

# The Grappling Wizard

Peter de Been, AFBJJ Pioneer

**Peter de Been is one of Australia's most accomplished BJJ competitors and coaches, and is also the founder of the Australian Federation of Brazilian Jiu Jitsu. In this exclusive interview, he reflects on his personal journey in the art of Gracie Jiu Jitsu and some of the memorable experiences he's had along the way, and gives an insight into what the martial art means to him.**

**P**icture this: the year is 1990 and Peter de Been, a dedicated martial artist and keen surfer from Torquay, sets off on an adventure to Brazil. There, Pete hopes to catch some of the local waves and see the splendid sights of Rio de Janeiro, but he's also on a mission. He has heard whispers about a little known but unique fighting system native only to Brazil and he is keen to experience it for himself. Perhaps it's coincidence, perhaps fate, but in Brazil Pete has the opportunity to meet and train with Carlos Gracie Jnr., a leading member of the soon-to-be world-famous Gracie family. Immediately he recognises that in Brazilian Jiu Jitsu and Carlos, he has found something special. Pete is instantly hooked by the art's practical and devastating technique, and his conversion to Gracie Jiu Jitsu begins.

Cut to July 2004, as Pete wins his professional Jiu Jitsu International Superfight in front of a capacity crowd of 4000 people in Sao Paulo, Brazil. It's fair to say that a lot has happened since his days as a part-time surfer and part-time martial artist who made a modest living from selling real estate in Torquay.

Chris Doyle recently interviewed Peter de Been for *Blitz*...

**Firstly, Pete when you first ventured to Brazil what was it about Brazilian Jiu Jitsu that made you decide you wanted to practise it?**

I first travelled to Brazil in 1990, and when I discovered Jiu Jitsu I realised that the other martial arts that I was doing at the time were not my true calling. I made the decision to dedicate myself solely to learning Gracie Jiu Jitsu. Actually, not many people would know this, but when I started my training I was the only 'gringo' (non-Brazilian) training regularly at the Barra academy for a long time, until some Americans started to make the journey in the mid-to-late '90s. Last year (2004) was the 14th time I've travelled to Brazil.

I would consider myself a logical person, so when I saw Gracie Jiu Jitsu I was amazed with the practicality and fluency of the art. There seemed to be a real purpose behind every move and each positional change was used to flow into the next move. I really related to the attitude and lifestyle of the Jiu Jitsu fighters at that time. Although it was obviously a devastating fighting art, the guys at the Barra academy held no airs and graces about their abilities. There was no sign of egos or big heads in the room. These guys were all very calm and in touch with their own abilities. Sure they were confident, but the better they were the more humble they seemed to be. That is why I must say, it hurts me these days to see so-called Jiu Jitsu practitioners, both here in Australia and in the USA, carrying giant egos, but without having any real ability or proper understanding of the art.



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### Can you describe the popularity of Jiu Jitsu in Brazil?

Jiu Jitsu is very big in Brazil compared to the rest of the world. They say that it has the second highest participation rate for sport in that country. Football (soccer) is still the most popular sport. Most kids in Brazil seem to know about Jiu Jitsu, and most adults have at least tried it at some stage. Brazilians start in Jiu Jitsu at a much earlier age than we do here in Australia. On the surface this may seem to be an advantage, but I'm not entirely sure that it is. Teenagers seem to have success in the art when they are tuned in and dedicated to their training. Children can't always make this type of commitment.

### When did you start teaching Gracie Jiu Jitsu in Australia?

I first began teaching to a select group of students in a room off my garage at my home in Torquay, in late 1993. I was only a novice myself at this time, but Carlos Gracie Jr. had faith in me and he advised me to finish up my training in Brazil at that time and begin teaching back home in Australia. He said that by teaching the art I would help my students to learn it, and that my students would then help me to get better. When I opened my academy in Torquay it was only the 14th Gracie Jiu Jitsu academy in the world at that time. I later opened a second academy because of the demand coming from Melbourne. We've been at St Kilda since 1996.

### Gracie Barra (pronounced Bar-ha) has produced some outstanding names in BJJ – what do you think makes it such a successful academy?

In the beginning it was the personality of Carlos Gracie Jr. that laid strong foundations for Barra Gracie to grow. From the beginning, I found Carlos to be very considerate and approachable. In the early '90s he and I did a lot of training together, both at his academy and also in his garage. Even though he was

light-years ahead of me technically, he was always interested in training and discussing new techniques. Today we still have the same relationship and enjoy plotting the technical advancements for the future.

