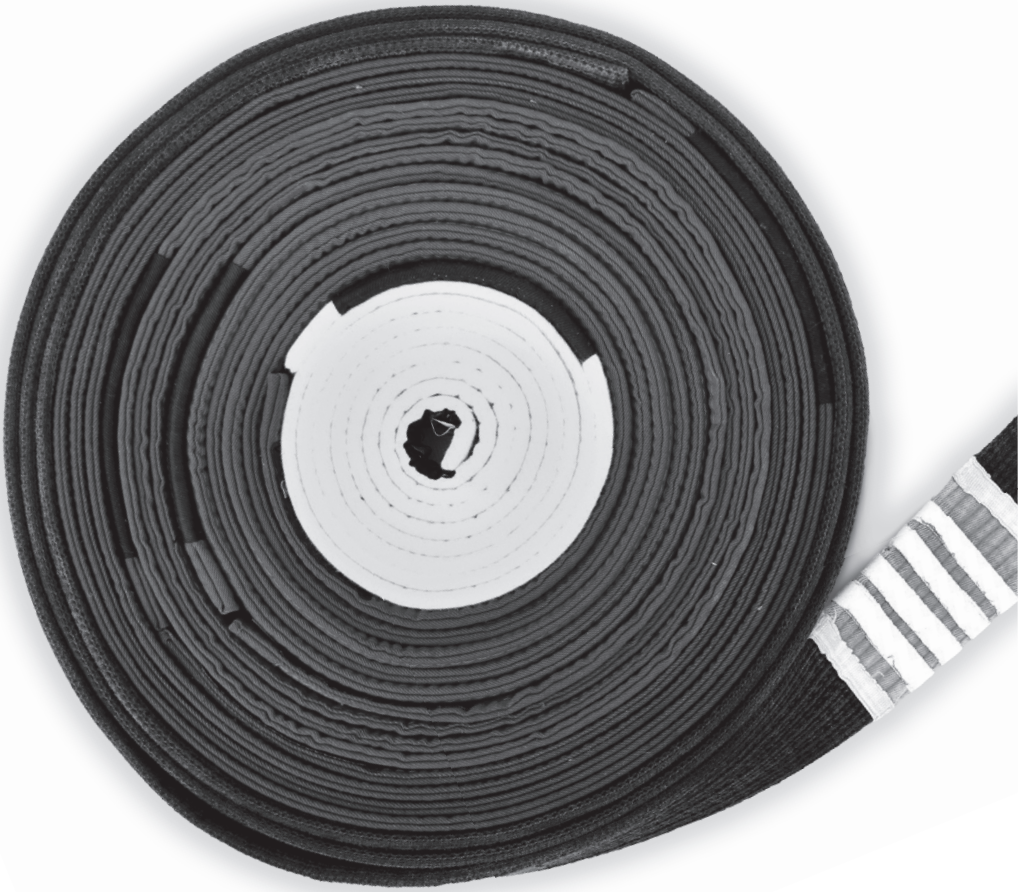

Jiu-Jitsu and Life

Lessons Learned on and off the Mat

TRAVIS TOOKE

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Writers of the Round Table Press
PO Box 1603, Deerfield, IL 60015
www.roundtablecompanies.com

Editor: **James Cook**
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Printed in the United States of America

First Edition: July 2020
10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Tooke, Travis.
Jiu-jitsu and life: lessons learned on and off the mat / Travis Tooke.—1st ed. p. cm.
ISBN Paperback: 978-1-61066-084-6
ISBN Digital: 978-1-61066-085-3
Library of Congress Control Number: 2020906536

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Introduction

In 2019, I celebrated fourteen years of owning a martial arts academy and thirty-eight years of being alive. That meant I'd spent over one-third of my life as a coach, a mentor, and a friend to martial arts students and peers (and nearly two-thirds of my life as a student). It also meant I'd spent one-third of my life working through challenges, trials, and failures in order to turn my passion for jiu-jitsu into a viable career.

Fourteen years is a big deal, since most martial arts schools close down within three to five years of opening. It's an accomplishment I don't take lightly—nor is it something that simply grew naturally out of the aptitude for jiu-jitsu I discovered as a teenager. It was far from easy.

