

Jiu-jitsu helps him grapple with business
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He came to martial arts for exercise. He found benefits beyond the physical.

Russell Redenbaugh's philosophy of life boils down to a fundamental choice:
"You can either be the designer of your life," he
says, "or the captive of circumstances."

Notice that he uses the word captive, not victim, of circumstances. Victim is not part of Redenbaugh's working vocabulary. It's a word that implies passivity, helplessness, being at the mercy of others and the vagaries of fortune.

Redenbaugh is a can-do, take-charge type of guy. He believes in making the future happen, in being the captain of his own fate, the master of his own destiny.

No one is exempt from accidents and bad luck, of course -- Redenbaugh included. What distinguishes superior people is how they confront and conquer adversity.

Redenbaugh was 17. He was in his garage building a model rocket, mixing chemicals together to make the most powerful propellant.

Boom! The rocket exploded in his face. Shrapnel peppered his body like a close-range shotgun blast. He lost both eyes and most of his fingers. By the time he got to the hospital, he had shed eight pints of blood. It took months to repair the damage so he could function. To grow skin on his hands, doctors sewed them temporarily to his stomach.

Redenbaugh had goals beyond recovery. Before the accident, he had planned to go to college. Those plans did not change. He went to the University of Utah, where he majored in finance and finished third in his class. Then he applied to some of the best graduate schools in the country. Harvard and Stanford weren't interested, but Penn was, and Redenbaugh came to Philadelphia to study business at the Wharton School.

He must have learned well. Today, Redenbaugh, 52, who lives in Society Hill, is a multimillionaire. He works for the Center City investment firm of Cooke & Bieler. He also runs his own consulting company, which specializes in supporting small, high-growth companies and helping them go public. The name of the company is Kairos, which is Greek for "moment of opportunity."

Redenbaugh gives a lecture at Wharton titled "Money, Wealth and Wisdom." Part of his wisdom is the importance of living in every dimension, participating in many arenas, applying yourself in a variety of endeavors -- family, work, play, sports, community, politics, service, society at large. He is married and the father of four children, ages 8 to 18. He is a member of the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights. Recently, Associated Services for the Blind gave him its Louis Braille Award for outstanding individual achievement.

Much of this information comes from friends and fans. Or it has to be teased out of Redenbaugh in modest, laconic bits. He does not wear his resume on his chest. But he becomes voluble and expansive when the subject is exercise, and what it does for the body and mind, and how rolling around on the mat has made him a better businessman.

In keeping with his philosophy of developing every aspect of the self, Redenbaugh began strength-training and lifting weights about 10 years ago at Maxercise, a fitness club in Center City. As it happens, Maxercise is also the site of the Gracie Jiu-Jitsu Academy. About three years ago, Steve Maxwell, the academy's director, began urging Redenbaugh to give it a try. Redenbaugh stalled. Maxwell kept pestering. Finally, says Redenbaugh, "I just ran out of excuses."

Truth to tell, he was looking for a form of exercise that would also be fun. "Jogging is really boring and swimming is worse," says Redenbaugh. "And racket sports, for obvious reasons, were out of the question."

Gracie jiu-jitsu was just the ticket. Some call it stylized street fighting, or graceful mayhem. It's a no-holds-barred martial art that has been perfected by several generations of the Gracie family of Brazil. These are folks you don't want to tangle with. They routinely win Ultimate Fighting championships, vanquishing and humbling all manner of boxers, wrestlers and black belts in judo and karate. Wiry and comparatively small, the Gracies topple beefy giants they seemingly have no business tussling with. Their secret? Canny application and exploitation of technique.

"Wrestling is 50 percent strength, power and speed," says Maxwell, 45, who once wrestled for West Chester State (and has the cauliflower ears to prove it). "Jiu-jitsu is 10 percent conditioning and 90 percent technique."

The other day, Redenbaugh was at the gym working up a sweat on the mat with one of his regular sparring partners, Charles Williams, 34, a senior student and assistant instructor. They executed a series of dramatic, almost balletic moves, tumbling, rolling, flipping, wrapping each other up with various arm and leg locks and choke holds (and quickly tapping or slapping each other to signal release, lest someone black out).

