away the sweat and if you want to go no-gi after a gi class, you can just take your gi top off." Kenny concurs and adds in some safety equipment as well: "Wear long-sleeve rash guard, board shorts, groin protector, and knee pads for no gi. The same should be worn under the gi, minus the board shorts."

Women usually tend to dress in layers so as not to be distracted by clothing getting pulled up. Felicia Oh has a system down, "I wear a tight tank (the kind with a built-in sports bra) and a t-shirt with the tank tucked into the board shorts for no-gi. For gi, I wear the tight tank or a sports bra with a t-shirt under the gi tucked into my pants." Valerie has a similar system, only she also layers a rash guard under the t-shirt, "For no gi, I prefer to wear a sports bra under a rash guard under a t-shirt on top, and a pair of compression shorts under a pair of board shorts on bottom."

Women also have a more complicated time dealing with their hair if it's long. Since longer hair can get pulled on or accidentally pulled out, hairstyles are an important aspect of preparing to train. "I feel it's my responsibility to keep my hair out of the way if I don't want it to get pulled out," says Felicia. The solution settled on by most longer-haired women seems to be a combination of braiding and ponytails—using multiple ties to segment the hair and keep it from potentially coming loose or falling out of the braid.

Tapping out

Sometimes the existence of women in a BJJ class can present a complication for the men who are training. It is not uncommon for men to be uncomfortable with women for a few different reasons. Sometimes they are

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Valerie Worthington on top at the No-Gi Mundials, December 2007.

not sure how hard to go; they are either concerned about hurting them or their egos are overcompensating out of fear of losing to a woman.

“Don’t have an ego,” advises Jimmy. “When you’re rolling with females, give them as much resistance as you think they need to work. Work on your technique instead of using maximal strength, but don’t be a dead fish.” Talking the issue out with a female training partner is highly suggested. Valerie adds, “Since there are relatively few women at any given academy, you can talk to them about your concerns about rolling too hard. Usually they will have plenty of experience rolling with people who are bigger and stronger than they are.”

When it comes to being submitted by a woman, men can sometimes find themselves feeling uncomfortable or feeling the urge to get overly aggressive with a female training partner in response. “Sure, you can probably crush her and tap her or, worse, injure her,” says Felicia. “How does that make you feel? You have an opportunity to work on techniques. You can learn about jiu-jitsu. You can see and feel that it does work. You can learn to respect the belts and what they represent. And learn to respect people no matter their size or gender. What if it’s a small guy? Is that different? Is the issue getting tapped by a woman or by a person smaller than yourself? If it’s because it’s a woman, don’t train with her...for her health and safety as well as your own.”

“If you’re rolling with a black belt female, she will have better technique and quite possibly tap you,” adds Jimmy. “Respect the belt. There is a reason why she’s attained the black belt. She’s put in the mat time,

trained, practiced, and sacrificed to get where she’s at. There is no shame in tapping to anyone on the mat. Every time you tap, you’re learning.”

“Tapping can be frustrating,” says Kenny, “but it simply means you are not solving the grappling equation in front of you as you train. This could be due to technical, mental, or physical limitations. You need to be smart enough to figure out which one it is or if they are all a problem. BJJ is all about problem-solving on the fly.”

“We’ve all been through this,” adds Jimmy. “It’s going to take time and practice – don’t worry, though; the longer you train, the better it gets. The guys who are tapping you were you before, but they didn’t give up and kept training. You can be them if you keep at it.”

Next month we will take the final step down the path of training Brazilian jiu-jitsu – how to survive in the long run and achieve the higher belt ranks.



Becca Borawski teaches and trains at [Petranek Fitness/CrossFit Los Angeles](#) in Santa Monica. She has a master’s degree in film from the University of Southern California and a background in martial arts training. She has blended these skills together to produce DVDs and build websites for professional fighters. Her main job is as the music editor on the TV show *Scrubs* and she currently trains jiu-jitsu under Eddie Bravo at 10th Planet Jiu-Jitsu in Hollywood.