



Mistake No. 1. Lewis Paleias blocks Ed Goh's initial attack, but fails to either damage or control his attacker's arm (1). Ed slashes Lew's wrist on retraction (2). Twisting his body and arm magnifies the cut. The attacker controls the injured arm and finishes the fight by slashing Lew's neck (3).

Respect the Blade

WHEN IT COMES TO FIGHTING SOMEONE WITH A KNIFE, WHAT YOU *DON'T* KNOW WILL SURELY GET YOU KILLED

By Lewis Paleias





1 Plyometrics/Flinch Response. Face your partner (1). As soon as you perceive movement, jump to the side while twisting to the right, blocking/smashing the elbow and forearm (2). Lewis simultaneously smashes Ken's forearm/elbow, breaks his knee and attacks the eyes (3).



The knife is a tool that strikes terror in most people, martial artists included. If it doesn't scare you, then you are an incredibly good fighter, extremely naive or have a death wish. Many martial artists have little, if any, knowledge of how to use—and defend against—an edged weapon. Most films depict knife combat in a totally unrealistic manner. In fact, a lot of the so-called “knife defense” techniques practiced in some schools would probably get you killed in an actual self-defense confrontation. Some of the flaws include:

- Assumptions are made that the defender is aware of the knife.
- Techniques are too complicated. You lose sensitivity and fine motor skills under stress.
- Most defenses neglect the free limbs of attacker.
- Techniques are usually taught against static attacks (your partner singly thrusts and freezes).
 - X-blocks and rising blocks. The knife wielder will slice deeply on retraction.

SCENE 1: The man steps out from the shadows into the glare of the streetlight. He's wearing sunglasses and the collar of his motorcycle jacket hides most of his tattooed face. Lewis, sensing danger, slows his pace. The man steps forward, blocking Lewis' path. Pulling a large knife out of his leather jacket, he shouts, "Give me your money, or die!" Lewis, a master of Chow Mein kung-fu, steps back into a fighting stance. Suddenly the man lunges forward, thrusting the knife at Lew's face. Executing a spinning roundhouse kick, Lewis knocks the weapon out of the thug's hand, pulls back his iron palm and...

Uhhggg! This is so unbelievable that I'm even making myself sick. Not only is it full of clichés, it's not even remotely believable. For some reason many martial art techniques assume that the knife wielder has no idea how to use it. Well, whether or not he can use it, once he pulls the knife the unarmed man is at a serious disadvantage, and if the attacker has even a little knowledge of how to use the blade, the chances are that he'll cut his victim to pieces.

Let's go back and revise my work of fiction. Instead of the high kick (which would probably have ended with a slashed femoral artery) Lewis deflects the thrust with a mid-level block, but his move lacks enough power to either damage his opponent's arm or unbalance him. Before he can continue with a punch or knee, Lewis feels a



Grabbing too close to the wrist can be dangerous. Even if you grab the wrist (1), the attacker can easily rotate his knife to cut your tendons (2). The larger the knife, the farther up his arm your check/control will have to be to avoid his rotational cuts (3-4).



Mistake No. 2. Lew makes the mistake of using a rising block against Ed's attack (1), exposing his inner arm and wrist. Ed promptly slashes (2). The attacker then traps the injured arm and follows with a stab to the stomach (3). A more effective response to the same attack would have been a simultaneous parry and counter to Ed's eyes (4), followed by an arm break (5). This allows you to control the knifehand at all times while angling away from a punch, kick or motor dysfunction smash to the forearm or an eye attack (6).

sudden sharp stinging in his wrist and realizes that while withdrawing his knife, his enemy has cut him deeply. His horror turns to shock as the blood starts pumping through the air. As he clutches his wound, the thug plunges the weapon into his stomach...

Hold on! But what if the block had worked? What if Lew was so fast that he saw the knife thrust in time to stop it with a block so powerful that it broke the thug's arm? Okay. Let's try to rerun this scenario, as it would probably happen:

As Lewis is walking past the streetlight, thinking about his miserable boss, he doesn't notice a man approaching, hands at his side. Walking past, the man suddenly grabs Lew's jacket and hisses, "Your wallet, NOW!" Without waiting, kung-fu Lew immediately punches the guy's face. OUCH! Lew feels a sharp pain in his hand. The man, holding a hidden blade against the inside of his arm, has blocked Lew's punch with it. In the same instant, as Lew retracts his spurting wrist, the man slashes forward against Lew's neck.

