

Q&A with Emily Kwok

by Sally Arsenault

Sally: You've created a third "How to Defeat the Bigger, Stronger Opponent" series with Stephan Kesting. What sets this set apart from the others?

Emily: *This instalment is geared for no gi grappling. We had really positive feedback after the first set, but some people wondered why there wasn't any no gi included. We intentionally geared the first series towards gi only because there was a lot of material to cover and thought it would be better to focus a separate DVD for no gi instead of cramming it into one.*

Sally: How did you come to collaborate with Stephan for the first set? Were you surprised at how popular it has become?

Emily: *Stephan and I go back...WAAAAY back...to me as a white belt, training in the basement of a Muay Thai gym. I was a student of Denis Kang's at the time, and Stephan was Denis's friend and teammate. Occasionally if Denis couldn't teach, Stephan would come in to help out. We've kept up here and there throughout the years, and reconnected when Stephan came to NYC a couple years back to meet the team at MGInAction. He asked if I would be interested in doing a podcast, then it evolved into a DVD project.*



I am surprised with how popular it has become only because I was so nervous making the first set, and wondered how I could possibly hang in there with the multitude of top notch BJJ talent there is to choose from. I should explain that my own feelings and insecurities are separate from the respect and confidence I have in Stephan's expertise and ability to understand and develop his market. In that respect, I trusted that Stephan would give me the right feedback to make sure I was delivering material that his audience would be interested in – thus creating a desirable product. I think we both knew it was a bit of a shot in the dark to see how receptive people would be to a DVD led by a female, but the market has grown and diversified so much in the last 10 years we figured it was worth a try! I am personally so grateful for the open mindedness and gracious reception we've had.

Sally: You said you felt you always had to learn the hard way how to defend yourself efficiently against larger people. Was your teacher a larger guy? Who were your mentors as your game progressed?

Emily: *In the beginning, I don't think there was much else to do than to just train with everyone that you could, which meant that sometimes my partners were close to double my size. In a class of 2 or 3 people, you can't really pick your partners! Lol. Coming up through the ranks, I wasn't very intelligent about my own safety because I hadn't figured out that being squashed by a 240 pound man who was better than me and had no mercy on a beginner wasn't helping my game much, and I didn't have people to tell me that this was a bad idea.*

*My very first instructor was the smallest of the bunch, though he was still probably 20-30 pound larger than me. The rest of my instructors ranged in the 170-200 pound zone. In terms of mentors, I have to say that I was quite unaware of the greater BJJ scene since I had been moving from Vancouver to NYC, to Tokyo and back...and BJJ was one of my **many** hobbies (I was an aspiring artist at the time). It wasn't until I was a purple belt that it became more serious for me and I began to learn more of the history, the athletes and the major competitions. I think I've always looked up to my instructors, they've all inspired in me in some way to do what I do. Throughout it all, my best friend, and the person who introduced me to BJJ, Roy Duquette has believed in my abilities even before I knew I had them. I've learned so much about the sport and subsequently, life, because of his time and dedication to being a great friend and all around knowledgeable and decent person.*

I am very thankful to have someone to look up to in more than one way. It's a very difficult thing to find someone who understands you, who sees that in order to help you excel at one particular thing, many other facets and dimensions of you need to be pushed as well. I've never been so harshly criticized or so greatly praised. He's always told me what I need to hear, not what I want to hear. And he never made my learning about what 'he did to get there', he is excellent at translating the important lessons and helping me make this experience about self discovery. I really aspire and hope to be able to do the same things.

Sally: I read that you got your black belt in about six years. That's really fast, what was it about your training that allowed you to progress so quickly?

Emily: *Was it 6 years? Lol. I started in 2001, and received my black belt in 2008....I suppose it was 6-7 years. I think I had a very unconventional history coming up through the ranks. I was a fine arts major throughout college, was very, and still am, interested in cultural experiences and travelling. Before BJJ played a bigger role in my life, it was a serious hobby that I practiced wherever my life took me. I never stayed in one place for more than 1-2 years, living between Vancouver, NYC and Tokyo, before settling on the east coast of the US In NJ. Training and competing for fun in 3 different countries between white-purple belt really forced me to test my abilities under different circumstances, styles and dogmas. As a result, I think helped me learn to adapt and grow quickly. I could see what my strengths were and was able to hone my skills in different environments.*

That being said, when I finally began to compete on a much more serious level at the IBJJ tournaments, I saw as a brown/black belt, that I had really strong strengths, but needed to balance out my weaknesses...because the women I was fighting in the black belt divisions were a different sort of animal!! Careerists, women who had made so many sacrifices and trained under the guidance of s strong

instructor, (sometimes an institution of them!!) and developed them as more well rounded fighters. Reinforcing what you do really well over and over again is wonderful until someone exposes the holes in your game. So the very factors that contributed to my success also contributed to a re-examination and hard look at what I would need to do in order to maintain a respectable game at the highest level.

