
BJJ

Efficiency Beats Raw Strength

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*The Jiu Jitsu I created was designed to give the weak ones a chance
to face the heavy and strong.*

— *Helio Gracie*

It was some rainy day in 1994. I was 17, and sitting in my mailbox was a videotape that would change my life. Back then, I never would have imagined that the footage on that cassette would impress me so deeply that I would spend the next 32 years of my life learning the art of Brazilian Jiu Jitsu -- and yet that is exactly what happened.

I still remember it clearly: I watched the first few seconds, the first fight, and it hit me immediately -- this is real fighting, and this is what I want to learn. It wasn't a rational thought. It was simply a feeling, a feeling that told me: this is what you have been looking for, even if you never knew it. And today, you have found it. It was the moment that changed my life forever.

Of course there were plenty of fighters in the nineties too. Names like Peter Aerts and Ernesto Hoost graced the covers of martial arts magazines, and their fights ran on cable TV. But while the Dutch champions were physically imposing figures who demonstrated near-superhuman toughness and durability, the Brazilians on my videotape were different. They were not "monsters" -- not six-foot-plus giants who could shatter baseball bats with their shins. They were completely ordinary people.

Lean, some of them downright skinny, average height, with no remarkable chin or toughness -- just regular human beings. But they could do something that made them supermen too, even if they didn't look the part. When Royce Gracie stepped into his first UFC fight in his white gi, he looked genuinely out of place. His opponents were big, strong, and muscular, and on paper he was hopelessly outmatched physically. But that night he made martial arts history, defeating every single

opponent without absorbing a single strike. He fought wrestlers, boxers, and kickboxers, and he beat them all -- because he could do something they couldn't: Brazilian Jiu Jitsu.

Today, 32 years later, the world has changed -- and the martial arts world has not been spared. MMA has become a mainstream sport with a massive fanbase, and BJJ is no longer a hidden gem. It is now standard training for every modern MMA fighter.

But the more BJJ and MMA have evolved into competitive sports, the further BJJ has drifted from its roots and its original DNA. BJJ was never a sprint -- it was always a marathon. It was never about winning; it was about not being defeated. BJJ was a martial art that gave weaker people a genuine chance to overcome physically stronger opponents.

That is exactly what makes Brazilian Jiu Jitsu so special. It is not based on imposing your will on your opponent. It is primarily about protecting yourself from their attacks and eventually exploiting their mistakes to win the fight.

When you're a fighter, you have to be ready all the time.

There's no 'I need a month.' It's always time.

*The art of Gracie Jiu-Jitsu is to learn how to defend yourself in any situation,
not to score points, not for tournament style.*

— **Royce Gracie**

This mindset is not just lip service or wordplay -- it is the deepest foundational principle of BJJ. It is what sets BJJ apart from other grappling styles and shapes the technical execution, strategy, and training methods of this martial art. Don't get me wrong: there are outstanding athletes in BJJ too. But the difference from other grappling styles is that it is not athleticism that makes a fighter exceptional -- it is superior technical skill. Physical fitness is only a multiplier for technical finesse, not a substitute for a lack of it. I believe I can say without exaggerating that the greatest BJJ fighters of all time were physically strong, but by no means exceptionally strong. Strength was never the defining factor in their success.

So what does strength actually mean in Brazilian Jiu Jitsu -- where does it get in the way, and where can it be used effectively? Those are exactly the questions I want to explore in this article.

Function Defines Movement

One of the core principles of BJJ is the pursuit of optimal execution for every technique. For me, as a 4th Degree Black Belt in BJJ, the goal after all these decades is still to find the perfect movement pattern for each technique and to keep refining it. It is not about drilling a mediocre technique hundreds of times and then powering through it with strength and explosiveness. It is about developing an ever more perfect body mechanics through deliberate practice.

Of course, in a real fight you can amplify that perfect technique with well-timed physical force -- but the vast majority of training time is spent developing technical efficiency.

As a teacher, I see the same pattern repeat itself constantly: people who are naturally strong and start BJJ often struggle to develop technically. Strength is best applied after you have already built a solid technical foundation in Brazilian Jiu Jitsu. Only then does it truly become a multiplier rather than a crutch.

*What is the purpose of defense? Preservation.
Preservation is easier than conquest -- and from this it follows
that, given equal means, defense is inherently easier than offense.*

— *Carl von Clausewitz*

Defense -- The Foundation of BJJ

The great strength of BJJ lies in teaching students how to escape from a wide variety of bad positions -- or better yet, how to defend themselves so effectively that those positions never arise in the first place. In Jiu Jitsu, we don't assume a perfect world. We assume our opponent is bigger, heavier, stronger, and more aggressive than we are -- and that we've already made plenty of mistakes. There is an ideal fighting strategy, yes, but there are also countless applications for situations where we are simply at a disadvantage.