The aim of Gracie jiu-jitsu is to move the fight, and your opponent, to the ground, which neutralizes weight and height advantages. "It doesn't take a lot of brute strength," says Maxwell. To make that point, he enlisted his son, Zak, 8, who amazed me and several other onlookers by flipping Williams, a linebacker-sized adult, as if Williams were a schoolyard featherweight.

Often, when beefy toughs show up at the academy, eager to assert their manhood, Maxwell assigns a student named "Little Tony" to administer what he calls a "skills assessment." Within minutes, Little Tony, who weighs all of 140 pounds, has them crawling off the mat exhausted, or begging for mercy.

In Gracie jiu-jitsu, the worst thing you can do is turn your back to an opponent. Reason: You're exposing your neck to one of 21 different choke holds. (Zak tried a couple on me; believe me, they work -- fast).

The beauty of Gracie jiu-jitsu, say disciples, is that it's potentially both very humane and very lethal. "You can go from zero to 100 in one second," says Maxwell. "You don't have to hurt the guy. You can put him to sleep with a choke hold and keep him on the ground for the police, with zero damage." Or, you can send him a message by breaking an arm or leg. Or, depending on your mood and just how obnoxious your assailant is, you can swiftly dispatch him to kingdom come.

Gracie jiu-jitsu comes in two varieties: the sporting, gentlemanly version, decided by points, and the vicious, fight-to-the-finish, street-thug version, decided by carnage. Redenbaugh, who comports himself in pinstripes, prefers the former. He practices for an hour or two three times a week. He has participated in several tournaments and won a tournament match. He has passed out from a choke hold and broken his leg. Yes, it's sweaty, it's bloody, it's brutal, and he loves it.

"It's a great sport," he says. "You can get totally exhausted in an hour. It's very strategic, kind of like a chess game. There are a lot of feints and setups. You move one way and catch your opponent moving the other. You need to be skillful in setting and detecting traps."

His blindness, says Redenbaugh, is "not much of a disadvantage."

"Since it's a grappling sport, you're in contact with your opponent most of the time," he says. "It helps to be good at reading and anticipating body movements, and being blind, I'm already well trained for that. More important are your hands and stamina."

Redenbaugh's hands are hardly normal; he's missing two fingers on one, and has only a thumb on the other. Characteristically, he shrugs it off, focusing on his assets. "I have bony forearms -- that's a big advantage," says Redenbaugh, whipper thin at 6 feet tall and 160 pounds. "I'm long, lean and flexible, so I have lots of mechanical advantages."

Redenbaugh didn't take up jiu-jitsu for self-defense, but he's pleased with the psychic side-effects.

"I do feel more secure. It's definitely changed my comfort level on the street, the way I walk and hold myself and move about in the world. I have a sense of assurance I didn't have before.

"It's very good training for business. I think it's made me more skillful -- not more bold, but better able to use strategy, to be patient and calm. It takes a lot of calm to be in a tournament match, and you can bring that sense of calm to other parts of your life.

"The martial arts -- this one in particular -- are very good for people interested in leadership roles in business and government, because they train you to stand your ground, to center yourself, to resist the temptation to be careless, impatient and overly aggressive."

After the jiu-jitsu demonstration, after Redenbaugh had showered and changed and was walking to the door with Luke, his yellow Lab guide dog, Maxwell pulled me aside.

"This guy is amazing, and the more I learn about him, the more amazing he is. He's an inspiration to us all. You see blind guys on the corner selling pencils, and then here's Russ, this self-made millionaire. What's with this guy? What's the difference?"

I know. It has to do with Redenbaugh's philosophy, spelled out at the top of this column, and something else he told me:

"When people say, 'I can't do it' -- and it can be jiu-jitsu or anything else -- they're wrong. They can, it's just that they don't or won't. Most of my accomplishments wouldn't have happened if I thought like that.

"My recommendation is: Be honest; make the shift from can't to won't. Instead of saying to yourself, 'I can't do it,' tell yourself, 'I know I can't do it, but if I could, how would I do it?'

"That subtle shift will make a huge difference in anything you do."

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