



THE DISTINCTIVE SPIRIT OF...

# KRAV MAGA

**Remi Lessore** looks at the distinctive spirit of Krav Maga and the related need to balance realism in training with the safety of practitioners.

**T**his month we look essentially at the distinctive spirit of Krav Maga and the related need to balance realism in training with the safety of practitioners – you are not better equipped to defend yourself if you are injured in class.

The pictures come from the Belgian branch of the FEKM (Fédération Européenne de Krav Maga). This federation is led by Alain Bayard, himself a Belgian military Krav Maga instructor who also teaches police and runs his own successful school in Herseaux, Belgium. He is hosting an international course in November (contact details at the end of the article).

Krav Maga has evolved in an environment in which extreme violence is commonplace. Its purpose is to remain safe in that environment. It is consequently being tested, studied and refined.

## A MODERN OUTLOOK WHICH REMEMBERS THE PAST – THE DOCTRINE OF SAFETY

In Northern Europe the person who has been most instrumental in the diffusion of this art has been Richard Douieb. He directs an annual seminar in December in Paris.

Although a modern instructor in that he is open to new ideas, he does not stand on ceremony and is very approachable, Douieb manifests and instils in his students a deep sense of the principles of Krav Maga. The ethos of the FEKM still stems essentially from the principles inculcated to him by Imi Lichtenfeld:

"I try to build my pupils into complete human beings. That they become so good as to not have to kill. While training, my first concern in the education of young people is for ethics. It is necessary to be humble.



"What counts most is not the technique in itself, but the person that uses it." This is essential when we consider how to train safely. Large egos lead to insecurity, competition between students and sometimes even with the instructor, and hence to injury. Furthermore, if the techniques are inculcated to people who will use them irresponsibly, the entire system can be brought into disrepute.

In Krav Maga, faithfulness to tradition is neither nostalgic nor sentimental, nor an end in itself. This is not so much another school of martial arts, based on conventional approaches, as a modern methodology characterized by a coherent and logical approach. This is intended to employ natural, practical and easy techniques, based on relatively simple movements of the human body. This discipline's concern with realism does not permit rules, limits or its exploitation in sporting events.

## SO HOW IS IT DIFFERENT?

As you know, Krav Maga means 'Close combat' in Hebrew. It is a complete martial art in itself and as such, is bound to include techniques which also exist elsewhere. Although some have been specifically developed within Krav Maga, its originality does not lie in the techniques themselves, but in the



way in which they are applied and particularly the way in which personal risk is reduced to a minimum. Richard Douieb claims, "If I were to see two people use the same strike, whether with their fist or with their foot, or the same release, I would be able to tell which of the two practised Krav Maga."

How can he affirm this? Douieb often speaks of 'the principle of security' (in French: 'le principe de sécurité'). He means safety – in execution and in training.

In order to understand, it is essential to recall that Krav Maga is only interested in what works – but what works not only to take out an attacker, but to survive doing it. Many other martial arts are highly effective and have mastered certain aspects of combat much more deeply than Krav Maga. One thinks of knife-work and the Filipino arts, grappling and Brazilian Jiu Jitsu, punching and Western Boxing, and no doubt, many others. Furthermore, many people practice other martial arts alongside Krav Maga. These are likely to find that, notwithstanding certain differences, overall Krav Maga complements what they are studying elsewhere. However, most of these arts carry some cultural, historical or spiritual baggage, either in the techniques they employ or in the way in which they are taught. That is, they seek to promote or preserve a particular heritage, or culture for its own sake as well as (and sometimes at the expense of) their combat effectiveness. Not so Krav Maga: if a technique is effective and simple to apply, it is adopted. Practitioners are only concerned with teaching and learning what is most simple and logical.

## SAFE PEDAGOGY

Krav Maga insists that simplicity is a determining factor in safeguarding one's chances of survival when attacked. There are two good reasons for short, simple movements: a simple move is easier to retain and apply and being short has less distance to cover, and is thus inevitably faster and should the fight develop, simple moves preserve stamina.



## EVOLUTION

We are not only talking only about the techniques themselves, but about the entire way in which they are assimilated. The Israeli government has never had the time or resources to train its soldiers for years as warrior monks, before sending them into battle. They have no elite cast handing down family secrets of warfare from generation to generation. Neither do these soldiers nor the reservists which make up the I.D.F. have the time to train for hours on end every day in order to retain their combat readiness. (In this sense they are also like the majority of us who have jobs, families and friends who also need our time). So, the effectiveness of Krav Maga lies not only in its techniques but also in the speed at which the principles and techniques can be learned and the ease with which they are retained, due to its foundation in the instinctive defensive reflexes of the human body.

