

## Q&A with Brendan Hufford

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By Sally Arsenault

**Sally:** You said “Supporting Drive-In BJJ Academy in Rio de Janeiro is the reason that I started Gi Drive and Ok Kimonos. Drive-In is located in a semi-favela part of Rio and I am vehemently passionate about the work that is being done there.” How did you become aware of their efforts and is there a particular reason why it strikes such a deep chord with you?

**Brendan:** I became aware of their efforts through Christian Graugart’s BJJ Globetrotter blog and the subsequent episode of the Real Rio web TV show that showed the academy.



I teach in an urban school in one of the more dangerous cities in the US and while I have never experienced any danger in the area, I have a lot of experience with children who want to learn but can’t because they lack the money, knowledge, or resources to make it happen.

I saw those EXACT same types of kids training at Drive-In’s academy and I couldn’t help myself. One day a friend and I were chatting about glorifying God over ourselves and it hit me that this was a perfect opportunity to help them. Since then, I’ve done a regional Gi Drive and even started a [Gi Exchange program](#) where parents can trade in gently used kids gis to be donated to Drive In’s academy in exchange for a discount on my gis.

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

**Brendan:** I’ve been training Brazilian Jiu Jitsu since 2006 and I am a purple belt under Miguel Torres.

**Sally:** Why the Tiger? Why OK!? What would you say the theme of OK! Kimonos is?

**Brendan:** The tiger actually came from some awesome early concept drawings that Seymour Yang (Meerkatsu) did for me for my first gi. The tiger has taken on a life of its own and quickly became the brand mascot. I couldn’t be happier because I think that the tiger is exactly what Ok! Kimonos stands for: fun AND ferocious.

I chose “Ok!” because I wanted something that was easy for kids to understand but also something that bridged language barriers. Around the world, people of many languages and cultures understand that “okay” is a phrase of positivity and acceptance, which is a strong message for me and the brand. This was kids of all cultures and languages can enjoy it!



The theme of Ok Kimonos is fun, nerdy, and cuddly. It's really everything our community is. We aren't the people screaming 'Break it!' at a tournament. We play video games and watch anime. We like stuff from the 80s and 90s. We train very very hard. We're assertive and confident, but not unnecessarily aggressive.

I think even more important is that we feel that this is a great message for kids. I want kids to know that it's alright to be silly, nerdy and dorky and then step on the mat at a tournament and hit a flying armbar in 6 seconds.

**Sally:** How fun is it to design gear with Seymour Yang?

**Brendan:** It's exactly like you'd imagine it to be:

I pick up Seymour in London. He climbs aboard the Ok! Kimonos private jet and we listen to Chopin, flying faster than the speed of sound, on our way to Greece. As we sit atop the Parthenon, hundreds of animals waltz in the background as Seymour and I discuss design and philosophy. It's pretty much the first 40 minutes of Disney's 'Fantasia.'

But seriously, I'm so thankful and blessed to work with Seymour. He's a brilliant artist and is very much a part of Ok! Kimonos. He is professional as an artist and a great friend as well.

**Sally:** What is the process of designing and manufacturing a gi like? Is it different than you thought?

**Brendan:** Running GiReviews.net gave me a bit of perspective that I wouldn't have had otherwise. But, honestly, nothing could have prepared me for the business of designing and manufacturing BJJ gis.

One of my favorite parts has been to hire designers and be a sort of a 'patron of the arts' so to speak. I love being able to have great creative minds like Seymour Yang, Scott Miller, Bong Abad, Evan Mannweiler and Chris Bones, create AMAZING work for Ok! Kimonos. I have yet to work with an artist who is not a total professional and I'm very blessed to have been able to work with all of these guys! Be on the lookout for some of my projects with them coming out late 2013 and early 2014.

Manufacturing is an entirely different animal in and of itself. A tremendous amount of time, effort, and money goes into



creating a product like a BJJ gi, but I'd be lying if I said it wasn't worth it in the end. I've been blessed to have surrounded myself with supportive people and even when frustrating things would happen (like getting an entire order of gis that bled color all over the place, making them unable to be sold), I was able to keep going. In short, it's definitely not as easy as people think and while a lot of people are starting 'BJJ brands,' this type of thing really isn't for everybody.

**Sally:** You also run GiReviews.net, how did you become so passionate about gis?

**Brendan:** I've loved street wear and apparel for a long time so when I became involved in Brazilian Jiu Jitsu, I was naturally attracted to Brazilian Jiu Jitsu gis. There's just a tremendous amount that you can do with them and I love that our art encourages artistic expression on our equipment, much like skateboarding. We can express our art and personality beyond simply training, but in our gis and other gear as well. This is typical of lifestyle sports and makes BJJ very different from other martial arts because I can express my outside life in my art and my art in my outside life, making them one and the same.

**Sally:** You've expanded into adult gis but I saw on Facebook that you won't be releasing a second batch of blue adult gis. What's next for OK Kimonos? What is your overall vision for the brand?

**Brendan:** The decision not to release the Blue adult tiger gis again was one that I made to really thank the small number of people who pre-ordered them before I was even an established brand. They ordered them based on a fun drawing from Seymour and trusted me with their money for 2 months. I felt like it was loyalty that should be rewarded with something special, and now they have a gi that nobody else will ever have again.

With that said, I believe very strongly in keeping certain things limited in number, while always offering a solid product at a fair price. We will always have basic gis in stock for kids and adults (which will get cooler and cooler as time goes on), but I will continue to keep some things limited in number just because that's something I love as well. I love my autographed Chuck Palahniuk and Gary Paulsen books because they're rare, not because they're expensive.



Which I think touches on my overall vision for the brand. Kids are the driving force behind our art, sport, and BJJ culture as a whole and will be even more so as it grows across the world. Kids need to be able to afford really cool things and as the first-ever kids BJJ brand, we'll provide that for them.

**Sally:** I heard a rumor about a possible women's line. What did you have in mind?

**Brendan:** A women's line is in the works as we speak and since I always chuckle at men who create lines for women without their

input, I'm exceptionally happy to have some of my good friends helping me with development and R&D.

**Sally:** I see that you have sponsored athletes. How do you choose who to sponsor?

**Brendan:** The first thing that I look at right away is whether or not they already support the brand. If they are the people who comment, share everything, like everything, and participate in discussions and contribute to the brand, I'll consider them first. There are a lot of other factors that play into it as well because I primarily sponsor kids so things are quite different, but I think that going over the top to support a brand first, and then asking if they'd be willing to help, is a great place for everybody to start.

Funny you ask actually, because I'm actually writing an entire article about BJJ sponsorship right now! It'll be free for everybody and it'll help everybody from the top on down; from the biggest brand owner to the fresh blue belt looking for some help.

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

**Brendan:** Thank you. Thank you, thank you, thank you.

Thank you to everybody who has supported me, GiReviews, and Ok! Kimonos thus far.

Heck, thank you to everybody who has read this far!

**As a way to say thank-you, please use code 'Sally' to get 10% off everything at OkKimonos.com. I'd give you free shipping, but all gis ship for free in the U.S., every day anyways 😊**

