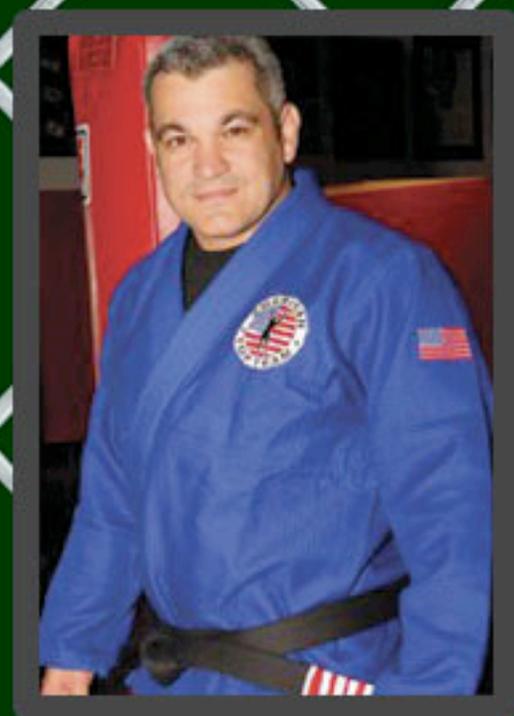


BJJ Secrets for MMA

**Adapting BJJ Training to Succeed
in Today's MMA Environment**

**by Ricardo Liborio
with Stephan Kesting**



BJJ Secrets for MMA

Adapting Brazilian Jiu-Jitsu to Succeed in Today's Mixed Martial Arts Environment

An exclusive interview with Ricardo Liborio of American Top Team

(www.americantopteam.com)

by Stephan Kesting

(www.grapplearts.com.com)

Ricardo Liborio is a legend in Brazilian jiu-jitsu, and he's well on his way to conquering the MMA world as well.

This articulate and thoughtful man is not only a famous BJJ black belt under the late Carlson Gracie Sr., but he's also the head coach and co-owner of the MMA powerhouse American Top Team (ATT).

Based in Coconut Creek, Florida, ATT has trained many of the top MMA fighters competing (and winning) in the UFC and other big shows.

The questions for this interview were submitted by the Grapplearts readership. Stephan Kesting then took what people wanted to know about BJJ and MMA training, and interviewed Ricardo Liborio in March, 2009.

For more information on Ricardo Liborio and/or ATT please visit www.americantopteam.com

Please note: this article is one of the resources available to readers of the 'Grappling Tips Newsletter'.

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Q: What does a typical BJJ class for beginners look like?

A: For beginners it all depends. First we try to find out if this guy has any martial arts or combat sports experience. If he has 8 years of wrestling and you put him with a 45 year old guy who just wants to train for fun then that second guy is gonna get hurt.

Our typical plan is to give a new student 2 weeks of basic half hour classes - 6 classes in total. Here they learn how to fall, how to roll, what the positions like mount and guard are, how to tie a belt...

From there they can go to the regular classes. We have beginner, intermediate, advanced and competition classes. We often have two classes going on the mats at the same time, because we have a lot of mat space. So we have a lot of options if you want to go pro.

In the regular classes we always do some sort takedowns as a warmup. First takedowns, THEN the ground. Everyone has to learn this - there is no way to avoid takedowns at our school.

Also, we don't allow purple, brown and black belts to train with beginners. I don't mix them with white belts unless I really trust them and they know what they are doing.

MMA sparring is three days a week, and at least 2 hours long. You have to be serious about sparring if you want to compete. The competition classes (with a LOT of sparring) are on Tuesdays, Thursdays and Saturdays.

Q: How do you teach MMA to beginners?

A: At ATT we start everybody with BJJ - BJJ comes first.

Even if a new guy comes in with 15 fights in Muay Thai then he still needs to learn the basics just like everybody else. But you also can't compare this high level athletic guy to a recreational player who is forty years old.

Also we have the green belt - it comes between white and blue belt. This was a huge gap in North America and the green belt fills the gap wonderfully. Here guys don't, or can't, train for 3 to 4 hours a day the way they do in Brazil.

It's very rare to jump from white belt to blue belt at ATT - only if the guy is training every day and comes to every class then sometimes - maybe - he can go directly to blue belt.

