

Methods of a Blademaster

Tom Sotis, Part Two

By Ben Stone

In the last issue of Blitz, Ben Stone described his seminar experience with Boston-born Tom Sotis, world-renowned knife expert and head of the AMOK! blade-fighting system. In part two, Sotis tells it like it is about the methods and misconceptions of knife-combat.

Blitz: What's the biggest no-no in an empty-hand versus knife situation?

One of the biggest no-no's is to think that your opponent will only make the single strike and comply with you. Your expectation is that they are going to continue pressing their attack and that if you grab that knife hand, they're going to continue fighting. One of the golden rules, in terms of your progression, is you must always be seeking to protect yourself. You must then inflict great damage. With that you will have a chance to seize the knife arm.

Once you do, you need to continue inflicting more pain and damage with your impact weapons, meaning your head-butts, elbows, knees and so-forth, so that you can gain more compliance and actually set your disarm in place. In order to accurately and securely grab his blade arm you will usually need two hands, at least momentarily. If you have not caused significant impact damage and you have your two hands committed to his one, then he has a free hand with which he is going to counter you.

Blitz: How good is improvised weaponry, and do you teach its use in the AMOK! system?

Absolutely. Once you have short-blade tactics and techniques, you can expand those to longer blades, and from that comes the stick. Therefore you have both edged, pointed and blunt instruments of various lengths. You can pick up a rock or a brick and still use all the same motions; you're impacting where you would attack their skeletal structure and maybe their nerves. If you have an edged weapon or improvised broken glass or whatever, then you would be attacking with the same motions, to the muscles and the circulatory system and so-forth. In that way, it translates to empty hands as well. With short blade tactics you have what we call 'weapons in parallel': You can affect almost any other weapon you put in your hand, including flexible weapons.

Blitz: Do you still incorporate pattern or flow drills in your training?

Pattern drills are very scarce in AMOK!. Just as static practices don't teach you how to flow, flow drills don't teach you spontaneity. While flowing is important, I think it's a mistake to base the largest percentage of your practices on flow drills. They were the predominant method by which I was taught knife-fighting. The problems with flow drills are that you have a compliant opponent. You're almost always in the 'mutual kill' range as well. To get better [at a flow drill]—and you know you're better at it because you're comfortable with the drill—you have to do it a lot.

In a real fight you're not going to be in a comfortable state of mind, so the drill brings you into a mental state that is incompatible with a real knife encounter. Flow drills have a hidden poison inside them, and that is, the motions of the drill become [a reflex] to you because you've done them 10,000 times. So in a stress situation, you are compelled to use those same combinations and motions, which are good to keep the drill going but not necessarily the best thing for your situation in combat. Flow drills are used in AMOK! like a medicine: if somebody has an absent reflex or an improper reflex, we might use a flow drill to help them repair that. That's usually a temporary fix for

that individual and once he's got that motion into his reflexes, you would immediately abandon the flow drill and go right back into your spontaneous practices to make sure that the reflex has embedded itself. I believe it's a mistake to think that because you're good at the flow drill, you are then going to be able to operate [those techniques] spontaneously. Continued flow drills are a way that commercial instructors are able to make their systems bigger and bigger, so it takes a long time for people to learn it. We still use some, because some skills need to be learned in a compliant fashion and then brought with more intensity into a non-compliant practice.

Blitz: Hypothetically, if confronted by an attacker wielding a knife, what weapon would you most like to have at hand to defend yourself?

Well, if he's at a distance, a gun is a good thing to have too! (Laughter). We don't ignore anything in our sphere of defence. Of course, the person who is highly skilled with a stick can also do a good job against somebody with a knife; to me, that's relative to your training. Rarely though do I have a stick as often as I have my knife. And a stick doesn't have the psychological impact that a knife has. Some blows with a stick can be absorbed while they're cutting you; very few cuts can be absorbed with that same type of ability to follow through. The psychological power of the weapon is also a very, very important factor that you can't overlook when comparing one tactic to another.

Blitz: Is a knife a practical self-defence tool to carry in light of legal and safety concerns?

Absolutely, if—number one—you have a weapon that is legal to carry, then it's always at your disposal. If it's not legal for you to carry a knife, there are a lot of really good pens on the market too. And improvised instruments abound in all your environments. When you learn short-blade tactics, you can carry any number of instruments that are not a folding knife but will easily substitute.

