

Methods of a Blademaster

Tom Sotis, Part One

by Ben Stone

Boston-based Tom Sotis, world-renowned knife expert and founder of the AMOK! bladefighting system, conducted two seminars in Victoria in late 2003. Ben Stone attended the seminars, which turned out to be a fun and controlling adventure into the world of knife-defence, and an insight into the man known in knifer's circles as one of the USA's best kept secrets.

For most that arrive at a Tom Sotis seminar believing they have a reasonable understanding of knife-defense a rude awakening is in store. After brief introductions we were instructed to grab a partner and line-up. To dispel any erroneous notions of what a knife-fight is really like, Sotis and his assistant, instructor Aaron DeSousa of Sydney's Combat Kempo, take a pair of foam-baton training knives and attack each other with a ferocious intensity that leaves most mouths agape. The whole exchange takes less than 20 seconds, their rapid-fire techniques indiscernible in the wild fray of swinging arms, thrusting batons, and shuffling feet. There isn't a neat disarm to be seen but every othersecond a loud WOP is heard over their yells as they disfigure, disembowel, and repeatedly kill one-another. Well, we have to imagine that part.

To reform any remaining skeptics we were all told to have a go. The 30 of us try as hard as we can to "cut" our partners while avoiding their weapon, parrying their strikes, and thrusting at their head, heart, legs, and anything we can reach. I don't know how many times my fingers are cut off or how often I block a strike to a vital organ only to have my adversary's knife stuck in my arm. I connect with many strikes to my partner's vitals but the momentary sweetness of success is too often soured by the realization that he has simultaneously slashed my throat or stabbed me through the heart. While the training blades are harmless enough - though still capable of producing large bruises and the odd welt - the mind boggles at the real possibilities.

While the frenetic sparring leaves many breathless - seasoned martial artists included - it is clear that were this real, most of us would be very lucky to be still breathing at all. As the Professor says later, "In a knife fight, it's not how much you get him; it's how much he gets you."

AMOK!'s bloody logo gives some hint as to the method behind the system's madness. "[The logo] is designed to tell you about the intensity of the mindset of the person you may be fighting and the type of mindset you are

going to need to survive an edged weapons encounter,” says Sotis. Or indeed to survive the first seminar. This first exercise, clearly one that Sotis deems most important in our development as “knifers” is designed to bring us closer to the true nature of knife attacks.

I receive a second more definitive lesson early in the seminar when Sotis calls for a volunteer. As he demonstrates a defense to my attack, he strips the training knife from my hands. We have all been informed of amok policy, if you are disarmed, your partner is to seize the opportunity for a kill, as an attacker may do, while you must recover your blade and defend. The AMOK! instructors instead whip their folding knives from their hip pockets opening them with a flick of the wrist and calling “Out!” in case their partner hasn’t seen it. Then they put it away and begin again.

I hardly have a chance to think of diving for my foam weapon before Sotis has driven me back several times with repeated thrusts into my gut; yelling and punching most of them through my doubled-over attempts to block. So this is what it is really like...

Though the principles of AMOK! are Filipino-based (he has trained under Grand Tuhon Leo T. Gaje Jr. among others) Sotis has significantly altered the format in which they are practiced, such that AMOK! now has more in common with military combatives. Most martial arts demand a longer period of time to develop a foundation upon which to build the other skills. In the military, immediacy is key, thus their priorities and emphases in practice differ. Most civilian martial arts, says Sotis, are taught with less lethal circumstances in mind.

“Generally you have an unlimited time line in which to learn it, and generally your opponents are somewhat compliant during your practice until you develop some skill. When I train the military guys, they don’t have that luxury, they have to get the most direct approach that will lend them some survival skills, and assuming they survive, they then have more time to practice.”

In AMOK! prioritization is paramount and practicing with a non-compliant opponent is top of the list. “When somebody pulls a knife on you in civilian life, isn’t it a life-and-death circumstance?” Sotis asks the group. “When a knife is produced, it matter not whether you are wearing fatigues on a battlefield or jeans outside, you’re in a life-and-death struggle. Therefore I believe it is only ethical to teach the same versions to civilians as I do soldiers.

Sotis has thus changed the AMOK! approach from martial knife-fighting to combative and adjusted its values and priorities to suit. "That is why we don't bow before running amok at the beginning. When you do your courtesy or you "Osu" it brings the martial dimension into play in your mind, then you get ready and set yourself for your class. That is a trigger to your mindset, that's why our courtesy is here", Sotis explains, raising his left arm to cover his heart and throat. "This is a trigger to the martial dimension so if somebody should attack me unexpectedly, my hand comes up to protect me, while I'll certainly be going for my blade and for follow up." To Sotis, prioritization is much more important in knifing than it is in empty hand combat. In knifing, he says, you can be "pretty adept very quickly" while empty hand fighting takes a period of development. AMOK! teaches both. "We teach the bladework from the beginning and it takes time to develop your empty hands, but they even out. I've changed a lot of our format to allow for that; and that's the reason I believe I don't teach martial knifework, but combative knifework. I don't really teach people knife-fighting as much as I teach them how to fight with a knife. Clearly there is a difference. Sotis explains that AMOK! includes extensive empty hands training because knife combat involves two types of situations: those where the opponents come together and apart-"that's largely knifework and footwork"- and those where the opponents come together and down. "Bringing a person down involves head control, arm-locks, wrist-locks, elbow-locks, sweeps, throws, and all those things by which you then get situational control over your enemy." he says.

