

To Dear John

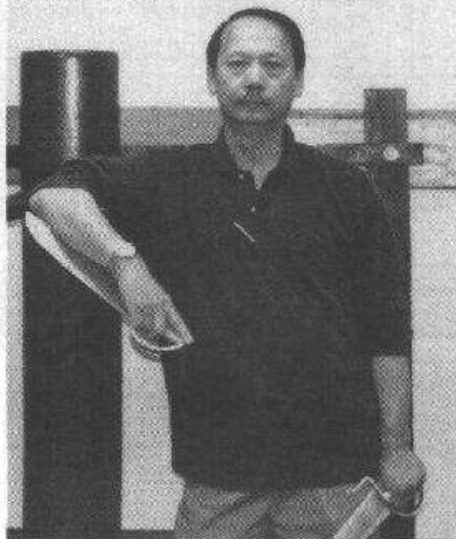
Debriefing Duncan Leung

*From
Sifu Shiu-Hung Leung*

Wing chun's controversial "dark genius" talks about Yip Man, Bruce Lee and what's wrong with his art.

BY HERB BORKLAND

Duncan Leung



Duncan Leung with four of his top students.

"I remember very well the first two times I fought someone with a knife in his hand. Instead of running away as before, I also pulled out a knife.

"I could feel my whole body freeze. My arms and legs suddenly felt so weak that, if my opponent twitched, my heart would try to jump out of my chest.

"I kept thinking: 'How sharp is his blade?...What would it be like if I got cut?' My mouth was dry, very dry. I could see that his eyes were also full of fear..."

—From the "Introduction" to Duncan Leung's knifefighting manual, available only to soldiers and police.

Duncan Leung is serious. He doesn't smile, he's not kidding.

Today he's a slightly-built, 52-year-old smoker, with a receding hairline and graying moustache. Not young, not superman, but even so he is commanding.

Part of it's the deep voice—he sounds like Yul Brynner—and part of it's in his gaze. When he looks at you, you feel that sifu Leung is taking your measure...against giants.

FLASHBACK—Hong Kong 1956. Fifteen-year-old Duncan Shiu-Hung Leung is outside running on his balcony.

Bruce Lee turns up in the street below. He yells: "I got something new to show you."

Duncan likes Bruce. His cousin, who's a film

actress, introduced them. It turns out, these two guys have a common interest: winning street-fights.

So Bruce joins Duncan on the balcony, to show off this fresh move. Duncan's not too worried; he's handled Bruce's stuff before. They start sparring...

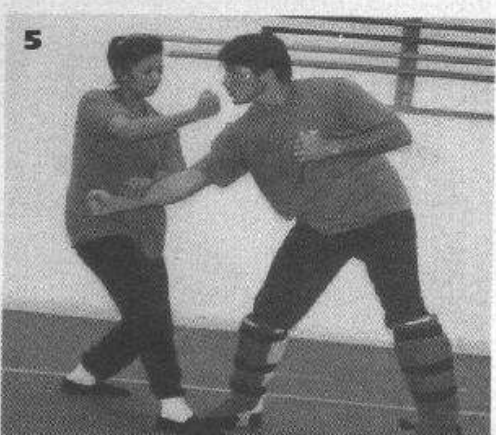
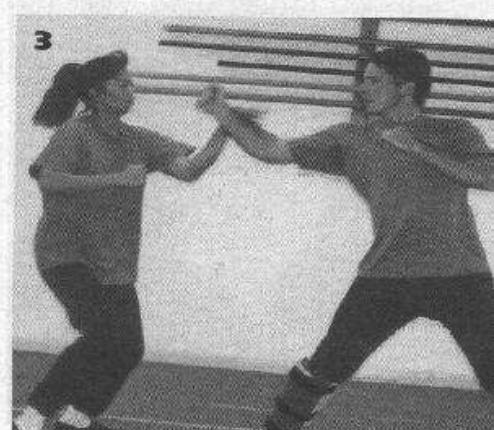
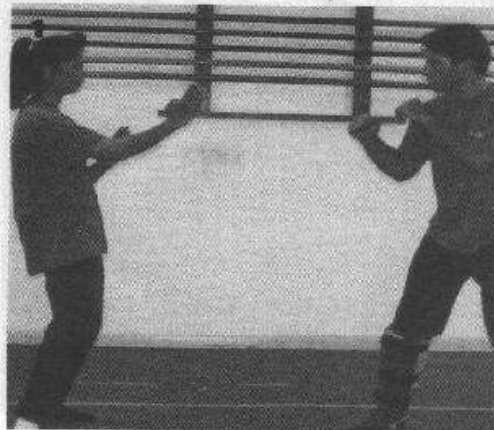
Breathing room

