

KATO AND THE JUDO MAN



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THE GENE LEBELL PROBLEM

Introduction

“Wrath of the Dragon” was a book born during the Covid pandemic. With businesses shut down, there wasn’t much else to do for quite a stretch of time, except sit in front of a computer. And so I began to write.

There were (and still are) a lot of falsehoods in circulation about Bruce, that, as someone who knew them to be falsehoods, I felt obliged to address. Consequently, my writing became more effusive, often spilling outside the boundaries of what the book was actually about. One such area that I found myself investigating was the widely-circulated claim that Bruce studied grappling under Gene LeBell. Ever since I interviewed LeBell in the early 1990s, it struck me that he didn’t really know that much about Bruce. Certainly not as much as one would expect if that person had spent the better part of an entire year training with him. When I asked LeBell specifics regarding Bruce, he became very vague, speaking in generalities. He made it a point to impress upon me that Bruce recognized his grappling prowess and felt obliged to learn Judo from him. This struck me as odd at the time, as there is absolutely no record from anyone who spent considerable time with Bruce that he engaged in grappling manoeuvres during any of his training sessions, either at his three schools or in private instruction. If it was such an integral part of Bruce’s new direction for his art, you’d think that there would be at least one of his students that would have experienced this. The man who introduced grappling into JKD was, of course, the late, great, Larry Hartsell, but he did this many years after Bruce had passed away. Consequently, I wanted to thoroughly examine LeBell’s various comments over the decades about his alleged training sessions with Bruce and see if his claims were consistent and verifiable. When Quentin Tarantino attempted to defend his portrayal of Bruce Lee in his film “Once Upon A Time In Hollywood,” he felt obliged to cite the folklore that had been circulated by LeBell’s camp over the years indicating that “Judo Gene” had been brought onto the set of “The Green Hornet” to teach Bruce a lesson in respecting American stuntman, and that his so doing resulted in Bruce seeing the error of his ways - not only on the set of “The Green Hornet,” but also in his martial development.

As indicated, previously, the following was going to be a chapter in the book, but as it did not involve a real fight, or even a sparring session, it really had no place within the book’s thesis. Consequently, I removed it. However, when Chris Kent told me he would like to publish it as a PDF for his students and those who visit his website, I was quite happy to allow him to do so. As anyone who knows me knows, I have the highest respect for Chris and his dedication to the reality of Bruce Lee’s art.

I hope the reader finds this excised chapter to be of interest.

- John Little

Bruce Lee took considerable pride in his fight sequences for *The Green Hornet* TV series, and also took seriously the fact that he would be representing the Chinese art of Kung Fu to a North American audience. This meant that the fighting scenes in which he displayed the art had to appear genuine; if the techniques were too ornate, it would diminish the perception of the art's lethality. To Bruce, Kung Fu was fast, precise and superior ("It's bad to say the best, but gung fu is pretty good"). To this end, he reasoned, his on-camera strikes should be delivered as fast and as close as possible to the stuntmen that would be receiving them. That way, the art of Kung Fu would come across to viewers as a valid fighting art, like the more widely known Karate and Judo. However, Bruce was not camera savvy at this point in his career, and didn't know that he could move slower and, thus, give the stunt people the time they needed to properly react to his techniques. Bruce Lee moving at maximum speed was simply too quick to register on film, and made his fight sequences appear as though those he was fighting were simply being driven backward or falling down of their own accord. While he had acted in eighteen movies during his youth in Hong Kong, Bruce had zero experience in choreographing fight sequences before the camera. Consequently, his preternatural speed and attempts to pull his strikes within a millimeter of the stunt people resulted in more than one of them being hit from time to time. And this created a problem. According to the series star, Van Williams:

Benny Dobbins was my stunt man. He was my stunt man almost from the beginning of my career. When I got the part they asked me who would I like for my stunt man? Well, there wasn't any other choice but Benny. So, they made him the stunt coordinator. We did a lot of stunts in that show if you remember. I mean, we used every stunt man in the business and went through half of them, and half of them wouldn't work on it and everything else because Bruce ended up kicking them or hurting them or doing something. They didn't want to work on the show anymore. It was a real working experience for both of them [Benny Dobbins and Bruce Lee]. That's why the tension grew and it grew and it grew, almost to the point where they got in a fight. *Almost*. Didn't happen. I got in the middle of it.¹

But the problem continued, with Bruce believing that he had to deliver his techniques quickly and from within actual striking range in order for them to appear authentic, and Dobbins explaining that his movements needed to be slowed down in order to register on film² and that he didn't need to be firing his kicks and punches from as close to the stunt people as he had been in order to sell the fight scenes to the audience. Frustrated, Dobbins went to Williams and explained what he saw to be a simple solution to the problem: He would let Bruce shoot it his way -- and then show him how it simply didn't come across on film.

