



# A tai chi fighter

Interview by Robin Gamble

Neil Rosiak has trained in tai chi chuan for over 30 years and has a wealth of competitive and combative experience. One of the first winners of the British Open push hands tournament he went on to win the Chuan Hua cup in Taiwan and was present in the formative years of mixed martial arts in London training with a wealth of professional fighters. He also worked as a bouncer for many years and had ample opportunity to put his training into practice. He runs classes in North London and can be contacted through his website:

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# TAI CHI IN COMBAT

First asked Neil about his long and varied experiences in combative tai chi, from competing to coaching fighters. What is his background and how he got to where he is today.

He told me that his interest started when he watched his father practise tai chi. He said: “I was seven and I used to see him do these slow movements and it piqued my interest. I was aware it was a martial art.

“When I was ten, I started training in shotokan karate. Shortly after, I started northern praying mantis, in Archway London. It was a mixture of styles, it had the high kicks of taekwondo, the grappling of northern praying mantis and the throws and locks of ju jitsu. It was like an early form of MMA. There was rigorous sparring and conditioning, it was well designed. So at a young age I appreciated a practical approach.

“Some time after I read an article by Dan Docherty called *tai chi gladiator*. It detailed his full contact exploits in Hong Kong. The way he described the training, approach and philosophy it sounded comprehensive and something that would allow you to develop beyond your sheer athletic potential because of theoretical and philosophical concepts in the art.

“I met Dan and liked the training. I trained with him and started competing in push hands competitions. I did the 3rd British Open in around 1992. I won the British Open and then travelled to Taiwan to compete in the Jwang Hua cup. I had a good experience, I won all my matches. However, I came back and felt like I needed more of a challenge.”

Some time around 1995 Neil left Dan’s groups. It was about the same time that footage of the first UFC’s (ultimate fighting championships) were circulating. Neil says: “At that time I found Lee Hasdell who was an early competitor in MMA (mixed martial arts), a very physical and skilful guy, he’d been recruited to fight in the rings



tournament in Japan. Lee had been to Japan and learned catch wrestling and competed in early MMA events. He came back to the UK and was one of the first people to organise shoot fighting, so I went along to his training.

“It was a hardcore fighting environment. Which was different to Dan’s place, I think, like his master Chen Ting Hung, Dan had wanted to teach hardcore fighters but because of economic pressures had reduced the fighting aspect, perhaps to make it more palatable. You can’t train that way and have a busy class. Not everybody wants to train like that.”

It was with Hasdell that Neil learned the ground game (ground grappling and fighting) but says that his day to day training was still tai chi. “Later,” he says, “I met more MMA guys to train with, one named James would call us the London Shootfighters when we competed. Soon other guys joined us. I’d become a bouncer and more bouncers would come to the daytime sessions. It grew into its own thing and turned into London Shoot Fighters which is now one of the longest running and most successful MMA teams in the UK.”

Tai chi combat, like any fighting system, needs strength and conditioning. I asked Neil whether he thinks modern tai chi needs to incorporate strength conditioning methods.

“It is really important,” he replied, “but it doesn’t need to be supplemented with modern methods. From what I have come to understand looking at modern conditioning I am always astounded by the tai chi system from Chen Ting Hung. When I look at it from a sports science perspective it is impressive.

“In tai chi there is so much to be done, drills, push hands and sparring, the additional conditioning should be minimalist. There are a few core exercises that, if you do

them well, you'll be rewarded with power, great speed and stamina. I remember when I was still with Dan training for a fight and I'd done this conditioning system for three months and then I'd go and spar really hard, we'd aim to knock each other out. It was brutal, I'd be going for ages, I just wouldn't get tired and I'd be knocking people out. I was amazed at how good the conditioning was. This is like they did in Hong Kong, that is why Chen Ting Hung was so successful. He had a great system but he knew 'specificity' was a real thing and if you wanted to be good at fighting you needed experience in real fighting.

"The neigong (internal training) is an amazing thing, it's a technique and power system and then wellbeing, I think even if you did side exercises on your own, you'd still become a beast."

A question that often comes up is the relationship between martial and health tai chi. If a tai chi practitioner is only interested in health benefits, is it important or necessary for them to learn the fighting aspects of tai chi chuan? Neil says that he doesn't think so: "But there are some things in the martial syllabus that could further develop your coordination, and it would build your cardiovascular system too. I remember reading some studies a while back and the factors that lead to a longer life, like longevity correlated with a strong V02 max (oxygen uptake) and, funnily enough, in our system there is a lot of interval training. Based on my understanding it is pretty obvious that would build your V02 max and therefore be very good for your health."

According to Neil there are a number of situations where tai chi techniques – its skills or tactics – have proved useful in a combative environment. He says: "In competition I have seen that tai chi, trained properly, is very useful. Perhaps more importantly as a bouncer I noticed in many situations, perhaps a couple of hundred, where rather than escalating to a situation where you are punching or kicking, I could easily control people using pushing hands



skills and things didn't escalate, and sometimes these are quite dangerous situations. Some of these are powerful people that have been armed, so if things escalate it can go badly wrong. I have found that if you use these techniques to control and restrain people and put them down with control and keep them in position it is infinitely useful.

