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**er than One!**

Former Student of Bruce and James Lee Speaks Out

# Two Lees Are Better Than One

By Paul Bax

**F**ew people can say they studied with Bruce Lee in the sixties. Even fewer can actually say they studied at two of his schools! Steve Johnson was a student of both James Lee and Bruce Lee. To even further his knowledge in Lee's "style of no style", he also trained in Seattle with Lee's first assistant instructor, Taky Kimura and his assistant Roy Hollingsworth. After becoming friends with James, and joining the Oakland class, Johnson caught the eye of Bruce who selected him to train with him at his Los Angeles Chinatown school.

**INSIDE KARATE:** How did you first find out about James Lee's school?

**STEVE JOHNSON:** I was looking in a publication when I was teaching in Pennsylvania and there was an advertisement for Bruce Lee's first book. James Lee's

phone number was in there, so I called that number, and James answered the phone. That's how I met him. We started talking, and I used to call him at least twice a week. We became really good friends over the phone, and that's how I found out about the Oakland school.

**IK:** What were some of the major differences between jeet kune do, and your previous martial arts training?

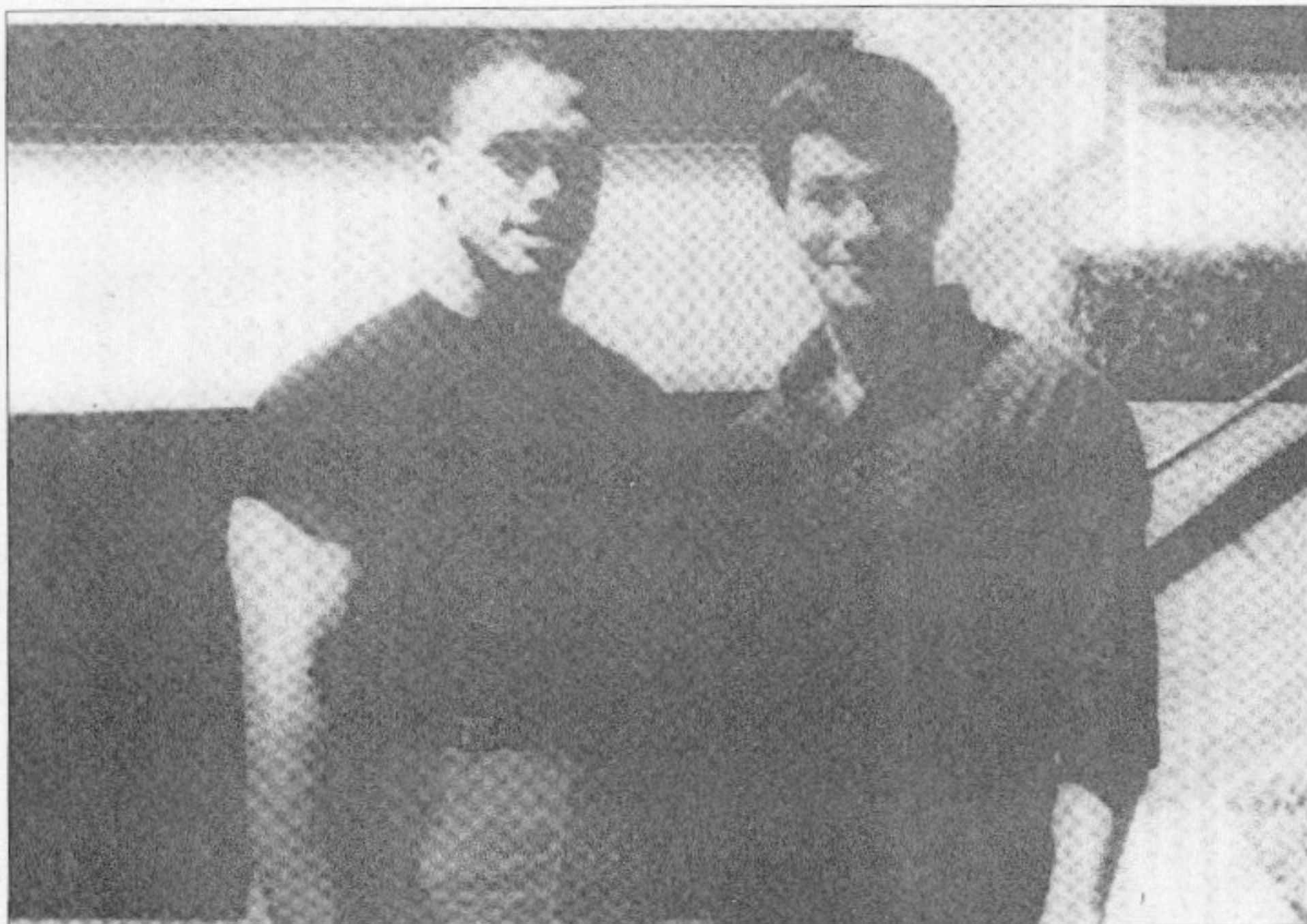
**SJ:** Well my previous training was all the traditional training; karate and so forth. Now back at that time James was still doing a lot of the Jun Fan applications. One of the differences was that there was movement, where as in the traditional you really didn't have real footwork to speak of. They had the traditional shifting, going from one forward posture into