But overcoming the odds to thrive in such a challenging business is not what I'm most proud of. The thing that puts a smile on my face day after day is also the very thing that can temporarily paralyze me. I'm talking about fear. Every day, fear pops up and tries to scare me away from doing something I really want to do or going after my goals. Does it ever win? Yes. I am not immune to fear. Some days it can get the better of me, and I'll delay or bail on doing something that would take me closer to a goal I really want to achieve—whether that's to grow my business or my jiu-jitsu practice.

But do I face the fear again the next day? Absolutely. The truth is that we need fear; it's how our species survived. Being truly fearless would likely earn you an early death. Alligator wrestlers, grizzly bear bow hunters, illegal bungee jumpers—they shouldn't feel totally relaxed and optimistic. These things can kill you!

In this book, I'll be telling my story. It's not just a martial arts story, a business story, or a story of my life, but it's a little bit of all three. Ultimately, it's a story about mindset, goals, passion, risk-taking, and, most importantly, it's about never giving up no matter the circumstances. I screwed up . . . a lot (it's a good thing I'm not a grizzly bear bow hunter). But I also did a lot of things right. I hope my journey helps you, whether you're pursuing a black belt, starting a business, or following a dream.

If you're a kid living in a mobile home with only the vaguest idea of what your future holds, or a complete newbie at business scared about

making enough to pay the bills, or someone who has had some success but doesn't know the next step—I feel you. I've been there.

Ultimately, I want this book to inspire you to pursue the life you want in spite of the fear. The number one regret of dying people is, "I wish I'd had the courage to live a life true to myself, not the life others expected of me."[1] I want you to find the courage to find your true calling and pursue it regardless of what others—family members, well-wishers, and haters—may say.

I hope my story inspires you to chase your dreams no matter what they are: opening a school, becoming a UFC champion, starting a business, becoming a nuclear physicist, or whatever matters to you. As you pursue them, though, fear will trick you into asking, "What if I lose?" I've asked this question a lot. But facing that fear will invite you to ask a new question: "What if I win?"

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1 Bronnie Ware, *The Top Five Regrets of the Dying: A Life Transformed by the Dearly Departing* (Carlsbad, CA: Hay House, 2011), 227.

When we deny ourselves the ability to feel pain for a purpose, we deny ourselves the ability to feel any purpose in our life at all.

—Mark Manson[2]

Skills are cheap. Passion is priceless.

—Gary Vaynerchuk[3]

CHAPTER 1

Passion and Purpose

Finding My Passion

It had been about three years since my parents divorced. I was fourteen, living in a mobile home park with my mom on the outskirts of Houston, when a friend rented some early UFC tapes (also known at the time as "human cockfighting") from the local video store. I knew nothing about it, but my interest was piqued.

"You mean like tae kwon do?" I asked, when Eric invited me over to check them out.

"No," he replied. "These are real fights—no rules."

We plopped down on the couch in his living room, cued up the VCR, and within minutes, I was leaning forward, shouting, "Wow, look at that guy," and "did you see that?! Run it back!" as I watched real martial artists applying their craft. We couldn't believe the world we'd stumbled upon. I'd taken my share of karate classes when I was in elementary school, but this was *nothing* like those classes. This was exciting. These grown men were tearing each other apart inside a chain-link cage—picking opponents up as if they were life-sized dolls, then slamming them

2 Mark Manson, *Everything Is F*cked: A Book About Hope* (New York: HarperCollins, 2019), 191

3 Gary Vaynerchuk, *Crush It!: Why NOW Is the Time to Cash In on Your Passion* (New York: HarperCollins, 2009), 9.

down on the mat or pinning them up against the fence.

Then this skinny little guy named Royce Gracie came out and started beating everybody with his jiu-jitsu moves. At six feet and a mere 176 pounds, he completely dominated everyone he fought and made it look easy. One of his signature moves was the rear naked choke, a technique that cuts off the blood supply from your opponent, forcing them to either tap out or blackout. He was also one of the only fighters wearing a gi (the traditional uniform used for martial arts), so his opponents couldn't escape from him as easily as they could from others whose skin was slick with sweat.