Duncan Leung tells the tale in his take-it-or-leave-it voice, 40 years later.

"After a while, I told him: 'There's not enough room out here.'

"We went up on the roof. Pretty soon I said, 'Still not enough room.'

"So we went on the hill. Plenty of room



“I started training along with Bruce. But I kept watching what the older students were doing. After a while, I went to the Old Man and said, ‘Is this all there is?’”

(Note: “A” is the attacker; “B” is wing chun). From the ready position, A lunges forward (1-2) with a straight punch to the head. B covers the punch with pak sao and simultaneously (3-5) delivers her own punch.

there, but...

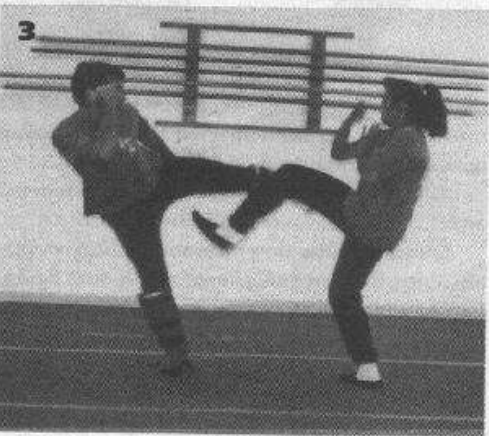
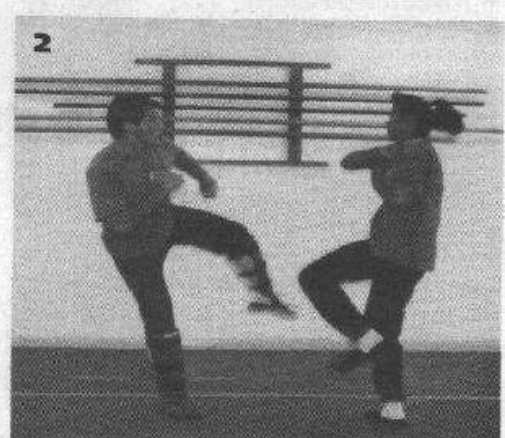
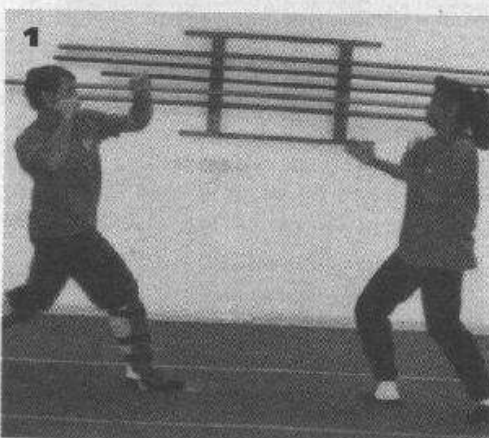
“Where did you learn this?” I asked him—the technique was ‘chase fists.’ He said he had a new teacher he wanted me to meet. Sifu’s name was Yip Man.”

An awed pause interrupts the conversation.

