

His students say he's "San Diego's best kept secret."



# Little Dojo. Big Jiu-Jitsu.

An interview with Gracie Jiu-Jitsu Black Belt, Robert Lovi

By Scott Hammond  
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To look at him, you'd never guess Robert Lovi is a Jiu-Jitsu expert. Standing at 5'8" and only 155 pounds, he's usually found smiling and chatting with friends at a cafe or surf shop in Pacific Beach. He doesn't have all the tell-tale signs you would expect from a top-level martial artist.

But anyone who has been in his dojo knows that Rob is "the business." His students marvel at his uncanny ability to dominate effortlessly people who are twice his weight. "At my size, I have to be technical," says Lovi. "There is always someone who is going to be bigger and stronger than me, no matter how big and strong I get. That's the beauty of Jiu-Jitsu. We target the body's weakest points, using leverage. The better your Jiu-Jitsu, the less effort you use." Robert likes to use the example of Brazilian world Jiu-Jitsu champion

and undefeated UFC fighter, Demian Maia to illustrate his point. Maia posted a [video on Youtube](#) where a friend taught a nine-year-old girl how to perform a *mata leão*, a neck choke that restricts blood from reaching the brain. Maia's friends wanted to see if this little girl could submit the world champion after a short lesson in Jiu-Jitsu. Just before passing out, Maia tapped his hand in submission, and the whole room erupted in laughter.

Robert earned all of his belts from Pedro Sauer, Rickson Gracie's most technical student. Professor Sauer is a 7th degree Red-Black belt and was dubbed the world's best Jiu-jitsu instructor in a worldwide poll by the prestigious Abu Dhabi Combat Club (ADCC).

It's no wonder then, that Rob

is so good on the mat. "It didn't start that way," Robert laughs. "Professor Sauer used me as an example in a seminar recently, when he said that a Black Belt is a White Belt that wouldn't quit." After working diligently for many years, sometimes training three times a day, seven days a week, Robert finally earned his Black Belt from Sauer.



Lovi with friend and Jiu-Jitsu World Champion, Andre Galvao



Lovi with his teacher, mentor and friend, Gracie Jiu-Jitsu legend Professor Pedro Sauer



Ronaldo "Jacare" Souza and Fernando Terere

Robert's Jiu-Jitsu lineage comes from Helio Gracie, the Grand Master of the Gracie family who improvised Judo Newaza to compensate for his small stature. Helio, who passed away in January at 96 years old, attributed his longevity and health to a lifestyle that included Jiu-Jitsu, family, and healthy living. Helio's progeny include Rolls (deceased), Rickson and Relson Gracie. These three are considered by many to be the most technical practitioners in the family, and the ones who emphasize clean technique, while other schools emphasize fitness and strength training.

"It's all good," Says Rob. "Everyone's Jiu-Jitsu is different, but it's all good. I found Professor Sauer, who, like me, is a pretty small guy. So naturally, his Jiu-Jitsu has to be very technical. I was lucky to be connected with the Rickson Gracie lineage, which articulates smooth Jiu-Jitsu and crisp technique."

Robert, who is married to a Brazilian girl, trained in Brazil with many of the world's top competitors and instructors. The long list includes Jacare, Terere, Jamalao, Telles, Galvao, Comprido and Costa. Rob owes a debt of gratitude to all the people who helped him improve his skills. "I learned the traditional Gracie curriculum from Professor Sauer, and the progressive, modern Jiu-Jitsu from these great competitors. I've been lucky and blessed to have trained with these guys, and I enjoy sharing my knowledge with my students. For me, Jiu-Jitsu is a gift, and I want to share it with good people out there."

Brazilian Jiu-Jitsu has origins in Japan. Kosen Judo was an adaptation of various forms of Japanese Jiu-Jitsu, and originally involved ground fighting, or "grappling," known as *newaza*. Modern Judo abandoned this component and became more sport-oriented, focusing primarily on throws from a standing

position. The Gracie family took the original newaza component of Judo and adapted it into an ingenious and powerful system. They were able to achieve this through continuous *randori*, or "sparring." They focused on the ground game, because that's where fights likely end up. The ground is the great equalizer.

"Jiu-Jitsu is primarily self defense," says Rob. "Master Helio always emphasized that point." But over the years, Jiu-jitsu evolved into a sport. Jiu-Jitsu is effective because it can be practiced at full speed against a resisting opponent. The Brazilian Jiu-Jitsu student understands the unpredictability of a resisting opponent, and empirically knows what works and what doesn't. This is one of the reasons Brazilian Jiu-jitsu is widely considered the most effective, battle-tested martial art in the world. It has become the core discipline behind MMA.

If you pass by Robert's academy on Adams Avenue, you probably wouldn't even notice it. There's no flashy signage, no prominent indication that anything is going on behind the tinted glass storefront window. Like Robert Lovi himself, it's low profile and unassuming. There's no marketing hyperbole—just a long, narrow room with mats. “This is my office,” Rob smiles. “I don't care about fancy stuff. I'm here to teach Jiu-Jitsu. Jiu-Jitsu happens inside your head, and the business decorations are meaningless. For me, the most important thing was buying the best mats available. A marathon runner doesn't wear cheap sneakers. In Jiu-Jitsu, the mats are our gear.”

