



## **S.P.E.A.R.ing Jerry McGuire**

By Tom Arcuri (Reprint from 2002)

Why Jerry McGuire you ask? If you have seen the movie, I think you will figure it out by the end of this article. If you have not, suffice it to say that I feel compelled to tell this story due to what I now know to be true (IMHO) regarding teaching self-defense.

I have studied martial arts since 1981 and started teaching in 1985. I am making an educated guess that my experiences over the last 28 years are more similar to yours than different. A punch is still a punch, even after we add some stylized variations to support a system or style. So do me the honor of emptying your cup and read on to discover what has motivated me to write this article.

I began my studies in western boxing. My father had done some boxing in the Navy during W.W.II so it held a fascination for me. Shortly thereafter, I discovered Bruce Lee, became a “groupie”, and began studying kung fu. My primary orientation was towards self-defense and Bruce’s philosophies appealed to me. A couple of years later, I ran across some folks professing an eclectic style of goju karate and have studied and taught within that system ever since. It is not unusual for a student to go through several styles before one “catches on”. In fact, it is generally accepted that we all study a system that “works for us,” (i.e. sport oriented, art oriented or combat oriented). Most of us go to great lengths to profess the virtues of our systems over others. Nothing surprising right?... You most likely have had similar experiences.

I was now ready to further my martial arts education by teaching some students. A friend once told me that “teaching is like learning twice”, so I was keen on sharing my knowledge to further develop my skills. My initial motivation for starting a school was purely selfish. Basically I needed more bodies to train with to improve my skills and test myself. Over time I developed an appreciation for the benefits that a well-run martial arts school could provide its students. Soon I was developing and incorporating systems within the school to help students realize their goals. I bet our paths are still roughly similar.

Becoming a professional full-time school director was now looking like an attainable goal. With the encouragement, support and help from my wife, Dana, I made the move to full-time and have never looked back. It was a dream come true.

I know you are asking: what does this have to do with self-defense, street fighting, etc.? Well, now it’s 1991, I am a school owner charged with running a professional school that is supportive of my student’s goals. As you know, one of the major reasons people come to us is to learn self-defense. Therefore among the countless other systems, methods, decisions that go into running a school, I needed to decide whether or not my combative techniques and systems supported the goal of effective personal safety training.

My initial efforts were centered on a concept called “freestyle” self-defense. This concept allowed the student to defend themselves with whatever techniques were deemed necessary and appropriate. So, we taught techniques and then did drills to test the student’s ability to execute them against an attacker(s). As I attended seminars and researched tapes and books, we would add a little judo here, a spot of grappling there and a bit of kali here, etc., etc. This resulted in what I considered to be a very well-rounded system. My personal reputation as a respected sport competitor and innovative self-defense instructor grew. However, there was one thing missing; most of my students did not execute at anywhere near my own ability, and to make matters worse, they were not using most of the techniques I was teaching. Over and over I would see only palm

strikes, and knee strikes. There was no variety in their execution. In fact I graded them on “variety” as part of their exams. I racked my brain on how to “improve” the student’s performance.

I consider myself to be a flexible, result-oriented person when it comes to our school, so I accepted responsibility for my student’s *‘lack of performance’*. Next I decided to inject some memorized combos into our curriculum. It seemed logical that if they memorized these combos then I would start to see more variety come out in our drills and exams. We worked at this for over a year, injecting approximately 40 memorized techniques and combinations. Students that excelled in memorizing and/or mimicking did show more variety, while performing in the air or in controlled cooperative drills. This was much like a traditional Bunkai that requires the partners to cooperate in order for the applications to make sense. However, when we tried to inject realism into our testing methods, the variety disappeared again. While a few exceptional students looked “OK,” the majority could not adapt to the aggression and spontaneity of the drills.

Once again I was in the position of not being able to reliably produce students that were anywhere near my ability. I had a gut feeling that they may not be able to successfully defend themselves in a “real street fight”. This gut feeling came from lingering doubts about my own abilities. Yes, you heard right. How could I not doubt myself if I could not reproduce my results with in my students? I knew that this was not an acceptable situation. My integrity dictated that I needed to provide the best self-defense information available to my students. So again the search was on for the missing link.

Now please don’t get me wrong—at that time we were producing the highest quality students we could. Most of you would have considered our SD system effective and you would have seen me as an “expert” martial artist.