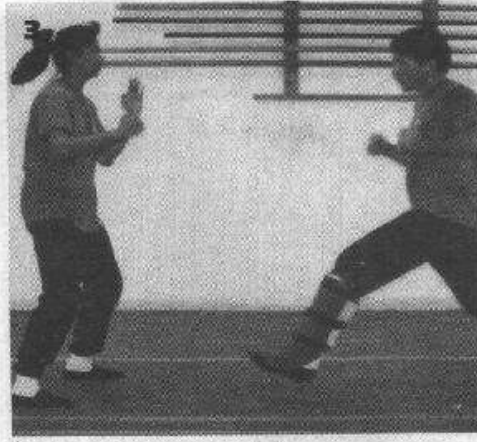
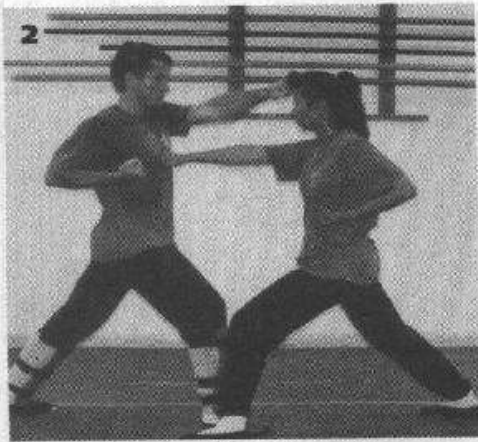
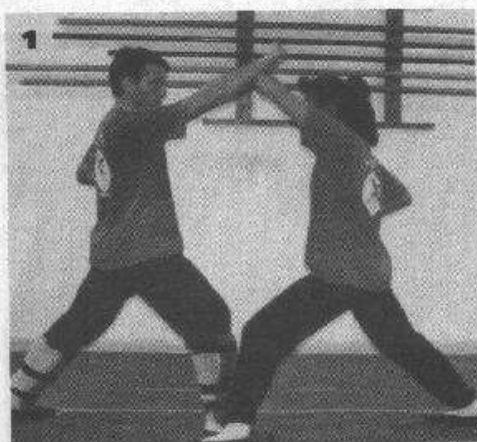
What a privilege to have actually been taught by the revered father of modern wing chun! Remember how sifu Man was portrayed in *Dragon*, Bruce’s bio-pic? As a saintly old-guy-with-a-twinkle-in-his-eye, like Ghandi morphing into George Burns playing God.

Today Duncan is managing director of an import-export company with offices in Virginia Beach, Va., and Hong Kong. Previously, he’s enjoyed commercial success in pursuits as diverse as Hong Kong movies (where he produced 24 feature films) to firearms (at one time he was the fifth largest U.S. importer). And when he did travel internationally to teach wing chun, he was the highest paid seminar draw on the circuit.

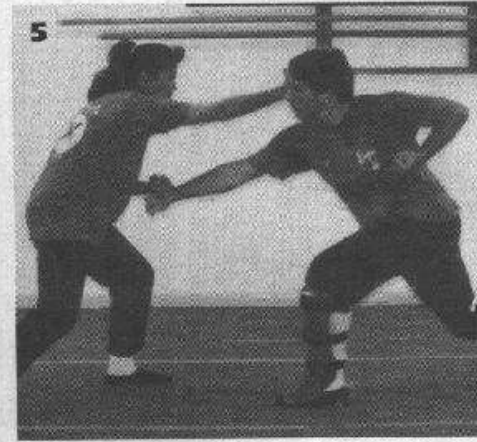
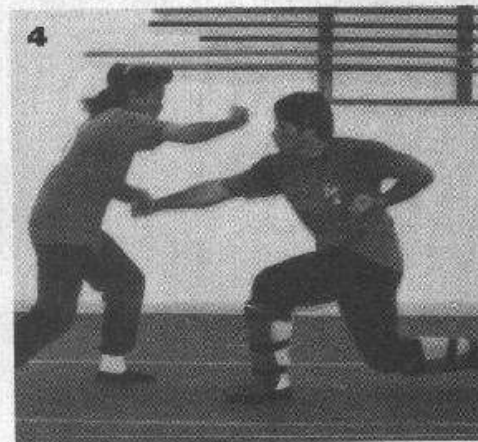
Yet Bruce Lee’s friend remains the most intensely private and least-publicized of the other greats of the mid-century Hong Kong martial arts renaissance. In approaching him, it may help to think of Duncan as a sort of anti-Bruce: the “dark genius” of wing chun’s golden rebirth.



A attacks with a roundhouse kick (1-2). B covers with taun sao and wu sao while simultaneously kicking (3-4) straight through the center to A’s midsection.