Williams picks up the story:

We had this one sequence where, it was very dark, we were down at a wharf or something like that and I was in this room and the guys had gotten me or were about to get me and Bruce is supposed to break down the door and come in and go after these guys. So, we shoot it Bruce's way, we let him set it up, and you can't even see him in the scene; all you hear is a bunch of yelling. The stuntmen had on lighter clothes and you could see them reacting, but you couldn't see Bruce or any of his techniques at all. So, we told Bruce to come and watch the dailies, so that he could see how the scene looked when we shot it his way. And he saw it and then was gone. So, I went back over on the set and said, "Did you see some of that stuff?" He said, "Yeah. There's something *really* wrong. Those guys [watching the dailies] were laughing. I don't want them to laugh." And I thought, I never heard them laugh, but because of the way it was done, you couldn't see Bruce – it was like a specter was striking at the stuntmen. So, from that time on, he and Benny started really working together and having Bruce stand further away from the stunt guys [during the fight sequences] and explained to him that film was only two-dimensional – not three – and that he could move a bit slower and from further away and it would still look fast and like he was making contact with the guy. He was very bright like that; once he saw something, and saw where the mistakes were made, he could pick up on it and instantly correct it.³

At this point, we must break away from the narrative to address some misconceptions. It will be important to remember that there had been a problem with Bruce making contact with the stunt people during his fight sequences, but, more importantly, this problem had been dealt with and corrected early on in the series. The reason this is important is that the original problem – but not its solution -- would be seized upon years later by filmmaker Quentin Tarantino and blown completely out of proportion in an attempt to defend his rather negative portrayal of Bruce Lee in his film *Once Upon A Time In Hollywood*. Tarantino would claim that:

The stuntmen hated Bruce on [*The*] *Green Hornet* and it's always been known. That's why Gene LeBell was brought in -- to teach Bruce respect for American stuntmen Bruce had no respect for American stuntmen, he was always hitting them with his feet and his fist and it got to the point where they would refuse to work with Bruce. He had nothing but disrespect for American stuntmen.⁴

There's a lot to unpack in Tarantino's statements. Certainly, Bruce had accidentally hit some stunt people during the early fight sequences in the series, and that some of these same people had indicated their refusal to work with him again on account of this. These facts are corroborated by Van Williams' statements. But for the sake of historical accuracy, it is necessary to take a moment to address Tarantino's other claims. To begin, there is "zero" evidence

(apart from Tarantino's assertion) that Bruce Lee hated American (or any) stuntmen. Indeed, by the time he became a superstar in Hong Kong he was known as his stuntmen's greatest benefactor. "Bruce often met with his stuntmen at night after shooting," recalled Robert Clouse, the director of Lee's last film *Enter the Dragon*. "He saw to many of their needs and they were on his team. Some would need loans and he was as generous to them as he was to so many others."⁵ Jackie Chan, for example, who began his career as a stunt person in the Hong Kong film industry recalled that Bruce "was very good to us, the little people. He didn't care about impressing the big bosses, but he took care of us."⁶ According to the star of the show, Van Williams, "Bruce seemed to get along with everybody; everybody seemed to get along with him."⁷ Speaking in another interview, Williams stated that, "Everybody just loved him around the set because of his enthusiasm, and he kept it pretty interesting."⁸ As Williams was also good friends with Ben Dobbins, the stunt coordinator of the series, one would think that if Bruce Lee had been causing a problem that required bringing in a tough guy to teach him a lesson in respect for American stuntmen, that Williams would have known about it – or that Dobbins, whose job (as the stunt coordinator for the show) was to look out for the well-being of his stunt people, would have at the very least expressed concern to one of the show's producers that Bruce's actions were hurting the stunt people, which would have caused delays in filming, which would have cost the show more money. Instead, however, according to Williams, Bruce and the stunt coordinator "became pretty close."⁹

CONTRADICTORY STORIES

As for Tarantino's claim that Gene LeBell being brought onto the set to rough Bruce up and, thereby, "teach Bruce respect for American stuntmen," the matter warrants further investigation.

Gene LeBell is something of a legend in American martial arts circles. His actual competitive background reached a peak in 1954, when, at only twenty-two years of age, he won both the heavyweight and overall divisions of the Amateur Athletic Union National Judo Championships.¹⁰ He would go on to do it again the following year. LeBell would later make the move into professional wrestling (his mother, Aileen Eaton, had been a promoter of professional wrestling and boxing in California) and, later, become a well-respected Hollywood stuntman. Bob Calhoun, the ghostwriter of Gene LeBell's autobiography (*The Godfather of Grappling*), supported Tarantino's claim that Ben Dobbins had placed a call to LeBell, asking him to come over to the 20th Century Fox lot to set Bruce Lee straight:

According to LeBell, Lee was a working stiff on the set of *The Green Hornet* but was kicking the shit out of the stuntmen. They couldn't convince him that he could go easy and it would still look great on film. The show's stunt coordinator, Bennie Dobbins, needed a ringer to deal with Lee, so he called in Judo Gene.¹¹

However, it must be pointed out that Gene LeBell is a self-promoter *par excellence*, and that this claim, as with so many of his other claims regarding his relationship with Bruce Lee, simply doesn't hold up under scrutiny. To begin, LeBell has claimed in interviews that he "ended up working for *The Green Hornet* -- doing a lot of the shows."¹² However, according to the IMDB database (which tracks such things), LeBell worked only once in *The Green Hornet* series (in a 1966 episode entitled *The Hunters and the Hunted*).¹³ Appearing in only one of *The Green Hornet*'s twenty-six episodes does not support LeBell's claim that he appeared in "a lot" of the shows in the series (in fact, he appeared in the least amount of episodes possible). Moreover, he didn't make it onto the show until its eleventh episode, long after the problem he allegedly had been approached to deal with had been solved. Indeed, if LeBell is to be believed, it means that Dobbins, the stunt coordinator for the series, didn't see fit to act upon Bruce hurting his stuntmen until ten episodes had elapsed. However, per Van Williams' report, the problem of Bruce working in too close and making contact with his stuntmen was quickly remedied by simply taking Bruce into the screening room to watch the dailies.