Back around 1991, there were only 15- to 30 students training at Barra Gracie; today there are hundreds. However, this small group still produced students who are considered today to be responsible for the development of certain attributes of the art. Barra students from the '90s were at the forefront of refining and developing Jiu Jitsu. Robert Correa (Gordo) is credited with developing the half-guard; Roberto Magalhaes (Roleta) is credited with developing the upside-down guard; Marcio Feitosa changed the way people thought about passing the guard with his phenomenal use of the hips. There are many more examples where Barra Gracie students of the day were in part or fully responsible for developing modern day Jiu Jitsu. Carlos fostered this thinking and earned the nickname Pastor from his close students. I believe this is where today's World Champion Barra Gracie team established its roots. Those dedicated students of the '90s formed a core, which led to the development of Barra Gracie and the Jiu Jitsu techniques now practised around the world.

### You've been an active competitor in international tournaments and world championships since 1995. Is competition the best way to improve one's Jiu Jitsu skills?

Competition creates pressure and when under pressure we all tend to make mistakes. In the academy we don't normally have to deal with pressure because we're training with our friends and really just experimenting to see what works — competition is all about using what really works! So the more you compete, the better you get at dealing with pressure. You're forced to find solutions to problems, and as a result your overall Jiu Jitsu will get better.



Pete & Carlos Jr in Brazil

### Who has been your most difficult opponent to date?

I've had some hard encounters with Edson Diniz, but 'Leozinho' (Leo Vieira) is probably the best and most technical person I've fought.

### What were the circumstances surrounding your own promotion to Black-belt?

In 1999 I travelled to the Pan-American Championships in Miami. I was set to compete in the Brown-belt 67-73kg category. As usual I hooked up with 'Carlinhos' before the competition to discuss the team draw. Carlos advised me that the only spot left on the team that I could fill was in the 73-79kg category. Naturally I accepted but I weighed in below 73kg!

It was an unusually disrupted Pan-Ams. I was scheduled to have my first fight at 12.30pm but finally got called up to fight at 12.50am. I remember many of the competitors were aggressive because of the long wait. My first opponent was no exception. I got thrown out of the ring and landed with my back onto the knees of a spectator sitting in the crowd. My back suddenly stopped but my arm kept going and tore my rotator cuff from top to bottom. I am not sure how, but I got back in and won that fight. Later that night, I had even more amazingly, progressed to the semi final at 2.30am. My team-mate Renato 'Renatao' Miragaia had already made it to the final. He said to me in Portuguese: 'Peter, I know your shoulder is bad, but if you can win your semi-final we won't fight in the final. I will give you the gold'. I thought that this was a great gesture, but then again that is how the Barra Gracie team thinks! So I realised that if I got into the final I would get a gold medal and even if I didn't win, I would still tire out my opponent for Renatao to meet in the final.

In the semi-final I fought well while hiding my injured arm from my opponent. I was up 6-4 with only about a minute left in the match. While I was attempting a sweep, my opponent started to back away. I chased



Pete locks on the choke in Sao Paulo

him and we both left the mat. There was no indication from the referee to stop even as we stumbled further out of the ring. Finally I let go of my opponent and stood and turned to the referee to say: "Look where we are!" At that moment my opponent picked me up at the legs and threw me over his shoulder, landing me right on my damaged shoulder. My arm popped out immediately and as I stood, my knees started to knock together. I remember being able to easily touch my calf with my fingers even with a straight leg and I thought, this can't be good! The referee was totally confused and after some discussions and with medical people running all over the place, he gave the fight to my opponent. I was rushed to Jackson Hospital in Miami by ambulance, but had to wait until 5am to have the arm put back in. Because it was Saturday night there were shootings, knifings, and overdose victims who, by Florida law, had to be attended to before me. I was discharged at 8am the next day and caught a flight back home at 12 noon.

Although I had managed a bronze medal for my trouble it was a hard way to get it. However, two weeks later I received an email from 'Carlinhos' with the following words unchanged (his English has improved since then): 'hy peter, I'm very happy to give one more black belt with honor, you deserve it, your character and your dedication made me proud to have a student like you. Congratulations! I hope all my black belt were like you. Carlinhos'

#### **Do you have a favourite technique?**

I definitely like all positions from the guard. The triangle-choke is probably my favourite finish. I have two or three sweeps from the open-guard position that I can depend on to work regularly for me. Over the last five years, I've developed a sweep, which I'm renowned for on the International scene. It's great to be able to start most fights with a 2-0 advantage, especially in the first 10 seconds of the match. At Barra Gracie everyone knows my sweep, but because I've been doing it for so long, it's still very hard to stop. I teach this sweep to my students as well, and now there are some students that trouble me with my own sweep! But that's great. That's what it's all about.

#### **What advice can you give to all the people training in Jiu Jitsu, who dream of one day reaching the black belt level, and also competing at the highest level?**

Don't be in a hurry and don't expect things to happen too quickly. Just commit yourself to training and you'll be surprised how fast you will improve. Always think about the concepts of Jiu Jitsu and how they can work for your particular body type — don't



focus on particular techniques or depend on tricks. Expose your game and allow your training partners to help strengthen your weak points. The depth of understanding you have in Jiu Jitsu will determine your long-term success at the highest level. It's more about the mind than the brawn. Get your mind and your understanding right first, then you can add some strength later if you need to.