This two-picture sequence (1-2) shows the difference between traditional techniques using the "block first and then strike" method. Notice that, in picture 2, both end up punching each other. (3-5) shows the advantage of simultaneously covering and punching. A is now walking into B's punch, and B is not getting hit back.



Revolutionary

Duncan Leung isn't a "genius" simply because he once swapped punches with legends. Or because he hasn't lost a fight since he was a teenager (and streetfighting is his first, great love—"Daily. For years. That's how it works. It's fun.") Rather, Duncan did what geniuses do—revolutionize.

Duncan Leung has radically altered the nature of self-defense for an entire generation of practitioners, behind the scenes, just as Bruce Lee did publicly. How? Duncan has spent 20 years helping redefine combat for American men- and women-in-uniform, those most likely to actual die fighting: our armed forces and law enforcement personnel.

More than just another professional martial artist, Duncan Leung's a professional's professional. He trains, not the students, but their harder-to-impress instructors.

Duncan's even tutored the toughest shock troops on earth, Navy SEALs. Behind his desk are plaques from Team Two and Team Four: "For lessons well-taught."

Today everybody lets on like they've trained SEALs. It's the ultimate certification of advanced knowledge—if you can impress a SEAL...

So let's hear from David K. Paaaina, former Chief Instructor Hand To Hand for Seal Team Two:

"His affable manner, the intensity of what he teaches, and the way he conducts business all add up to one thing, a professional, the best I've seen..."

"Whatever his endeavors are, I fully endorse Duncan Leung.

"From myself and my teammates, our heartfelt thanks and gratitude."

From the Navy, the Army, the FBI, the Virginia Police, Duncan Leung has more testimo-

nial letters than he can frame, more plaques than wall space to hang them. There's just barely room for the engraved Colt .45 presented by the FBI.

From the shadows

Here then is an extraordinary man seemingly at the height of his powers. Yet recently this pro's pro has come forward, out of the



shadows of black bag operations and classified information, to be debriefed. Duncan Leung now says that the mission is over:

"I'm sick and tired of any kind of martial arts."

Duncan looks down to snub out his cigarette. It's hard not to glance at his scar again. Part of what makes Duncan's genius dark is that he is a man of scars.

FLASHBACK—Canton, China 1942. Duncan was born into a well-to-do family; Dad owned newspapers. Several years later, they moved to Macao, and there something tragic happened. Young Duncan witnessed the murder

of his own father. That is the inner scar.

At age seven, some dental work became infected and led to oral surgery which, unhappily, was also botched. The result: Duncan's jaw bears a deep gouge, in front of his right ear—the outer scar.

As fate would have it, the doctors suggested martial arts as a post-operative therapy. It was to be hung gar for his health or, at least, that's how things started out.

"First of all, I didn't want to learn to fight. (But) after I learned martial arts, I started getting more interested in—I was a bad kid anyway—I started getting interested in hurting people. I thought: 'It's a game, it's good, it's fun'; and I started liking it."

"So you'd go streetfighting with Bruce."