Interestingly, some years before Tarantino's comments, LeBell had stated that, while he did receive a call from Dobbins to appear on *The Green Hornet*, the reason had nothing to do with teaching Bruce Lee a lesson about anything:

Benny Dobbins was stunt coordinator for the show and he called and asked me to check out some kid by the name of Bruce Lee: "I got this guy who does the same stuff you do," Dobbins said. Of course, Benny didn't know the difference between Judo and Kung Fu, but he wanted me to watch this new actor work.¹⁴

However, LeBell would later state that:

Bruce Lee demanded respect. And Benny Dobbins the stunt coordinator, the guy that hired me, he says, "well, tease this guy a little bit — and that's what the stunt guys do — and make him part of the family." So, he says, "Well, pick him up."¹⁵

The researcher into the matter is immediately left confused as to why exactly LeBell was invited onto the set. Was it to make Lee part of the stunt people's "family" with a little good-natured teasing, to simply observe the techniques of a fellow martial artist (of which there were few on television at the time), or was it, as Tarantino evidently believed, that LeBell was brought in specifically to "teach Bruce respect for American stuntmen?" At various times in his life Gene LeBell has claimed each of these as being the reason. However, as his statements contradict each other, clearly not all of them can be true. That he would be brought in to teach a lesson (i.e., rough up) a co-star of a new TV series seems highly dubious, as producers generally tend to frown upon anyone or anything that would either upset the temperament or physically hurt any of the actors they've employed for their productions, as such invariably causes delays in production schedules, which, again invariably, ends up putting their productions over

budget. Consequently, an employee of the production (the stunt coordinator in this case) bringing in a tough guy for the express purpose of smacking around one of the show's costars, is an action that would undoubtedly have cost Dobbins his job. It was also the kind of thing that would have -- instantly -- put an aspiring stuntman like LeBell out of the industry.¹⁶

THE "LESSON"

The next area of confusion arises in the story as to what exactly the "lesson" was that Ben Dobbins wanted Gene LeBell to teach. LeBell would claim that Dobbins had told him to put Bruce "in a headlock."¹⁷ However, he would later claim that Dobbins instructed him only to "tease him" and just to "pick him up."¹⁸ These, also, are not the same things. And the confusion as to what happened next only increases from here. LeBell has claimed that "I just snatched him [Bruce Lee] and picked him up and held him in what wrestler's call a 'crouching nelson.'"¹⁹ However, he has also claimed that, "I was the stunt coordinator for 'Green Hornet' [he wasn't; Ben Dobbins was] and I snatched him [Bruce Lee] in a fireman's carry and walked around with Bruce sitting on my shoulders."²⁰ A fireman's carry is a move where one drapes a person over one's shoulders, such as a fire fighter would when carrying somebody to safety. For the definition of a 'crouching nelson' we have to go to LeBell himself, as the author can find no trace of it online or in speaking with any of his grappling friends: "a 'crouching nelson,' only you have one arm between his legs, one around his neck [he's demonstrating this with his arms in front of him, not to his sides] and he's stuck."²¹ Once again, while there may perhaps be similarities in the holds, the way that LeBell describes them, these are two completely different techniques (the latter would appear to be a hold applied to somebody when they are on the floor and you are attempting to turn him over onto his back). The impression one gets from reading LeBell's various reports of the encounter thus far is that he doesn't have a clear recollection of why he was invited onto the set, what he was supposed to do once he got there, or, evidently, what he did to Bruce Lee. In any event, the story continues:

So LeBell went up and grabbed Lee. "He started making all those noises that he became famous for," LeBell said, "but he didn't try to counter me, so I think he was more surprised than anything else." Then LeBell lifted Lee onto his back in what's called a fireman's carry and ran around the set with him. 'Put me down or I'll kill you!' Lee screamed. 'I can't put you down or you'll kill me,' LeBell said, holding Lee there as long as he dared before putting him down, saying, 'Hey, Bruce, don't kill me. Just kidding, champ.'"²²

Leaving aside the fact that Bruce never made the high pitch war cries "that he became famous for" until he filmed *Fist of Fury* in 1971 (five years after encountering LeBell on the set of *The Green Hornet*), the story contradicts what LeBell told the author in 1993 -- that he never picked Bruce up and ran around the set with him:

QUESTION: I think maybe when you worked with him on *The Green Hornet* he was still heavily influenced by Wing Chun.

LEBELL: Absolutely. I think he changed his mind when I sat on him.

