

By Trevor Sivester



Sifu Benno Westra

Practical Role 'Model' for Modern Martial Artists

Sifu Benno Westra is a Dutch ex-special forces Soldier, who managed to travel the world pursuing excellence in martial arts by working as a model. For a long time he's been a creative presence in Wing Chun, and his training with Sifu Wan Kam Leung has led him to become Europe's main representative of Practical Wing Chun, the style of this legendary Hong Kong practitioner, who trained with Bruce Lee. I recently had a chance to train with him at a seminar he ran courtesy of his only instructor in the UK, Ross Sargent, at his friendly club, Cambridge Kung Fu.

You have an extensive background in martial arts, beginning with Tae Kwon Do, continuing with full contact Karate and Aikido. What is it about Wing Chun that attracted you beyond what these other approaches have to offer?

BENNO WESTRA: The problem with the other martial arts I'd been doing, was that it was always the physically strongest person who was the best in class. One day I went to a Wing Chun seminar and saw a really good, small, Korean guy beating guys who were bigger than him. And that's what triggered me, because I was working the door and whenever trouble started I'd always hear "I'll take the small one - and that was me!" I was always fighting my ass off against people who thought I'd be easier because I was smaller. Whenever you're on the street and there is any trouble it's always people who are bigger than you; I've never been attacked by a midget!

So Wing Chun was sold to me on the basis that it was developed by a woman, which I'm not sure I believe, but I understand the metaphor.

That you should assume your opponent is stronger?

BENNO WESTRA: Right.

And you've been on a journey within Wing Chun, moving through several systems. I notice that you put great emphasis on angles in your training, both in relation to your opponent and of your limbs. Is that general in Wing Chun or something particular to you?

BENNO WESTRA: Well, I started off in the Leung Ting system and what I found was that, although I liked the system, if I got in trouble on the street, I went back to my full contact experience, I didn't use my Wing Chun. I didn't feel comfortable with it and I thought there were too many holes. So when I moved away from the guy who I trained with I took the liberty of changing some of the forms, movements and how I punched. For example, the principle of stepping with your full weight on your back leg. On the street you will not do that because it restricts your mobility, so I changed it to something more balanced. To

support my ideas I started looking at other Wing Chun styles. I gained extensive experience training in the Wong Shun Leung system with Sifu David Peterson, who is a good friend of mine and a real icon within that system. Certain things, such as keeping centre and the emphasis on angles attracted me but it was too narrow, in my opinion, for street application. So I integrated what I felt was useful into my system and got in contact with Sifu Wong Nim Yi of the Mai Gai Wong system, one of the real Kung Fu masters from China. He impressed me again with his chi and physical side of his Wing Chun. His training regime was amazingly tough. It's a fantasy that out of nothing you can learn how to absorb the force and be soft, you have to be fit in order to do that.

You have to be strong to be soft ?

BENNO WESTRA: Yes. So in his training, if he gave a seminar, you got two hours of warm-up! So I liked that emphasis, but you know with somethings you get a click? I didn't get that, so I took what I could use and developed my own system, which I called Jing Wu Yong Chun Quan. I put stuff in it from my Aikido background, my ground fighting (Brazilian Jiu Jitsu), stuff from Escrima, other Wing Chun styles and full contact Karate. So, ironically, while it began as a system for the weak to defend themselves on the street, it went full circle, where again it was the guy who was the fittest and strongest who won again. For a mixed system that works in the ring I think it's pretty good, but for on the street I still wasn't satisfied.

So your system is a hybrid?

BENNO WESTRA: Yes, my system is a hybrid system.

In that sense similar to what Bruce Lee was trying to achieve with JKD in bringing things from other systems and not getting stuck in one style.

BENNO WESTRA: That's right.

What's your ambition with this, World domination?