I have no guilt or shame regarding this period in my development. I was operating with the best information I had at the time, and within this model I was doing a damn good job. However, the model I used was based on assumptions that were flawed and in some cases simply wrong. Once I was ready to look outside this model I was able to understand self-defense on a whole new level.

Before I continue you should know that we still teach kata and sparring. I teach the same style I did before my paradigm\_shift. Here’s where our paths may differ. I simply teach self-defense as a separate subject in onto itself. I **do not** relate self-defense to kata or sparring. (More on this later.)

*What is a real street fight?* It is a fight you cannot avoid. This is an important distinction. We should not prepare people for macho ego-based fights that need not occur, and are more accurately described as sport fights. I was concerned about addressing violent bullies, rapists, muggers, road rage, and domestic abuse. Now here is the kicker... who is mostly at risk in the above-mentioned attacks? The answer is overwhelming women and children, civilian adult males are far less likely to have a real street fight (remember the definition). This meant that the self-defense system I taught had to be practical for women and children first and foremost.

I teach annually at a summer martial art camp [www.Super-Summer-Seminars.com](http://www.Super-Summer-Seminars.com). It is a great camp that I highly recommend. As it happens, while we were realizing our approach was not working, I met Professor Arthur Cohen at this camp. Art is a well-known self-defense instructor, author and lecturer. He introduced me to the first important concept that helped me get out of the box. I attended his lecture on the physiological effects of survival stress on the human body where he described the effects of an adrenaline dump during a “**real fight**”. Tunnel vision, auditory exclusion, rapid heart rate, etc., were discussed. The moment of discovery for me was when I learned that during survival stress situations, fine motor skills decrease and gross motor skills are enhanced. This means that a person’s ability to execute self-defense techniques that require multiple movements (fine/complex motor skills) is greatly diminished while under attack. Conversely gross motor skills were not affected and were even enhanced during extreme stress. Remember when I mentioned that we used to monitor student’s ability to demonstrate “variety” during self-defense exams? We saw the same gross motor skills over and over because of the

effects of stress. So variety is no longer graded, **results** are now the paramount measuring stick. I no longer cared how many techniques a student knew, I was only concerned with how effective they were at extracting themselves safely from the situation. So I spent the next year revamping our drills to resemble realistic scenarios while emphasizing gross motor skill counters and an awareness of the physiological effects of stress.

As it happens, a year after hearing Art Cohen's lecture, I was at the same summer camp and had the opportunity to attend a class by world-renowned self-defense instructor Tony Blauer. Coach Blauer explained that his primary business was training elite military and law enforcement throughout the world. That got my attention right away. I am sure you will agree that martial artists/school owners have nowhere near the real world experience of these groups. As the saying goes, if it's good enough for them...I was all ears. Coach Blauer explained that his system was three-dimensional (emotional, psychological, physical). He explained that if you do not train in all three dimensions you are predisposing yourself to failure should the situation go outside your comfort zone. In other words, if a student trains a lapel grab **without** injecting realistic levels of physical and verbal aggression, when faced with a **real** attack in the street the student may experience a "psychological void". Their brain has no comparable experience, making it difficult or even impossible for them to respond effectively. Coach Blauer went on to explain the Startle-Flinch response, the Cycle of Behavior, fear loop, Ballistic Micro Fight and the basics of his S.P.E.A.R. System. He also talked about the legal, moral, and psychological consequences of fighting. How many of us spend a significant amount of time teaching our students confrontation avoidance and diffusing skills? Now, without going into detail beyond the scope of this article, suffice it to say, "the student was ready and the teacher had appeared".

I had committed to standing up in a friend's wedding that same afternoon and had to miss the last hour of Coach Blauer's class. As my wife and I drove to the wedding, we feverishly discussed the class and immediately recognized that Tony Blauer's concepts would be the basis of our future self-defense curriculum.

Upon our return to the martial arts camp, I spoke to several other instructors present at the Blauer seminar and inquired about the material I missed. They proceeded to give some general descriptions of the S.P.E.A.R. tactic and a drill or two. However, none showed very much enthusiasm for the concepts. It was difficult for me to understand why they did not share my enthusiasm. I now realize that I was already three-quarters out of the box when I meet Coach Blauer.

One of the reasons the S.P.E.A.R. System is more widely accepted by law enforcement and elite military groups is that they are focused on results in the real world. Safety and survival are paramount for professional warriors. I ask you ...shouldn't it be paramount for civilians also?