Royce Gracie's fighting was one of the coolest things I'd ever seen. I knew nothing of jiu-jitsu's mental components, nor could I have guessed at that early stage that jiu-jitsu would become a lifelong passion and career. All I knew was that Gracie had blown my mind. He made it look so fun that I wanted to start learning everything I could about this fascinating sport immediately.

I was hooked. From then on at home I wouldn't shut up about jiu-jitsu. I kept trying to force my younger brother to wrestle with me (he wasn't always up for it, believe it or not).

Then one day my mom was working out at a local gym when she spotted a flyer advertising jiu-jitsu classes at the martial arts academy next door. In support of my new obsession—and/or to save her own sanity—she signed me up. About a week later I was front and center at Champion Martial Arts, standing on a training mat in my first stiff, dull-white gi.

The class began with a mandatory four-hour orientation to introduce us to the fundamentals and sparring. I was so amped up about this opportunity that I had no concept of going "light." I was fifteen years old in a class full of adults, and I was determined to prove myself. I took it so seriously that when it came time to bow out (the bow martial artists typically take at the end of a match), I felt like I was going to throw up. I was so exhausted I went home and passed out in bed by six p.m. I didn't wake up until ten a.m. the next day.

After that, I returned to the school a couple of times a week to take jiu-jitsu classes. I also practiced the other martial arts the school taught—that was required to qualify for moving up the ranks in belt training—but my heart was always into jiu-jitsu. The sport was so new that none of the teachers really knew how to teach us much about it, so they just

showed us whatever small grappling moves they could. The instructor had taken a few classes from some members of the Gracie family as well as Carlos Machado but had limited training in the art. It was good enough to get me started in the right direction. Any amount of formal instruction was better than what my friends and I had been doing up to that point, which basically involved slamming each other around on pieces of insulation foam we'd pieced together like a giant puzzle in the backyard. To this day I'm surprised that somebody didn't get really hurt during those ridiculous "matches."

But the more I learned, the more I wanted to know. So in addition to practicing at home every day after school, I entered local tournaments. In similar academies around town, we were all doing our best to figure out all the moves we could. No classes in the area focused solely on jiu-jitsu, but a handful of schools offered some form of grappling, whether it was judo, sambo, or modified "gringo" jiu-jitsu. Even then I sensed the struggle of trying to grow without continually seeking out peers who challenge you. We just had to be a little more resourceful when it came to finding jiu-jitsu-specific opportunities. In most cases, even when it came to tournaments, we were just a handful of people with some exposure to jiu-jitsu (mostly through VHS tapes, since the internet was still in its infancy) and a little background in traditional martial arts training, standing in dingy, fluorescent-lit rooms in our sweaty gis, ready to take each other on. No one had even developed a scoring system yet to determine winners. It was mostly left up to the coaches to decide. But the more we competed against each other, the better we got and the more quickly we learned new techniques. During class I got thrown around, wrestled to the ground, and tapped out more times than I can count, but I also earned some wins against adults who were much bigger than me.

• • •

Despite all of that initial enthusiasm and success, when I was sixteen, I decided to take a break from martial arts. It wasn't like anything happened, per se; it was more that I'd decided the stuff I did at fifteen was no longer "cool."

But after a couple of months, I got a call from Siggy, a woman I'd trained with at Champion. Surprised to hear her distinctive German

accent, I wondered how and why she'd tracked me down.

"The last time I saw you was when you won that tournament at Alvis's studio a few months back," she said. "You really did great winning in overtime! It was not an easy win. We were all impressed, especially Alvis."

"Oh, thanks!" I said. "That's so cool to hear."

I was starting to feel glad she'd called. Alvis Solis, who owned a martial arts school across town from me, was one of the only blue belts in Houston at that time. (The blue belt is the second rung in the five-degree ladder that culminates in a black belt.) I'd seen him train once before at a seminar, but other than that, I didn't know him well.

"Still training hard?" she asked.

