

FACE! MASH!



**Kelly McCann's Essential
Self-Defense Moves for
Winning Real Street Fights**

by Robert W. Young
Photography by Thomas Sanders

Kelly McCann is one of the most experienced real-world fighters you're likely to encounter. Scratch that. If you're not part of the military special-ops community or certain other government agencies, chances are slim that you'll ever meet him, let alone pick his brain for fighting secrets since he doesn't train the public. Fortunately, you can benefit from his knowledge and experience because Black Belt has developed an ongoing relationship with him.

Here's the short version of his curriculum vitae. He is a former U.S. Marine special-missions officer responsible for counterterrorism and counter-narcotics. He now serves as president of Crucible, a firm that organizes protective details in all sorts of high-risk environments, provides security support services and trains military, government and law-enforcement operators to do whatever it takes to survive and complete their mission. He has taught combatives and other special-ops skill sets for more than 25 years. His clients include the U.S. Department of Defense, as well as various other U.S. government agencies and special-mission units. He and his team have operated and provided training in more than 30 countries.

The duties and services McCann has rendered over the years reveal his specializations in the field of fighting: the development and implementation of numerous concealed-weapons courses, combative-skills curricula and street-crime avoidance programs. He's also served as a subject-matter expert in close-quarters combat, high-risk protective services, high-risk-environment force protection tactics, and terrorist techniques and procedures. A former military and security analyst for CNN and MSNBC, he can now be seen on Fox News.

Since 1993, McCann has operated Crucible, an elite empty-hand and weapons training facility located in Fredericksburg, Virginia. (Psst ... don't bother vying for a spot in one of its high-demand courses unless you're a police officer or member of the military. They don't take civilians.)

— Editor

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What's your opinion of the material that's being taught in the civilian self-defense community?

I really don't have much to do with the civilian self-defense community, but it seems that there are far more "armchair" instructors than there are instructors who have a personal relationship with real violence. That's apparent from some of the DVDs and videos I've seen. The techniques are way too segmented, way too defensively focused — pretty impractical.

There are two problems with that. One, the armchair instructor doesn't understand how the body dysfunctions in a potentially lethal encounter or what you can expect your body to reasonably be able to do. Two, it means students who pursue self-defense from an armchair instructor often don't understand that there's not a painless way to learn because you have to be put under duress in training to do it. You have to have a technique done to you in order to feel the effectiveness, and you have to do it to others to see that you can achieve an acceptable result. There are, of course, a lot of well-intentioned teachers; they simply lack experience with violence. There are also a lot of students who see training as more of a social event.

To overcome that obstacle, must a student of self-defense seek out a teacher who has firsthand experience with violence, or is it sufficient to study under a teacher who's studied under someone who's experienced it?

You can learn from someone who's been properly trained but who doesn't have firsthand experience. It's critical that your instructor understands what the physiological effects of imminent danger are and how those effects diminish response ability, as well as how street violence occurs. The problem is, in the martial arts, a student usually has a subordinate position with respect to his instructor, and the student should never question the instructor. You can't ask, "Who are you and why should I listen to you?" Unfortunately, there are a lot of charlatans who can look the part

to a newbie.

The second part of the solution is for the student to personally embark on a journey to understand what real violence is, how quickly it happens and under what conditions — including how a human being reacts under duress. There's a ton of literature about what you can and can't do when you suffer tunnel vision, auditory exclusion and physical dysfunctions.

After that, the student needs to find an instructor who will put him in those positions in training so he has to defend himself under duress — using sensory overloading, stressors, etc. Then the student will learn whether he really needs a right-hand technique, a left-hand technique and a two-hand technique — or just one technique that handles all those variables, which is what we believe. Choice reaction time should be minimized to increase the likelihood of success on the street.

What aspect of civilian self-defense needs more emphasis?

You need to learn equally about when you'll be expected to fight and how you'll be expected to fight. You might be able to do a certain technique every time in a safe environment — and then completely fail on the street in an unfamiliar environment [because you're] under duress and in a compressed time cycle.

Is too much time spent on empty-hand self-defense and not enough on weapons defense?