As a group we tend to be control freaks, ego-centric, and a bit insecure regarding our skills. This is ironic since we emphasize self-confidence and constant devotion to self-improvement to our students. We spend an inordinate amount of time arguing to be right, even in the face of evidence to the contrary. Knowing forty or four-hundred techniques gives us control and feeds our egos, but does it enhance our student's survivability in a "real street fight"? Remember, it's women and children that are more likely to have to defend themselves in our society.

To quote coach Blauer: "*are you teaching what's probable or what's possible?*" There may be four-hundred styles of martial arts, but there is only one species of human being on this planet. Are there really four hundred ways for humans to defend themselves in a "real street fight"? The most important Blauer Tactical Systems maxim relating to this article is "***don't show students what you can do, show them what they can do.***"

Let's face it, most of us were raised in a culture where the master instructor demonstrated techniques that took most students years to master, if at all. This model predisposes most students to fail in the face of a *real* confrontation.

I sleep very well now, knowing that I am enhancing our student's safety and quality of life from day one and each time the train. Coach Blauer's research lends itself to managing all kinds of

conflict not just physically violent ones. We now have a comprehensive approach to bullying that includes effective physical skills, avoidance tactics and diffusing skills. Where it differs from many approaches is the fear management tools that help us do much more than give lip service to self-confidence. We can now create the true confidence to act even in the face of high-intensity stress.

Tony Blauer's S.P.E.A.R. System on which Personal Defense Readiness program (PDR) is based, can address scenarios from verbal diffusing to lethal force and everything in between. Believe it or not, we teach one system to all ages and both genders. I can remember teaching women and smaller men arm bars, wrist locks etc. and pre-framing them that this would not be an effective technique for them in most types of scenarios they might face. I then told them they had to know this to teach it to others. Was I enhancing their safety? Through Coach Blauer's research we have come to realize that 'control techniques do not work in *out of control* situations'. We still teach some control *techniques* but they are for very specific scenarios and for use after you have gained psychological control of yourself and physical control of the assailant.

S.P.E.A.R. is an acronym for Spontaneous Protection Enabling Accelerated Response. It is based on our behavioral and genetic responses to sudden violence; it is a combative science, not a style or martial art. Students learn how natural responses enhance our ability to survive the ambush and how to convert them rapidly into protective and tactical responses. It does not replace a martial arts system... instead it provides a tool to weather the ambush, gain control and then access your personal style toolbox—in other words, it's '*a bridge to your system*'.

PDR will help you survive the initial attack, gain control and then access the complex motor skills of your style.

As I said earlier, we teach three subjects in our school art (kata), sport (sparring), and combat (self-defense). To earn a black belt in our school, you will major in at least one of these subjects and minor in the other two. We go to great lengths to explain the benefits of each subject, but we almost never relate them to each other. This allows the student to develop the most effective mindset for any given subject. For example, your mindset for a point sparring match (cooperation, sportsmanship, respect, etc.) will not enhance your response-ability in combat. There are many methods of class scheduling to accomplish this. We teach a rotating four-week schedule in which we teach basics in week one, self-defense in week two, sparring in week three and kata in week four. We also offer specialized PDR/S.P.E.A.R. training weekly and seminars quarterly.

The difference in our student's response-ability has been remarkable. Remember, your top students will be able to perform moves at a high level regardless of what you teach. However, how will they perform under realistic combat stress? Our top students are still our top students athletically but the ability gap between them and our average students while under stress has narrowed drastically. The most profound substantive change is the increased capacity of our student body to understand fear and stress. They react to it faster and more proactively.

The Personal Defense Readiness (PDR) program has brought me full circle back to my roots. I now teach self-defense confident that I am enhancing the lives of all of our students and their families. It is based on real human responses in high intensity scenarios and is easily accessible to the average human being. The S.P.E.A.R. System is more reliable and **much less perishable** (easy to remember) than any thing else I have seen in twenty-eight years of training and teaching.

Thank you for doing me the honor of reading my Jerry McGuire-like treatise. I sincerely hope that I may have motivated you to step out of your box, and explore the possibility that this System can greatly enhance the survive-ability and response-ability of you and your students. You can get additional information at [www.BlauerTactical.com](http://www.BlauerTactical.com)

Reach Tom Arcuri at: [Tom@PDRTeam.com](mailto:Tom@PDRTeam.com).