the other, but nothing as flexible that offered the maneuverability that JKD did.

**IK:** James Lee was a lot like Bruce Lee in some ways. What were some of the characteristics they didn't have in common?

**SJ:** James was still into the Jun Fan area, where Bruce's footwork for example was a lot different. There was even more mobility in L.A. as opposed to what we were doing at the Oakland school. We were using a somewhat traditional bi-jong, which had been modified for the Jun Fan stage, but it wasn't like the bi-jong that we used in Los Angeles.

**IK:** Were there any different training formats at the Oakland school that differed from the Los Angeles school?



The author poses with Bruce Lee for a candid "two shot".

**SJ:** Well the drills of course were different, but they were all intense. I remember some of the training in L.A. when Bruce would turn the lights on and off, and we would respond do the different drills. We would respond to the drills according to the lights being on, or off.

**IK:** What was it like to spar with Bruce Lee?

**SJ:** Bruce's ability was supernatural. He could move in and out with incredible speed, and quickness. One of the many memorable experiences was when Bruce and I were squared off, and he said to me, "When you think I'm going to move, back off as quick as you can." He was about eight feet away when I thought I detected a movement. I was about to begin my retreat when I felt his shoe lace on my neck. How he bridged the gap so quickly, and executed his hook kick so precisely still amazes me.

**IK:** You have also trained with Bruce's senior student in Seattle, Taky Kimura.

Explain your relationship, and what was it like training under him?

**SJ:** Well Taky kind of stays in the background, but he's extremely proficient in what he does. He very impressive, and a very powerful person. The Jun Fan prevails there. The same types of things that we did in Oakland, was what was being done in Seattle. The person that would do most of the drilling at the club in Seattle was Roy Hollingsworth. Taky would decide what we were doing, but most of the drills were conducted by Roy.

**IK:** How did you come to train with Yip Man's son, Yip Chun?

**SJ:** Originally I was going to study under Yip Man himself, but before I could get to Hong Kong he passed away. His son had taken over the school and was aware his father wanted to work with me, so he made contact to tell me he was taking over.

He was aware of his father's wishes to work with me, so he agreed to train me. That's how I met Yip Chun.

The training under him was pretty intense. We did a lot of wooden dummy work, and discussed the center line theory as well many details, concerning the Wing Chun system. It was really unique, because most of the training was done on a roof of an apartment building. That's where the school was.

**IK:** How did Chun's applications of Wing Chun differ from what Bruce taught you?

**SJ:** It was a lot more traditional. It was all the original applications. Bruce's innovations were very apparent. That's one of the reasons I wanted to train in Wing Chun, because I wanted to see where Bruce's roots were, and how he made the progressions that he did. There weren't any real similarities in what Bruce did compared to this. It was real tradi-

**“Originally I was going to study under Yip Man himself, but before I could get to Hong Kong he passed away.”**

tional, and Bruce had made so many innovations to the traditional methods that you could easily see the difference

**IK:** How was Yip Chun as a martial artist?

**SJ:** He was maybe 85 pounds, and your typical proverbial old master who had all this power. We would work on chi sao and it felt like he was bringing up his energy from the ground. His technique was perfect. Everything he did worked. He looked like a frail person, but the power he had was incredible

**IK:** At your school in New Mexico, what type of curriculum do you teach?

**SJ:** We kind of mix everything up. We do the Jun Fan applications, we apply the Jeet Kune Do concepts, and then I've put together a method that combines all of



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these things along with other principles that I've learned.

**IK:** You're in just as good of shape as you were in the sixties, if not better. How do you stay in such great condition?

**SJ:** Bruce was very intense when it came to physical conditioning. During one of our many conversations about training he said, "It doesn't matter what you know, if you're not in good physical condition it won't work." Understanding what he meant, I try to use any available time I have to jog, ride my bike, do light weight training, etc. Recently, I have made available my own complex carbohydrate formulation called "CARBO-MAX" which is extremely effective as a energy drink, and also for muscular weight gain. Martial art practitioners, weight lifters and athletes from all over the U.S. are using it with impressive results.