QUESTION: You “sat on him,” did you?

LEBELL: Well, when you say that, I mean, you come down here and I’ll show you what I mean. You take a guy that’s a Karate man or Wing Chun man ... a man’s a great boxer or a great Karate man, and you take him down with something simple like a football tackle, get on top of him and it’s the best wrestler, am I correct?

QUESTION: Absolutely.

LEBELL: Get on top of him and get him in an arm lock and you just crank it a bit, he can’t throw a punch and he can’t throw a kick. When a guy is down on the ground and he feels helpless, he says, “Hey, I gotta learn something, here. I’ve got to learn this.”

QUESTION: Is that what happened with Lee and you?

LEBELL: Yeah.²³

So, which was it? Did LeBell pick Bruce up in a fireman’s carry and run around the set with him or did he football tackle him and then sit on top of him -- in front of all the cast and crew -- and put Bruce in an arm lock? Again, these are not the same things. If the fireman’s carry scenario is true, (despite neither Van Williams nor Robert Fitzsimons have any recollections of witnessing such a spectacle), what exactly would have been the “lesson” that Bruce was being taught? That he better not hit any more American stuntmen-- or else somebody might pick him up and run around the set with him? One would be forgiven for thinking that the “lesson” a Judo champion had been specifically brought onto the set to impart to Bruce would’ve been made of sterner stuff. But the story gets better. Despite Bruce Lee’s well-known dislike of anybody touching him,²⁴ for some inexplicable reason that runs completely contrary to his character, he passively accepts LeBell’s grabbing him and parading him around the set amongst a roomful of his coworkers. Moreover, apparently his being put in a simple fireman’s carry (or crouching nelson, or whatever) and being hustled along a hallway resulted in an epiphany of sorts occurring. This incident apparently caused Bruce Lee to recognize that this element (a fireman’s carry?) was what was missing from his martial art.²⁵ Bruce then, for some reason, equates having been carried around the set with the art of Judo (an art, incidentally, that does not have a fireman’s carry as part of its arsenal). Consequently, Bruce recognizes that he needs to learn the techniques of Judo which, until this moment, were apparently completely foreign to him, and that he must incorporate these techniques into his art of Jun Fan Gung Fu. Similarly, he recognizes that LeBell is the best man to teach him this art. Here, LeBell picks up the story:

And then he says, “You’ve got to come to my dojo and do Gung Fu So, I says, “hell, I’ll go down to his dojo.” Well, his school ... our mats are thick [at Gene’s school]; he had just a thin tatami, which is about an eighth of an inch thick, and if you fall on it, it’ll

break your gluteus maximus. And so, I said, “Well, you’d better come down to my school if you want to work ...”²⁶

In another interview about why he and Bruce didn’t train at the latter’s Kung Fu school, LeBell claimed it was because he “kept getting sick from that stinky incense he burned in his gym. I told him I wouldn’t go there because his dojo smelled worse than a Chinese laundry house Bruce came to my dojo after that.”²⁷ Interestingly, when I asked Bruce Lee’s Chinatown student, Steve Golden, if the Chinatown school had thin mats on its floors and how it was to train there with “stinky incense” wafting throughout the building, he was nonplussed, replying, “As for the Chinatown school, no one burned incense when I was there and the floor was concrete.”²⁸ Be that as it may, let’s return to Gene LeBell, who continues on with his story:

Because he [Bruce Lee] wanted to get into wrestling, Judo is what they called it, Judo’s a form of wrestling And he wanted to get on to that finishing holds on the ground, arm locks, leg locks, neck locks, twisting the body around. He worked out with me for about a year, on and off. Once he’d come twice a week, once he would skip a week. He’d workout in the afternoon; he liked to do it when nobody was around.²⁹

Once again, a problem arises with LeBell’s account. As the decision of Bruce to learn Judo is said to have occurred as an immediate result of his having been picked up and trotted around the set of *The Green Hornet* by LeBell, and that the one and only episode of *The Green Hornet* that LeBell appeared in was filmed on or around September 20, 1966 (per the production date indicated on the final draft of the script),³⁰ the date that LeBell first arrived at Bruce’s school (and noting its tatami flooring and overwhelming incense) had to be in close proximity to this date. However, Bruce Lee’s Los Angeles Kung Fu school wasn’t open in 1966 when LeBell filmed his episode of *The Green Hornet* and, in fact, wouldn’t open for business until February 9, 1967.³¹ That LeBell would come to visit Bruce at a school that didn’t yet exist is nonsensical. Moreover, the claim that Bruce spent a year studying privately with LeBell lacks any corroborating evidence whatsoever. LeBell’s statement that Bruce preferred to train with him when there was nobody around is both convenient and highly suspicious. On its surface, it looks to be an attempt to deflect questions as to why, if in fact Bruce trained with LeBell, there is absolutely no evidence for it. Not only are there no photos of the two together, but there is no evidence of anyone seeing Bruce Lee practicing grappling at his house or (later) at his martial arts school. If Bruce saw Judo as being the missing piece to his art, then why is there no evidence of it having been added to it? It is certainly peculiar that Bruce, who, by all accounts, was quite open with his students about what he was studying and researching in the martial arts would keep them in the dark about his study of Judo. That he would devote a full year to the study of the art, only to not practice it, again, makes no sense. Perhaps most telling is the fact that not one of Bruce Lee’s daytime diary entries made mention of Gene LeBell (or his school) at all, which leads one to suspect that the entire story was fabricated. But why?