Simple distinctions like this are at the core of AMOK! theory, as is simplicity itself. When you are fighting, it's not what you know, it's what you can distinguish; what your mind sees in the moment and can react to, it's your distinctions that present to you your opportunities, and therefore your course of action," says Sotis. He breaks all the flashing of blade and life-and-death jousting into a few simple principles" "Safe or unsafe- that is your distance; single or combination strikes- that is your timing; to the inside or outside of the arm or body- that's your position and targets; supported by your checkhand, on demand or command- you either use it or you don't, and that will depend on your distance, position, and your timing. "Almost everything you learn about fighting from me falls somewhere in that category." he says. "And when you're fighting, those are the only things you can distinguish anyway."

As our intermittent sparring indicates, trying to decipher whether you are receiving a number 8 or 9 strike in the heat of combat is not only impossible, but unnecessary. "You know what those names are good for?" says Sotis emphatically.

"So after you've kicked somebody's ass you can say exactly how you did it- but it's not what you were thinking in the moment." A comment from a man at one of his seminars was the impetus for this realization. "He said, "If just for one minute I could be inside you and look through your eyes and see what you see, I'd give you my car." And he had a nice one," laughs Sotis,

"So I was thinking, How could I get that car? I began to think about that. What is it that I am looking for and that I do? When you're fighting, it's basic; is this a kick or a punch? You don't start thinking; wait a minute that was a front-kick or a reverse-action punch. Your mind doesn't think that definitively in combat."

"These distinctions become ultimately important because what you can distinguish or see determines how you act. And the more clearly you can distinguish what's going on, the more options you have to act on. So these kind of distinctions are very generalized, but in doing so, they make your reactions much faster."

Sotis recalls a formula for reaction time used by biochemical engineers: $270 \log E \text{ times } P \text{ plus one}$. "P" means the number of things your mind has to consider before it can make a decision and act on it. Therefore, as the value of "P" rises, your mental reaction time begins to increase. So the paradox is- how can I continue to learn without adding new labels, which then spoils my reaction time?" Sotis solution is that the labels are still learned for the purpose of learning and training, but are discarded in combat.

For those who think the approach is too simple to be the work of a master instructor, Sotis has many anecdotes to persuade them otherwise. In a break he tells of a man who challenged one of his instructors in South Africa telling him he could disarm him. Ignoring the instructor's advice he attempted to kick the knife (a large tanto) from his hand. A simple tilt of the instructor's wrist guided the blade down through the man's incoming lower leg out the other side. With a knife stuck in his leg and a better understanding of knife defense tactics, the man was taken off to the hospital.

But for all the stories he has collected there's no bravado in Sotis' tales and even when he is making jokes – which is reasonably often – his words have an underlying seriousness. He has trained many elite military and law enforcement units, including Russia's Spetsnaz, the South African Special Forces, and the US Secret Service, FBI, and DEA, and his extensive experience has lent him an intimate knowledge of the subject matter's gravity. He wants no-one to leave with an inflated sense of their abilities.

"You meet people who say, "We have knife defense", Well, I don't have knife defense," he says a matter-of-factly. "I have practices that I think will give me a better chance, but I don't think I have knife defense".

It is sobering to see a world-renowned blade-fighting expert throw his wallet onto the floor of the dojo at an imaginary attacker's feet. "That's free. If you want to touch me, it's going to cost you." he says. "That's what I tell people. I don't think I have enough pride and ego to face a blade empty-handed for what's in my wallet. I've seen guys tougher than me bleed to death in my arms because they made that mistake, and I just realized I wasn't going to." The high stakes for a knifefight for both parties means establishing an attacker's intent is important, says Sotis. While an aggressor may be exhibiting the means and capability to harm you (by threatening you with a knife), it is important to ensure he has the intent before you act, lest you escalate the situation. Trying to attack him could be the worst move of all, Sotis warns, because it is easy for him to defend himself- with the knife. I realized early on in the sparring sessions that waiting to cut an incoming limb is a safer tactic than lunging for the kill.

"If they pull a knife on you thinking its to scare you and then they're forced to defend themselves, they're going to react violently, explains Sotis, "That's why I usually advise people to wait and let them attack you, because if so, they've demonstrated their intent."

End Part 1