

# BJJ IN SCHOOLS



**ALMOST EVERYBODY WHO HAS TRAINED IN BJJ EVENTUALLY HAS THE SAME THOUGHT: "I WISH I HAD STARTED THIS WHEN I WAS YOUNGER." A COMMON THEME AMONG THE CHAMPIONS OF THE SPORT IS THAT THEY BEGAN IN THEIR EARLY TEENS OR EVEN DURING THEIR PRE-PUBESCENCE, RESULTING IN TWENTY-YEAR OLDS WHO ALREADY HAVE A DECADE OR MORE BEHIND THEIR BELTS. CHILDREN ARE A HUGE MARKET FOR MARTIAL ARTS SCHOOLS, WITH NUMEROUS PARENTS EAGER TO SIGN UP THEIR KIDS.**

Fortunately, although some instructors view teaching children as little more than a cash cow, there are others who believe it is their duty to try and improve the lives of their younger students through martial arts training. David Lee is one such instructor, who was motivated to launch his Free Jiu Jitsu program to uphold the honourable history of martial arts instruction for children:

*"I was sick of seeing the martial arts industry prey on the false representation of the arts and worry more about what's in their bank account than what's being taught on the mat. I was sick of seeing schools take full advantage of parents' belief in only what they see and I was frustrated at the lack of research taken. I wanted to open their eyes to real martial arts and real martial artists."*

Examples like Free Jiu Jitsu show how Brazilian jiu jitsu is part of that tradition, with multiple programs designed to help children better themselves through BJJ. Best of all is when such an initiative can be incorporated within the public education system, broadening access to BJJ for children who might otherwise be unable to afford classes. Jamie Hussein has been running the Future Champions project at schools in London for several years, in connection with

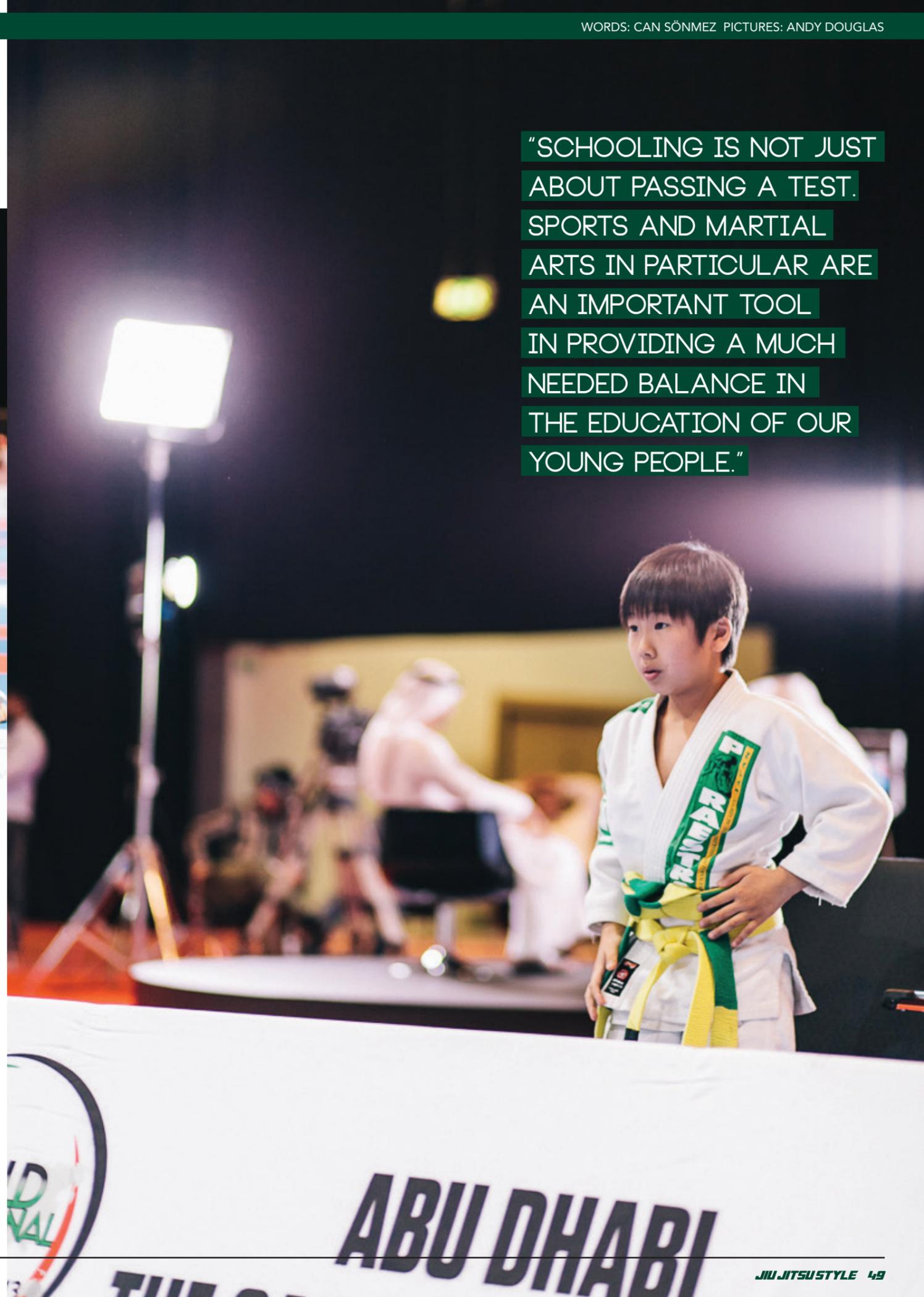
the Metropolitan Police. Hussein's work in the United Kingdom focuses on underprivileged youths who may have had behavioural problems in the past and it already boasts several impressive success stories.

