



7 things

I wish I knew

when I was

a blue belt!

By one of the original BJJ Dirty Dozen  
John B Will

Starting out in any endeavour is a task fraught with peril. Small adjustments at the start of any journey can have very significant consequences further along the path. Consider a hairs-breadth change in the angle of the muzzle from where a sniper takes his shot and how this can make a difference of dozens of yards at the targets position a mile away. As Frank Herbert in his classic novel Dune, said ‘beginnings are delicate times’.

When we first step onto the BJJ landscape, our footing is bad, our direction uncertain and it may seem as though we are being thwarted at every step. In fact, many people quit training, not only before earning their Blue Belt, but before they even get a glimpse of the larger picture. The unfortunate fact that most people starting out in BJJ feel like people who are trying to solve a jigsaw puzzle without even seeing the front of the box, makes the challenge far more difficult that it needs to be. There are things I know now, that if I had have known them at Blue Belt, would have my journey a little more pleasurable, a heck of a lot easier and perhaps even, a little quicker. Let me share some of them with you ...

- **Big Picture: The Front of the Jigsaw puzzle box**
- **Fine Distinctions: Differentiating discomfort from injury**
- **Patience: The better the blue the better the black**
- **Acceptance: Where you are is where you need to be (Melissa)**
- **Getting Game: Plan beats no plan**
- **Game Diagnostics: Organizing and collating your technique database**
- **MMA Entries: Structure based defence to set up takedowns**

## The Big Picture

Knowing the lay of the land before starting out on a journey is immensely helpful. In my distant past as a corporate trainer and team-builder, I had a roomful of executives divide up into small group in a race to solve a small jigsaw puzzle. All the puzzles were the same but for one difference; half of them came loose in plastic bags and the other half came in their original boxes. Complete with picture on the front. Always, the groups that had the benefit of knowing what they were trying to build before they started, finished far more quickly than those who had no idea what they were building. The message is simple 'get the overview first. As someone starting out in BJJ, this should mean two things.

- Get an overview of the landscape as soon as you can. This means, understanding the main positions that occur once the fight hits the ground, which ones are good for us and which ones are bad; and finally, how all of these positions relate to each other; ie: how to move from one to the next, and so on. I have seen many students confused by their instructors attempts to explain to them the finer points of a basic guard pass, but they don't even understand why they would want to pass the guard in the first place; they simply have not been given a reason to want to pass the Guard yet; from their point of view, they are already 'on top', and they just don't see the need to upgrade their position. Escaping from the mount is obvious to everyone but passing the guard (for example) is not obvious. Make sure acquire a fairly good idea of where you want to be and why; before embarking on the hunt for the perfect triangle (for example).

- When first learning a new technique, don't be too bogged down by the details. Stand back a little, get the broad idea first, do a dozen repetitions and digest the 'big picture' first; then ask to be taught again, and take some of the details 'on board'. First time around, just rough it out; the same way an artist starts a portrait. As you begin to get the idea, start filling in the details.



So your first task, before heading off onto strange and wonderfully intricate tangents, is to familiarize ourselves with the basic building blocks of the BJJ landscape. Be familiar with the basic positions, know which ones are good and learn to 'keep' them, learn which ones are bad and learn to 'escape' from them and then learn some attacks from each of the main positions. Do this before heading off deeper into the wonderful maze that is BJJ!

Time for a shameless plug: for any interested in a detailed book on this very subject, [click here](#) to check out my BJJ Fundamentals and other books.

