



With the Back on the Ground: From the Early Japanese in America to MMA - How Brazilian Jiu-Jitsu Developed

Luiz Otavio Laydner

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It wasn't likely, without the benefit of hindsight, anyone in the crowd at McNichols Sports Arena in Denver, Colorado, that 12th of November 1993 had a clue that they were witnessing history in the making. The modest audience attending UFC 1 was certainly surprised as they left the venue. Partly the surprise had to do with the violence they'd just seen, real human combat, with no rules or limits, mutually agreed to by contestants caged into a fenced enclosure. But that sense of surprise was also due to how easily the tournament winner dispatched his adversaries. The time his three fights lasted in all: five minutes, less than two rounds of a professional boxing bout. They'd have been more surprised still had they known the champion wasn't even in the top tier of his art's practitioners back in his homeland. With Royce Gracie's victories at the subsequent events the community of martial arts scholars became acquainted with what is now known as Brazilian Jiu-Jitsu but at the time wasn't yet called by that name. Naturally, analysis of this phenomenon brought with it controversy. What ensued was an intense "battle for legitimacy" where experts in an array of martial arts sought, to no avail, to come to a consensus on just what Brazilian jiu-jitsu is, what the Gracies' role in its development was, etc... Truth is, it is a modern day expression of an ancient philosophy of combat. Its initial success was the consequence of a process that began 90 years prior, when a group of Japanese martial artists brought judo to America and over the course of years unconsciously adapted their techniques to deal with the problem at hand when they were repeatedly challenged by American wrestlers who were almost invariably bigger and stronger. The natural consequence of this was the development of a style of fighting that would respect the natural physiology of humans, and a peculiar combat philosophy. The outcome of this philosophy of pursuing superiority led to the creation of vale-tudo in 1930s Rio de Janeiro. That was the starting point of the timeline in which Brazilian jiu-jitsu developed, quite unmethodically mixing combat in the gi, no-gi and "valendo tudo," or "anything goes." At several points the art came close to extinction or being absorbed by judo, escaping this fate mainly because of the obstinacy of Hélio Gracie. From the '30s onwards Brazilian jiu-jitsu plotted a path of near total isolation, restricted to a small number of practitioners but preserving the original combat philosophy, a still frame of an era on its way to forgottenness. Until it captured the world's attention on November 12, 1993. How this process unfolded, that is the aim of this book.

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