Q: How do the professional fighters at ATT typically schedule their training. What are the different components (e.g. Sparring, strength, cardio, technique...)?

A: Our fighters have a schedule. They train twice a day, six days a week. Actually Saturday is just one session, so they've really got 10 or 11 sessions in a week.

How they structure their training depends on whether or not they have a fight coming up

If he's between fights, and he's just trying to improve, then he has a bit more flexibility in how and what he trains.

But if he has a fight coming up then you have to look at what they need. A typical training camp is 8 to 10 weeks, and you have a strategy for the fight. Everything depends on who his opponent is. If his strategy in the fight is going to be to sprawl on his opponent's shots, then he's going to be doing a LOT of sprawling...

In general, the group classes cover the basics of everything, and the one-on-one private sessions go more into strategies.

Q: Is it possible to train at the level of a pro fighter while still working a full time "regular" job?

A: I believe it is possible for anyone to succeed if they've got the right state of mind and the right passion. But to go to the highest level of fighting it's not possible.

Maybe it's possible to become a B level or a C level fighter, but to become an A level fighter - no way. To fight at this level a fighter needs to go home and rest between training sessions. If he goes to work instead then it's not the right thing to do. Ask Georges St. Pierre if he has another job...



*Ricardo Liborio
a Carlson Gracie Black Belt*

Q: What do you think of the debate over crosstraining in different martial arts vs. concentrating on one art - jiu-jitsu for example - and then trying to exploit the vulnerabilities of other martial arts?

A: I think that you need to cover your deficiencies and weaknesses in all areas with cross training.

Of course I believe that jiu-jitsu is the most efficient martial art out there. If you separated them and you had the clash of the styles between equal physical abilities then jiu-jitsu would win 100% of the time. Royce Gracie proved this long ago.

But jiu-jitsu is different from MMA, and MMA is a different world now. If you don't train in the different areas then you're not competing at the highest level.

If you're not training in striking and takedowns then you're not going to be a good MMA fighter. If you avoid the other martial arts then you're avoiding learning, and you need to keep on learning.

Here's an interesting thing. Let's say that you're really good at jiu-jitsu, and you want to develop your striking skills. To get better at striking you have to dedicate yourself to it, and of course your striking will suck at first. But at the same time your jiu-jitsu skills are going to suffer because you're not training that area very much - you won't be sharp on the ground either. So now, for a while, you're going to be in a phase where you think that you suck at everything.

This is normal - it's part of the game. Just keep going, keep going, keep going. You're eventually going to become a very well rounded guy. A guy who can fight standing up, and wrestle, and grapple. It's just time.

You cannot just do the things you like doing and hope to become a complete MMA fighter.

Q: Which UFC fighter has the best jiu-jitsu right now?

A: The perfect example is Demian Maia. He's done the transition from BJJ to MMA more efficiently than anyone else I can think of right now.

He doesn't miss the position and goes straight for the submission. Demian Maia is so quick, efficient and fast.

MMA is NOT BJJ. If you're terrified of losing position in MMA then you make the fight boring.

Q: If an untrained person wanted to eventually fight in MMA would you make them train BJJ with the gi first?

A: Somebody without BJJ experience should definitely train with the gi - they have to do it because it's the core of the art. After a while of training with the gi, it depends on his schedule

Q: What would you do if you had a BJJ world champion (with the gi) who wanted to make the transition to MMA?

A: You have at least three different types of jiu-jitusu: jiu-jitsu WITH the gi, jiu-jitsu WITHOUT the gi, and jiu-jitsu for MMA. These are three different things. Someone pounding your face changes everything! All of a sudden you can't do a lot of things on the ground that you could do before, without striking being involved.

So if I had a BJJ world champion training for MMA my suggestion would be for him to put his gi aside and work his no-gi skills. Then he has to transition to the MMA environment. For example he has to learn to deal with strikes on the ground, but also with someone who's only goal is to stand up and back away from him on the ground. Put someone in your guard, and see what it's like if all he wants to do is put his hands on your biceps, stand up and back away. This is very different from regular jiu-jitsu.

So you've got to start no gi training and jiu-jitsu training for MMA. It's a huge reality check for most people.