"Not really," I replied. "I kind of decided to take a break."

"Oh, really?" she said. She sounded surprised, and I felt myself flush. "Why's that? You were always so into it at Champions."

"No reason, really, just school and stuff . . ." I didn't say anything else. Looking back, I think maybe I was just being a teenager.

"I get it," she said. "School can be time-consuming, for sure. Anyway, Alvis is looking to build a pure jiu-jitsu program, and your name came up. I told him I'd find out if anyone at Champion knew how to get in touch with you. If you want, he says you can come train for free for the rest of the summer."

That short call reminded me how much I still enjoyed jiu-jitsu. And I'd be training for free? Free is hard to pass up, especially when free is about all you can afford. By the time I hung up the phone, I was already excited.

So at age sixteen, in my busted-ass car with no AC, I made the ninety-minute roundtrip drive across steaming-hot Houston five or six times a week, getting in as much practice and training as I possibly could. Once I was back, it was like I'd never stopped training at all. It felt like coming home. Sometimes I'd even go twice a day. What I lacked in technical proficiency I made up for with just the grind of going to Alvis's school every day, trying again and again.

One of the handful of students in the class was this guy Doug, a tough-as-hell country boy who constantly kicked my ass. He wasn't a huge guy. In fact, his frame was about the same as mine, only his had more meat on it. We'd spar a lot, and he would always kick my butt. For the life of me, I just could not beat him—until one day, after several minutes of

surviving another beating, I finally caught him in an arm bar.

I didn't celebrate externally, of course—that would be bad form—but in my head it was like fireworks were going off. *Oh my God! I did it!*

That's exactly how it happens in jiu-jitsu. Just like a lot of things in life, you don't have a lot of giant breakthroughs. You have a few little victories amid a lot of getting beat up, losing, and showing up again the next day to do it again.

I learned to find victories where I could. Sometimes it was a victory when I only tapped out (or submitted) one time instead of five. You have to be willing to grind it out and stick with what you love. If you resist the urge to quit, true transformation begins.

That's when I first began to comprehend how discipline creates success. No matter how passionate you are about the *idea* of something, you won't get very far without putting your thoughts into action. Sure, I had a natural aptitude for jiu-jitsu, but if I'd never put in the work and made practicing a priority, I would have remained an average-to-good martial artist at best. Anyone can become great at almost anything if they dedicate enough time and commitment to their chosen task.

Equally important to discipline is faith: believing the path you're following will lead somewhere. I first began teaching classes with Alvis at age seventeen. Teaching with him gave me that first glimpse of what I could become. The more my own practice progressed, the more I could share with others. I fell in love with teaching from the very beginning. Not only was it exciting to see teammates turn my demonstration into actions, but I had to dive even deeper into the techniques myself so that I understood more completely how to teach them to others.

Teaching and training with Alvis, my growth became exponential. I started to understand that I might have found something I could stick with for a very long time. Nothing in school had ever really spoken to me. In fact, I felt itchy and restless even being in school—I was one of those kids who couldn't wait for that 2:30 p.m. dismissal bell every day. As far as extracurricular activities went, I played football for many years, but I just did it because it was something to do. Jiu-jitsu was the first thing to ever really grab me; and the more I sweated on the mat, the stronger my drive to pursue it grew.

Although jiu-jitsu was quickly becoming my sole focus in life, I still imagined a more traditional route for my future. I never really considered

college: my brother and I grew up in a single wide trailer at the end of a small trailer park in Tomball, Texas. My family didn't have that much money, and I didn't have the grades or sport accolades to earn any scholarships. I figured my best bet was the military—learning new skills while traveling the world sounded like a good deal to me. Specifically, I fantasized about becoming a Navy SEAL. I couldn't join up until December, so after graduation I got a landscaping job to start saving money, imagining myself bigger and beefier after my SEAL training, wearing camo, hung with gear . . .

But then came an opportunity I couldn't resist. It was one of those moments in life where a pathway opens up in front of you, leading to something that, way up ahead in the distance, looks like it might be your future. In this case, my dad happened to mention that his friend Bradley would be working in Dallas for a few months.