## Fine Distinctions

A large and important part of gaining experience (in almost any endeavour) is to become acquainted with the idea of making 'fine distinctions'. An Eskimo, whose lively-hood and survivability depends on a profound understanding of his or her environment, has many, many words to describe the thing that most of us simply call 'snow'. In the Eskimo's world, such distinctions are vital; far more important, for example, than they would be to someone who lives



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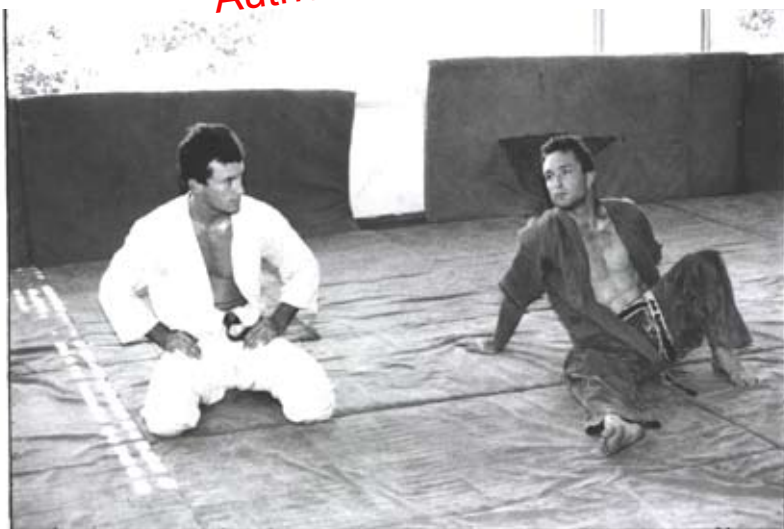
in Texas. Fine distinctions are all about profound understanding; something that is very important for those training in BJJ.

The first fine distinction that people need to make in grappling is the distinction between discomfort and injury. When we first walk onto the mat and someone gets a good knee-ride on our belly, we think we are going to die; well, perhaps I'm exaggerating a little but many people actually believe they are at least being injured by this position. Post blue belt of course, most of us don't give the slightest thought to the minor discomfort this position causes; but beginners do, so much so, that it sometimes drives them to quit before they too make the same fine, and very important distinction. As beginners, it's a rather big step to make the realization that for the most part, when we think we are being injured (and that BJJ may not be for us) we are more than likely only experiencing discomfort. And that will soon pass.

## Patience

Whenever we start out on a new endeavour, we need to resist the insistent tendency toward wanting immediate results. Results, in any worthwhile endeavour, come only after we undergo a certain apprenticeship. Something that I tell my students, is this, "The Better the Blue, the Better the Black". Much of our foundation, as a BJJ Black Belt, is laid during the formative Blue Belt phase of our training. An ill-equipped Blue Belt will almost always never even make it to Black, let alone be a competent one. There is no rush; the journey to Black Belt is all about just that, the journey.

Besides this, we are there to enjoy and fully engage in the experience of learning. This means that we enjoy the learning at every stage; not just at the stage where we have risen to become the alpha male or female of the mat. Enjoy becoming a white belt, enjoy becoming a blue belt, enjoy becoming a purple belt, enjoy becoming a brown belt and enjoy becoming a black belt. The operative word here is becoming – you don't get any rank in BJJ – you become that rank. Enjoy the becoming! Remember, you are investing in yourself every time you train. Enjoy every step of that investment process. For another article on the [World's Best Investment – Click here.](#)



## Acceptance

Back in the early 90's my wife Melissa, and I were over training on the Machado mat in Los Angeles. Most of the BJJ students back then (pre UFC) were fighter types who had some understanding (based on experience) that ground-fighting was important; in other words, the mat was full of ugly, neanderthal-like fighters. Melissa, weighing in at 50 kilograms, was spending all of her mat-time on the bottom. There was simply no way she was going to dominate the many large, ego-driven males that seemed to walk in through the doors each week. Eventually though, she developed a great Guard, a superlative defence and eventually, she began to establish her own reign of terror over many of the brutes who formally mauled and mangled her. When she entered the female division of the Pan AMS some year back, she not only dominated all the Brazilian competitors, she submitted every single one of them, easily! All that time she spent on defence has paid her huge dividends as a BJJ fighter. The moral of this story is simple – wherever you are, is exactly where you need to be. Have patience – enjoy it – all of it!