Only someone who develops a strong defense can ever truly fight efficiently. A fighter with no defensive game -- one who survives purely by overwhelming opponents -- is running on strength and athleticism alone. They will burn through enormous amounts of energy even against weaker opponents. That works as long as you are the strongest person in the room. But BJJ was not made for the strong -- it was made for the weak, so that they too have a chance to defend themselves.

The fighter who learns to protect themselves and refuses to give their opponent what they need to attack successfully develops the composure and clarity to strike offensively at exactly the right

moment. Only someone who can control chaos can capitalize on the opportunities that chaos creates. That is precisely why defense is the foundation of BJJ -- the bedrock on which everything else is built.

Accepting vs. Forcing

Perhaps the most significant difference between the original idea of BJJ and its modern versions -- or other grappling styles -- is this: the original BJJ philosophy was always about accepting situations and protecting yourself so thoroughly that your opponent has no effective avenue of attack. When they eventually make a mistake, become careless, or overextend themselves, you seize that opening to apply a submission. You don't force actions or attacks. You accept, flow with the fight, and wait to exploit your opponent's errors.

Modern BJJ and other grappling styles, by contrast, operate at a much faster pace with far more athletic execution -- because the goal is to score as many points as possible in as little time as possible, or to force a submission. For competition, that strategy is important and effective. But even that athletic style of BJJ still rests on a foundation of perfecting technical solutions, ideal leverage, and a smart game plan in training. That technical toolkit is what allows you to then crank up the tempo and execute with greater speed and athleticism.

Anyone who relies on strength at the beginning of their BJJ journey to mask a lack of technique will not achieve the same results as someone who first develops their technique and then builds physical athleticism on top of that foundation.

Small Steps and Fast Decisions

In BJJ, there are no holds that freeze a position forever -- no single stance in which you can control an opponent indefinitely. Everything is a fluid process. Good BJJ is built on making many decisions in a short period of time and linking many small steps together quickly. Only that way can you truly adapt to your opponent and exploit their mistakes.

A skilled BJJ practitioner doesn't hold their opponent in place -- they control them, read them, and stay one step ahead at all times by reacting instantly to the smallest movement. Someone who relies on raw strength and simply clamps down is essentially stuck in a one-way street. They can hold on, but there is no way back. No options, no transitions, no fine motor control -- just the desperate hope of hanging on long enough. When the strength runs out, they are completely at the mercy of their opponent's rapid decision-making.

Efficiency is created by constantly adapting to new angles and force dynamics, optimizing leverage in real time -- and that happens through continuous decision-making and adjusting your movements to your opponent's actions. These adjustments are sometimes extremely subtle, barely visible to an outside observer, but they are shifts in the interaction nonetheless.

Reason and Feel

For me, BJJ is an art -- an expression of my own personality: spontaneous, unscripted, authentic. But at the same time, BJJ is also a science, a rational system that, as I mentioned, demands making many fast decisions in a short window of time. That is where the game plan comes in -- the strategy, the linking of different techniques.

Someone who works through all possible "what if" scenarios for a given situation, and develops a sensible response for every action their opponent might take, will always hold a decisive advantage. They are not choosing from chaos -- they are selecting from a set of well-prepared options. That means they can likely react faster and more effectively than someone with no game plan, or only a rough one.

Of course, reason has its limits, and every game plan is ultimately just an attempt to make the uncontrollable controllable. But the path to freedom always runs through strategy. Strategy is like a map -- it helps you find your way in unfamiliar terrain. Over time it becomes unnecessary, because you eventually know the landscape so well that you have developed an instinct for every angle and every dip in the ground. When you reach that level, the map becomes obsolete. Feeling is thinking at a higher level -- but it is reason and the game plan that laid the groundwork. Freedom comes when you know the rules deeply enough to feel when you can break them.

A Lifelong Journey

BJJ is not fast food. It is not built for quick results. It is a martial art with depth. Learning BJJ is like learning a language or a musical instrument. At the beginning comes the grind: endless repetitions, movements that simply refuse to click no matter how many times you drill them. In Brazil, the word "porrada" is used -- in the context of BJJ, it roughly translates to "the daily hard work on the mat." But that intense labor is the very foundation of what makes BJJ so fascinating. The perfect technique, the body awareness, the confidence that grows from all of it -- these things take time, they demand effort, but they are worth it. They are unique skills and breakthroughs that stay with you for a lifetime.

Perhaps for this very reason, raw strength plays a secondary role in BJJ. Strength, fitness, and above all resilience are the domain of youth -- they come and go. What remains is technique. Technique outlasts decades, keeps improving, and gives your personal BJJ a new, deeper meaning year after year. BJJ begins and ends with technique. In between stands your own development, your own goals and limits, your understanding and sometimes your confusion. But in the end, it is not just BJJ -- it is an expression of who you are.