Doesn't sound that earthshaking, right? But it just so happened that Carlos Machado owned a jiu-jitsu school in Dallas. THE Carlos Machado. Considered the father of jiu-jitsu in Texas, Carlos was Alvis's coach and—get this—Chuck Norris's personal martial arts teacher on the set of *Walker, Texas Ranger*. He was also the only jiu-jitsu master within about a thousand miles of me. If Bradley would let me share the room, I could use what I'd saved so far to pay for tuition and cheap food and train under one of the few black belts in the country.

Or I could stick around Houston watering lawns.

I was pretty shy, though, and couldn't work up the nerve to ask Bradley if I could stay with him. I *could*, however, work up the nerve to ask my dad to ask Bradley.

"So Bradley is heading up to Dallas," I said to my dad one night as we sat in front of the TV watching, coincidentally, an episode of *Walker, Texas Ranger*.

"Yep," my dad said (always a man of many words). He didn't turn his head, so I was staring at the salt-and-pepper of his sideburn. "His company's sending him up there on a commercial refrigeration project."

"Cool," I said. "Oh, wow—check that out." Chuck Norris had just choked-out the bad guy. "Um, you know what? The guy who teaches Chuck Norris his jiu-jitsu has a school in Dallas. His name is Carlos Machado."

"Cool," my dad said, eyes glued to the television.

"Well, anyway," I continued, trying to sound as casual as possible. "I'd

love to train with Carlos. Do you think Bradley would mind if I asked to stay with him while he's there? So I can take classes?"

This time my dad turned to look at me, surprised. "Well . . . not sure he's got the room, Travis. He's sharing a hotel room with a guy he works with."

"Um, still," I said. I knew my request was starting to sound ridiculous, but I couldn't let this chance slip away. "Would you mind asking him for me?"

One thing I can say about my dad is he's always supported me, even if he didn't always relate to the passion I have for jiu-jitsu. He reached out to Bradley, and incredibly, Bradley and the other guy said I could sleep on the floor of their hotel room. Throw down some blankets for bedding, and I was all set. It was a BIG favor to ask, but I asked, and I'll always be glad I did.

Every day when Bradley and his colleague went off to work, I headed to Carlos's school and trained twice a day: about two hours in the morning, and another one-and-a-half to two-hour class in the evening. Carlos understood the art so well, and his technical proficiency was like none I'd ever experienced. I had seen him in action once when he'd come to Houston to teach a seminar, but nothing compared to being in his presence every day, soaking up every detail. Every class was a new experience. It wasn't just that his moves were so much more technically accurate than anybody else's. It was that he performed them with a Zen-like calm. No matter what position he was in, he never panicked or acted aggressively. His moves were so smooth and seemingly effortless. It was like watching the most graceful and carefully choreographed dance you've ever seen. More than that, there was virtually no ego involved. It was simply jiu-jitsu in its purest form.

For the next four months, at the end of 1999, I returned to the hotel sweaty and exhausted, but filled to capacity with motivation and inspiration. Not only was I learning under one of the most skilled jiu-jitsu masters in the world, but I was also training alongside the best guys in the region.

Carlos Machado presented me with my blue belt in early December. A week later, he offered me an invitation that seemed too good to be true.

"There's a tournament next week at the Gracie Academy in LA. If you're interested in competing, there's a paid-for ticket with your name on it."

I don't think I could have said yes any faster than I did. Since my tenure

with Carlos was about to come to an end, I'd been preparing to move back to Houston and enlist in the Navy. But the chance to visit the legendary Gracie Academy was a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity I couldn't pass up.

I can vividly picture walking into the academy. It was huge, super clean, and nice. The entrance showcased a display of Gracie Jiu-Jitsu history, and the people in attendance read like a who's who of jiu-jitsu and MMA. Almost all the competitors were students of either the Gracies or the Machados, with a couple of smaller schools also receiving a few invitations. One of the first people I noticed was the legend himself, Hélio Gracie—the cofounder (and veritable godfather) of Brazilian Jiu-Jitsu. He must have been in his mid-eighties then, short but lean and erect, with the high-cheekboned face of a hawk. He and his brother Carlos were the reason I was there. Together they created Gracie Jiu-Jitsu, which became known as Brazilian Jiu-Jitsu. I remember feeling numb and tingly as I got to say hello and shake his hand.

