

An Interview with Killer Bee Kimonos' Jesse Bellevance

By Sally Arsenault

Sally: Why BJJ? What is your background and BJJ rank?

Jesse: I fell into BJJ by accident back in grad school back in 1996. It all began when I was driving to a supermarket of all things to pick up some yogurt for my Mom. Pulling into the supermarket I almost hit these two drunken guys stumbling across the road from the neighboring bar. I blew my horn and weaved around them but they decided to follow me back to my truck which was now parked in the supermarket's parking lot.

As I was walking to the store from the truck they surrounded me and starting hemming and hawing about why I honked my horn at them. I was trying to talk the one guy down when his friend punched me in the side of my head. Funny thing is instead of hitting him back I punched the guy I was trying to talk down instead. After that I have a hard time remembering what happened until I was holding the guy in a modified head lock. I mentioned to them the police might help us resolve our situation and they got spooked and ran. They were later picked up down by the seven eleven and arrested for assault.



After that I went through the whole phase of wanting to defend myself. So I signed up for a martial arts class in town that taught Kung-Fu. The class was great but I noticed there was another group that would come in and put mats down on the floor and wrestle. My Kung-Fu instructor was very open-minded and suggested I try it. I did and was hooked into BJJ for the next 16 years.

Back then, 1997, no one was ranked where I was. However we had two instructors who were watching all the BJJ videos/reading books at the time

and were able to pull some techniques from them to teach to us. In 1999 I moved to the Quantico, Virginia area. I first trained at former Navy Seal Pat Trey's school, Trident Academy in Woodbridge, Virginia and earned my blue belt. I then found a new school, The Lab, which was more local to my residence under Chad Lebrun who is affiliated with Leo Dalla. There I earned my purple and later brown belt in 2008. I later moved again to the Charlottesville, Virginia area where I now train under Gordon Emery who is affiliated with Revolution BJJ.

Sally: On the Killer Bee website you explain that the "Killer Bee" aspect of your company's name derives from your love of beekeeping and the tenacious behavior of Killer Bees. What behavior specifically makes the Killer Bee similar to a Brazilian jiu jitsu fighter?

Jesse: Hah! Honey bees are defensive by nature and will only attack if threatened or disturbed. Killer Bees are actually regular honey bees but hyper defensive to an excessive level of intensity. They are also very persistent in following you when you have been marked by them with their targeting pheromone. Normal honey bees may only chase you for about 50-100 yards stinging you merrily along the way. Killer

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Bees will follow you up to a mile and in far greater numbers. It is almost like an off/on switch with them. The aspect of their nature, of not attacking unless provoked, and when they do attack using such overwhelming intensity appeals to me.

Sally: In addition to the regular Killer Bee gi line, you offer a custom gi service for a price less than other brands' basic gi. How can you do this?

Mainly because I do almost all of the setup work and I have a great manufacturer I work with.

He is willing to work with me on small batch requests that are highly varied.

Sally: Offering lower prices than the other brands is something your site advertises and customers can purchase a basic gi for about \$80, yet the quality and customer service of Killer Bee Kimonos is exceptional. Why do you offer such a great deal?

Jesse: I know how much a gi really costs after import duties, taxes, etc. I sell them for a comfortable level of profit for myself and will not go lower than that except on a special occasion such as a Holiday sale. It is one reason why I have a hard time selling wholesale. Other companies may charge 180.00 for a gi and offer a wholesale price of 120.00. I am not able to do that because my prices are already as low as I need them to be for the level of profit I want to make. Basically people can buy from me at an almost wholesale price compared to what other companies are charging.

As to customer service I just want to treat others as I would want to be treated when buying any product. I would like prompt responses to email inquiries, a fair price on a good product, an easy exchange/return policy, unique services as seen with the custom gi program, and the ability to easily speak with the owner of the company. All these features I would want so I offer them to my customers.

Sally: What is the process of designing and manufacturing a gi like? Is it different than you thought it would be initially? I've read that you have a great relationship with your manufacturer, how were you introduced?

Jesse: I have tried to break down the process of designing your own gi as easy as possible. Designing a gi is a visual endeavor so having some kind of web interface that allows the user to see all of the visual options is a requirement. The user is able to choose options and see them change in real time on the screen. Because there are so many options I have also had to include charts and tables to help users make the right selection. For example, I allow the user to modify the primary features related to the sizing of the gi. Total arm length, total pant length, and collar to skirt end height are all modifiable. However these measurements are subject to the Costanza effect (shrinkage) because of the



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laundering process. To compensate for this I have a chart that will list the desired length and the associated measurement to account for shrinkage when put through the laundry cycle.

Once the user has completed their design and submitted it to me. I take that information and build a proof. That proof is sent back to the customer and they approve of all of the details or make changes. Once finalized, the request goes into a folder for submission to my manufacturer in Pakistan. From that point it will take about 45-75 days to be completed and delivered to the customer.

I originally did this all by a simple form that would allow users to fill in fields but they could not see what it would look like until I generated a proof. The new website, www.killerbeecustomgi.com, allows users to see their creation before their eyes. This helps cut down on a lot of the back forth as people can almost see exactly what they are going to get.



My manufacturer is a great guy. We frequently chat via Facebook about business and life in general. I have full trust in him and his company. It took a year to develop our business relationship to where it is today.

I did have a supplier before my current one that was not as attentive and left out items for my shipment and never followed up despite my repeated requests to complete my inventory. Another supplier just made lousy gear. It's the nature of this business.

Anyone considering doing business overseas should always proceed with caution. There are good and bad people in the business community. Sometimes you end up getting burned before you find the right person.

Sally: Your basic gi designs are very simple but you've recently been expanding into tshirts and other products. Do you create the artwork yourself or do you have an artist?

Jesse: The main logo was my design. I wanted something clean and simple that would appeal to a wide audience. I was going for a Rorschach drawing and a bee merged together. The latest t-shirt was designed by a U.S. based graphic artist named Evan Mannweiler. I like his work and he has helped me on some other side projects. If you need a graphic artist look him up!



Sally: I heard a rumor about a possible no gi line. What did you have in mind?

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Jesse: Nothing too crazy. Just some no-gi shorts and rash-guards with our logo on them. I am still evaluating them so they will not be released until I am sure it is what I want.

Sally: You have four sponsored athletes including me. How do you choose who to sponsor?

Jesse: I do have four right now. One is a young man down in Texas who is going to be phenomenal as he gets older. His name is Isaih Calderon and he trains with Team Tooke.

Second is Shaun Kennedy out of Charlottesville, Virginia. He came into our school a few years ago as a blue belt from Hawaii and steamed rolled his way through competitions. Earlier this year he won Gold at Worlds for purple belt. He most recently earned his brown belt and every time I roll with him I pay dearly. Most importantly he is a really nice guy.

I also am sponsoring two female athletes up North. Sally Arsenault from Halifax, Nova Scotia and Ayanthi Gunawardana from the New York/New Jersey area. Both are dedicated athletes who I feel best represent the spirit of what I am aiming for with sponsorship. Both write interesting blogs and generate really good content about the martial art we all love.



Sally: Is there anything you want to say to fans and followers?

Jesse: Thanks for your business and support online. Thanks also for the patience with the custom gi process and the willingness to try a new way of buying a gi. If you ever need to contact me I am an email or phone call away and will be happy to assist you in finding the right gi for you.