There's a liability issue related to that choice for instructors who deal routinely with the public, and rightfully so. In our litigious society, people might be able to come back on an instructor who reasonably and accurately taught techniques before putting the responsibility on the student to perfect those techniques and judge when to use them. A guy learns how to take away a weapon on Thursday and then tries to do it on Sunday outside a restaurant during a street robbery and gets shot. Now he's crippled. He's suing his instructor. That's not a concern for the



IMMINENT ATTACK: Kelly McCann (left) assumes a nonthreatening guard position when he is confronted by a threatening stranger (1). He visualizes striking the assailant before the man can attack him, then executes a stop-hit face mash as soon as he detects increased physical aggression (2). To create the correct hand shape, McCann orients his fingers as if he's holding a softball. The movement is executed by vaulting forward off the rear foot, thus propelling the hand into the opponent's face. McCann doesn't step forward and pull his weight, nor does he strike with his arm. Rather, he uses his whole body for power.



ONE-HAND GRAB: The assailant grasps Kelly McCann's shirt and begins pushing him backward (1). As soon as his intent to punch is clear, McCann attacks the gripping appendage with a hand hook; he doesn't grab it (2). He then pivots on his right foot and violently moves his shoulder and hip rearward around the pivot point, jerking the man forward and disrupting his balance. At the same time, he strikes downward into the crook of his arm. The explosive blow relies on off-balancing, pain avoidance and pressure to put the thug on the ground—all while McCann maintains the hand hook (3). As the opponent falls, McCann continues to "open the gate" by pivoting out of the way as he moves his striking hand to support his gripping hand (4). Without bending down, McCann extends the trapped limb and uses the inside of his thigh to hyperextend the elbow while keeping his weight on the knee that's trapping the man's head. Meanwhile, he collapses his right knee against the assailant's back as he chambers his right hand for a strike (5). McCann then unleashes blows as necessary without aiming for specific targets (6). Face strikes are avoided because they would require him to bend too far forward and thus risk being pulled down.

students we train because they know they're far more likely to face those eventualities and have accepted the inherent risks involved in their jobs. It behooves them to get proficient at weapons techniques.

Is that why military instructors readily teach soldiers how to disarm a gunman, while most civilian instructors say, "Just give him your wallet"?

Yes, and by the way, you should give him your wallet. If the soldier is on leave and confronted by [an armed assailant who wants] his wallet, he should give it up, too! Your wallet, your watch — no material possession is worth dying for. The problem is when the potentially violent encounter becomes about something else and your life is in danger. In our clients' world of work, the situations in which they would disarm someone have nothing to do with a robbery and everything to do with duty responsibility; that responsibility doesn't [apply] to the public.

What kind of weapons should martial artists carry for self-defense, and what should they have at home?

The legal ones. Make sure you meet all your state's legal requirements before getting or carrying a weapon. OC gas (pepper spray) is great to carry because it's a distance weapon. You can use it early in an altercation, before you even make contact with the assailant, and not a lot of technique is required. When it's legal, an expandable baton is also great because it gives you distance. It's basically a stick, and everybody can use a stick with some degree of success.

In states where the expandable baton is illegal, like California, is there a legal option that's just as good?

The pocket stick — also known as the *yawara* or *kubotan* — is good if you have the skills to use it, but it's not quite as effective as the expandable baton because you have to close with your attacker. Knives are certainly good — if you've got the guts to use one. A sharp instrument is a great weapon; trouble is, its use is generally viewed as felonious. If you ever use a knife in self-defense, you'll probably get killed in court. The opposing attorneys will undoubtedly say a higher standard applies because you've been trained and that you should have tried to ... blah, blah, blah. That's why OC gas and pocket sticks are better weapons for those who know how to use them.

What about in the home? Are guns the answer?

Yes, and dogs. At home, you want layered security. You want to affect the thinking — the decision-making process and victim selection — of anyone who may be looking at breaking in. You want to make him think you're a hard target. For the first layer, you should have good lights around your house and good locks. If someone breaks in, the second layer is a dog. For the third layer, OC gas and maybe a gun — with the caveat that you have to be properly trained in combative shooting while under duress. A gun is good only if you'll use it and know when to use it. You also need to consider who else is in the home, who has access to the gun, and what safety measures need to be in place to protect it from theft and/or unauthorized use by a child.