Other attendees included Hélio's son and jiu-jitsu pioneer, Royce Gracie; Ed O'Neill, the actor known as Al Bundy from *Married with Children*, an early devotee of the art; Travis "Serial Killer" Lutter; Robert DeFranco; Rico Rodriguez; and Anthony Perosh—all stalwart competitors and champions of jiu-jitsu and the UFC. Even Rafael Lovato Jr was there. Only sixteen years old at the time, Rafael would go on to be the winningest American in jiu-jitsu history. He is currently the Bellator Middleweight World Champion. In other words, the competitors in attendance were of world-class caliber.

This event was unlike any I had competed in before. There were no time limits. Matches were won in one of two ways: by submission or by being the first to score fifteen points. The rest of that trip was a blur because I had only one match, but it was a doozy and it took everything I had.

I squared off on the mat against another, more seasoned blue belt. The match started, and I was able to secure a takedown and a guard pass to gain a few points early. "Okay, this shouldn't be too bad," I probably thought to myself. "Time to press ahead, and I'll get the submission in no time."

But "no time" turned into five minutes, and then twelve minutes. My opponent kept escaping my control and recovering his guard. I started feeling wiped. He hadn't scored any points on me. We'd scramble and

I'd pass his guard, but he would recover. Twelve minutes became twenty, then thirty, then forty minutes. My head was light, I was soaked in sweat, my throat was on fire for a drop of water, and I could barely keep my hands in front of me. I had gotten to twelve points. My opponent still had zero. I was almost guaranteed the win, but I had to either get him to submit—unlikely, given my weakened state—or score three more points. My opponent didn't look so hot either. It probably looked like a bar fight between two wasted barflies by the end.

I glanced at the referee and thought, "Okay, if I just pass his guard one more time, I'll get the three points needed." I wasn't going to quit just because I wanted to lie down and die. I was in it to win. I made one more scramble, got past his guard, and held him in place to secure the points. I smiled: thank God it was over.

Except the referee didn't give me the points. I remember looking at him like, *Motherfucker, really? I had him!* My teammates were also vocal about the non-call. The referee wouldn't have it. No points awarded.

By this point, I'm not even sure how I'm still breathing. Is it considered submission if I just collapse? I wasn't sure. I gave it one more try. I loosened my control and my opponent recovered guard. I immediately passed his guard for the final time, and then, with the last sip of energy in my muscles, I held and glared at the referee.

The referee stood with arms akimbo, leaning in as if he wasn't sure. It seemed to take forever for him to decide, but he finally did. After forty-five minutes of fighting, he finally gave me my last points, and I collapsed on the mat and literally crawled back to my team. I had never been that exhausted before, and I've never been since.

I'm not sure how, but I made it back to the apartment I was sharing with my team. I remember that a bunch of the guys were going out drinking after the tournament. I was too young to drink, but I didn't want to go anyway. I just slept on the couch the whole time. But I had won and in the company of some of the most awesome names in the sport. Many of the details of that day might have escaped me, but I'll never forget the exhaustion—and I'll never forget shaking Hélio's hand.

Following My Purpose

Reaching a goal like a blue belt feels great, but that feeling actually fades pretty fast. It's pursuing the goal that makes martial arts fulfilling—just like life. Renew your goals constantly and pursue them with all you've got—that's how you find purpose in what you do. Many religions will label purpose as living for God or gods. Family will sometimes try to define your purpose for you by insisting that you follow in a parent's footsteps. Others will see a talent you have and try to give you a purpose based on this talent.

But don't try to make everyone happy. You will only succeed in being less happy yourself. Ultimately, you must create your own purpose or "destiny." I found that out myself when I got back from Dallas and got ready to enlist in the Navy.