**IK:** What type of relationship did you have outside of training with Bruce Lee?

**SJ:** Bruce loved to shop, and one of his favorite places was a store called Fred Segal. Bruce had a shirt that I really liked, so he said we should go get one. We went out to Segal's and bought one, and I haven't seen one like it since then. I still have the shirt.

**IK:** Were you a part of Lee's now famous backyard workouts?

**SJ:** Yes, in fact I remember a day when Bruce had some two-inch boards laying around, and he asked both myself and Ted Wong to hold the boards for him. He broke one, then two, and eventually three, and then even four of them. Then we held five. He told us to hold them very firmly, and he came in and kicked them. Only the back board (the fifth board) broke, flying out of our hands.

Ted and I looked at each other in amazement. We were both shocked he could do that. Then he went ahead and broke the other four. We already knew he could do that, but we were puzzled as to how he broke only the fifth board without cracking the other four.

**IK:** Did Bruce ever show you in any forms?

**SJ:** Well, I don't think Bruce wanted

anybody to know he was any good with forms, but I had seen an episode of "THE GREEN HORNET" and he did a praying mantis form, so I asked him about it. He showed me this form, and he was excellent. Everything he did was with such precision. It was perfect.

**IK:** How do you feel about the recent controversy concerning original jeet kune do as it was taught before Bruce Lee's death, and the concepts method of today as it was popularized by Inosanto?

**SJ:** I don't think there should be a controversy. The essence of what Bruce was trying to do was to have everybody develop through themselves with what they were learning. You can have five people being taught the same thing, but they

**"Bruce was very intense when it came to physical conditioning. During one of our many conversations about training he said, "It doesn't matter what you know, if you're not in good physical condition it won't work."**

would mold it to their own way, or their own application. I don't really feel there is room for controversy.

**IK:** So do you think Bruce would be happy with the way the art has progressed over the years?

**SJ:** I think he would be very disheartened with the controversy going on, because that isn't what he had in mind. He was constantly trying to evolve, and make progressions and innovations. I think that with each individual who has tried to do that, like Dan Inosanto who has tried to learn more and more to improve himself despite how fantastic he already is. He continues to strive for excellence. That's what it's all about. That's what Bruce did, and that's what he would have continued to do.

**IK:** So do you think Bruce would have added on all these different arts like Inosanto has done?

**SJ:** Yes. He would have continued to try to get better, and find other ways of cutting down on the time lapse, and just trying to improve constantly. I know with his skill the way it already was, it seems impossible to do, but he continued to work on improving himself.

**IK:** Is Dan content with the way JKD has progressed over the years?

**SJ:** I don't really know. Dan doesn't really talk a lot. He seems to be involved in what he's doing, and trying to improve himself and provide the best quality training that he can achieve, and the best quality of teaching that he can do. Dan, Taky, Roy (Hollingsworth) and Ted Wong are all excellent examples of what Bruce would have wanted in his students.