MONEY – THE BRUCE LEE CONNECTION

It's hard to envision now what Bruce Lee meant to the martial arts industry in America. Prior to the release of his films in North America, and the martial arts craze that followed immediately in their wake, one was hard-pressed to find a martial arts studio and very few martial artists were earning a living merely by teaching, say, Karate or Judo. However, the interest that Lee's Hong Kong films generated globally resulted in a tsunami of interest in the martial arts, with the result that, by 1974, there was a martial arts school on virtually every street corner, and within every strip mall. Money was now being made. And, with so many schools now competing for business, every martial arts instructor was looking for something that would give him a competitive edge in the marketplace. And, if one could somehow connect oneself to the phenomenon that was Bruce Lee, it was both a leg up on one's competition and a ticket to print money. Martial artists that knew or trained with Lee, now were emboldened to come forth to share this fact with consumers. Some (by no means only LeBell) would claim that they had taught him, which advanced their profile within the industry, as, if Bruce Lee went to them for instruction, so the reasoning went, how much better must they be than he was! Tae Kwon Do master Jhoon Rhee (another person who was no slouch in the self-promotion department) claimed that he had taught Bruce how to kick high.³² Chuck Norris would claim likewise.³³ Lo Kam Man claimed that he and his uncle, Yip Man, were the ones who had taught Bruce Wing Chun,³⁴ and Ji Han-jae (who would appear in Bruce's film *The Game of Death*) claimed that he also taught Bruce Lee.³⁵ There would be others who would make similar claims once Bruce was no longer around to refute them and dollars were to be made. Indeed, an entire cottage industry has grown up around people who claimed to have taught Bruce Lee a lesson in their martial art. It actually got to be quite overwhelming attempting to keep track of the number of "teachers" that Bruce was alleged to have had.

The author recalls that when he first signed up for Karate lessons, that part of the sales pitch my instructor made to me was that Bruce Lee practiced Karate. The dojo even had a poster of Lee near its change room to further underscore this connection. I also knew of a Kung Fu teacher in Toronto who claimed that Bruce Lee came to him for lessons, which resulted in a flood of students coming into his school. The fact that Bruce Lee had neither the means nor the inclination to commute from Los Angeles to Toronto for Karate lessons was evidently lost on his students. But that was (and remains) the case; if you can establish a connection to Bruce Lee, all you have to do is build your school and they (the students) will come. It wasn't until years later, when I worked for the Bruce Lee estate in creating a series of books based on Lee's surviving writings, and happened upon Lee's daytime diaries that I had a means of checking — in Bruce's own handwriting — the various claims made by these individuals to see which were true and which had been made up out of whole cloth for the sole purpose of selling memberships in their martial arts studios. Bruce's daytime diaries were fascinating historical documents and very comprehensive. They contained information that ranged from what he did in his daily workouts, to whom he trained with, to whom he met for lunch, what doctor's appointments he had, notations regarding family and friends' birthdays, private Kung Fu lessons that he taught,

tournaments that he attended, movies that he saw or was working on, and promotional appearances. He also had written down motivational passages for when work was scarce and times were lean in order to keep his enthusiasm high during what otherwise might have seemed like nothing but dark clouds descending upon him from all sides. His daytime diaries also listed the names, phone numbers and addresses for all the people that he knew and worked with. Not surprisingly, there was no evidence of Bruce having practiced Karate, and the Canadian Kung Fu instructor's name was nowhere to be found. What did surprise me was that this was also the case for Gene LeBell, whose name did not appear in any of Bruce's daytime diaries — from 1966 through till 1973.

Other falsehoods from LeBell regarding his relationship with Bruce Lee border on the bizarre. He would claim that while he “didn’t go to Hong Kong with him for *Enter the Dragon*, but when he came back, he told me, “I did this armbar to show you.”³⁶ However, when the author asked LeBell when he last saw or spoke with Bruce, LeBell replied that it had been “well before he died.” When pressed for more specifics, he said, “In the last few years [of Lee’s life] I didn’t get a chance to see him at all When he started doing a lot of the movies, you know, I just didn’t see him.”³⁷ Given that *Enter the Dragon* was filmed in 1973 and the last time that LeBell claimed to have seen him was (at the latest) two years prior to this, his claim, again, is nonsensical.