I'd completed all of the necessary applications and was cleared except for a final medical examination. By this time I'd been training a lot and was in really great shape. The medical exam would be easy peasy . . . or so I thought. Somewhere in the time between my stay in Dallas and returning home, I'd developed eczema on my right ring finger, just a little rash, probably from an allergic reaction. Barely seems worth mentioning, right? Well, in my case, this mild condition raised some kind of red flag during the exam. So on my ship-out day, I was not allowed to ship out. To get into the Navy, I'd need a waiver.

It seemed ridiculous—come on, eczema couldn't keep me out of the Navy! But the longer I waited in limbo, the more worried I got. It was probably about a month, but it seemed like two or three before the phone rang with the final decision.

"Hey man," the guy on the other end said. "Bad news. The waiver was rejected."

"Okay," I said slowly, trying to figure out what exactly this meant. "I got the right medicine, and the eczema is totally gone now. Do I have to reapply, or what do I do?"

"No. Unfortunately, it means you can't go at all," he said matter-of-factly. "You've been denied. But here's the good news: you can go into the Army instead, but it will be with a different job and at a lower starting rank."

As we continued to talk, I quickly worked out what *that* meant. I'd be enlisting in a different branch of the military, I wouldn't get to choose the job I wanted, and I'd be entering at the lowest level.

Nothing about that felt right. It didn't even come close to fulfilling any plan I'd had for myself. "I'll think about it," I said. "But I don't think that's going to work for me."

I placed the cordless phone back down on the charger and stood there for a moment, taking in what had just happened. I had no idea what I was going to do. I didn't feel heartbroken, exactly, but I did feel very lost. I knew I could still figure out a course for my life. I was smart, I had drive, and because of jiu-jitsu I wasn't afraid of hard work. I just wasn't sure exactly which path to focus on next. My mental map of the next four years had been wiped clean.

I needed a new plan. So much of what happens to you is out of your control and even random, but so what. As a martial artist and as an entrepreneur, I've learned that when your plan doesn't work, it's not time to give up. It's time to make an adjustment. I had a handful of private students at Alvis's school and remained committed to my training. That hadn't changed. All I needed was a part-time income to supplement what I made at the studio. A plan would come to me soon—and maybe, just maybe, it would have something to do with jiu-jitsu.

So I found a job as a personal trainer at 24 Hour Fitness, and the extra income and flexibility allowed me to continue pursuing my goals in jiu-jitsu. In fact, I purposely scheduled all of my personal training clients between two and six p.m. so that I could still get in two-a-days at the academy. I probably could have made more money by setting up appointments when people were actually NOT at work, but there was only so much of my own day I was willing to sacrifice. Though I loved training people, I didn't have passion for the work. I knew I wanted to master and teach jiu-jitsu, so I wasn't going to allow my training to suffer.

For the next four years, when I wasn't working for someone else (24 Hour Fitness and a brief stint for UPS), I dedicated every spare minute to elevating my own skills and sharing everything I knew with the students. I continued to travel to Dallas to train under Carlos Machado and eventually earned my brown belt in 2002.

• • •

Once you start sharing more and giving back, it changes the way you view your purpose. This is a huge part of being a martial artist, as opposed to simply "somebody taking a martial arts class." It's also what distinguishes

an inspirational leader from a mere boss. Purpose almost always involves sharing your passion with a community. Without it, you quickly lose sight of why you were pursuing your passion in the first place.

In fact, two students I trained, Will and Brandon Lorenz, ended up helping to set me on the next path of my jiu-jitsu journey, perhaps the most transformative path of all. More specifically, it was their father, Bill Lorenz, who presented me with the kind of gift you can never repay but are forever grateful for.

I had trained Will and Brandon on and off for several years alongside Alvis. They were two of the best kids in the country, doing judo, wrestling, and jiu-jitsu and winning nearly every competition they entered. Will, the older, was quiet and controlled; Brandon was a physical and emotional firecracker. Bill really liked my teaching style, which was focused on highly technical and accurate application of the art, and appreciated the way I worked with both of them. My love and passion for jiu-jitsu always came through when I was working with his boys. And although Bill would often ask about my goals and ambitions, one day he caught me off guard.