Nowadays, self-defence systems are often derived from traditional martial arts, or combat sports. Important work is being done on the rediscovery of the CQC elements which were



present at the birth of these arts. But they have followed an inverse evolution (from which those interested in self-defence are trying to recover them) as compared with Krav Maga. It has never produced 'players' such as in Judo and Taekwondo, nor have its techniques ever been codified, nor 'hidden' within patterns or forms. It has only ever been a method of self-defence and combat built on the principle of maximum efficiency.

Although, Krav Maga has never been through a 'sport' stage, there is nothing wrong with training in Krav Maga alongside combat sports. This can be a simple and effective way in which to gain experience of performance under pressure – an invaluable quality. However, this cannot be at the cost of losing sight of the original goal - to become proficient in a comprehensive method of self-defence, without embellishment or adornment.

For example, if someone practices MMA or boxing (Western, or Thai/Kickboxing) as well as Krav Maga, when training for their sport they must not acquire habits detrimental to their ability to defend themselves outside the ring – for example clinching for striking arts, or a stance that does not protect the groin.

But short and sharp moves, so often targeting the throat, the eyes, the groin, etc. as demanded in Krav Maga, carry risks in training – a mistake could seriously harm the training partner. Yet accidents are rare. One reason for this is the type of people we teach and how we teach them.

## MODERATION : TECHNICAL AND PERSONAL

Who exactly ought to study this brutally effective system? In view of its uncompromising attitude to combat and its roots in the very brutal settings of which we are daily made aware on the international news, it is tempting to believe that Krav Maga is better suited to the military than to civilians or even to the police. How could a police officer justify employing such aggressive counter attacks, for instance?

## KRAV MAGA



As Imi said, the most important attitude for a student is humility. When thugs cross our threshold – and they sometimes do – they either very quickly moderate their attitudes or are firmly invited not to come back.

In a real fight we need to bear in mind that it is rarely justifiable to annihilate someone, although Krav Maga reserves that option. In order to maintain safety and proportionality we need to consider that sometimes 'more is less'. People who may have learned self-defence at civilian self-defence training centres for professions where these skills are necessary are sometimes unable to apply those skills and techniques to detain suspects or defend themselves or others.

For example, it can be simply impossible to apply an arm-lock or to put hand-cuffs on someone who is in a blind rage. The professional might then feel they have to employ more decisive means – a heavy blow to the head with a fist or baton, CS or pepper spray, even a handgun – because they know no other effective means at their disposal. They will thereby immediately go to a higher and much more dangerous level of force than originally intended and would be necessary if they knew more. It would be better to have the ability to employ methods such as those taught in Krav Maga, in a manner which is calmer and more controlled. Members of these professions often seek out more effective training than they have received – Krav Maga provides an answer to this problem. All techniques can be applied with different levels of force, often permitting considerably less violence than without these skills.

### AVOID OR ATTACK

World events, epitomised by the horror of September 11th and other news, but also experienced by day to day violence in our cities, schools, on transport, and sometimes even in our homes, invite us to consider how best to be prepared. Krav Maga teaches that the most effective means of not being injured is first of all avoidance: do not be in the same place as danger; recognise the signs and

prevent it or leave. However, caution is no guarantee of safety. It is possible to bring a gun even through metal detectors if it is made of ceramic, so too bladed weapons. One might have to defend oneself against a 'Stanley'-type knife, which might also be made entirely of plastic, someone trying to detonate explosives inside shoes, etc. It is impossible to search everything, to avoid all risk. One needs to know how to react to actual threats from knives, handguns... These issues are as important for those working in civil defence such as police and soldiers, as for those civilians whose responsibility it is to ensure the safety of school children, or even night-clubbers, and also for private individuals who might need to defend



themselves or those near them.

But if avoidance is not an option, then the next safest attitude is - **attack**.

Using a bb pistol my first instructor, Gilles Hassine gave us a chilling demonstration: Playing the terrorist he ordered three students to their knees. Adopting what they thought was a realistic attitude, all three complied. He shot them all in the head (without pellets!).