LeBell’s statement to the author that it was his sitting on Bruce and putting him in an arm bar that caused Bruce to declare “Hey, I gotta learn something, here. I’ve got to learn this,” there is even more reason for scepticism. According to Calhoun, for an entire year LeBell taught Bruce “finishing holds on the ground, arm locks, leg locks, neck locks,” and would add that LeBell also taught Bruce “takedowns.”³⁸ However, the question must be asked: *Why?* It must be remembered that when Gene LeBell first showed up on the set of *The Green Hornet* in 1966, the techniques of Judo were by no means foreign to Bruce Lee. He had already studied Judo while living in Seattle, and his student Jesse Glover, who was a second-degree black belt in the art and the winner of multiple regional championships, had long ago shared with Bruce the same techniques from Judo that LeBell would claim he taught him. According to Glover:

Bruce was quite interested in Judo. I taught him some techniques shortly after I met him. He came to all of the matches that I had in Seattle and took a Judo class at the University of Washington from one of my formal teachers. Bruce played around with a few arm-bars, wrist-locks, pins and chokes Fred Sato was another person in Seattle who showed Bruce some stuff about Judo.³⁹

There is absolutely no evidence that Bruce Lee studied grappling (let alone for an entire year in secret) under Gene LeBell. Indeed, the techniques that LeBell claimed to have taught him, Bruce had already learned from Glover. It’s true that Bruce owned two books authored by LeBell -- one on Judo and another on self-defense -- but these were two books of ninety-four that Bruce owned on Judo and self-defense in a personal library of over two thousand titles. It

hardly rises to the level that LeBell would boldly proclaim on the cover of his book *Gene LeBell: Grappling Master: Combat For Street Defense And Competition* (published in 1992) that he was “Bruce Lee’s grappling instructor.” As an aside, and what made the author first question LeBell’s assertions regarding Bruce Lee, was when he told me that “between you, me and the lamppost, Brandon [Lee] was a hell of a lot better [than his father in martial arts].”⁴⁰ No disrespect to Brandon at all (whom I had the pleasure of meeting and interviewing in 1992), but he was by no means even close to his father in terms of his martial arts ability, and certainly wasn’t a *better* martial artist. For someone to claim otherwise is clearly someone who could not have spent much time in the company of Bruce Lee at all.

In the final analysis, neither Tarantino’s nor LeBell’s Bruce Lee stories appear to pass muster. But perhaps the author is mistaken. Despite the apparent contradictions indicated above, perhaps, as Gene LeBell has indicated, he was willing to put his career as a stuntman in jeopardy by coming onto the set of a television series to correct a problem that had already been remedied nine episodes prior to his arrival; that a simple Fireman’s Carry on the set of *The Green Hornet* resulted in Bruce Lee no longer hitting American stunt people, and that a football tackle and an arm bar (the latter of which Bruce had learned in Seattle some six years previously) suddenly caused him to conclude that Judo techniques were missing from his art; that he studied in secret with LeBell for an entire year and yet never practiced the techniques he learned, and that he would tell LeBell the last time he saw him in 1971 about a technique he used in a film that he made in 1973, and that Brandon Lee was a much better martial artist than his father. The author will leave it to the reader to decide.

NOTES ON TEXT

1. Van Williams' commentary in "Bruce Lee Hollywood Folklore That Inspired Quentin Tarantino's 'Once Upon a Time in Hollywood'" on <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=x2uyS54xs6o>
2. Charles Fitzsimons, one of the producers of *The Green Hornet*, and the assistant to the show's creator, William Dozier, recalled that Lee's speed had posed a problem for the camera ever since his screentest for Greenway Productions in 1965: "One of the interesting things about the screentest; we had to slow up his action because we found in the test that he was moving too fast for the speed of the motion picture film. People may not realize that he could have been faster than he was." Charles Fitzsimons interview with the author, March 20, 1996. This was corroborated by Gary Owens, who played the Daily Sentinel television newscaster in the series: "One of the things I remember most about Bruce was that he always had to be slowed down. His actions were just too fast for the camera. Even any form, or kata if you prefer, had to be really toned down, slowed up enough to be photographed so that it would look natural. He was much too fast and too vigorous for the motion picture camera. It's unfortunate that we didn't use slow motion, stop action, and some of the tricks we have in such common use today. That was all to come later in Bruce's own feature films. When we shot *The Green Hornet*, we tried to work fast and economically. No one really wanted to take the time, trouble and expense to do what we now insist upon. Of course, that was some time ago when we were filming *The Green Hornet* for television out on the 20th Century Fox lot. We do know that Bruce was so fast that even the slow-motion camera couldn't pick up his movements, they had to be especially shot. But whatever he did on the set, we all just stood around and marvelled at him." Gary Owens quoted from the article "Kato Without Tears," published in *Fighting Stars* magazine, Fall 1977.
3. Van Williams interview with the author, March 28, 1996.
4. Quentin Tarantino quoted from the video "Quentin Tarantino on the Bruce Lee 'Hollywood' Controversy" on the Joe Rogan podcast at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YmvOEj00LB8>
5. Clouse, Robert, *The Making of Enter the Dragon*, Unique Publications, Burbank, California, 1987, pp. 70-72.
6. Jackie Chan quoted in Polly, Matthew, *Bruce Lee: A Life*, Simon and Schuster, New York, 2018, pp. 416-417. See also: "Often times, when Bruce saw certain people, particularly stuntmen, were doing things far beyond what was called for in the script, he would call in the paymaster to see that the man received double wages for the day." Clouse, Robert, *The Making of Enter the Dragon*, Unique Publications, Burbank, California, 1987, pg. 122.