"In fact Chen Ting Hung's son said to me that he has never had to hit people, he just controlled them.

"I think BJJ (Brazilian jiu jitsu) is great, but personally, I've never needed to be grappling on the floor. For me good wrestling skills have worked. I think, typically, grappling on the floor is the last place you want to be."

A tai chi practitioner can do a number of things to improve their combat performance. According to Neil practising combat is paramount. "The sad reality is, I've got a great bunch of guys who I train and I want them to reach their full potential, but I know they need to experience some full contact fighting to really forge their skills. So they have a full understanding of the reality of things, the speed, the power, and momentum of real combat. In turn, it will improve their form and their drilling will improve. I don't think you need to have many fights, maybe five to ten fights would do for most people. But when you are dealing with your friends it's difficult, you don't want to hurt them. That can limit your combat potential. Generally, in class, I keep the sparring light and playful, then those that want to take it to the next level should compete in full contact.

"In tai chi we have ting, hua and fa. Listening, neutralising and issuing. Essentially, you want to be able to read and listen to the situation, and then train yourself to react as well as possible and issue your own counter. It is systematic, working towards spontaneity. You can then ramp it up. Chen Ting Hung said that your partner should eventually be able to scream and shout and throw forceful techniques at you and you should be stillness in motion, emotionally unmoved. It takes a lot of training and then hopefully, one day, if something does kick off, it will be a natural response for you. That is the ideal of the drilling in our system; that coupled with a bit of light sparring for most people is going to be fine along with some wrestling and push hands. You can do that at high intensity. But to become the ultimate tai chi fighter you have to have fight experience, but it's not for everyone.

"There is probably an over emphasis on softness and a lack of respect for hardness in the general tai chi community," says Neil. "Look at all the karate guys and muay thai guys and there is a reason they are effective, they spar and they hit things hard. They have that yang intent. Tai chi should be no different in that respect. Of course we cultivate the soft aspect but we should also cultivate the



In a time and place when combat efficient martial arts like BJJ, muay thai and MMA are easily accessible we must consider why people should consider training tai chi as a martial art. Neil says: “BJJ is good as a martial sport With the exclusion of old more self defence based BJJ schools, I don’t think it’s really a self defence-art. The others (muay thai and MMA), are really good for building fighters but they are ring sports, good for combat athletes. They may not have those emergency, efficient self defence techniques. Technically, tai chi done properly, using all the methods and theory, could potentially allow a person to keep developing just beyond their natural athleticism that the other arts rely on.

“There are subtleties and efficiencies built into the tai chi system that allow someone to develop high levels of effectiveness fairly quickly regardless of size. You could just train the combat side of tai chi and it probably wouldn’t look much different to MMA, but the rest of the system, the internal strength, the forms, the weapons, they would enable you to develop your coordination and movement to higher levels and there is a lot of training that helps you develop a relaxed state of mind during combat; it may enhance your ability to be more spontaneous to achieve a flow state.

“There is also mental and movement training that may allow someone to achieve a higher level of performance. Let alone the recovery methods. Then you have the strategic information in the classics, it's really useful when applied. A good MMA coach would have that, but in tai chi it's built in. Also, in today's world the older Asian philosophies could be looked upon as an antidote to the current attitudes in martial sports: narcissism and shallowness.”

Asked to describe what does great tai chi look like when applied in combat Neil replied

“I often used to look at the boxer Prince Naseem; his evasion skills were amazing and the way he punched, from his legs. He would evade with the upper body and then use his legs and explode. I thought he was a good example of a tai chi fighter. Another is Joe Louis. He was hard to hit, perfectly balanced and threw punches like a tai chi fighter should. Fedor Emeleinko’s tai chi qualities were that he was very calm and neutral and able to adapt to anything and that is meant to be the idea in tai chi, adaptability and fighting them where they are weak. And Fedor was a master at that and he could seamlessly transition from punches to grappling to a throw and back.

“So somebody who trains in our system should have that kind of goal. I think that would be an advantage over perhaps other MMA systems in that everything is designed to be integrated from day one, whereas I know many MMA people separate out the other disciplines, they’ll be using boxing here and BJJ there.

“Saenchai (legendary muay thai fighter), also has fluid movement, accurate striking, creativity and spontaneity. Many people miss the point that tai chi should be spontaneous. Regardless of their level everybody has two arms and two legs, at the highest level it is no different.”

In the past two years Neil reckons he has made a few game changing discoveries. He started training with Chen Ting Hung’s son and has done a lot of research with him. He says: “Firstly the internal strength training I did with Dan was very useful. But I’ve completely relearned it now with Yan, the son. It is significantly different; it makes more sense to me now. So, the relearning internal training has taken things to a whole other level for me.

“The other thing is re-learning all the traditional self



defence applications with Yan. Chen Ting Hung taught a system of 48 self defence drills. I wanted to make sure I had those correct along with the pushing hands exercises. Also the eight forces, just developing my full understanding of what they are and how they are applied. So all of that has been game changing and it's all happened in the last few years.

“A lot of people think tai chi fighting is going to look like a movie. It is more than likely going to look like a guy fighting another guy. Fighting is fighting. Don’t expect mysterious chi power kind of stuff, it's going to be the same as any fighter but ideally, it's going to be a highly skilled fighter.”