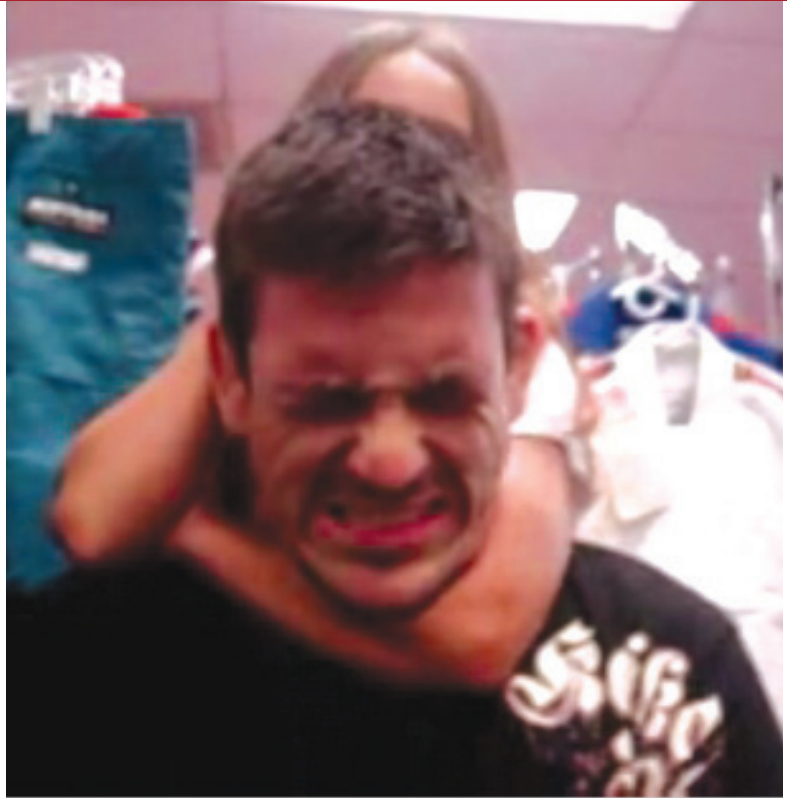
When asked how his school is different from other academies, he replied, “San Diego is a great place to learn Jiu-Jitsu; there are a lot of excellent places to learn. Our academy has a different focus than most places. We aren't competition-oriented, so our classes are more laid back and fun. There's no tension or feeling that you have something to prove.”

Rob feels that many people avoid learning Jiu-jitsu because they feel intimidated or don't want to be injured. “What they don't understand,” Rob explains, “is that Jiu-Jitsu isn't like that. When done correctly, it's really flowing and smooth; more like Zen than anything else. Your mind and body start working together, and there's a point in your training where your body just knows how to move automatically. You just feel like you're in a different plane of existence for the time you're on the mat. We all have a lot of respect for each other, and everybody's here to learn and enjoy Jiu-Jitsu. I give a lot of private lessons to business owners who felt intimidated to come to class. But once they saw what it was all about, they had the confidence to transition from private lessons to group lessons. They tell me how much Jiu-Jitsu has changed their lives.”

Robert emphasizes crisp, precise technique. “A lot of big guys come in and just start using their strength. What they don't realize is that the more they exert themselves, the more it works against them.” Jiu-Jitsu uses an opponent's movements to set up a superior position. From that position, the Jiu-jitsu student then goes for the “submission,” a joint lock or blood choke that ends when the opponent “taps,” or submits. The submission is performed using physics and biomechanics. “If you're using a lot of force, then you're doing the move wrong. The idea is to let your opponent



Lovi demonstrates one of his signature techniques that he calls the “L-Mount.” Using body leverage against the elbow joint, the opponent must surrender before the elbow is broken.



(Top Left) Lovi with students in Newfoundland. (Lower Left) Lovi with Grand Master Helio Gracie. (Right) A screen-shot from the famous viral video that demonstrates the tremendous power of leverage. Jiu-Jitsu World Champion and undefeated UFC fighter, Demian Maia, tries to resist being rendered unconscious from a mata leão blood choke. The person doing the choking was a 9-year-old girl. Maia had to tap out. - Photo courtesy of Team Brasa - [www.brazilianblackbelt.com](http://www.brazilianblackbelt.com)

use the power. If he pushes, you pull. If he pulls, you push. Either way, you're letting him do all the work. He's essentially defeating himself."

Rob says that people start Jiu-Jitsu for the self defense, and stay for the mental challenge. "The first class, the student just doesn't know what's going on. Positions feel awkward, and it's usually tough to remember sequences. But by the third class, something just clicks, and then it starts to make sense. It's really interesting to watch that paradigm shift with new students."

Lovi says that it's a tall task explaining what Jiu-jitsu is all about. "It's one of those things in life that you just need to experience in order to understand." The discipline teaches students to move and think in different ways, some of which are counter-intuitive. Some people liken Jiu-Jitsu to Sun Tzu's Art of War.

Tzu opens the first chapter by writing, 'War is deception.' Every move in Jiu-

*"We aren't competition oriented so our classes are more laid back and interactive."*

Jitsu is meant to deceive the opponent into mistaking your intentions. This is where it becomes a totally mental game," says Robert. Jiu-Jitsu is often referred to as "physical chess." For this reason, the martial art has drawn a lot of interest among the least likely of students—business professionals.

Tom Lappin is an attorney with a successful law practice in downtown San Diego. He says that he enjoys the mental challenge as much as the physical component. "There aren't a lot of activities in life that provide mental stimulation along with great cardio, natural strength training and self defense. This is some-

thing I can see myself doing for the rest of my life, and the fringe benefits are all useful."

In a move that shocked the chess world, child chess prodigy Joshua Waitzkin left the professional realm of chess to pursue Brazilian Jiu-Jitsu full-time. This apparent non-sequitur comes as no surprise to any student of Gracie Jiu-Jitsu.

Robert Lovi and his dojo may not look like much, but looks can be deceiving. His students think he's the hidden gem of San Diego, and Lovi has achieved a loyal following. "My students have come a long way. At first they think it's an impossible journey, but I always repeat Professor Sauer's mantra: 'What's difficult today is easy tomorrow.'"

Website for the Robert Lovi Academy  
<http://www.graciesd.com>