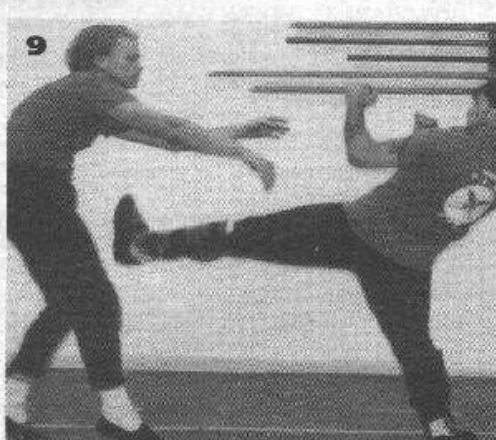
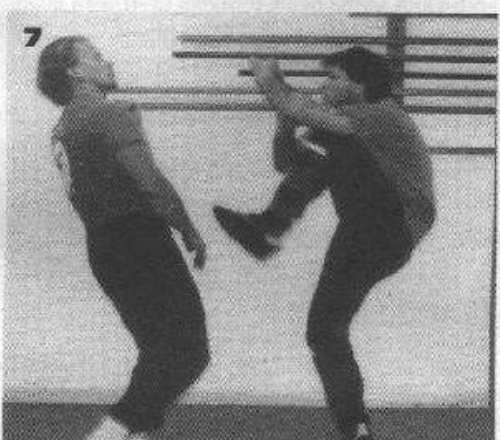
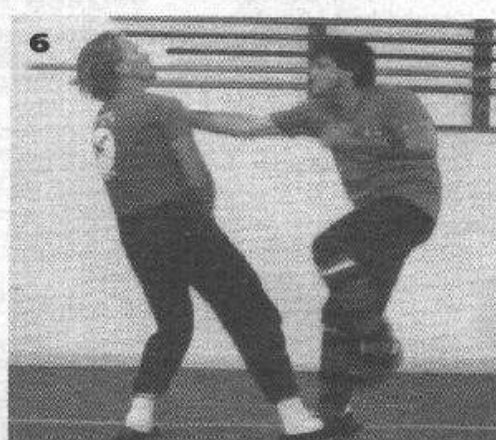
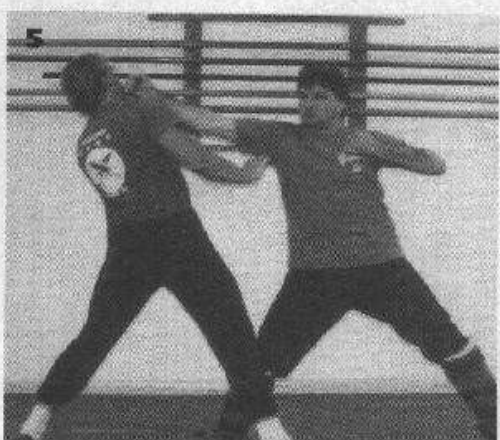
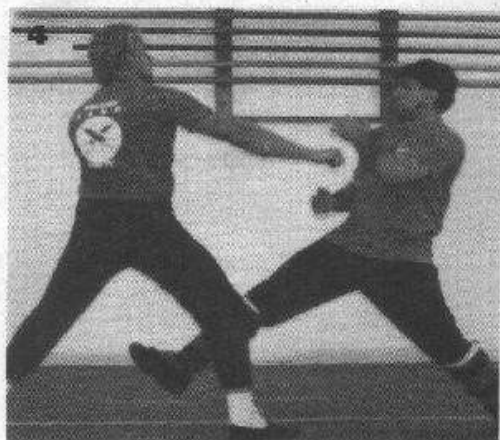
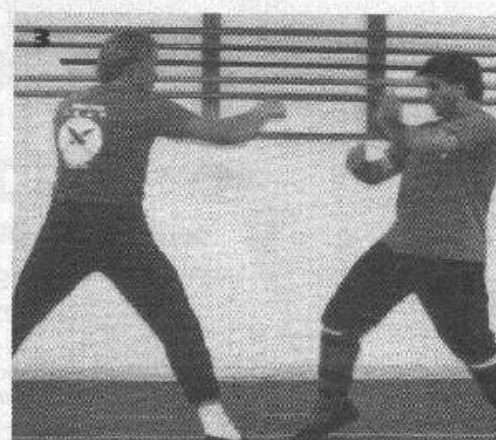
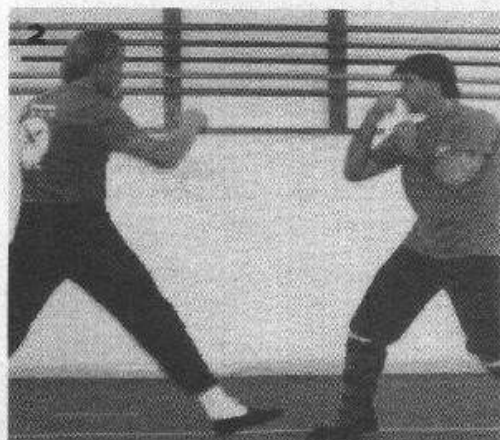
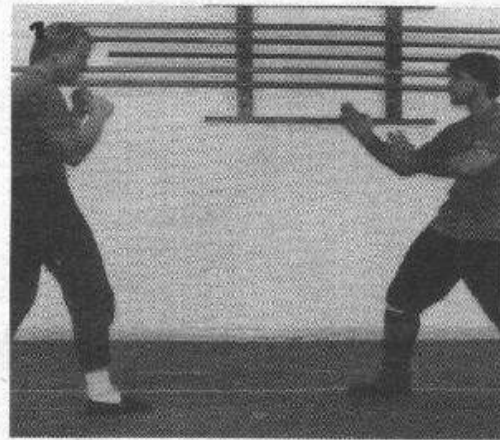
"Not as much as the newspapers say... Bruce Lee was good. He was good when we trained with the Old Man together, and later on (when he came back to Hong Kong) he was even better...It means a lot to me that Bruce kept in touch right up to the end."