7. Van Williams quoted from the article “Bruce Lee Touched The Lives Of The Greats,” published in *Black Belt Magazine’s Best Of Bruce Lee # 2*, Rainbow Publications, Burbank, California, 1975, pg. 50.
8. Van Williams, interviewed on March 28, 1996 for A&E’s *Biography* series episode about Bruce Lee.
9. Van Williams comments in “Bruce Lee Hollywood Folklore That Inspired Quentin Tarantino’s ‘Once Upon a Time in Hollywood’” on <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=x2uyS54xs6o>
10. As per Gene LeBell’s website <https://judogene.com>
11. From the online article “Debunking Quentin Tarantino’s ‘Mockery’ Of Bruce Lee” By Bob Calhoun, <https://www.ozy.com/true-and-stories/debunking-quentin-tarantinos-mockery-of-bruce-lee/95956/>
12. Gene LeBell quoted from the video interview “Gene LeBell talks about Bruce Lee” on https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dJoCtd_cblQ
13. IMDB information on LeBell’s career: https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0059991/fullcredits/?ref_=tt_cl_sm
14. Gene Lebell quoted in the 2016 online article “Gene LeBell Comes To Grips With Bruce Lee” at <https://www.martialartsentertainment.com/gene-lebell-comes-to-grips-with-bruce-lee/>
15. Gene LeBell quoted from the video “Bruce Lee The Early Years - Gene LeBell Interview” on <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mf7XPT-rtyo>
16. According to Van Williams, *The Green Hornet* was Ben Dobbins first job as the Stunt Coordinator for a television show: “Benny Dobbins was my stunt man. He was my stunt man almost from the beginning of my career. When I got the part they asked me who would I like for my stunt man? Well, there wasn’t any other choice but Benny. So, they made him the stunt coordinator. It was the first time he was the stunt coordinator on any show.” Van Williams comments in “Bruce Lee Hollywood Folklore That Inspired Quentin Tarantino’s ‘Once Upon a Time in Hollywood’” on <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=x2uyS54xs6o>. Gene LeBell had started in the stunt industry in 1962. His appearance on *The Green Hornet* series marked only his thirteenth professional job as a stunt person in four years, and seven of those jobs were uncredited. https://www.imdb.com/name/nm0494061/?ref_=fn_nm_nm_1#stunts. It would seem both an unprofessional and very risky gamble to take with both men’s fledgling careers for either of them to willingly collaborate on roughing up or potentially injuring the co- star of a television series.
17. “LeBell says when he got to the set, Dobbins told him to put Lee ‘in a headlock or something.’” From the online article “Debunking Quentin Tarantino’s ‘Mockery’ Of Bruce Lee” By Bob Calhoun, <https://www.ozy.com/true-and-stories/debunking-quentin-tarantinos-mockery-of-bruce-lee/95956/>

18. “Benny Dobbins the stunt coordinator, the guy that hired me, he says, ‘Well, tease this guy a little bit — and that’s what the stunt guys do — and make him part of the family.’ So, he says, ‘Well, pick him up.’” Gene LeBell quoted from the video “Bruce Lee The Early Years - Gene LeBell Interview” on <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mf7XPT-rtyo>
19. Ibid.
20. From the online article “The Old Man And The Gi: Ahead Of His Time,” by Joseph Santoliquito at <https://www.sherdog.com/news/articles/2/The-Old-Man-and-the-Gi-53517>
21. Gene LeBell quoted from the video “Bruce Lee The Early Years - Gene LeBell Interview” on <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mf7XPT-rtyo>
22. Gene LeBell quoted from the online article “Debunking Quentin Tarantino’s ‘Mockery’ Of Bruce Lee” By Bob Calhoun, <https://www.ozy.com/true-and-stories/debunking-quentin-tarantinos-mockery-of-bruce-lee/95956/>
23. Gene LeBell interview with the author, 1993.
24. “He has a violent temper – violent temper. If you ... he didn’t liked to be touched. He would just go crazy.” Dan Inosanto quoted from the online interview “How Tough Was Bruce Lee? Danny Inosanto Finally Answers The Question!” at <https://www.wingchunnews.ca/how-tough-was-bruce-lee-danny-inosanto-finally-answers-the-question/>
25. “Back on his feet again, Lee didn’t kill LeBell. Instead, Lee recognized that the lack of grappling was a deficiency in the Jeet Kune Do style of martial arts he was developing.” From the online article “Debunking Quentin Tarantino’s ‘Mockery’ Of Bruce Lee” By Bob Calhoun, <https://www.ozy.com/true-and-stories/debunking-quentin-tarantinos-mockery-of-bruce-lee/95956/>
26. Gene LeBell quoted from the video “Bruce Lee The Early Years - Gene LeBell Interview” on <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mf7XPT-rtyo>
27. Gene LeBell quoted on <https://forums.sherdog.com/threads/gene-lebell-and-bruce-lee.928555/> Also, when the author interviewed LeBell in 1994, he said that Lee’s burning incense at his “dojo” was his most distinct memory of Bruce Lee.
28. Steve Golden, Facebook Message to the author, Wednesday, August 25, 2021.
29. Gene LeBell quoted from the video “Bruce Lee The Early Years - Gene LeBell Interview” on <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mf7XPT-rtyo>
30. The cover of the script indicates the date of production as being September 20, 1966: <https://scriptcovers.tumblr.com/post/123923430357/the-green-hornet-robert-l-friend-et-al-1966>
31. That the Chinatown School in Los Angeles didn’t open until February 9, 1967 was indicated both in Bruce Lee’s daytime diary entry on that date, as well as a copy of the Chinatown school attendance records, which were given to the author by Dan Inosanto on January 11, 1996.