The thing with guns is, a person may be a good shot, but that doesn't matter if he second-guesses himself right up to the last minute and doesn't shoot until it's too late. For that kind of

person, OC gas is a better option.

What's the value of improvised weapons? How can a person train to use them?

An improvised weapon is a mentality, not a tool. In other words, if you have the improvisational mentality, it doesn't matter what's at hand. You can use a pen to stab. You can fold a credit card and use it to cut a guy's face. You can grab a soda can and rip it in half — and you'll have two knives. Even a videocassette, slung into a guy's throat, can be more effective, and quicker, than an empty-hand technique.

How do you teach that mentality?

You show your students how it's done by using a lot of examples, after which you teach the principles: how to create leverage, how to inflict pain, how to cut, how to see the "weapon" attributes in ordinary things.

What are the best martial arts for students interested in reality-based self-defense?

The Philippine arts are one of the best choices because they're just so dirty — in a good way — and utilitarian, and they're great for developing hand speed. When it comes to striking, *krav maga* has come a long way. It used to be just bad *jujitsu* — if you look at the book *Fighting Fit* by Col. David Ben-Asher of the Israeli Defense Force, you can see that — but it's evolved into a very good striking system.

Did krav maga evolve here or in Israel?

It evolved here. It's remarkable. I was a krav maga member in the early '80s because I wanted to see what it was about. I wasn't that impressed. Now it's a fierce striking art. I also like some of the karate styles that are short on philosophy and religion and long on strength, power and short, linear movements. Same with some of the Korean styles that focus on power strikes. Actually, any martial art that's boiled down to its essentials will do. Unfortunately, instructors feel compelled to make their students think their particular style or "way" is best — all of it — but the truth is that if you boil down any style, you'll have very similar techniques that really work.

Do the styles that are generally considered most applicable to the mixed martial arts — *muay Thai*, boxing and Brazilian jiu-jitsu — also work for reality-based self-defense?

Thai boxing is fantastic because it teaches knees, elbows and all that good stuff. Jiu-jitsu is super for conditioning, fosters a good, tough mentality and teaches you how to roll. Boxing is good for hand speed and hand techniques — a straight jab is still one of the toughest things to counter.

The departure is that we teach combatives only as a means to get to a weapon. On the street in Bosnia, Somalia, Kosovo or Baghdad against a huge guy who could pound my head flat, would I try to take him down and use a martial arts technique? No. If he meant to kill me, or in my judgment could or might kill me, I'd use my empty-hand skills to hold him off until I could get to my knife. He might take me down and try to hit me, but my right hand is going to be pulling that knife out of my pocket, and if I have to, I'm going to gut him like a fish to save my life. That's

the difference: The goal in combatives isn't to use a technique; it's to win.

Of course, you need the moral authority to use that much physical force, and that comes from being avoidant. As a nonduty-bound civilian, you should fight only when you have no other choice. You have to lawfully adhere to the force continuum and can use the upper end of the force continuum — extreme force — only when you believe your life is in jeopardy.

In the firearms community, it's often said that you should use your handgun to get to your rifle. Is it like that with respect to using your empty-hand skills to get to your weapon?

Absolutely. That's the role of combatives as we teach them. Getting to your weapon may not be the only thing you do once you have control of a situation, but you do want some type of weapon in your hand — whether it's OC gas or whatever. It just makes sense to have something that gives you an advantage.

There's no equality in a fight. In Iraq, there was an incident during the initial invasion in which a tank commander believed he saw the flash of an optic — a sniper scope or anti-tank weapon — indicating he was about to be shot. He shot at the flash and coincidentally killed a reporter who was also in the hotel. There was controversy in the media over whether the tank commander should have used his main gun on the shooter in the hotel. Of



