

Tough Guys: A survival guide to life in South Africa
By Jono Le Feuvre

When Lee Wiltshire¹ passed the man loitering in the subway he was convinced the character was up to no good. He did his best to make eye contact with the man, but the character's gaze was as shifty as his demeanour. Lee passed by the man without incident while his mind continued to play over the possible scenarios that could have unfolded. Trained in the art of knife fighting and self-defense, Lee fancied his chances in a knife fight – if he'd actually had a knife. Unfortunately all he had was a newspaper and some low fat yoghurt – neither product dangerous enough to be banned from airline carry-on luggage. Lee was still teasing out the various ways his attacker could have approached him when the knife came swinging over his right shoulder. The subway man had indeed been bent on a blitz, and Lee was the target.

But let me interject here to paint a more complete picture. Lee is not a big man. He does not ride a Harley Davidson. Lee does not have a shaved head; he doesn't spend much time in bars, and has never broken a pool cue on anyone's skull, spine or nasal cartilage. In fact, at first glance, there is absolutely nothing tough about Lee. Even his name is a little girly. And yet Lee was not going to allow himself to be intimidated by a man or his weapon. He deftly managed to step out from under the attacker's knife and swatted him away with the newspaper while nimbly dodging some feeble stab attempts from the rather surprised mugger. The mugger soon gave up and began nonchalantly strolling away. This filled Lee with a deep rage. He is a law-abiding citizen in a free country. Lee should have no reason to be afraid. This knave with a knife should be the one in fear – instead of brazenly seeking to end a man for his groceries in broad daylight.

Now the fact that Lee outwitted his armed aggressor is worth noting, but what is of even greater importance was the fact that Lee had access to a mystery ingredient in his makeup that refused to allow him to be intimidated by an armed aggressor who clearly had the upper hand. In short, Lee was tough.

May the Biggest Stick Win

But way back when life was all about sabre-teeth and wooden clubs, toughness was measured by the size of your weapon (I'm talking about the wooden club) and conflict was usually won by wielder of the biggest stick. It must have been awfully confusing then, for the biggest-stick carrier (we'll call him Barry), when he was trounced, time and time again, by a small cave dweller, who never carried anything larger than a birch twig. Very soon, in a series one-sided skirmishes, Big Stick Barry had lost his wife, his stick and his collection of shrew skulls to the devilish twig-wielder. What Barry learned very quickly was that there is more to being tough than big sticks – and if Small Twig man could learn it, then so could he.

Welcome to the Tough Club

In that respect, very little has changed over the last few thousand years. No matter whether you're facing a mugger in a parking lot, or a drunken Bulls fan after his side just got trounced by the Stormers, there are certain elements that will either work for

¹ This *is* his real name, which has been stated deliberately because he deserves recognition for his valorous antics.

you or against you in your efforts to survive. Your strength, reflexes, surroundings, mental awareness, and fear all need to be handled correctly in order to triumph. Surprisingly enough, mastery over these elements doesn't come naturally to us all. Such mastery needs to be learned, nay, *ingrained* into the very fibre of our being, so that when the surge of adrenaline grips us, late one night in a poorly lit back alley, we are able to rise to the occasion and show the world, or at least our would-be attacker, what toughness personified looks like. Are you ready for the transformation?

Fatal schoolboy errors

"You will never rise to the level of your expectations," says Morne Swanepoel from CombatCoaching.com, "you fall to level of your training." This is Morne's high-performance street fighting self-defence guru speak for "you're not as hot as think you are." Another rookie mistake people make is not only to overestimate your own abilities, but to *underestimate* your attacker's. "A 13-year-old boy with a knife in his hand is a very dangerous threat," says Morne. "He may not look like it at first, but age doesn't come into the equation here. If you are being confronted or attacked by someone who is seemingly smaller or weaker than you, remember that, more often than not, they pose a real threat, or they would not have confronted you in the first place." Parts of being tough means having a realistic idea of the threat you're facing. A man who agrees with this sentiment is Dieter Winckelmann – owner of Tactical Advantage self-defence training in Gauteng. "Possibly one of the biggest mistakes that untrained people make is to think that only the other person will get hurt in the fight. The truth is that if you find yourself in a punching fight, prepare to get hit. And if you land yourself in a knife fight, be prepared to get cut."

