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ISSUE 37 2010 U.S. \$5.95/CAN \$7.25



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Ten Minutes with a Master Jiu-Jitsu Player: Sergio Penha

By **RJ Clifford**

As MMA continues to explode into the stratosphere of sports culture and mainstream acceptance, it's important to recognize some of the people behind the scenes who helped turn the sport into what it is today. Not every building block of modern mixed martial arts came from inside the cage; teachers and trainers gave their students the knowledge to dazzle the audience with their evolving skills.

Enter Sergio Penha, Brazilian jiu-jitsu teacher extraordinaire. Before the term "MMA" was even invented, Penha and his training partners mastered the craft that soon became an international phenomenon. Having taught some of the world's best fighters over the course of his life, Penha took some time away from teaching to discuss his life in jiu-jitsu, how it changed him and how he stays young.

TapouT Magazine: Explain this deep love for Brazilian jiu-jitsu you seem to emanate to everyone.

Sergio Penha: It's a sport ... the submissions have so many positions and different possibilities. You have submissions and sweeps and so many different situations. That's what makes me love the sport.

TAPOUT: Did you ever fight yourself or did you stick to jiu-jitsu?

SP: Just jiu-jitsu, just the competition.

TAPOUT: When did you start training fighters?

SP: I started training some fighters in Brazil. I was involved with Marco Ruas and helped him for maybe a year before he fought in the UFC. I also trained with Mario Sperry back in Brazil when he was a brown belt. I've been involved for a long time in the sport. I trained (Kazushi) Sakuraba in Japan and (Nobuhiko) Takada.

TAPOUT: Do you train mostly fighters or do you teach jiu-jitsu to regular folks as well?

SP: I have a lot of fighters train at my gym, but mostly I am just a jiu-jitsu coach.

TAPOUT: What are your thoughts on the evolution of MMA?

SP: We train MMA at the school one day a week with everyone sparring together including take-

downs, punches and ground work. Basically we have done the same thing for 34 years. When I first started the school, we did the same thing as MMA; it just didn't have the name. But now MMA is a great thing. Now you can make money, but before you couldn't make any money. You trained jiu-jitsu and trained in the school, but you didn't have any support. You trained because you loved it. Now the sport has grown so much, so fast that you can make a living, just for training and fighting in MMA.

TAPOUT: Who are some of the fighters you train regularly now?

SP: Regularly now I train Stephan Bonnar, Steve Cantwell, Alex Schoenauer, Anthony Njokuani and Chidi Njokuani. Maurice Smith also trains with me. Basically it's those guys training with me now.

TAPOUT: When did you decide to make teaching jiu-jitsu your whole life?

SP: Around 2003 after being an airline pilot. I never lost contact with jiu-jitsu, but now I can stay close to my family, so I don't have to travel so much. I started training people in jiu-jitsu fulltime in 2003.

TAPOUT: What made you want to give up being a pilot and focus on jiu-jitsu?

SP: I loved being a pilot too, but I decided I wanted to stay close to my family. Maybe I don't make as much money, but I stay close to my family and do something I love.

TAPOUT: So being a pilot took you away from the family more than you'd prefer?

SP: Yes. I stayed just eight days a month with my family. It's not good for the kids. I have two boys and one girl. My oldest son is 20 and he does jiu-jitsu with me; my little one is 14 and he also comes and trains with me.

TAPOUT: Would they ever want to fight or do they stick with just jiu-jitsu only?

SP: For now my older one is in college and is going to UNLV. If either one wants to be a fighter, that's OK. It's a long way to get there. My youngest one is 14, so if he wants to be a fighter one day, it's a long way but I will support him.

TAPOUT: What is your goal as a teacher for your students?

SP: I teach jiu-jitsu because I love it. Jiu-jitsu is a big part of my life. Situations like different positions and stuff are a lot like life. Sometimes something happens in your life and there are so many possibilities you can escape. Everyone has a hard time sometimes; everybody has a different economic situation or whatever. You have a possibility to escape anything. You have to stop, think, assess the situation and do the best you can. I've been like that my whole life. Even when I was a pilot, I used a lot of things from jiu-jitsu — not positions — but how I think in jiu-jitsu terms to decide how to escape certain situations. I think that jiu-jitsu has helped my life a lot.

TAPOUT: You have a long, extensive history training fighters. Do you have any good stories of guys you have taught over the years?

SP: Not really. Basically when you are teaching, you have to push the guys so hard and do a good job; you don't have time to play and have fun. The fun is in the match. But you don't have much time to go grab a beer with your friends ... it's not like that. You have to focus on the match.

TAPOUT: As you get older, what are you doing to stay healthy and young?

SP: I like the Sir Jason Winters supplements. I was introduced to these products about 5 years ago, when I started training his son, Raymond Winters. They have supported us a lot and I appreciate that. I use their supplements and drink their tea every morning and night. I eat healthy as well and train hard my whole life and I respect my limits. As you get older you have to respect your limits.

*For more on Sergio and his school, log onto www.sergiopenha.com.
For more on Sir Jason Winters, log onto www.sirjasonwinters.com.*

VITALS

Sergio Penha

RANK

Red & Black Belt, 7th degree

Sergio Penha's instructor is Master Oswaldo Alves, world famous in his own right.

OSWALDO ALVES RANK

Red and Black Belt, 8th degree

LINEAGE

Sergio Penha « Oswaldo Alves « Reyson Gracie « Carlos Gracie, Sr. « Mitsuyo "Conde Koma" Maeda