Q: It's very frustrating to watch MMA fighters (including those in the UFC) make grappling mistakes that most BJJ Blue belts know to avoid. So how much effort do you think it is to add good, solid BJJ techniques into the MMA game?

A: To develop a good solid BJJ game and to apply BJJ in MMA you need to have good coaches, especially to cover the basics which are so necessary.

High level jiu-jitsu with fancy flips and crazy transitions is amazing to me, but if a high level wrestler wants to start MMA then he needs to get good at the BJJ basics. This will make a huge difference to his fighting ability.

Just to show you how important a good coach and a good school is, it's not uncommon to find good blue belts who can kick the ass of many fighters on the ground. And that's all because he's got strong basics.

Q: How does one train to fluidly mix strikes on the ground with your grappling? Are there specific drills to train that?

A: Yes we have a lot of drills to cover this aspect of training, and it's not only in jiu-jitsu practice that the fighters do this. The conditioning coach also teaches and trains this aspect.

When you ground and pound somebody you still need to grapple all the time. The guy getting pounded won't just lie there - he'll try to get away, and you need to be grappling the whole time to establish and maintain your position.

There are specific drills and technique series we do to develop this. You hit the guy - one two three - and then he reacts in a certain way and you respond by doing the next thing. You need to do a lot of repetition of this to become smooth and fast.

Q: What is the best way for a fighter to spar MMA and practice their ground & pound without killing their training partner?

A: Oh my God - this is a very difficult problem for everyone training and coaching MMA! If you know the answer maybe you can tell me! *laughing*

You've really got to go light. You've got to control your intensity and the guy receiving punches needs to be understanding about any small accidents.

If you want to go hard with your ground and pound use a punching bag on the floor. Now you can really let your hands go.

If you go hard with a partner you're going to hurt the guy. Then he'll hurt you back and now you've got a real fight with bad feelings. That's how you lose training partners.

Guys DO get excited though, especially before a fight. The coaches try to watch out for this and keep tempers down.

Also, after the practice we make sure that everybody shakes hands. You can go hard during the training session, but afterwards everyone has to share the love. The bottom line is push your partner to the limits, but try not to hurt someone from your school

Q: Sometimes you see fighters hitting focus mitts or thai pads in a way that is boxing or kickboxing-oriented rather than MMA oriented. What kind of standup pad work is best for MMA?

A: In MMA you usually see one, two or three punches. You rarely see more than three punches, unless the guy is already out.

In this sport you have punches, elbows, knees, kicks and takedowns. A five-punch combination is possible, but usually you hit the guy with one or two shots and then he clinches. If you're getting the better of him in the standup then he'll go for the takedown, or even pull guard.

So keep it simple - three punch combos maximum. Unless he's already hurt, or you're training for stamina purposes...

Also the angles are very important - you need to know how to change them and switch between attacks. Always have a plan B: you start with a strategy to set up your combination, but if he defends it you need to know how to flow and adapt.

Q: What advice do you have on diet and nutrition for fighters? What are the most common dietary mistakes that fighters make?

A: The most common mistake fighters make is to try and lose too much weight right in the end, just before the fight. You need to prepare yourself with a healthy diet beforehand.

If you try and lose all that last-minute weight through dehydration you can really hurt yourself, and even die! Losing 15 pounds in 2 days can shut your kidneys down if you don't know exactly what you are doing.

My big tip here is that to compete at a high level you need to look for a nutritionist to work with you on these things. We have a nutritionist at ATT who really helps our fighters with nutrition and the dehydration-rehydration process.

Also keep in mind that you lose a lot of weight at the beginning of a training cycle - you're doing more cardio and you can eat more.

Closer to the fight you're training less intensely because you can't get cut, you can't break your nose. You're not going full speed anymore and you have to eat slightly less to stay on track.

And of course you avoid sweets, avoid fried foods and excessive carbohydrates

Q: Are there any supplements that almost all MMA fighters are taking?

A: Our nutritionist takes care of all that stuff. We're sponsored by Champion's Nutrition and our fighters get their vitamins and most of their supplements from them.

Of course there are a lot of supplements; you have supplements for losing weight, gaining muscle, increasing stamina... BUT you need to be careful, because a supplement that benefits you in one area could hurt you in another.