BENNO WESTRA: (Laughs) No. You see, I was criticised by some people for being arrogant enough to develop my own system, but I thought, well this has been going on for ages with the families developing their own styles, so why not? I really thought that I could develop a system that would be the best stand-up system in the world. But until the moment I met my Sifu in Hong Kong, Wan Kam Leung, I thought, man, this will take me a life time. When I met him though, I thought it was the best Wing Chun in the World, I'd finally found what it was all about. He's 65 years old, and his approach shared some similarities with what I was doing, but, for example, he refuses to go to the ground in a fight. He says it's not a good place to be, and he uses the Wing Chun weapons rather than my Escrima. With him the system is pure, it borrows nothing from other approaches, and what was most significant to me was that his system is really practical. Everything he did really worked on the street - so everything that I was looking for, he'd already thought of!

So your hybrid morphed into his Wing Chun?

BENNO WESTRA: Well, actually no. I want to get to be as good as I can be in the Practical Wing Chun of my Sifu, but at the same time, for people who like sparring, or who maybe want to go into MMA, I still teach my system. The difference is that in my system we add a lot of ground fighting, sparring, knife fighting and stick fighting, but the forms are the same in both systems. I also teach the system as taught by my Sifu for people who are interested in Wing Chun only.



On a personal level, you've been learning martial arts since you were 15. I work as a sports mind coach with a range of sports people and one of the key things is helping them stay motivated. I find it's often not the person with the most talent who ends up winning, but the person who turns up most consistently. How do you maintain your motivation?

BENNO WESTRA: I'm probably one of those people who has that virus whereby I can't sleep or eat without Wing Chun. One of the guys who teaches for me in Spain, when he first met my girlfriend, leant over the table and said, "So you're happy with being in second place?" She said, "What do you mean? And he said "Don't tell me he didn't tell you that you can have a relationship with him, but the thing that will be number one will always be martial arts training." And she said, "Yes he did tell me, but I thought he was joking." He said, "Do you think he's joking now?" and she said "No, because if I had to choose, Wing Chun would win". That may not be a good thing (Sifu looks at Ross's wife Laura and laughs) but...

Very sensibly Ross is keeping quiet.

BENNO WESTRA: I think you can only be as good as you can be if you completely focus on it. I'm already splitting my energy between different martial arts, which annoys me a little bit, but in Europe there is much more a cultural thing for fighting on the ground, whereas in my Sifu's culture they don't go in for that so much, so it's right that I offer the purity of his approach, and the additional choices of my system, but splitting my focus is sometimes frustrating for me.

You said that the practicality of his style of Wing Chun attracted you, and it was the same with me. I do kickboxing as well, but on the street it has limited practical application beyond the punching skills, because how high can you kick in jeans? And you don't have gloves to block with. I love the intelligence of Wing Chun, and its directness.

BENNO WESTRA: That was also something that triggers me. When I started with Tae Kwon Do I was attracted to the forms, and was national champion several times doing forms. I like the precision, the details. It's nice to have a puzzle and figure how to put it together.

So in a sense you see a fight as a puzzle?

BENNO WESTRA: The fight itself is not so much of a puzzle to me. It used to be a test, when I'd fight on the street, but I often found that I didn't use my training in Tae Kwon Do, or whatever. I'd trick them - "hey man what's that over there?" and sucker punch them. I've almost never had a fight that started with people squaring up to each other.

So the answer to the puzzle is in the preparation?

BENNO WESTRA: Yes the puzzle is in the body mechanics and kind of how to know when someone really wants to hit you, the body language. To me the fight itself is no longer interesting, it's almost boring. I had a period when people would come from different schools and I would have the feeling that they were going to test me and I would be a bit nervous about getting it right. But now when they come, even if they're World champions, it's boring to me because I know what they're doing. And, if you have

trust in the forms and the theory, it really is boring. I don't mean to be arrogant, but the fight takes care of itself.

In my coaching I talk about 'getting out of your own way'. That by training yourself well you can leave your unconscious to do the fighting, or run the race, or hit the shot, and leave you as a kind of spectator to your body's choices. Is that the kind of thing you mean?

BENNO WESTRA: Yes, you have to let the Wing Chun flow.

So with people just starting out, what kind of advice would you give them about Wing Chun?

BENNO WESTRA: Give it time, you have to give it time.