Training tough

"There are both mental and physical aspects to preparing yourself for survival on the streets," says Morne. "When my students progress in their training, there is a definite change taking place mentally and physically. One becomes 'tougher' as you learn to deal with the physical contact of your training partners, but you also become more aware of your strengths and weaknesses. You learn what your body will allow you to do – depending on your fitness, age, body structure etc. Mentally you become tougher by learning to hang in there when the training pushes you to your limits. This is an important aspect to handling a violent attack – to be able to endure and do what is necessary to survive a situation."

Freeze, this is a stick up

The trouble for most of us, however, is that, faced with an attacker, whether it's a seven-foot behemoth making passes at our wives, or a hi-jacker at a traffic intersection, we freeze up and fail to do anything at all. Under high levels of stress, our sympathetic nervous system (SNS) kicks into action. The SNS sets about preparing your body for battle without really consulting anyone important – like the brain, for instance. The SNS releases hormones like adrenaline into your blood stream in order to make your body stronger, faster and "sometimes even anaesthetized to pain," says Geoff Thompson, author of *Dead or Alive: The Definitive Self-Protection Book*. "The more dangerous the situation the bigger the adrenalin release. The bigger the release, the better you perform, but by the same count, the bigger the release, the harder it is to control," continues Geoff.

In a flash, your pupils are dilated, your heart rate is up, your brain has all the blood it could possibly want, and less important functions, like digestion, have their blood

supply dramatically reduced (which explains the sinking feeling in the pit of your stomach).

“With all this going on, the result is that you may not be able to see the same, think the same, or move in the same way,” says Kevin Davis, a tactical survival contributor to Officer.com. “We must try to understand how stress affects us so that we can anticipate the changes. Our bodily responses are there to heighten our mental and physical abilities, but, if we are unfamiliar with the symptoms that come with a surge of adrenaline, we are left shaky, nauseous and rooted to the spot. Our lack of action gives the attacker complete power to decide what happens next.

Which brings us to a point where we can actually learn something from Big Stick Barry, despite all his defeats. “In primeval days when man had to fight to live and eat, the feeling of fear was an everyday occurrence that would have felt as natural as eating or drinking,” says Thompson. “In today's society, some people go through a whole lifetime without ever experiencing it fully. So when a situation arises that causes the adrenalin to flow, we are so unfamiliar with it that we naturally neither welcome it, nor like it. We panic.”

“The best way to deal with this is to ‘rehearse’ or expose oneself to these scenarios, within the correct training environment,” says Morne.

“In a violent conflict a cry for help is sent to the subconscious mind, which digs around for an appropriate answer. Instead it comes up with an “error” message – ‘no information on this subject’. That’s why one freezes up,” explains Dieter. “You need to place the correct information into your brain. This is done through correct, meticulous, and repetitive training.”

Being the Hard Target

But being tough begins long before the much spoken about do-or-die moment. “Being tough means possessing survival instinct and awareness,” explains Swanepoel. “Every time your brain senses danger it goes through four steps: observation, orientation, decision-making, and action. It never changes the order, or skips a step. Being aware of this process will set you well on your way to avoiding possible nasty situations.

“By constantly **observing** your surroundings you can give yourself far more time to react to possible danger. The images you see are packed with information – someone walking toward you, a car blocking your path, the sight of a knife, or the intention in an attacker’s eyes,” continues Morne. “Your brain then **orients** you in relation to the threat. Is it immediate, or do you have some time to escape? Do I have the upper hand or not? After working these things out, you are now in a position to **decide** on the best course of action – to run, fight, or even comply with a mugger’s demands. Once you’ve made this decision you need to follow through with your **action** immediately. A second’s hesitation can change your fate in a conflict situation,” he adds.

“That’s very well,” you might say, “But how do I know what to look for. After all, one can’t predict the future.” And it’s true – you can’t predict the future. “But there are some things you can look out for when dealing with possibly violent characters. When being approached by someone look out for a red flushed face, rapid, shallow breathing, a fixed stare, or a rigid body. More pointers to possibly nasty characters include shaky hands or clenched fists, irrational behaviour, and any signs that the person is under the influence of drugs or alcohol,” lists Swanepoel.