#### **Where do you think the sport of BJJ will be in 10 years, and to what do you attribute the amazing growth in the sport?**

Our Jiu Jitsu here in Australia is already at a very good level. I have very high standards of grading. I believe my standards are among the highest in the world — mirroring those of the elite academies in Brazil. I began teaching at the end of 1993 and I pride myself on always having very dedicated students. Many of the original core group are still training today. I still haven't graded anyone to Black-belt. I see Black-belt in most cases as being the result of around 10 years of hard training. Because of this ethos, we've built a very strong core group in Australia. This core has established a quality precedent that will hopefully help the level of Jiu Jitsu in Australia rival that of Brazil in around 10 years time.

We have an established tournament scene in Australia. Now the AFBJJ competition circuit has expanded with the inaugural Australian Champions Cup, set to take place in Brisbane on 24 September. In the lead-up to this event, all the states will run their own State Championships, allowing the medalists to qualify for the Australian Champions Cup. Medalists from the Pan Pacific Championship can also qualify for the Champions Cup. It's a very exciting time to be practising and competing in Jiu Jitsu.

In terms of the evolution of the art itself, I think that in the future 'the guard' position will gain even more emphasis than it has today. There is an increased belief by some that strong wrestling techniques can beat the guard, but I think that the more technical the guard becomes, the more it will be used. There will be a resurgence of the guard, and in the future it will be the trademark of the best Jiu Jitsu fighters.

#### **What does Jiu Jitsu mean to you? Is it a lifestyle as many people say?**

Jiu Jitsu lifestyle was one of the first things that I could totally relate to. Almost all of life's little questions and dilemmas can be answered with a Jiu Jitsu philosophy. I feel, since having Jiu Jitsu as my friend for over

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15 years, that I have grown substantially as a person. I've tried to pass this understanding in life that Jiu Jitsu has shown me, onto my family and friends. Many of my students also think very much with a Jiu Jitsu philosophy, as does my own family. I have taught them that it's great to win, okay to lose sometimes, but most importantly they should have fun and always respect others.

### Regarding your International Super-fight last year, how did you get involved in it and what technique did you use to win your match?

The Desafio International Super Fight Series is the brainchild of Victor Costa, the owner of Koral Kimonos. *Desafio* means 'challenge' and that's what it is. Victor sponsors some of the best Jiu Jitsu fighters in the world. The Koral team fights in front of huge crowds in a fight-night atmosphere — there's television, smoke, music, girls and prize money. I also fought in the first event in Tokyo. The 2004 Desafio was held in front of 4000 fans in the heart of one of the world's biggest cities, Sao Paulo. The Grand Olympia Palace is an awesome venue, with full bleachers overlooking all the action. There were eight large screens strategically positioned around the venue allowing everyone a close up view

of the fight, [plus] a huge main screen above the fighting ring. It was very impressive.


Before the fight I was very nervous because of all the action around me. It was very hard to relax. My opponent, Marcelo Gheler, was introduced first and all I could hear through the smoke was a huge roar. Then when I was introduced, it was absolutely silent. Marcelo is a well-known fighter in Sao Paulo, with an academy of 300 students.

When the match started, I began with my now-trademark sweep to go up 2-0 in the first 10 seconds. The crowd was eerily quiet. As I was attempting to pass Gheler's guard, a sole voice from the stand called out in broken English: "I believe in you Peter de Been." I have no idea who that voice might have belonged to, but I was very happy to hear it at the time.

Marcelo had a difficult guard and I became a bit frustrated. He swept me and I remember thinking, "Thank God for that!" The crowd went into hysterics. The score was 2-2 but I started to feel that I could win. I went back to my half-guard. As Ghelar attempted a foot-lock, I took his back and he was a little shocked. I kept the pressure on, not wanting to give him a chance to regain his composure. We struggled for a minute until we went out of the ring. The referee

tried to stand us up in the middle again, but I refused and said in Portuguese: "No, we are not changing the position." The referee finally agreed and I applied a *relogio* (clock) choke to win the fight by submission. The rest of the night was great. I won extra cash for getting the fastest submission of the night.

### Who has been the biggest influence in your Jiu Jitsu career?

These days my greatest influences and inspiration come from my family and my extended family — my students. Everything I do is for them and they give me strength to strive for excellence. In the beginning, my major influence was 'Carlinhos' and the people at Barra. They gave me the belief that I could succeed. When I travel anywhere around the world, I still feel that I'm part of one big family. Carlos Gracie Jnr. is the person who first enthralled me with the art, and he has continued to stand by me for more than 15 years. My friends from Barra are many, too many to list, but they have also helped to guide me along the way. Renzo Gracie, Marcinho, Gordo, Nino, Gordhino and many others have supported me totally. They give me the enthusiasm to keep training and to continue to devote my life to teaching and spreading the Jiu Jitsu message in this part of the world. 

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