

Lethal Weapon, Peaceful Mind

Words: Jamie Christian Desplaces

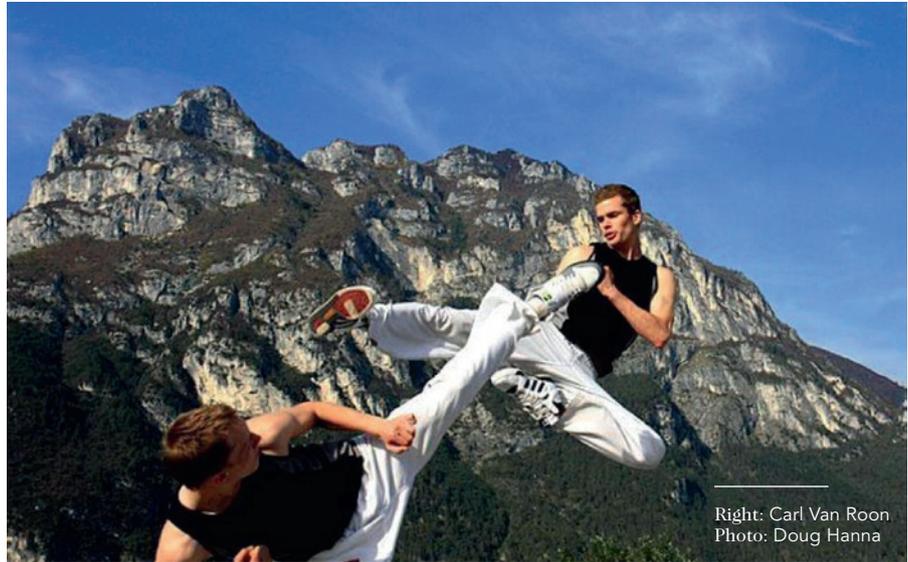
“I feel bad about knocking people out in tournaments,” says world champion martial artist Carl Van Roon. “The first few times part of you does experience a rush, a boost, you do feel like a superhero. You’ve worked to develop your body to this point and it’s satisfying in terms of being an artist, but not in the long term. You want to win, but you must beat-up another human being. It’s never my intention to hurt anyone.”

He’s been knocked out in return, though you wouldn’t guess it. In twenty years of fighting, he’s suffered broken ribs and hand but never his nose. Van Roon’s chiselled features have remained enough intact to secure past modelling work (though he does admit to having had to borrow his girlfriend’s foundation to mask the odd black eye). I ask if he’s afraid when he fights.

“Preparing for combat is something your body is never going to feel totally comfortable with. Generally, if you don’t have that nervous anticipatory energy, then you don’t fight well. But, for me, the fear of not fulfilling my potential or of letting others down is worse than the physical pain.”

Carl Van Roon is composed, well-mannered, well-spoken and articulate. He quotes Einstein, Darwin, Buddha and Bruce Lee. He has a master’s degree. He is engaging, his answers measured, his tone intense. He worries he takes himself too seriously. Ambition, success and ego, he laments, are often intertwined. It is his folly, or has been. He’s working on it. His self-awareness is admirable. But then, you don’t become a multiple world champion, one of the toughest men on the planet, with a half-cocked attitude. Self-deprecation is a new challenge he is embracing and he’s fond of challenges.

The ‘art’ is as important as the ‘martial’ and like all artists, he has embarked upon a voyage of self-discovery. The irony is not lost on him. He understands the difficulty for an outsider to grasp the nuances, the paradoxical complexity of finding inner-peace through violence. But, he claims, it is a violence of a spiritual nature: “It is through the paradox that understanding deepens. By exploring violence and the dark sides of human emotion, you become more compassionate. We can’t pretend



Right: Carl Van Roon
Photo: Doug Hanna

that these things don’t exist. We have to embrace our whole selves.”

Opponents he labels “comrades”, brothers-in-arms whose purpose is to help him develop and him them. You must show compassion to your opponent, he says, anger will blind you. Fighting is a conversation, a physical debate, the sharing of skills: “I put forward a question with an attack, he responds and vice-versa. Whoever converses best, wins. It just so happens that this type of talking hurts a bit more. The intention should never be to harm, but to challenge, learn and grow together through the process.”

As for style, technique, Carl wishes not to be labelled. He has studied many disciplines, from karate, to kickboxing, jujitsu to taekwondo. While he respects each tradition, he follows the teachings of Bruce Lee. You must adapt, evolve, take the best of each. It will limit the self to concentrate on just one. Be like water. If you punch water it is soft, it can’t be hurt. When dropped from a great height, it will smash rock. If in a cup, it takes its shape, it becomes that cup. “When an opponent is trying to hurt you,” says Carl, “if you’re clever, then they’ll walk into your fist, throw themselves to your foot. You use their force to your advantage, incorporate it into your technique in the same way water works with its environment.”

He couldn’t understand Bruce Lee’s teachings as a youth, he says, but as he aged they have developed meaning. Lee’s words haven’t changed, Carl has.

He is 29 and a father of a two-month-old daughter, Adara. “Life has taken on a deeper meaning,” he tells me. “I reflect on my behaviour and wonder if I am being the kind of person that I would be proud to have as a father.” He’s presently working as a stuntman on The Hobbit sequel, a career-move he’d like to develop. Another world championship looms in October. He lives on Australia’s Gold Coast at the Gwinganna Lifestyle Retreat, an idyllic mountain setting. His role as activity manager is to “inspire guests to find optimum wellness through physical movement.” He was reluctant to make the move from Auckland, he’s not a fan of change (another thing he’s working on), but his partner, Marney, convinced him otherwise. He’s glad she did: “She’s well-travelled, and has an open-mind that challenges me. She’s intuitive and perceptive of things which I am not. It works well.”

Van Roon too, has travelled, taught and competed around the world. He can’t name his favourite spot, there are too many and he’s humbled by the opportunities that he has been afforded. The globetrotting, though, has come at a price. “I sometimes feel a little bit lost, like I don’t know where I belong,” he reflects. “Though I’m a proud Kiwi, I also feel that I am a citizen of the world now. That my identity has become fluid.”

Just like water.