

The Traveling Black Belt

by Vickie Hornback

Often you hear talk among senior students at training facilities of their “martial arts family.” Is this a limited expression for a particular school and its branches or perhaps just that style of martial art? As the experience of “John the traveling black belt” proves, it is much broader than that.

John Hornback has spent his entire martial arts career traveling across America. He has done this due to his day job as an inspector, spending five days of the week on the go away from his traditional family and friends. Through his martial art he has found there is a bond that reaches past the traditional lines of school, lineage and even type of martial art. With an open mind he has traveled to forty-nine states and visited countless dojos, dojangs and training establishments. Most of the time he has had incredible experiences, often spending the latter part of the evening after class as a “show and tell,” each person taking turns in showcasing their techniques and way of thinking, with both parties ending the night feeling enhanced by the shared experience. On the extreme occasion, he’ll run into a money-driven location that wants nothing to do with martial arts exchanges. This is, however, rare and can be counted in single digits.

The visits are always a dual exchange, with Hornback freely sharing his training strategies with the local school’s black belts. He advises, “As a student of martial arts, you do well in keeping your mind and body open to new experiences. You should never be done learning and know that your particular strain of martial art, no matter how great, is just that—one strain of an endless amount of possibilities.” He often seeks

out different styles from his own Tae Kwon Do, like Judo, Karate, cage fighting, Kumdo, Kung-Fu or weapons training (sword, stick, nun chucks or even bows). He feels this diversifies him, making him stronger as a black belt and also a better instructor with new influences he otherwise would go without. “If you find yourself in an actual fight, you will have more of a base to protect yourself with, and as you do not get to pick your attacker, they could be from a multitude of backgrounds, leaving you best off familiar with as many varieties of fighting styles as you can.” Hornback does caution

people open to trying out different styles to pay special attention to their sparring first and even watch a few rounds before trying it out as sparring varies quite a bit from school to school and you do not want to join and hurt someone or yourself getting injured.

Hornback explains the ins and outs of a basic visit: “When walking into a new facility, you can’t help but to feel a mixture of excitement for what you hope is a good exchange, mixed with a tiny

bit of anxiety in thoughts of rejection—although not very often, it does happen. After stepping in and introducing yourself with a brief recap on your credentials and eagerness to share in a training session or two, you eagerly wait for the verdict. Are you going to be allowed to join in? Most of the time you are invited to join class, and oftentimes they are as curious about you and your style as you are of them. As class begins, you try your best to be a chameleon while your evening’s instructor keeps a close eye on you. They often ask if you call each move the same or if you perhaps have a different name for it as they transition from common blocks and



strikes. Variations on stances and how much you chamber your movements are common, and coming from a Tae Kwon Do background with about 70 % of class being focused on kicks, it is a huge change to most other disciplines that oftentimes have quite a bit more upper body focus. Another drastic difference is that Tae Kwon Do has a minimal---if any at all---on-the-ground training like Jiu-jitsu, grappling and Judo, which all have extensive on-the-ground training. This is at first quite intimidating, as you become like a white belt again on the ground in a strange location, having to put your trust in 'the martial system' and that we all are here to take care of one another." To date Hornback is happy to report that his approach has been very successful. "I have been very well looked after, with my hosts explaining their theories and techniques down to the mechanics of them."

There is almost always also a cultural exchange---some more in depth than other-where Hornback shares in his martial arts school's lineage, even at times reciting it back from present day to the Moo Duk Kwan that his particular lineage stems from, with his evening's host sharing theirs as well. The majority of martial arts schools are quite proud of their particular heritage and know its history well. This frequently leads to in-depth discussions on the importance for black belts to expand their training to include weapons or, as in some schools, to sample other fighting styles and bring back what they have learned to their school for their next dan test to hold a "show and tell" of what they have learned to their judges prior to ascending in rank.