There are lots of ways to keep the knife out of sight before the first cut. You can use the opposite hand to pull and unbalance your victim or as a screen to hide the knife's approach. In fact, statistics show that most victims never even see the knife—they think that they were punched, not stabbed. I was attacked, many years ago, by a thug wielding a straight-edged razor as I was carrying a bag of garbage to a dumpster late at night. No words were spoken. He just approached and struck.

Instinctively, I blocked with the garbage bag and pumped up by the adrenaline "rush," proceeded to strike him everywhere I could with my fists. I must have been winning, because his face was one bloody mess. He turned and limped away as a car approached. Feeling faint, it took me a while to realize that all "his" blood (plus a couple of pints more) was spurting from my half-severed finger like a fire hose. I never felt a thing.

So how do you defend against a weapon that you don't see? I remember once, long ago, someone asked that question while my teacher, Dr. Yang Jwing Ming, was teaching the knife disarms that are part of the YMAA curriculum. He answered, "Always assume that someone attacking you has a hidden blade in his hand; that way you won't be surprised when it's true."

On the other hand, he also told me, "Only a desperate man fights barehanded against a knife." If you are fortunate enough to know that your attacker has a weapon then, as the great Dan Inosanto once said at a workshop, "You need to get an equalizer." This might be a chair, stick, garbage can lid, a soda can—any hard (or hot) object that comes readily to hand. Don't assume that your 10 or so years of martial arts training are a guaranteed solution. Without an equalizer you have a life-threatening problem. You see, to kick, hit or throw your opponent, you first have to get past his knife, and every time you do that you risk having at least your hand, arm or leg cut. Don't assume that you can take a cut to any of these "minor" areas and still finish the fight. I once had a teacher insist we slash a standing rib roast with a 3-inch lock blade. Even if you do it only half-right, the length and depth of the wound should give you a realistic assessment of how easy—or hard—it would be to continue fighting after receiving such a wound.

A knife will cut both on extension and retraction of a movement, so, if he misses, the knife wielder doesn't have to re-chamber his hand and start again. Whether he uses his weapon offensively or defensively to block, parry or jam your attack, the result will always be the same: You will bleed. The speed that a knife moves obviously depends upon the expertise of the person wielding it, but even an amateur will appear fast (for instance, a 6-inch blade is that much closer to you than simply a fist, thus you have to be at least 6 inches quicker to avoid being cut). Police research has proven that,

at a range of up to 20 feet, the knife is a faster, more effective weapon than a handgun. On top of that, only 10 percent of people shot actually die from their wounds. Compare that with 30 percent of those stabbed. Here's more police research, thanks to Jon Vazquez, director of the 911 Training Academy:

1. The most popular strike is the hammer strike: either straight down or diagonal.
2. Knife attacks are incredibly accurate, penetrate deeper than bullets and create remarkable permanent cavities that rip through organs with one stroke.
3. The typical depth of stab wounds in homicide cases is 1 to 1-1/4 inches through the rib cage and into the heart.
4. The main types of wounds causing death are single stab wounds.

5. Because of the small surface area, the amount of force per unit area is tons per square inch. Police ballistic armor is not designed to protect against stabs but may afford some defense against slashing.

So, let's assume the worst-case scenario: You are unarmed, with no equalizer available and you are about to be attacked by a man with a blade. What are the principles that might help you stay in one piece? Here's some suggestions.

1. Flee! Run Away!

Learn to listen to your intuition. If something doesn't feel right, it probably isn't. The best defense is to not be there in the first place. When unarmed, always try to escape. Even during the fight, you don't have to win. If you can "sting" him enough and injure him or get at least 10 feet away from him, research shows that you can escape without him following. Your defensive response should be to create distance. If it is a robbery, don't hand him the wallet. Toss it either left or right and flee in the opposite direction.