32. "Bruce Lee did not know how to kick. He had some hand skills but his kicking could not compete against Tae kwon Do. He first saw me jump eight feet and break three boards. We became close after that. I learned hand techniques from him and taught him kicks. He gained his fame through kicks." Jhoon Rhee quoted from the interview in "MuhammadAli,JhoonRhee&TaeKwonDo" at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DMUuZyh7Kws&t=61s>
33. "He was really a hard trainer. He wasn't a kicker back in those days. Wing Chun was not about all those spinning kicks, which I was known for. I was known for my kicking ability. And he was known more known for his sticky hands and this stuff here. So, we started exchanging techniques. Because he didn't believe in kicking above the waist at that time. And I said you should be able to kick anywhere. If your open in the head you should be able to kick the head. So, we started exchanging all these techniques and of course six month later he could do it as well as anyone -- the spinning kicks and all that." From the online article "Chuck Norris Explains How He Taught Bruce Lee To Kick High" at <https://www.wingchunnews.ca/chuck-norris-explains-how-he-taught-bruce-lee-to-kick-high/>
34. From the article "Me and my uncle Ip Man taught Bruce Lee Wing Chun kung fu. He was rubbish when he started" by Joe Henley, published in the online version of the *South China Morning Post* at <https://www.scmp.com/magazines/post-magazine/long-reads/article/2186246/me-and-my-uncle-ip-man-taught-bruce-lee-wing-chun>
35. "He learned some technique. I taught him some technique." Ji Han Jae interview with the author, 1998.
36. Gene LeBell quoted in the online article "Debunking Quentin Tarantino's 'Mockery' Of Bruce Lee" By Bob Calhoun, <https://www.ozy.com/true-and-stories/debunking-quentin-tarantinos-mockery-of-bruce-lee/95956/>
37. Gene LeBell interview with the author, 1993.
38. From the online article "Debunking Quentin Tarantino's 'Mockery' Of Bruce Lee" By Bob Calhoun, <https://www.ozy.com/true-and-stories/debunking-quentin-tarantinos-mockery-of-bruce-lee/95956/>
39. Jesse Glover quoted in Bax, Paul; Smith, Steve; Glover, Jesse; Lacault, Gael. *Jesse Glover: Disciple of the Dragon: Reflections of Bruce Lee's First Student, Jesse Glover (Disciples of the Dragon Book 2)*, Missouri, Kindle Edition, pg. 2213.
40. Gene LeBell interview with the author, 1993.

About John Little

John Little is one of the world's foremost authorities on the life and work of Bruce Lee, his training methods, and his philosophy. Selected by the Lee estate, John has been the only person ever authorized to review and use the entirety of Lee's personal notes, sketches, and reading annotations, and to edit books on Lee's martial art and its far-reaching underpinnings. He compiled and edited material into five books in the Bruce Lee Library series published by Tuttle Publishing.

John served as associate publisher for Bruce Lee magazine, the managing editor of *Knowing Is Not Enough*, the official newsletter of the JFJKF Nucleus, and a director for the Bruce Lee Foundation.

John is also the author of *The Warrior Within*, as well as an award-winning filmmaker who created three documentaries on Bruce Lee: *Bruce Lee: In His Own Words*, *Bruce Lee – A Warrior's Journey* (film and book), and *In Pursuit of the Dragon*.

Recognized as “one of the top fitness researchers in North America”, John is a prolific writer and has authored 12 books on exercise and 38 books on philosophy, history, and martial arts. In addition his numerous articles have been published in every fitness and martial art magazine in North America.

A Note from Chris Kent

I've been intimately involved in Bruce Lee's art of Jeet Kune Do since just before his untimely passing in 1973. And over the years I've seen many misperceptions, misconceptions, and inaccuracies put forth concerning Lee and his art. When John told me about his new book, *Wrath of the Dragon*, I was excited. He sent me the material you are now reading as he was considering including it in the book. When he informed me he had changed his mind, I told him that while I agreed with his reasons, I felt the material would shed some light on a subject that has been distorted by many people for decades, and asked if he would allow me to turn it into a PDF article and make it available for people to read. John graciously agreed and gave me his permission to do so. I'm sure that it's inevitable that this article will, for whatever reason, upset some people. However John has provided verifiable evidence of massive contradictions coming from LeBell. John has also told me personally that he is more interested in the truth than in being proven right or wrong, and so if anyone can step forward and produce evidence to the contrary, he'd be very happy. In my opinion this article shines a bright light on the subject of Bruce Lee's affiliation with Gene LeBell.

- Chris Kent