One of the schools Hornback has joined class at is Reis Martial Arts Academy in Marshfield, Wisconsin. It is owned and run by Master

Instructor Daniel Reis, who is a 7th degree black belt with more than 25 years of experience in a wide variety of martial arts and self-defense disciplines. He teaches Nunchaku Do, Eskrima weapons, Okinawan Kobudō and Tae Kwon Do, as well as practical street defense, women's self-defense, pressure-sensitive joint manipulation and grappling. He has won 28 grand champion competitions in forms and point sparring and over a hundred first places. He also has eight years of military service and puts a lot of emphasis on that "brain structure" at his facility. Master Reis is a firm believer in the value of



continued growth and openheartedly invited Hornback to join his class. He himself is highly dedicated to this mission by each week traveling for an hour to Wausau, Wisconsin, to continue his personal growth by training with his 9th degree Grandmaster Robert Likes, who is 78 years old and still active on the tournament scene. Master Reis is

also a big advocate in finding the perfect balance between being a traditionalist and utilizing modern advancements. In his training facility Master Reis offers a media center with 40" TV screens showing the purest versions of forms and techniques he has been able to strip them down to. Tradition dictates his sense of respect and honor to the past, as over time schools and generations of instructors have changed forms and techniques from their origins. This might seem harmless, but with time it becomes substantial, Master Reis explains. With tradition and modern technology blended together, he offers each movement and traditional form at the press of a button to all of his students to view before and after class. This eliminates having color belts teach lower belts a wrong technique when he is occupied elsewhere while allowing the past to be taught in a modern environment.

Hornback has extensive first-hand experience with this trend and explains how schools teaching the exact same forms vary at times to the extreme, with blocks, kicks and kihaps changed or added,



making it quite the challenge at times to blend in, even when training in the same discipline. He finds Master Reis's use of technology groundbreaking and a great asset to his school.

Over the years Master Reis has had a few different traveling black belts who have made their way through the doors of his academy, and at times he himself has done the same and stopped in at training facilities while traveling. He finds that most martial artists have the same core values, which give us a common bond to progress from: "As a martial artists, we do well to continue our education and not to 'boo-ho' other systems, as that would be limiting ourselves." He also goes on to say that his favorite aspect of Hornback's visit is easy to define: "After class we shared in our personal martial arts journeys and took the time to get to know one another on a human level as well, sharing in our family and life experiences. It's good for the martial arts community to get together at tournaments and with seminars, especially when we can enhance our program and invite world competitors and

also by visiting one another's training facilities, and if a friendship is forged, even better"

The crucial ingredient for a positive exchange is quite simple: be humble and kind, leaving your personal training facilities rules at the door and being attentive to your visiting location's way to train, as you are their guest. Never fear making a mistake. If you immerse yourself in your visits, you will make a multitude of them. Just always do so with courtesy and a smile. Your hosts will understand and more than likely go out of their way to fill you in on their procedures and theories. The information you leave with is up to you and your ability to truly open yourself up to another way of thinking on how to train, fight and defend yourself. Each time you open yourself up, the easier it becomes to relax and reset your own way of thinking and absorbing the new information. What you do next with it is just as important. If you leave it behind and never think of it again, it will slowly get lost. If you instead think about what you have learned and how it best fits in with you and your personal style and physical abilities and embrace it, you'll advance yourself and add an additional layer of resources to your martial arts armory.

Opening yourself up to new encounters and embracing the unknown can be intimidating at first, but if you get past that intimidation, you can find great knowledge and gratifying experiences on the other side and, as in Hornback's case, widen your martial arts family across state lines and martial art styles.

Victoria Hornback is a black belt, instructor, business owner and proud mother who lives in the US but originates from Sweden. She is married to John, also a black belt and "Aussie" born in Malaysia. "The diversity in our family creates new ways to view the world and makes us part of a growing, multi-cultural society." She is passionate about creating partnerships between private, state and government law enforcement and martial arts. "We need to work together to stay strong." She can be reached at tkdswede@gmail.com