

Self-Defense Instructor of the Year Jim Wagner

by Robert W. Young

I volunteered to write this piece about Jim Wagner because he always credits me with having “discovered” him. Truth is, neither I nor *Black Belt* is responsible for Wagner’s rise to prominence in the self-defense world. He did it all himself. We just hitched a ride. OK, OK. Maybe we bought him a couple of tanks of gas.

Black Belt’s first dealings with Wagner bring up a tinge of guilt on my part. Early in 1998, he mailed me a proposal for a column that would address the defensive needs of police officers, military personnel, bodyguards and growing numbers of civilians interested in learning no-frills fighting. It was professionally presented on paper and saved on a floppy, and he even included the first three installments. I read it, and it was great. It filled a gap in the magazine’s coverage of the martial arts that until then we didn’t know existed.

So I placed the materials on my desk—and shuffled them around for more than a year. Each time I caught a glimpse, I’d make a mental note to contact Wagner and tell him we were interested.

One day, I got a wild hair and called to give him the green light. He said he was working as a police officer in Southern California and was a partner in a successful outfit that taught the fighting arts—sniper rifle, handgun, knife, empty-hand, etc.—to cops and soldiers. In between, he said, he’d be able to feed us a steady diet of columns. We shook hands over the phone.

Right out of the gate, Wagner stirred up a hornet’s nest with proclamations that *kata* training does little to prepare a person for combat and that complicated combinations of strikes and blocks won’t work in a real fight. Readers were up in arms, and vicious letters poured in. Of course, his critics were outnumbered by martial artists voicing their support.

Wagner kept writing, and you kept reading. Because of his growing popularity, he felt comfortable enough to quit his day jobs and pursue the martial arts dream: teaching civilians, writing articles and books, producing DVDs and conducting

seminars around the world. It’s a life thousands of *Black Belt* readers would give their eye teeth for.

Along the way, Wagner took pains to ensure that his self-defense skills were cutting-edge. He booked seminar gigs with elite military units around the world, and as soon as he was done teaching them what he does best, he would ask them to show him what they do. He enlisted with the Federal Air Marshal Service to serve his country but also, no doubt, to glean what he could from their training—and maybe improve it a little with his own tactful suggestions.

And year after year, Wagner grew in status and became the talk of the town. Friends inside the Los Angeles Police Department would tell us how SWAT team members discussed his work every month. Wagner himself would tell us how *Black Belt* readers in

countries as far away as Scandinavia would take a liking to his ideology, then book him for on-site seminars. People everywhere—civilians as well as “those who fight for a living,” as he says—were flocking to Wagner’s way of thinking.

His meteoric rise to fame prompted this company to produce eight Jim Wagner DVDs and one book (more are in the works), and all sell well. He remains in demand around the world, where he preaches the gospel of reality-based fighting, a genre he single-handedly defined. With all that success, we feel fortunate that he hasn’t outgrown his roots here, and we’re proud to induct him into the *Black Belt* Hall of Fame as 2006 Self-Defense Instructor of the Year.



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