He invited me to lunch and got blunt. "Why aren't you in Brazil, man?" he asked me without warning. Bill was a child of the '60s. He had shoulder-length white hair, always wore sandals, was a smooth guitar player, and was about as cool as they come.

The question surprised me so much I straightened up to look at him. "What do you mean?" The thought of going to Brazil had never really crossed my mind. It simply wasn't reasonable. When you've never had money, it never even occurs to you to spend time dreaming up far-fetched ideas like that one. "Move to Brazil? I don't see how I could do that."

"I'd be happy to try to make this a possibility if you're interested," he said. The restaurant crowd thinned out as the lunch hour winded down. "Think it over. I think it would be the right move for you. I see the way you work with my boys. You're a great teacher and you've got lot to offer." Will and Brandon had just finished eating, and Brandon started putting Will in a mock choke-hold. Bill laughed as he separated them. "Knock it off, buddy." Then he looked at me. "Honestly, Travis. I think Brazil is the next logical step."

It was one of those life-changing turning points, one that I completely failed to notice. In the weeks to come, I barely gave the conversation

a second thought. The fact was, at that time, my goal was to continue to work with Alvis both as an instructor and a partial business partner. My friend Jeremy Trahan introduced me to some motivational reading material. I'd been reading a lot of Tony Robbins's books, and I was really excited about the idea of becoming an entrepreneur. I had finally come up with a new plan for myself after being rejected from the Navy, and my mind was pretty set.

Until a couple of months later, that is, when Alvis and I traveled to the world championships in Brazil and did some training there. From the moment I got off the plane in Rio, I had a gut feeling that this place was pretty special. Between the tournament, the training, and the people, it was the exact opposite feeling I'd gotten when I'd been presented with the idea of going into the Army. It felt *right.*

The next time I saw him back in Houston, Bill and I were watching Brandon practice in class. "How was training in Brazil?" he asked.

"It. Was. Awesome," I said, emphasizing every word and making direct eye contact with Bill. "Really, really awesome. Really great. Just . . . awesome."

Yeah, I was at a loss for words. Now that I'd experienced it firsthand, I was desperate to get back to Brazil. But somehow I didn't want to ask Bill outright if his offer was still on the table. I guess I hoped that repeating "awesome" over and over combined with some pleading glances would be enough of a hint.

"That's good to hear," Bill said, patting my shoulder and grinning from ear to ear. "I told you you'd love it." He turned back to watching Brandon, and in the ensuing silence, broken only by the grunts of the boys on the mat, my heart sank.

"The thing of it is, Bill . . ." I started, unsure of how to ask my generous friend for help. "What I mean to say—"

"My offer still stands, you know," he said glancing back at me. "I mean, if you're thinking about going back."

In that moment, a whole new world of possibilities opened up for me. Not only was I being given the opportunity to live in Brazil and train with some of the greatest Brazilian Jiu-Jitsu fighters on the planet, but I was confident that my newly acquired skills would pave the way for me to open my own academy when I returned.

Within a few months from that turning-point conversation, I was

on the plane. And my dad had already given his blessing to use his garage to teach jiu-jitsu lessons when I got back.

Sometimes the less you know, the less you fear. I'd never left Texas for longer than two weeks, I didn't speak a word of Portuguese, I didn't know a single soul in Brazil, and I had no idea how much money it would take to live on once I got there. All I could do was work with what I'd been given and trust that this leap of faith would show me where I needed to go next.



Travis Tooke has been the master instructor and CEO of Team Tooke Mixed Martial Arts for the past fifteen years. He earned his black belt in Brazilian Jiu-Jitsu from Carlos Gracie Jr. and currently holds the rank of fourth-degree black belt. Travis has been teaching jiu-jitsu for over twenty years and has trained thousands of students, including UFC veterans Andrew Craig and Yves Edwards. He is also an active jiu-jitsu competitor.

Travis lives in Houston with his wife Ingrid, and, besides teaching and training in jiu-jitsu, he is a student of life. He loves expanding his knowledge, growing his business, traveling the world, fishing, and learning to play guitar.