Keep in mind that nutrition is important - and without proper nutrition all the supplements in the world won't help you.

Also understand this - if you've got great nutrition but bad technique then you're still gonna lose! Conditioning is also important if two people have equal skill levels. You can get high level black belts get their guards passed simply because they're exhausted!

Q: How do you relax when someone is trying to choke you out, or take your arm off, or punch you in the head?

A: It comes down to having the knowledge of what to do, and the practice of having done it. If you've faced that situation before in training and know that this is going to happen in the fight as well then it really helps.

It's very hard if you go into an MMA fight and think that you're not gonna get punched in the face. You can't be surprised when that happens - you've got to accept it and be prepared for it.

When something bad happens you've got to be relaxed and know that you can reverse the situation. Some people are born with that ability, and others have to learn it through training, and maybe with help from Yoga, NLP or meditation.

It comes down to facing the possibility that bad things can happen.

When a striker gets knocked down he pops right up again. A jiu-jitsu guy might have made a mistake and his opponent is passing his guard but he's already working on replacing the guard. Wrestlers who get taken down don't stay there - they scramble right back up again.

For these guys recovering from a bad situation has become a reflex. They've learned that you CAN continue and win, even after things have gone badly for a while.

Q: If you get caught in the turtle position in MMA, what are the best techniques to use?

A: It all depends on the situation and on your background.

If you're in turtle and a big guy is hammering you he's probably not thinking about taking your back. He's just going to pound you. Even if you get to guard he's still going to keep on pounding you, so you'd better be good at the guard position.

So you have to ask yourself - what are you best at? There are so many different techniques, but they have to work for you. If you had a jiu-jitsu guy he'd probably want to get back to guard, but if he doesn't know how to control his opponent from there then he's still gonna get pounded.

Q: What are the best side control escapes for MMA?

A: It all depends on your level and where you want to end up. A jiu-jitsu guy will shrimp and put his knee and elbow together to re-establish guard, but a wrestler might try and roll his opponent.

Just like for the turtle position, it all depends on where you feel safe - what position can you feel safe in and take a minute to breathe and recover?

Q: What do you think of the half guard in MMA? It seems like some fighters (Nogueira, Demian Maia) are managing to pull off sweeps from that position?

A: I think that the half guard is brilliant in MMA, if you know how to use it.

One reason it's so good is this: let's say that you're using the regular guard against an opponent who only wants to make posture, stand up, escape and back away. Keeping him on the ground is very hard. With the Half Guard it's much easier to keep your opponent on the ground.

The best half guard ever was Minotauro (Antônio Rodrigo Nogueira) in the Pride shows in Japan. What he did was unbelievable. Minotauro also won his UFC fight against Tim Sylvia because of the half guard.

Q: What are the highest percentage takedowns for MMA?

A: That has to be double leg and single leg takedowns - that's what you see in MMA all the time. The clinch is also important, especially the basic clinch with underhooks and overhooks.

Q: Who is the best in BJJ? Now and in the past?

A: The best BJJ guy for me has to be Carlson Gracie. He was my gold standard as a coach and as a competitor. He inspired me to do what I do today.

But the best guy I've ever seen rolling is Marcelo Garcia. I've never seen anything like him before. He is someone to be followed and idolized, as a competitor, a fighter and a person - he's one of the best people that I've ever met.

Marcelo is training MMA with us, so I've seen him do MMA a lot. He's capable of doing amazing things. We have some of the best guys in the world training with us, and he can use his game in MMA perfectly

I see how capable he is at applying jiu-jitsu in MMA, but he's also stepped up and has become very serious about training other aspects of MMA. In striking, for example, he's past the point of being afraid of punches. He's stepped inside the game of MMA and has adapted his own game. I think he will do very well in MMA!

Stephan Kesting: Thank you very much for your time. As you know, these questions mostly came from the readers of my newsletter, and I think they'll really get a lot of your answers

Ricardo Liborio: Any time my friend. Thanks for your interest in American Top Team!



Ricardo Liborio guiding the next generation of martial artists

The questions for Ricardo Liborio were provided by the readership of the Grappling Tips Newsletter.

If you would like to sign up for this FREE newsletter and access other great resources please visit www.grapplearts.com/newsletter for more information.

Thank You

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