**IK:** What are some of the differences between the JKD from the Chinatown era, and what is being taught now?

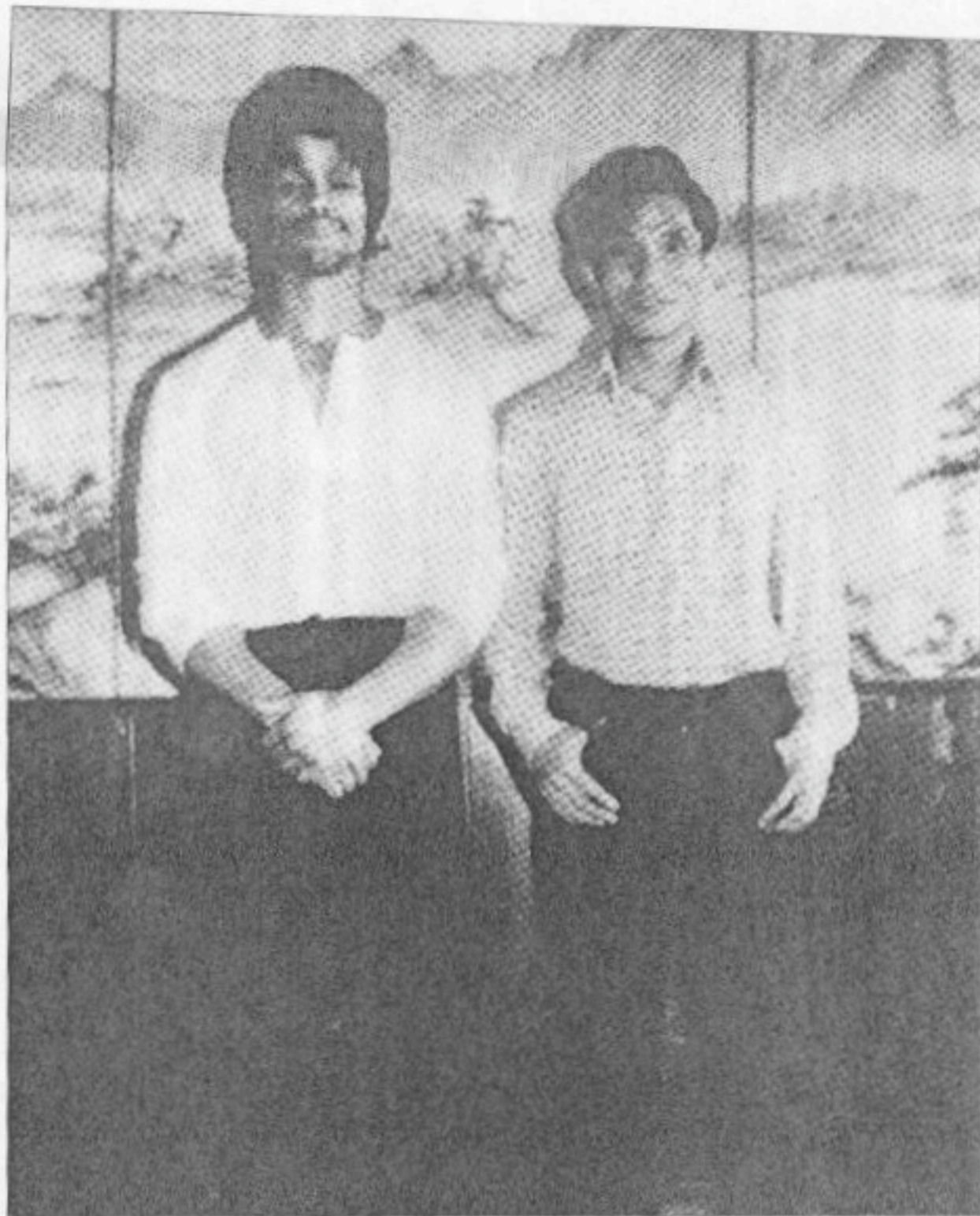
**SJ:** I think the training is close to the same. I think the method of how it is being taught is what has changed. For example we had a structured school in Chinatown where we would do various drills, techniques, combinations, and physical training. Since there aren't a lot of schools, and most of the training is done through seminars, you don't have the time to do the exact type of training that we did there.

**IK:** The JKD society was recently disbanded. Do you feel it is vital that a new governing body is created to promote coalition among JKD practitioners?

**SJ:** I think it's getting into a lot of political involvement. We never had that with Bruce. We just trained, and followed what Bruce was trying to convey to us. That's what we did. Now it seems there has been a lot of changes as far as organization, and hierarchy. That just gets us away from the entire thing. It's not like it used to be.

**IK:** What steps can a student take to assure he is receiving authentic instruction in jeet kune do?

**SJ:** I think they would have to seek out one of the people that was either



with Bruce, Dan, or Taky; one of the original people. If he can seek those people out he's going to be assured of getting the essence of what Bruce was trying to teach.

**IK:** Is there a particular aspect of JKD that you emphasize to your students?

**SJ:** Not really. We use a lot of footwork, we use a lot of spontaneous response movements. It's geared towards actual application in the street without having to have a uniform on, or having to take your shoes off, and going through all the rituals.

**IK:** Could you give me your definition of jeet kune do, and what effect has the art had on your life?

**SJ:** I would say it's a concept of fighting that has no real rules, and no limitations. Whatever works, works.

One of the things that really stayed with me, along with a lot of other things was when Bruce said, "JUST REMEMBER THAT THE PERSON LEFT STANDING IS THE WINNER." That statement had a great impact on my future as far as combat. That's what got me through when I was being disqualified for excessive contact in tournaments. That's what stayed with me.

**IK:** How do you feel about the death of Brandon Lee?

**SJ:** Very controversial. I don't believe it was an accident. With all of the films that have been made with incredible fight scenes, and choreography that has been done I just don't see it as an accident. Whatever they would come up with, I could never believe it was an accident. Brandon had a good career ahead of him. He was up and coming.