## Getting Game

Basically here I am talking about making a plan. As the old saying goes 'A bad plan today beats a perfect plan tomorrow'. The plan doesn't have to be perfect, it just has to be something. As far as BJJ goes, I think that the most basic of plans should incorporate three things:

- A Guard passing plan
- An attacking/sweeping Guard plan
- A finishing plan once you have passed the Guard or Swept your opponent

Now, it's important not to become obsessed about the construction of this plan before reaching Blue Belt. We need to develop a good overall foundation before we start focussing on specific strategies. But at least have an idea, as you become a Blue Belt, of your favourite way to pass the Guard, your favourite way to Sweep someone if they are in your Guard and your favourite way to submit them if you are in control of their upper body (Mount, Knee-ride, Side Control, North-South, etc). Having this plan in place, means you go onto the mat with something in mind; rather than always just naturally reacting to what the opponent is doing. Don't obsess about it but do have a good idea of what you want to do.

## Game Diagnostics

Although this is a long term learning strategy it is good to start the habit early. It can make a huge difference later on, especially as you begin to gather, collect and master more and more techniques. It's a relatively easy matter to remember five things, if five things represents all you know; but as time goes by, you will be exposed to hundreds of techniques, and it's good to provide yourself with some kind of structure early on in your

training so you can better manage this ever-growing collection as you move upward and onward through the various ranks.

Think of it like this, for every position that exists in the ground-fight, (more than a dozen different positions) you should become clearer and clearer on your answer to three questions:

- what is your number one 'go to' move from that position
- what is your escape if you are caught in that position
- what is your best transition (where to now) if you are losing that position

Having a good working knowledge of these three things, from each of the ground positions, will give you the foundation of your overall Game. It is important to make sure that you have at least one thing to do for each of those situations before you gather and collect say, a dozen things to do, from one of them. Some people 'obsess' with a particular position to early on in their development, to the detriment of many other positions in which they may well find themselves; tis is a bad foundation for good grappling. In fact, I have constructed a simple diagnostics tool that many of my students use to track where the 'holes' in their game lie, so they can address them and develop a more well-rounded and more adaptable game. [Click here to go and get it!](#)

## MMA Entries

Again, this is not that important before Blue Belt level; but becomes more and more necessary afterward. It's one thing to assume the fight will somehow end up on the ground; but this is not necessarily true. On the other hand, why would you want to take someone to the ground unless you were very confident that in doing so, you will have greatly improved your chances of winning. Hence, only bother with this after your

skills make this likely to be the case.

Start with a good double leg takedown; it's easy to learn and very effective. Learn to shoot the takedown from distance (jab range) and from very close (contact range). But here's the important thing: learn to crash in and connect up with an opponent who is striking with confidence and surety. This is something that most beginners (and quite a few seasoned BJJ Black Belts) baulk at; surprisingly, as there are several very simple solutions that require little timing, little talent and not all that much practice.

Using Structure Based Defence strategies like 'the Shell' and others, allows us to confidently crash in through an opponents striking and take him to the ground. I have used this simple and effective idea hundreds of times with 100% success. For a small video clip check out [Video #1 after Clicking Here](#).

My own students become familiar with the idea of using the Shell Structure as a defensive measure against a wailing opponent from the very outset. It builds tremendous confidence and takes away their inbuilt fear of being hit. Knowing they can move in and tie an opponent up without getting knocked out, allows them to more fully engage in their ground skills development on their journey to and beyond Blue Belt. I have met many BJJ practitioners over the years, who are quite competent on once the fight hits the ground, but they actually have little or no idea of how to get the fight to go there. This undermines much of their training but can easily be overcome with some simple and easy to learn strategies that are built on the concept of Structure Based Defence.

In conclusion, I hope that some of these ideas prove useful to you. They are aimed at the beginner, someone who is still in their first 1-3 years of training. But having said that, I have also known many people who have been training in BJJ much longer, and have yet to address these points. So regardless of your level of BJJ experience, please consider carefully some of what I have said. Had I understood these things when I began my own BJJ journey back in 1987, I have no doubt I would have been better for it.

Train Hard – Train Smart.

John B Will

To read my regular blog – [CLICK HERE](#).