But given the choice, the folding knife is the way to go. Again, the psychological power of the blade is really important. For years [the blade] has only been used by the miscreants of society. You can even see it in the social mores of your society, reflected in movies, where only psychos would use a blade. In America, [this attitude] was formed at a time when firearms were the predominant means of self-protection. But in the end, we have to ask ourselves, why should we allow the miscreants of society to be the only ones able to capitalize on the power and potential of the blade? The blade offers the average individual, especially women, powerful self-defence in a very short period of time, while their empty hands are in development. I don't believe that empty hands should be ignored. I don't think carrying a blade is a magic bullet either. I think the two things need to be done appropriately and in proportion and that will significantly increase one's sphere of defence.

Blitz: Do you teach ground-fighting with the knife?

Yes. Some of the guys with us are very highly skilled ground-fighters. We began to wonder: 'Well, if I'm on the ground, I could just get my blade and stab him.' Instead of thinking this would be true, we decided to find out. Fighting with some of the guys who are much better ground-fighters than me, I found I was unable to access my blade. Especially when they knew I was going for it, it was easy for them to counter. So what became important is that the person has to have basic skills so he can survive long enough or position himself to access his blade—[skill] not only in the techniques but the judgment as to when you could try such a thing.

Again, that's a multi-faceted area that needs a great deal of study and the experts among us have been working on that very hard. It's actually going to be taught at our [autumn] camp, but not by me. The experts underneath AMOK! will be presenting it and I will be their student that day.

Blitz: If you can't use a blade well, can you defend against one?

The question is, how well can you defend against one (laughs). It's a matter of degree. Of course, anybody can get lucky, but when you're talking about probability versus possibility, a person without blade training has a very low possibility of surviving that encounter very well. A person with training has a much higher possibility. With a lot of training and effort, maybe you've moved in to the realm of probability. All those things are relative to the circumstance of the person attacking and the person receiving. But all things being equal, the more you train, the luckier you get.

Blitz: What would you consider more dangerous: learning no knife-defence or learning flawed knife-defence?

Learning flawed knife defence. Number one, because you have fundamental misconceptions of how the attack will occur. It will put you in a mindset where you're going to become so surprised psychologically it's going to be much more difficult to deal with. If they have no training at all, I find that some people have a better chance at problem-solving because you haven't narrowed their minds as to the expectations. They will often come up with different solutions out of their instincts and natural defenses that could save them. I think that improper fundamental assumptions will be one of the biggest problems a person will face.

Blitz: Do you think it's important to impart any philosophy or value system with what you teach?

Yes, we do. The ethics in the IBFG (International Blade-Fighters Guild) were established in the very beginning and our strong ethics earned us an incredibly strong following among law-enforcement in the United States. We saw how many books and videos were on the market and how many civilians and law-enforcement were now facing an elevated technical threat. That's one of the fundamental reasons we established the guild in '92, so that law-enforcement and reputable citizens could have a place to go where they might be able to learn to train themselves against this new threat. In the end, fundamentally, you don't have control over another person's actions and just like any martial artist who teaches somebody in here, they could go out and use that inappropriately as well.

In the '60s when people started teaching karate, they used to say, well, you don't have to worry, because karate makes the body a weapon, and punks will go out and buy a weapon, they won't develop themselves. And now we see 40 years later that our prisons are full of martial artists as well; we see that such idealistic thinking was wrong. As far as knifing goes, videos and books have been on the market for years. I don't produce training videos. I like AMOK! to be hands-on and we work as closely as we can with every individual. I'm proud to say that we've taught thousands of people self-protection skills and to our knowledge not one person has ever used any information inappropriately. If something like that ever did happen, it would be a tragedy, but I have to ask myself: Should I not teach 10,000 people to protect themselves in case one might do wrong?

They don't need my training to hurt somebody with a knife. Almost anybody who wants to hurt somebody with a knife can do that before they come to my class. What you learn here is how to protect yourself against somebody doing that. Furthermore, when you become a more skilled knifer, you have a chance to end an edged-weapons confrontation without killing your opponent. If the only thing you know how to do is stab him back until he dies, then that's what you are relegated to. But if you have training, then you have a lot of other means and methods by which you might diminish your opponent and otherwise repel that attack without taking their life. In that respect, it's a much more ethical and humane way of facing that type of miscreant.

Blitz: Do you feel a need to make a moral judgment on the intentions of the government or military groups you're training, before you begin training them?