2. Be Decisive

If you sense that a fight is inevitable, don't wait to be the first one hit. Watch for initial body language that indicates you are about to be attacked and make your move decisively. A first-move advantage can help you get and stay on top of the fight right from the start, providing the blade is not yet completely out. **Danger Cues:** Hands in palming position or subtle/furtive motions;

wandering eyes—escape route or target glance; change in demeanor (tightening jaw

"An old man with a small knife is younger than a young man with no knife: With every drop of blood, the young man ages rapidly."

and hidden hand); abrupt change in direction toward you; knife sheath unsnapping (or sound of Velcro) or clicking of blade locking; stance and kinesics; subject profile. Once his blade is out, however, let him come to you.

3. Rehearse

You need a mental plan. Be prepared by thinking through a fight just as you would other tactical scenarios. Where would you hit first? What would you do after you land your first blow? What would you do if you get hit and lose your balance or become momentarily dazed? What would you do if your fight goes to the ground, as many do? Find a couple of serious training partners and practice your knife defenses from all angles, starting from slow speed to combat speed. Practice only with people who can control their power and are capable of aborting their attack/throw rather than harming their partners.

4. Stay True to Safe Defense Principles

If your techniques are complicated or if they depend on your being faster or stronger than your attacker, you're going to get a rude awakening; weaker people usually don't go after stronger people. The attacker already has two advantages: He has already chosen to use the weapon and he probably has the luxury of the first move.

Master Chan Ching Kai once said, "An old man with a small knife is younger than a young man with no knife: With every drop of blood, the young man ages rapidly."

1. Don't aim to block and counter. Unless you are incredibly fast (yes, fear slows us down) you run the risk of having your arms/legs slashed. Instead, look to parry and/or control his knife arm while simultaneously hitting him. You need to give him, as Dr. John Painter calls it, a "brain blink." That's when you can apply chin na, a break or a throw.

2. If you kick, don't kick high. High kicks, unless you are phenomenally talented, will allow the opponent to slash or stab your leg. It's much safer (and just as effective) to kick low, aiming for the knee, shin or ankle. If you (luckily) jam or control his knife hand, a knee to the peroneal nerve in the thigh or a stomp on his leg would be a welcome addition.

3. While you must pay acute attention to the knife, remember that he can (and will) punch, kick, headbutt, elbow and bite.

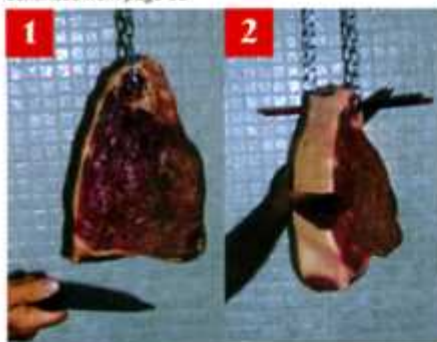
4. Keep moving; a static stance is called a "target." If you're so close to your opponent that he can reach you without stepping (Red Zone) and he moves first, you'll probably get cut; your brain can't react that fast (Reaction Gap Syndrome). Maneuver so he must take at least 1-1/2 steps to reach you (Yellow Zone). This gives you reaction time to move off the line of attack and counter or flee.

5. Hit Where He'll Be

If you try and attack through his defenses, he merely has to wait and slice your hands and legs as they come into his range. It's tougher for him to counter if you attack where he's going to be. You know where he's going—at you! As you move offline, fire your attack at where you were. Let him run into your fist or leg.

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Imagine this slash on your arm or leg (1-2).

Consistent practice with your partners will allow you to get the hang of this trick.

6. Whatever It Takes to Survive

There are two key things to remember in a fight. First, your life and family don't depend on you fighting fair; they depend on you fighting to win. Secondly, there's a big difference between fighting for control and fighting to survive. If it's a survival issue, anything goes. When your life hangs in the balance, it's crucial for you to think unconventionally and use anything you can to defend yourself. Slamming a door in the face; stabbing a pen into the hand, neck or eye; throwing someone down the stairs; pounding a phone against the bridge of the nose; biting; kicking; scratching—whatever it takes to survive is what you need to do.