Years of experience

Duncan's debriefing occurred at the wing chun school space which he shares on alternate nights with his good friend sifu Hoy Lee, the most senior American instructor in jow ga.

"Why are you granting a martial arts inter-

Herb Borkland is a frequent contributor to *Inside Kung-Fu*. He last wrote about Maryland sifu Hoy Lee in the August, 1995 issue.



From the ready position, A attempts (1-3) a jab to the face of B. B draws backward out of the reach of A's jab. B then comes (4-6) from behind the withdrawing hand of A to deliver a punch to the face. B then delivers (7-9) a thrusting straight kick to the midsection.

view after all these years."

"It's not for self-promotion. I'm getting out of teaching. But...I feel that I'm in a position to tell people my experience because I've gone through hell getting it."

"Yes."

"I want people to understand—what is martial art? The art is—I can hit you, you don't hit me."

"And I want them to know—what is the best martial art?"

"It's the one that fits you, gives you confidence, convinces you. Who is the best teacher? It isn't how good the teacher is, it's how good the teacher makes you."

"Lastly, what is wing chun? You overcome

your opponent, not by speed, not by power, but by shortening your distance, cutting his timing—and crashing in. Because I want you to walk into my fist, my kick.

"And there's only one way to find out what is useful or not, if you learned anything or not. Try it. Just like the Old Man taught us: 'You want to know how good you are? Try it. Pick a fight.' And if you're trained right, you don't look, you don't see, you react."

As he speaks more about Yip Man, it becomes obvious that Duncan reveres him. The Old Man hated foreigners.

"He charged \$8. I started training along with Bruce. But I kept watching what the older students were doing. After a while, I went to the

Old Man and said, 'Is this all there is?' Because I wasn't that impressed. 'What do you expect for \$8?' he asked me. 'Have you got \$300?'"

"Defending the rice bowl"

Duncan explains that, if sifu Man were to expose the core teachings of wing chun to even his most casual students, he'd soon have had them opening up competing schools right down the street. The Old Man was simply "defending his rice bowl."

So Duncan tricked his mother into paying for years of closed-door lessons. The rest is history. He went on to become one of the top two or three wing chun fighters of his generation, right up there with William Cheung, whom he

knows and admires.

"What about the legacy of Yip Man?"

"The Old Man created two problems...Nowadays you see wing chun, everybody thinks they're doing the right thing, but 99 percent of the schools you go to all teach differently. Why? They all come from the Old Man."

"Well, they say he'd 'modify' the teachings depending on..."

"No. Wing chun is very abstract. You either understand it or you don't. If you don't understand, you ask the Old Man...You say, 'Sifu, this is the way, right?'"

"He always said, 'Yes. You're a genius. You're the best.' So, for you, what do you think? 'Oh, I'm doing it right—he's (classmate) doing it wrong.' Yip Man never offended anybody. And that's why—same style, same form taught by him—they all do it differently."

"The second thing is, he'd never teach you anything because you're not paying him enough."

"What's the most important lesson he ever taught you?"

"The Old Man told me: 'Don't believe in me. Find out yourself if it works or not. Then you know if you do it right or wrong; then you know if what I teach you is good or bad.'"

"He encouraged you to go out and pick fights?"

"Pushing us to, in fact."