There are certain countries that are known for their human and civil rights violations and I do my best to avoid those situations. Countries that I work for are in most cases because I'm well connected in our own government. If I'm going some place that I've never been, I'll make sure that I check things out in advance. I do the best that I can. In the end, if you're going to go train soldiers to do some knife-work, rarely is that going to be the means by which they choose to dispatch any number of their enemy. It's still almost always with guns and all the weapons they have. Very rarely does it come down to knife-to-knife. Although when it does, obviously that's why they need my training. It's not that I'm passing moral judgments on them but clearly I seek to be doing the right thing, no matter who I'm teaching.

Blitz: Do you get many challenges of the kind you recalled during the seminars?

Well, I don't get as many now as I used to. When I first started doing this I had quite a few. And for the most part the challenges I receive now are not like martial arts challenges, where someone comes in and says, 'I think you're full of crap', and it's a very personal thing and everybody gets all wound up over it. When I train military groups, because these men are staking their life on this information, they have a right to challenge it, to make sure it's correct. If somebody's challenging me as an individual, that's different to challenging the information. If somebody challenges the information and they want to come at me full-out to find out, I'm happy to do that because it gives an opportunity to show everybody that it does work under those circumstances.

It helps them know that it works and gives them the confidence that it works. In combatives circles, when somebody challenges your information and asks you to prove it, it's not seen as a personal affront or a challenge, it's normal training.

Blitz: Other than the Filipinos, have you trained with many masters from other knife cultures around the world?

Sure, I meet knife culture all over the world, because people use knives everywhere and in different ways. The Indonesians and the Filipino, they use their blades somewhat similarly, but not the same. The Japanese as well; they have knife-work of their own, but it's a little bit different. South Africa is the murder and stabbing capital of the world—they call it knifer's paradise. There, of course, more people have died by blades than by AK-47s. And with that, there are people there who have their own street systems and so-forth. We study and investigate those as well. In each area we go, we look for the knife culture. Who is doing what? What are their styles of thinking? What are their predominant methods of attack? And so-forth. So we can adapt to the needs of any culture into which we bring AMOK!

Blitz: Why do you think the Philippines have developed such a strong knife culture and is considered to be so far ahead of others?

Most other land masses that were in warfare really moved towards firearms several hundred years ago, so most people's training went to firearms. People didn't really carry swords for combat any more. Therefore, knife-work as a supplement to sword-work fell away also. Usually the knife is left to the miscreants of society in those countries as well. In the Philippines, because they were occupied by the Spanish for 377 years and then the Americans, they were never really allowed to amass firearms. But as an agrarian and tribal society, made up of over 7000 islands

which are very separated, people there lived with their machetes and knives because that's how they make a living.

When you had a problem there, you couldn't really go to the Spanish authorities because then they would punish everybody. So if he had a machete and you had one, that's how it got dealt with. So over the last several hundred years, the knife-fighting in the Philippines has continued to evolve. I met guys in the Philippines who told me that in WWII they were very young, so they didn't have any guns and they had to go out and set up ambushes and kill as many of the enemy as they could and then bring the guns back to the village. Then the old guys would get the guns. Some guys said, 'I fought through the whole war and I never got to fire a gun!' (laughs)

Blitz: What plans do you have for AMOK! here in Australia?

My goal is to expose people to the realities of the edged weapon; to its benefits, its potentials, its dangers. And to let people do what they will with it, in so far as how much they want to pursue it. I'll keep coming back as long as they invite me to. My goal is to spread awareness among martial artists that this is the greatest threat we're going to face. Professional martial artists who are teaching self-defence—not just martial arts, which can be taught for reasons other than self-defence—and realize that not everybody will attack you with empty hands, it's prudent to take into your training the idea that somebody might attack you with a knife. Therefore, you should seek the very best information.

Blitz: What drives you to keep learning and why do you remain so passionate about knifing?

There's a certain undeniable truth to the blade. When you live with that undeniable truth every day, it's very refreshing. It doesn't allow for too much hypocrisy or for unproven ideas to last too long. When you get in there and you see the reality of the counter, you lose your ego right away if you want to continue doing such a thing and survive. Being in a group of talented martial artists and dedicated people who've lost their ego and want to learn and practice together, to me that's just a wonderful atmosphere. I can't think of having a better job in the world than this.

End Part Two