Then we re-did the exercise, someone else held the gun and played the bad guy. The others held boxing gloves and were prepared by Gilles. Now when the gunman gave them an instruction, all ran at him, throwing their gloves. We saw that he did not get in one well-aimed shot before being overwhelmed. We can view the harrowing scene of the school kids in the canteen of Colombine High School cowering under the tables and wonder in hindsight if it would not have been safer for all of them to



attack the gunmen simultaneously. But that sort of reaction takes training which they sorely lacked.

We need to remember that an attacker has a head start in any altercation: it is therefore absolutely essential that in order to recover one's safety counter-moves be fast, short and simple. The entire system is based on these principles.

### AWARENESS OF THE ENEMY AND COURAGE

Without descending into paranoia we have to know that we are dealing with types of conflict that are different from the wars of history. The struggle for safety in modern society is paradoxically in some ways similar to the conflicts in which traditional martial arts were conceived. Dangers come not so much from war between defined nations (which now normally try to avoid the financial and human cost of conflict) though these wars may still occur. These nations normally impose laws controlling the bearing of arms.

Dangers are now – as in the pre-civilisation past – posed by rogue personalities, movements and ideologies. Violence is now more personal and more likely to impinge upon individuals who are not formally engaged in warfare.

On this basis those who choose to be prepared for conflict need to train in combat sports and particularly in self-defence systems. These must include techniques which work in confined spaces such as on planes and trains, in corridors, in crowded places, from a seated position, etc. They also need to train in something other than physical skill... that is, in courage. Like any form of strength – physical, mental and emotional – courage can be trained in and enhanced with courses and lessons. These can be also be nurtured in Krav Maga.

### SAFE TRAINING: REALISM AND TRUST

Because of the absence of limitations in Krav Maga, it is imperative that instructors abide by stringent safety practices to ensure that

students can progress in a secure environment. However, what we aim to achieve is to prepare people for any type of move or attack. In so doing we do, we do run inherent risks.

On one hand, we must train to punch in the throat in order to have that option should the



need arise. But to do this realistically, in training we have at least to approach the throat at the correct range.

So students learn not to extend the limb but to stop short of but close to the target when striking. Sparring is continuous and light but if certain areas are struck lightly or where striking is too unsafe e.g. to the back of the neck, or to the eyes, when the blow is simulated. When this happens the partners stop and start again in order to acknowledge the vulnerability of their guard. Furthermore, for example, when training to grapple we know that several effective blows would need to be struck first in order to stun and relax the opponent – in a fight, if an opponent is too tense then it will not be possible to apply a lock or to throw them. But, if having received a combination of blows a partner then tenses when the lock is applied then the other will have to apply far more force



than would really be necessary if the blows had landed in earnest. This would present a danger of sprains and hyper-extensions. It is therefore also imperative that both partners be relaxed, trust each other, and respond realistically to the blows they receive – i.e. to respond as though the blows were delivered with full force.

While acknowledging the risks of training, the important thing is to reduce them as far as possible.

But we cannot substitute these brutal techniques for others which might be athletic and impressive but impractical in a real altercation. These might look good at a demonstration but be impossible to apply under stress, in a crowded bar or on a train.

As mentioned above, aesthetics are of no concern to us; the first priority is safety and in order to safely maintain our physical integrity the techniques must be effective. Krav Maga wants to avoid any false (e.g. teaching of difficult or impossible techniques). It seeks instead to nurture habits which will be effective when they need to be. The Kravist cultivates an attitude of survival. This may include the willingness even to kill in order not to be killed or to defend another. However, alongside this ruthlessness it is also necessary to acquire skill,

compassion and respect, and through self-control not to cause injuries disproportionate to the actual threat.

To summarise, let us quote again from Imi Lichtenfeld on the purpose of Krav Maga: It was devised "So that one may walk in peace."

In order to achieve this :

- In training - respect of the partner and the teacher, correct distance, trust and realism.
- In daily life - avoidance is better than combat.
- In combat – courage and the willingness to apply maximum force and yet to retain the option of compassion and moderation.

This is the point at which Krav Maga becomes an art.

Richard Douieb will be directing a four-day course 19th – 22nd December 2014 just outside Paris. This will include four hours per day of technical training in groups adapted to the level of each student. There is a further hour of free training for any who wish to become instructors. For those who are tempted, but who feel it is all a bit too close to Christmas, you might consider that Paris at that time is a pretty wonderful place for your plus one.

Thanks again to Alain Bayard and his school. For details of the seminar on 15th November you can contact Alain on **0032 497 45 01 55** or **atkravmagastylemouscron@hotmail.com**

Remi Lessore teaches in Brixton. See our website for details: **www.southlondonkravmaga.com**