Sally: You've been able to travel the world and have even visited my city, Halifax, NS. I know Peggy's Cove was super impressive but what has been your favorite location?

Emily: *That's a tough question! I just love being in foreign places...but I think the place that has left the biggest impression on me was the temples of Angkor Wat, in Siem Reap, Cambodia. I travelled there on my way home from a year in Japan. I had never been so deeply affected by a place, so entrenched in the history of humankind. It's is just mind-blowing. Cambodia is a country in recovery from the years of bloodshed under the Pol Pot regime and a country in transition. I arrived there from Bangkok, Thailand, where you have modern technology all around. Siem Reap was a one lane dirt strip airport at the time but then you had multimillion dollar Sofitel resorts next to \$7/ night locally run guest houses. It was a fascinating, magical place. I would love to go back.*



Sally: Of all your matches, which was your favorite?

Emily: *A match that I lost! I fought Stacy Cartwright in the quarterfinals of [ADCC in 2007](#). I was invited to compete just weeks before the event after losing in the finals during the qualifiers earlier in the year. I had a sever compound fracture on one of my fingers that made training so painful, so I'd been healing the injury. 2 weeks before the competition I got the splint and stitches removed (I had broken off the entire tip of my finger and the nail-bed had to be stitched back down) and threw myself into whatever training I could get in. 1 week before the competition I basically over-trained myself into a 102 degree fever that lasted for 3 days. Everyone was concerned about how I would do.*

I knew this was a huge opportunity and when I arrived, I fought my heart out and amazed myself and my friends. I had pretty much run my gas tank out 5 min into the match and fought on pure will into overtime where I lost. My head instructor was nowhere to be found and a teammate helped corner me...so in a way I felt that in that match I gave it my all. I often wish I could tap into that feeling more often!! It's a hard place to get to, and mental will is I think, the biggest thing to be concerned about in a match at that level.



Sally: Is there anyone you would like to rematch or someone new you'd like to roll with?

Emily: *I'm in awe of how quickly women's BJJ has grown, and the quality of technique is superb. When I compete, I go to fight with women who I respect for loving the sport so much, and for sacrificing all that they have to be there. There is no one person...they change and grow everyday. Also, having competed for a while, making friends, training, and running women's camps with fellow competitor and friend Val Worthington, I've had the opportunity to train or work with some of the best! Hannelle Staack, Michelle Nicolini, Sayaka, Shioda, Luanna Alzeguir, Gabi Garcia...just a sprinkling of the talent that I've crossed paths with.*

Sally: You've competed in MMA as well as BJJ but not as extensively. Why do you prefer BJJ?

Emily: *Because MMA makes me want to throw up...after I've been abused. Lol. BJJ training is fun, you can be defeated, go have a rest and get back in to train the next day with mostly muscular aches. MMA...different story!! Being hit, conditioning, being hit again – is not so fun. There was a time when I first arrived in NJ when I started training for MMA again but it was very challenging to get a fair match. I didn't know when I had taken my first pro MMA match in Korea that I wouldn't be allowed to go back to amateur upon returning to North America. So I was 1-0 amateur and 1-0 pro, but the matchmakers here couldn't get me an opponent with a comparable record of 2-1, 3-1 1-2 (for example) record. I had won the Mundials at that point and many MMA fighters with similar MMA experience (1-2 years) wouldn't take fights with someone who had so much ground experience. So, I was being offered fights with women who were 10-2, 7-1, 6-3...the records carried so much weight that I decided it ultimately wasn't worth it. MMA and BJJ are different sports. You can certainly be more informed about your training, but I feel like to be a good MMA fighter, you have to TRAIN in MMA most of the time. A little specialized striking time, ground time is great, but the majority of the training is putting it together.*

Sally: If you could begin again as a white belt, what would you do differently?