IMPACT WEAPON: Kelly McCann (left) faces Jack Stradley in the guard position (1). Because a bludgeon becomes increasingly dangerous as you move away from it, McCann opts to vault inside the arc of the weapon so he can neutralize it without having to control it (2). Attacking with his whole body, McCann indexes his right hand on the back of his head, resulting in a spearing elbow that's driven into the man's sternum or any nearby body part. The spearing elbow transitions into an ax hand that "hacks" the head/neck/face without being pulled back to chamber. McCann's left arm drops to the outside of the weapon arm and locks onto it by gripping it above the elbow. Next, the right hand hooks the man's neck (3) and yanks him down into a rising knee strike (4). McCann fixes his eyes on the body part that his final strike will hit: the back of the man's head/neck. As his foot drops to the ground, he pivots to generate power with his whole body, culminating in a slashing elbow to the back of the attacker's head (5). He finishes by stomping on a joint—preferably the elbow, knee or ankle—to immobilize the assailant (6).

5 Essential Strikes for Reality-Based Self-Defense

- **Hammerfist** It's powerful, it's a gross-motor movement and you can quickly fire off one shot after another.
- **Face Mash** Using your palm to hit your opponent in the face while you throw your bodyweight into it is very effective. If he can't see you, he can't hurt you. The goal is to hit him in the face and slam his head back. As his head moves backward, you'll likely have one or two fingers impact an eye.
- **Ax Hand** It's another gross-motor movement. It's a little more involved because you have to know how to hit and how to chamber. You make the impact with any part of your arm from your elbow to the tip of your little finger. It's a linear technique, so you're intersecting your target, not trying to hit it like you do with a punch. That increases your chance of success.
- **Shin Kick** In combatives, this has a different meaning than it does in Thai boxing. For us, a shin kick uses the instep of the boot to hit the guy's shin. The effect can be overwhelming. The Thai kick that uses the shin to strike the nerve in the thigh is great, but a lot of people can't articulate their hips enough to get the angle and power. You have to come outside, then downward and across as you step across in order to drag your weight through. You can't just snap the kick out.
- **Spearing Elbow** The forward elbow strike is very effective. Any elbow strike is, actually.

Note that I left out the chin jab. The problem is, it's so potentially damaging that if it becomes something you rely on, you'll eventually hurt someone terribly.

—Kelly McCann



course he should have. Shoot a bullet at me and I'll shoot artillery back at you. When your life is on the line, it's about winning. It's the same thing if someone tries to take my life outside my office. I didn't start it, so at that moment, there's no fairness or equality. I'm not trying to fight him on equal footing or fight *with* him; I'm trying to beat him as quickly as possible so I can walk away.

You must hate all the martial arts movies in which the armed hero finds himself facing an unarmed bad guy, then throws his weapon away so they can fight on equal terms.

Of course. I also hate movies in which a guy takes a slashing elbow strike across the jaw or a devastating punch to the head and keeps fighting. Movies show a lot of inaccurate things related to fighting, and they adversely affect how people shape their perception of reality on the street. There are many myths about dropping your hands, what your attacker's off hand is doing, the speed of retracting hands and one-shot stops, but in reality there are no absolutes. Any martial arts instructor who says, "If A, you do B and then C," is not being honest.

That way of thinking has prompted some martial artists to adopt a philosophy that holds, "I'm going to fight fair as long as my opponent does. If he starts to fight dirty, then I'll go for his groin or eyes."

My old man used to tell me, "The only dirty fight is the one you lose." There's no such thing as dirty fighting; there's only fighting. You fight to win. And the only way you can say that is if you have a strong moral compass, if you're ethical, if you're avoidant. Anyone who naively thinks he's going to fight an enemy or criminal or anyone who truly means him harm "fairly" is going to end up an oil stain.

Is there any connection between reality-based self-defense and the mixed martial arts?

Oh, yeah. I hope MMA becomes an Olympic sport. These guys are unbelievably skilled, the best in the world. MMA is out of the spectacle stage now; it's a true martial art. But not all of it applies to self-defense.

It's like in shooting. Does IPSC or IDPA shooting have anything to do with shooting a person in self-defense in Baghdad or Kabul? Functionally, yes, but there's a whole understanding of context you've got to add to it in order to benefit from training for competition. The same is true of MMA.