How long would you say it would take for someone to have a level of knowledge that would translate to something helpful in a street situation, with an average amount of effort?

BENNO WESTRA: Well we have something in the syllabus which we call conflict strategy and tactics. It's a self-defence method where we apply Wing Chun techniques

and angles, but it's very simple to learn, a little like Krav Maga. No disrespect to that system, but both teach a few basic responses to set situations. That can be learnt quite quickly, but it's a little like elementary school; sooner or later you want to move up and learn more.

And the level that's 'up' is Wing Chun?

BENNO WESTRA: Yes, and also Aikido or Ba Gua, and maybe one or two others. They're very good systems, but not easy to learn.

I agree, I felt the Aikido training I was given when I was in the police was useless. In the time we were given - probably less than 12 hours, we had no chance of gaining enough expertise to make it useable on the street. Do you think Aikido could be compressed, to make it useful more quickly?

BENNO WESTRA: I think it's like Wing Chun, it can't be learnt in a short space of time, it's just not possible. But I do think they could change the teaching system a little and adapt like we have, and it could then be more accessible.



Everything I have done with Wing Chun has been to make it more applicable to the street, and the forms I learnt from my Sifu reflect that. It's so logical and uncomplicated; it flows.

When I first met Ross for some private lessons I said to him that I didn't want him to teach me Wing Chun, just some of the aspects of it - like Chi Sao and trapping techniques, to extend the options I had from what the kickboxing I do provides me. But by the end of the first lesson he'd shown me some very cool stuff and I said to him, forget what I said, start me at the beginning, because it all made so much sense. It strikes me as a really intelligent system.

BENNO WESTRA: It is really important to start from the beginning, because it's built up in such a brilliant way.

Which kind of goes against the way things are in the 21st century, where everyone wants everything instantly - you know, the 'make me a black belt in a year' mentality.

BENNO WESTRA: Indeed. In Practical Wing Chun we require possibly three times as many applications of a form to grade as other Wing Chun systems. You can't hurry expertise.

And it's important that there's no b*£&%!t. Some schools seem to suggest there is a hidden level of knowledge that the instructor's won't show you. You can ask me anything, and I'll show you what I've learned.

So Ross, turning to you for a second, where do you want your club to be in five years?

ROSS SARGENT: Well, I'm really excited to be training with Sifu Benno and being the first person in this country to be teaching Sifu Wan Kam Leung's style of Practical Wing Chun. I'm looking forward to promoting it and showing people how excellent it is. I've been practising Wing Chun for fourteen years, and training in his style for just one year has transformed my understanding.

(Trevor) I've been really impressed since joining your club with the friendly, relaxed atmosphere you and the guys create; there's barely a whiff of testosterone - and the work you do with kids is great.

ROSS SARGENT: The children are really important. If we can help them get confidence in themselves it can really help them in life - and a lot of that comes from having a connected relationship with your body and unconscious mind. Martial arts is a great way of learning to trust your body, and through consistent training, children lose fear. And we teach them a range of martial arts, rather than immerse them in just one from the beginning, with the aim of giving them an education in Martial Arts, helping them to keep an open mind, whilst learning fundamentals like balance and coordination, and of course always including the magic ingredient... Fun!

(Trevor) That's great, thanks to you both for an excellent days training.

For news on further seminars with Sifu Benno Westra, Sifu Wan Kam Leung or Ross Sargent, go to <http://www.cambridgekungfu.com/>

About the author

Trevor Silvester is the founder of the Quest Institute which specialises in Cognitive Hypnotherapy and NLP and is one of the largest and most successful hypnotherapy training institutions in the UK. His work with clients includes helping sports people improve their performance using mind body techniques, and is part of the Team Perfect sports network ([www. http://www.qntuk.com/team](http://www.qntuk.com/team)) A published author and popular speaker, Trevor also runs a private practice in Harley Street, London. To order Trevor's books and audio downloads, or to find out more about training with Quest, visit www.questinstitute.co.uk

For more information about seeing Trevor, visit www.trevorsilvester.com