For example, Hussein has managed to take one of his students, who has been at Future Champions since his first session as a thirteen year old, to compete at the World Pro. In common with many similar programs, the goal is not simply to create talented competitors: Hussein is equally proud of another student who is applying to the University of Cambridge.

Martial arts have long been seen as an excellent learning resource for young children, helping them develop discipline and respect along with improvements to their physical health. Ideally that feeds into their academic achievements, as in the case of Hussein's university hopeful. Hussein feels that BJJ should not be seen as just something kids do for fun outside of their studies, but on the contrary could be central to their ability to progress at school:

*"Our project is just one of many out there around the country trying to do what is right in relation to children and young people."*

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We hope that the government wakes up and realises before it is too late: schooling is not just about passing a test. Sports and martial arts in particular are an important tool in providing a much needed balance in the education of our young people."

There are several thriving examples of comparable programs outside of the United Kingdom. In Canada, Curtis Malin runs what he has dubbed 'The BJJ Program', founded together with Andrew Gummer in September of 2008, after a year of presentations, meetings and discussions with administrators from the Edmonton Public School Board. Malin can also attest to the personal and academic growth BJJ is able to engender:

"I have watched BJJ Program students with self-esteem issues become leaders within their grade level, their peer groups and at our school. I've watched students gain the self-confidence to stand up for themselves, or for others who can't, in playground altercations. I've watched students with academic motivation issues become better students. I have witnessed students find an identity through their BJJ training and have seen them rewarded for their hard work.

In fact, we just had one of our yellow belts win gold at both the Kid's World Jiu-Jitsu Championships held this summer in California and the Abu Dhabi World Pro Qualifier in New York. The enthusiasm and energy that these students display on a daily basis is why my program has become so successful. It is evident that Brazilian Jiu-Jitsu increases the desire and motivation of our kids to do their best in both academics and athletics."

Ralph Presgrave, who runs Submit 2 Success in the North of England, also emphasises the way that BJJ can turn a child's life around. "It's great to see a kid with not much confidence develop over a couple of months from training BJJ. I have a young kid who has mild learning difficulties and it's amazing how much he understands BJJ, his grappling is superb and he has a real passion for it."

Lee's experiences with Free Jiu Jitsu have led him to develop a strong belief in the power of jiu jitsu to foster positive change, echoing the thoughts of Presgrave and Malin. He also feels that these changes can prepare a student for the harsh realities of modern life, insisting that when a child learns BJJ:

"The benefits are endless. There are all the usual physical attributes along with the discipline to set goals and achieve them. I am a firm believer that a real martial artist can become a high level human being, dealing with adversity on a daily basis, as with the toughness of getting to class and training. Sweating for your dreams, for fun, working on self-improvement, knowing how your body moves and works gives you a deeper understanding of yourself and the world around you."

Most of us can attest to the power of BJJ in changing our lives for the better, especially if we are going through hard times. Beth Thrasher, who founded Vector Jiu Jitsu in the United States, credits Brazilian jiu jitsu as "the vehicle that brought both my husband and I out of deeply depressive periods in our lives, before we'd even met, 1,000 miles apart. It is also what brought us together."