Emily: *Everything and nothing. Lol. I think my experiences have led me to where I am now, and I enjoy this place a lot. Sometimes I find myself lamenting that I wish I had a singular team or institution to have guided me throughout my career so that I could have had a legendary competitive resume! Certainly wish there had been no petty team politics involved, but that the end of the day I am a better off person for having gone through it all. I really enjoy working with others, keeping people inspired, perhaps being a multiple time World Champion was not in the cards for me. Then again, perhaps I'm not finished yet! Lol.*

BJJ had taught me so much about myself and how I engage with the world. All of my particular triumphs and challenges have led me to have a very colourful life. I can confidently say, 'you don't know what you don't know' (my friend Val says), which means that we lead ourselves through the dark much of the time and you have to hope that it's all been worthwhile!

Sally: You do a lot of work to help women become involved in BJJ. What has been your greatest achievement in that regard?

Emily: *Meeting all of the tremendously talented and interesting women around us who train. Relating to women who otherwise feel alone, or discouraged, on the verge of quitting...who come back camp after camp, year after year and thrive. Sometimes we question how long we can really do this, there are so many exceptional female athletes that are offering their own services, is there a need? Can we compete? But we've realized that we are in this to build a bigger and more secure community for all of us, and what I mean by secure, is to help all of these women secure their legacy, so that they can pass their knowledge down to all of us...so we have begun forging relationships to work with a lot of these elite competitors. We want to transcend boundaries that might otherwise be set by team politics or rivalries. We see a bigger picture where there should be room for all of us. There isn't a place or a reference that is very comprehensive that includes a lot of women so we are trying to get the word out ourselves!!*



This is in addition to the undeniable fact that what we try to offer at camp is more than technical expertise, but that we moderate, debate and try to enrich these women's lives by helping each other articulate and discuss important issues relating to the BJJ lifestyle and how it fits into our well being, our daily lives. We have so many awesome campers who keep this dynamic alive...and very healthy!!

Sally: Regarding your recent wedding was the Vera Wang dress everything you thought it would be?

Emily: *Yes. Vera Wang is a god in my books and the entire wedding celebration was centered around her masterful creation. 😊Also, for a person who never thought she would wear a ball gown because I thought I would look like an Asian cream puff...I must say it is extremely fun. Every girl should run around in a big poofy princess dress at least once in her lifetime!*

Sally: Do you have any BJJ and/or MMA photos to share for the article?

Emily: *Some, and none! Lol. I think something from womens' grappling or from my school, Princeton bjj....I will probably forward you some!*

Sally: I asked Stephan to share his favorites with us so I'll ask you to do the same:



Sally: What is your favorite gi brand?

Emily: *It's changed hands over the years. At this moment, I really enjoy the gi's that our school makes because we made them!! And the very fun, very cuddly – Inverted Gear gi. Who doesn't want a panda bear on and inside their gi?*

Sally: What is your favorite no gi brand?

Emily: *Don't know if this counts, but coming from Vancouver I am a big follower of lululemon. They don't necessarily make no gi clothing, but they do*

make tons of workout/athletic lifestyle clothing that is comfortable, high quality, functional and it looks good to boot!

Sally: What is your favorite submission?

Emily: *Time and time again, the arm bar from mount. It's an oldie but a goodie and is exposed in so many positions. I also really like an arm bar that I showed in the new DVD series, it's a leg in armbar from a scarf hold position. Super sneaky!!*

Sally: What is your favorite movie?

Emily: *So many, too many...I love Darren Arronofsky – Requiem for a Dream. As my sister in law would say, I love emotionally traumatizing movies. Lol. Empire of the Sun (Steven Spielberg), The Killing Fields (Roland Joffe) Ouuu.. The Professional!! (Luc Besson). Recently, I saw Argo which was fantastic, and I love quirky coming of age films like Big Fish (Tim Burton), Crooklyn (Spike Lee), or Girlfight (Karyn Kusama). Girlfight has a funny personal story behind it, I used to religiously watch this film before every competition for inspiration! I like films that make you really feel something...cheesy? ☺*

Sally: What is your favorite cheat meal?

Emily: *Everyone close to me knows I have a sweet tooth and I hoard Canadian chocolate bars. Especially kit kats. The quality Canadian junk food is far superior to the candy bars here. I have quasi regular shipments from friends back in Canada. When I teach seminars there I usually bring back a suitcase full of Canadian cookies, candy bars and gummies...wine gums!!*