"Can't do that to students today, can you, sifu?"

"No. And the Old Man also said, 'You want to be the best in martial arts? You have to fit in this category: you have to be young when you want to learn. And you have to be eager. Young and eager. You have to have guts, and you have to be able to take some pain. You have to be rich, so you can afford to pay me. And, most of all, you have no habits.'"

"No bad habits."

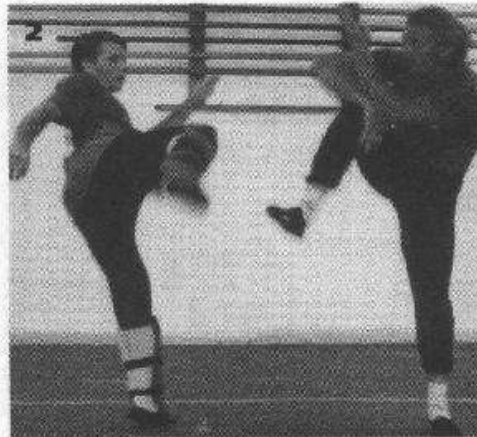
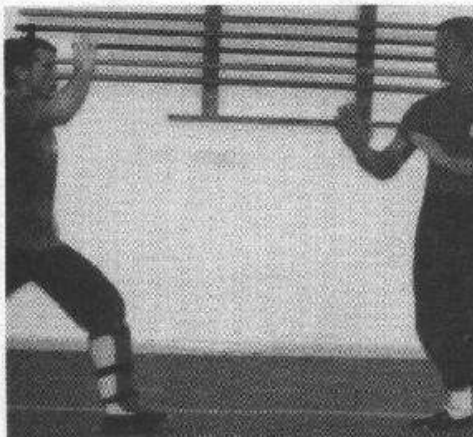
"No, has nothing to do with smoking and drinking. You have no habits—like dating girls, or family problems, or your little kid's problem, or your parents' problems."

The year Bruce left Hong Kong for the States, Duncan moved to Australia. Eventually, he became fruitfully involved in import-export Down Under, which meant plenty of traveling.

