

The Way of the Gracie

By Karen Eden

Sgt. Leonel Vargas, L.A. Police Dept and Gracie Jiu Jitsu Student.

In Riverside, California, Gracie Jiu Jitsu instructor Sam Marcellini has quite a reputation with the law. Fortunately, it's a good one. Marcellini, one of only three black belts under Royce Gracie in the state of California, has been teaching law enforcement officers for ten years now. He follows the curriculum of grappling and takedown techniques specifically designed for law enforcement by his instructor Royce Gracie who also lives in southern California.

As a matter of fact, if you drive by and peak in the studio, it's not uncommon to see Royce himself on the mats, grappling with officers at Marcellini's Martial Arts Academy.

For years now, the Gracie system has become synonymous with law enforcement. Since 1995, Special Forces, Secret Service, FBI agents, Army Rangers, Navy Seals and countless local sheriff and police departments across the country have endorsed the Gracie system as the one martial art form nearly infallible when it comes to law enforcement situations.

"We stand out because our style is actually non-violent. We also teach officers the best way to guard their weapons in case of a surprised close range attack...it's all about control," says Instructor Marcellini.

Sam Marcellini, Gracie Jiu Jitsu black belt and Royce Gracie's sparring partner.



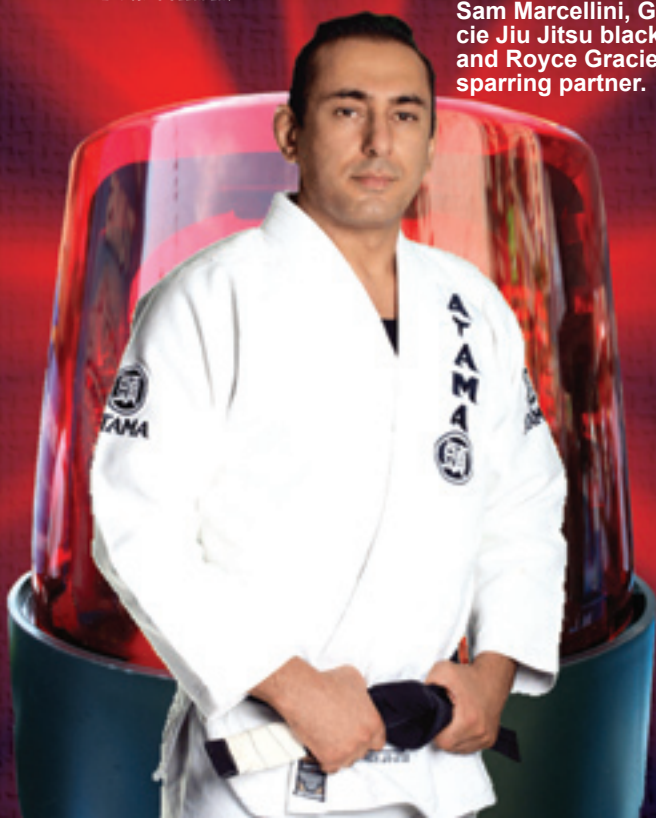
"our style is actually non violent."

Cops say the Gracie system is designed to handle situations with which the average martial arts student will never have to deal. When asked exactly what these techniques are, Marcellini humorously responds, "If I told ya...I'd have to kill ya."

All humor aside, the Brazilian Jiu Jitsu hierarchy does not prefer to dispel its techniques publicly, to ensure they don't fall into the wrong hands. But they have agreed to dispel exactly why the program is so prolific with law enforcement.

Size Doesn't Matter

"The truth is officers come in all different shapes and sizes," says Sgt. Leonel Vargas of the Los Angeles Police Department and student of Sam Marcellini. He says a big concern in law enforcement is being able to take control of an assailant with the least amount of violence possible. "I want to protect myself, but I also want to handle the assailant in a way that will cause the least amount of damage for everyone."



According to Sgt. Vargas, many altercations will end up on the ground before the suspect is ever handcuffed. That's why control and submission holds are a huge part of the Gracie system curriculum. And when it comes to this part of the program...size really *doesn't* matter. It's the old adage that it's "not how much you have, but how well you use it."

Instructor Marcellini is quick to respond, "We teach techniques that are based on leverage and timing...not strength. And we also want them to be able to pursue their suspects without having to beat them up."

No Strike Zone

As an officer whose duties entailed gang enforcement for the LAPD, Vargas says that he once had to strike a suspect to subdue him. "The suspect went to jail with minor cuts and bruises, and I went home with a broken hand," he says.

"We let all LEO's (law enforcement officers) know right away that you don't have to use strikes...there are plenty of other options out there," says Sam Marcellini.

Sgt. Vargas states it is these options that has lead him to encourage all police officers to be efficient in Brazilian Jiu Jitsu. "Since I've gone to less striking and more grappling, I haven't been seriously hurt once," he maintains (knock on Jiu Jitsu mat.)

Vargas also feels that "control without striking" has huge benefits on all sides of the law. "Cutting down on injuries and keeping everybody healthy is an 'A-1' priority for all of us."

Hands-off the Billy Stick

Another aspect unique to the Gracie system is that all law enforcement classes are taught with the understanding that an officer will have to defend and subdue with a weapon attached to him or herself. Whether it's a billy stick, a taser or a gun, you have to double your focus when you're defending yourself or taking down an assailant while carrying a weapon of any kind. "It's no secret that many officers are shot with their own gun," notes Sgt. Vargas.

Instructor Marcellini says the Gracie system spends countless hours just going over hands-on

Royce Gracie and Sam Marcellini grapple.



Royce Gracie instructs local law enforcement at Marcellini's Martial Arts Academy.



techniques dealing with this aspect alone. "You have to know how to approach people while carrying a weapon in the first place. But we specifically deal with how to keep the assailant at a healthy distance, so that he can't get close enough to your weapon to use it on you," Marcellini says.

The Fear Factor

"I don't care what anybody says. We aren't out there competing for gold medals and we're not cage fighting. If you're in law enforcement, fighting is real life, and sometimes a matter of life or death. Everybody in law enforcement knows fear...it's what you do with that fear that dictates your survival," says Sgt. Vargas.

And Instructor Marcellini will be the first to tell you that there is a huge mental aspect in teaching Gracie Jiu Jitsu to law enforcement. After all, fear is an automatic built-in self-preservation mechanism, and it's built into every human being. According to Instructor Marcellini, the best way

to handle this built-in mechanism, is to give cops the confidence they need to combat fear. "We want these officers to already have a plan in mind. We're talking about techniques that have been rehearsed, so that they'll automatically know how to handle a situation before it even happens." That's also why police officers across the country will get together in their spare time to practice these techniques once they learn them.

"We know that they know what they're doing," Instructor Marcellini adds. "We just want to help them do their job more efficiently and safer. And I think that everyone involved would agree that we give them some of the best tools in the business, especially when it comes to being 'surprised' by an attacker."



Royce Gracie, Sgt. Leonel Vargas and Instructor Sam Marcellini



Royce Gracie and Sam Marcellini instruct local law enforcement officers.