Thrasher is a teacher in Mississippi, at a school which is among the lowest performing in the whole country. There is a great deal of poverty, violence, crime and gang activity. Thrasher had experience of several extra-curricular programs which she describes as "completely ineffective", despite their government funding. Having felt the transformative power of jiu jitsu in her own life, she reasoned that her students might similarly benefit.

Money proved to be a major hurdle before Vector Jiu Jitsu could get up and running. This is a recurring issue for most programs. Hussein notes that Future Champions "began in 2008, just at the beginning of the financial collapse, which has been hard to contend with", but he also points to a more positive interpretation: "this also shows what we can achieve on pure goodwill alone." Funding options are varied but require a certain amount of knowledge and luck. Presgrave describes the route he took with Submit 2 Success:

"I had been a local authority youth worker. I was training BJJ at the time under Shaun Matthews, as a white belt. I told the kids I worked with, who had shown an interest in martial arts, 'Look guys, you can apply for money from a youth activities fund and learn properly'. We set up a seven week pilot project covering super basic stuff with Shaun's guidance. It was a huge success (excuse the pun) with the five guys involved, who were not from the best background. They all gained an accredited certificate through ASDAN too. After that the council funded us for a year, I took redundancy and started to just run Submit 2 Success on a voluntary basis.

The project evolved from there. I made lots of links and got turned down from lots of places for funding, but after a while we had secured something long term. This allowed young people access without having to pay, as it was a really deprived area. We currently have several funders, including the NHS and local councils in Thornaby and Stockton."

Government funding also helped Rafael dos Santos at Gracie Barra Cornwall, who was able to access a Sportivate grant. As a result, he could then run a free six-week course for 14-25 year olds, along with support to join regular classes. These funding sources are key, but it is not always possible to secure them. It takes a lot of hard work and preparation, particularly given there is often considerable competition. Thrasher's efforts in the United States also eventually bore fruit, but not without difficulty. As she describes it:

"After doing a research literature review to support our claim that a martial arts program for urban youth would have positive outcomes, I approached the principal at my school and asked if we could start Vector Jiu-Jitsu as an after-school club at Wingfield. Without batting an eye she said 'Sure, go ahead. Just find your own money to fund it.' I made sure to follow up with the school district's legal counsel and executive director, who both gave their stamps of approval as well."

In the middle of 2012, Thrasher and her husband attempted to garner funding from multiple local sources, but without much success. Only city councilman Tony Yarber offered them support: as Thrasher remembers, Councilman Yarber was "a martial artist himself, so fully understood the power physical arts can wield in a young person's life. He worked to gain us an audience with local business firms, and they were enthralled about our program but pledged no funds."

At last, Thrasher's project was loaned \$1,500 from the JROTC Booster Club at the school where she worked. However, she had no choice but to provide the additional \$1,500 needed

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to buy mats herself. This was a considerable difficulty for a single income household with two toddlers to feed.

Money is not the only potential problem. Malin discovered that "My biggest obstacle in establishing the BJJ Program was convincing administrators that I wasn't teaching students to 'fight' during school hours. Many people still see jiu-jitsu as equivalent to mixed martial arts, popularized from the UFC, and obviously don't want that being taught to students during school hours."

This lack of recognition for jiu jitsu is a point also raised by dos Santos, who notes that "BJJ is not on the official list of sports in the UK, so a BJJ club cannot be registered as a CASC (Community Amateur Sports Club). Therefore it does not qualify for many benefits, e.g. business rates exemption, not to mention funding opportunities." Fortunately, that is not the case in every country. According to UAEJJ.com, the United Arab Emirates can boast of a fully-fledged program of BJJ integrated with

public education. BJJ is available to 13,000 pupils in Abu Dhabi, Al Ain and Al Gharbia aged between 9 to 14 years old, including both male and female students.

To leave the last word to Thrasher:

"You can throw money at the declining academic performance in children all you want, but if you don't stoke the intrinsic fire within and encourage those children to take advantage of resources already at their disposal, then your money is wasted. We truly feel that jiu-jitsu WILL stoke that fire in hundreds of thousands of school-age children and thus, Brazilian Jiu-Jitsu might just be what saves public education."

Thanks to Jamie Hussein from Future Champions, Beth Thrasher from Vector Jiu Jitsu, David Lee from Free Jiu Jitsu, Rafael dos Santos at Gracie Barra Cornwall, Curtis Malin from The BJJ Program, Ralph Presgrave from Success 2 Submit and Jorge Sacchetto from Highland High School