7. Do You Have the Fighting Spirit?

Shock and panic can be deadly enemies in a fight. Be sure you are prepared to suffer injury and continue fighting. Be prepared for the sight of blood—you probably will be cut. Also, learn some basic first-aid so that if cut, you know how to treat the injury; serious cuts need immediate attention. You don't want to win the fight only to bleed to death a few minutes later. Stories abound of officers surviving against tremendous odds, even in the worst situations with the most horrific injuries. Unfortunately, there are also stories of officers who died after being overcome by the shock of suffering comparatively minor injuries.

8. Hit to Create Dysfunction

Never spar with anyone. Poking and jabbing (unless directed to a vital point such as the eye) are not going to end a fight. Full blows delivered in a calculated fashion and designed to deliver the impact necessary to end a threat is what you need to be issuing. Educate yourself on body points that, when attacked, will cause dysfunction in your opponent and

restrict—better yet, eliminate—his ability to continue fighting. This includes strikes to motor points: arms, the lower abdominal area and the legs. I teach all these points in my Active Countermeasures classes, and I'm consistently surprised at how few martial artists know the most effective dysfunction points.

9. Control the Delivery System

Don't go for the knife or wrist; they're moving too fast to really see. Learn to control the elbow and arm rather than the wrist/hand. A skilled fighter will fold at the elbow if his wrist is controlled. If you jam or smash at the forearm, elbow or above, you connect directly into his spine and can move and unbalance him. Here's a great exercise: Have your partner put a piece of tape on his wrist and elbow (or stand in front of a mirror). Start slashing while trying to focus on the tape. You'll notice that while the hand is a blur, you'll still be able to track (and hit) the elbow tape.

“Always assume that someone attacking you has a hidden blade in his hand.”

10. Keep Breathing!

A common instinct in a fight is holding your breath, which can be very dangerous. Lack of oxygen will cause you to tire more easily, become dizzy and could even lead to passing out. Equally important is the fact that being struck while your breath is held can lead to serious internal injuries. Remember to consciously tell yourself to breathe throughout the fight. It could make all the difference.

11. Become a Knife Fighter

The best way to learn how to defend against a knife is to learn the techniques and strategies that a knifefighter uses. This will greatly improve your survival chances even if you are unarmed. Knife-fighting is a highly developed art that requires speed, timing, sensitivity and courage.

Here's an exercise I practice with security forces that will give you a cold reality check (though it's actually a lot of fun): Get a couple of red water-soluble

markers (not permanent magic markers or you'll look like Halloween for a month), you and a gung-ho partner dress in long-sleeved white shirts (eye goggles are a good idea) and just go at it. Even at friendly speeds you'll probably find yourselves covered in red lines. I find that this exercise doesn't work as well when you practice against your own students, since, out of respect, they rarely come at you with the same power or speed that police/security force officers do. These guys want to make sure your training works in the street and don't care about your title.

Some people think that fighting is natural, that it's hard-wired in the brain. “Fight or flight,” on-off; it sounds almost instantaneous. In actuality, all humans follow a multi-step pattern: 1. We stop what we are doing; 2. We turn toward the source of the threat; 3. We freeze while we try to assess the peril; 4. If we see danger, we hide if we can; 5. If we can't hide, we flee; and 6. If we can't flee, we fight for our lives. Reaction and scenario training can greatly speed up your response process.

Also, expand the horizons of your art. Don't be afraid to check out other systems and styles. Find great teachers and be prepared to invest the time it takes to absorb what they have to offer. I've been fortunate to have been exposed to great teachers, such as my friend Dr. Yang, Jwing Ming, master Liang Shou Yu and master Chan Ching Kei. Attend workshops and seminars; they're taking place all around the country. Just look at what's listed in the Main Events section of this magazine. Try to glean as much as you can and take it back home and practice.

Finally, go beyond the very notion of Asian martial arts. Working with great police/military trainers such as John Vazquez, training director of the 911 Training Academy, and William Garrison, hostage negotiation trainer of the Crisis Resolution Institute, has expanded my conceptions and application of my art (plus allowed me the expertise to teach in a different arena). There is a huge body of scientific techniques that can greatly increase our awareness and ability to pick up non-verbal cues, all of which will increase our level of response. 🐉

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