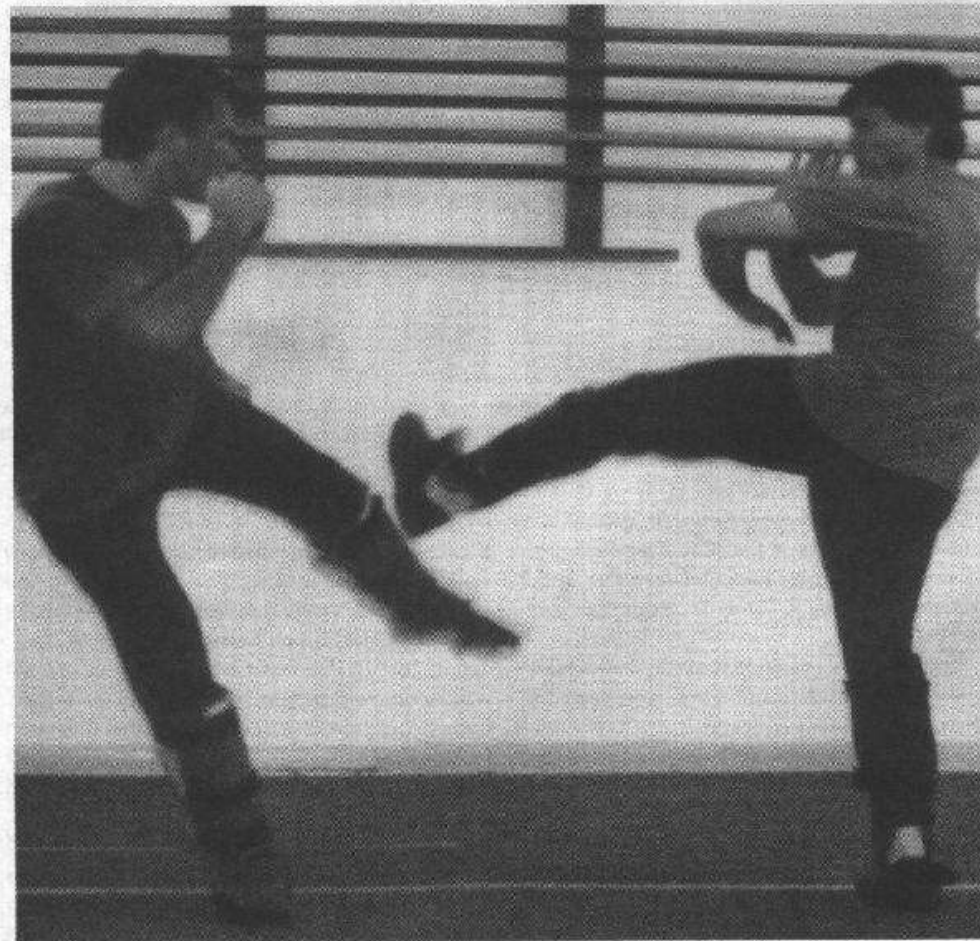
Okay, try me

During a 1970 business trip to New York, Duncan was offered a job giving private instruction. As word got out and Duncan became swamped with clients, he opened his first U.S. school at 2 Great Jones Street, on the fringes of New York City's Chinatown. America had discovered Duncan Leung.

There were a lot of grudge matches associated with this pioneering open-door school; in those days, there were always traditionalist sifu who'd feel honor-bound to challenge him for teaching Chinese "secrets" to "foreign devils".



From the ready position, A attacks (1-2) with a roundhouse kick to the head. B covers (3-4) with quan sao while simultaneously kicking to the knee.



At the Great Jones Street kwoon, a “locked gate match” came to mean that Duncan’s opponents weren’t let out until they got carried out.

“How do you expect me to demonstrate wing chun? The only way is—‘Okay, try me.’”

One of the teachers who tried Duncan was Ron Van Clief, recently seen fighting Royce Gracie in *The Ultimate Fighting Championship IV*. In the best tradition of their styles, Duncan and the “Black Dragon” became friends. They even made a bit of show biz/martial arts history together by co-producing the first kung-fu ever seen on Broadway, an all-star review called “Kung Fu—A Mystical Excursion Into The Oriental World of Self-Defense.”

“Everybody’s doing too much chi sau,” he says of today’s wing chun. Because why? They don’t have to teach you anything but chi sau. Wing chun’s famous for chi sau. Yes, it’s the most important thing—as a beginner.

“But who fights with chi sau? What if there’s no contact? Your opponent doesn’t have to be in contact to throw a kick or a punch at you. Chi sau is important for learning sensitivity, but the most important thing is learning to cover.

“See, we do not block. We cover. Blocking never works. Blocking, you have to see something happen. Covering is, before it happens, you protect. Then I’m always one step ahead of you.

“In most styles, they hit each other. In wing chun, I’m covering and hitting at the same time. We do everything simultaneously. Result: I’m twice as fast, and I don’t get hit. Period.”

“We intercept (kicks) using low stop kicks. You can’t reach me. I’ll break your leg first. If I’m kicking your legs, I have better reach than you, and it’s faster (kicking low rather than kicking above the waist).”

“What people are missing is, they’re not emphasizing conditioned reflexes,” he notes, providing a morsel of sage advice. “Responses have to become second nature by doing them every day over and over again.

“And there’s too much solo practicing. Wing chun must be pre-set through repetition, person-to-person, not by yourself. And when they do spar, they shouldn’t be beating each other up. That’s stupid. Learn how not to be hit.”

It’s after midnight when Duncan finishes his debriefing. The interviewer himself is black-and-blue from some of sifu Leung’s vigorous “explanations”. Good-nights are said; he shakes hands firmly. He is short and blase and yet somehow very moving. Strangely enough, the second emotion blunt-spoken Duncan Leung inspires in other men, after respect, is... loyalty.

The next morning, his friend Hoy Lee tries to put a good face on any talk of Duncan Leung’s retirement. “Maybe he’ll just cut back for a while...” He muses. “You know martial arts. Some good times, some bad, but it’s always in your blood.”

If only Bruce could stop by to show Duncan one new move, don’t you think?