Technically and functionally, these guys are world-class athletes, and you should watch them and learn from them. But you need to analyze what you see: Is a technique used in the ring something you're going to pull out of your [butt] in Mauritania and use in a fight? Maybe not because the condition of the fight is going to be completely different. Under the conditions we train for, it's more about serious injury, abduction or murder — not prize money. You may be a great [grappler] until you strap on your Level-IV armor, your combat load of 180 rounds of M-4 ammo, your day pack, your blow-out med kit, your drop-leg holster and so on. Are you really going to roll around on the ground with all that gear on? Will your strikes look the same? Hell, just wearing concealed armor and a concealed pistol changes everything. As an example, not only do we train students how to defeat the mount, but we also teach them how to draw and use their pistol, expandable baton and knife from the mounted position. The mindset is completely different from normal civilian training.

If you go back to Bruce Lee and *jeet kune do*, it's all about attributes. I rely a lot on speed. I'm fast, and I can couple that with movements that generate power. I weigh only 159 pounds, but I can do things that a 250-pound guy might not be able to. Similarly, that 250 pounder is going to be more powerful than I am, so it's unlikely I can rely on strength. So I never say, "You have to do exactly what I do." That's ridiculous. Bruce Lee had it right when he threw out all the stuff that was meaningless and boiled it down to "less is more." He accepted that there are different body types and ways of thinking.

People who don't do that are part of what's wrong with combatives. There are traditionalists who learn World War II combatives verbatim, and then there

are guys like me who believe in some of it but who also believe in the Philippine martial arts and jiu-jitsu — in an eclectic mix.

It's simply not about "My *sensei* can beat your *sensei*," or "Your Korean style isn't as strong as my Chinese style." None of that matters. In the end, the only thing that matters is that you believe you're training hard and the right way and that you're

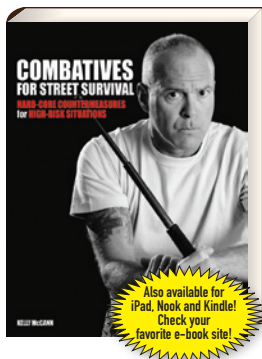
capable to a standard acceptable to you. It is, after all, your life. No one can say empirically that this is more devastating than that or make outrageous claims about whatever it is they teach. But if I'm going to deploy with you and your physical ability may directly affect my safety just as mine does yours, then we've got to talk. Otherwise, we don't have to agree. ✂



AGAINST THE WALL: The opponent pins Kelly McCann and holds a gun to his head (1). In response, McCann passively turns his palms outward without raising his arms, which could be viewed as a sign of aggression. His action places his hands close to the pistol without telegraphing his intent. McCann explosively turns to his right and sweeps the muzzle into his outstretched right hand (2). At the same time, he moves his head away, doubling the distance between it and the muzzle. Keeping his body clear of the muzzle, he holds the attacker's wrist stationary while rotating the gun inside his hand (3). No one's grip is strong enough to prevent the technique from working. Note that McCann doesn't try to manipulate the man's wrist. Next, he rips the weapon rearward and out of the attacker's disrupted grip before executing a face mash, which knocks him backward and to the ground (4). **Warning:** Don't attempt a gun disarm unless you've had extensive instruction and can consistently achieve the desired result.

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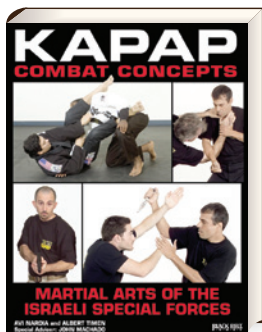
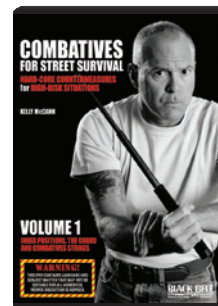
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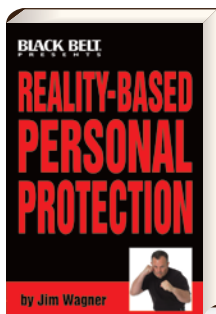
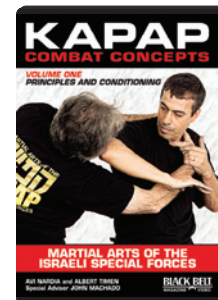
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