Choose Flight

So you're prepared to get punched, you've learnt to control your adrenaline, you know how to pick a shady character, so surely it's fight time, right? As the great Braveheart once said, "We didn't get all dressed up for nothing." But, sadly, for fightclubbers, there is still one more obstacle to overcome on the path to true toughness – and it's a biggie. Gentleman, may I welcome into the ring, weighing in at almost nothing, but capable of fatal damage, your ego. For all the ways that the various approaches to self-defence differ, the one thing that they agree upon is that escaping conflict is always first prize. "Proper training should open your eyes to the world around you," says Winckelmann. "It should enable you to make an informed, unemotional decision to avoid conflict *wherever* possible." But what about when your dignity is stripped, or your pride wounded? What happens when my lovely wife is insulted by a beer-swilling, stench-steeped miscreant? Surely a tough guy defends his wife's dignity? Well, that depends on your perspective. "Being tough is about being principled, steadfast and disciplined," says Dieter. "What your ego will do is to propel some inappropriate behaviour into full blown public violence, which carries with it, not only the risk of injury or death (whether intentional or accidental), but also some fairly serious legal consequences. An insult to one's dignity (or your wife's for that matter) seems a small price to pay to avoid that." And that's a tough decision to have to make...

Side bars:

The tough guy's hierarchy of needs

Combatcoaching.com's Morne Swanepoel has spent more than 30 years in the martial arts fighting, and personal security industry. All the years have convinced of one thing – conflict is to be avoided wherever possible. Check out how a tough guy handles conflict:

1. **Escape.** "By using ones awareness one can escape most situations. For example, you're standing at your local bar having a drink and you can sense some guys giving you the dirty looks and passing some comments. The best thing to do is to get into your car and go to another pub, if that's what you want to do. If a certain area is known for hijackings and violent crime, avoid the area. If you are living in an area which is known for home invasions, move to another area. If you are confronted by three guys in a dark alley, don't try and duke it out with them (even if you think you have all the training you need). Escape, escape, escape."
2. **Control.** "When dealing with some punk looking for a fight, you can defuse the situation verbally by telling the guy you aren't looking for any trouble. Sometimes, however, that isn't enough and physical conflict is inevitable. Use the least amount of force possible to control a situation – especially if the person is under the influence of alcohol. They may have no idea what they're doing. Use the wall or the floor to control the attacker. In a mugging situation you may have to find a way to disarm the attacker or tie him up until the police arrive. If you can control him this will always be a better option than your last resort – destroy."
3. **Destroy.** "When all else fails and the confrontation has progressed to such a level where you or your family's lives are in danger, or they stand a chance of being seriously injured, then it is time to 'destroy'. This means taking the fight

to your attacker and doing whatever is necessary to protect yourself and your family.”

For when you really have to hit something:

Punching another human being is no walk in the park. You need to be able to apply the right amount of force while doing the least amount of damage to your own body. This is not as easy as it sounds. Here are some pointers on delivering the necessary evil:

Tools for the job:

“Generally one uses the palm of the hand to strike hard parts of the human body, like the skull,” instructs Morne. “For softer parts, like muscle, you’d use a fist. Being able to make a fist around something in your hand, like a pen, will result in a much more devastating punch.”

Hitting the mark:

“You can have the most powerful punch in the world, but if it misses its target, it’s useless to you,” says Morne. “Aiming for the jaw bone is more likely to give a spinal twitch, which will result in the much feared knockout. Other areas that can be effective are the James Bond back-of-the-neck strike, the neck itself, the temple, and the ribs.”

Remember the Tough Guy’s hierarchy of needs:

“In the end, one should rather be looking to apply submission holds i.e. blood/air choke, which have far better results than any strike. It’s also a more humane way of dealing with an attacker and safer in the sense that, if applied correctly, you stand an extremely slim chance of a fatal injury (or those nasty assault charges),” adds Morne. For more information on training classes and nationwide workshops visit:

www.combatcoaching.com

Taking higher ground:

In any fight one is always trying to keep your head and stay on your feet. “At a reflex level this makes sense, as it offers you more options in the fight or flight response mode. But this is not necessarily the only way to do things:

“A lot of fights do end up on the floor and being comfortable with being on the ground and using ground-based fighting puts you at a great advantage,” says Dieter Winkelmann from Tactical Advantage. “It gives you a fallback position. When used correctly, the ground can be a transit point for regaining your feet through things like rolling. It can also provide a good foundation, which, if used in conjunction with an attacker’s poor balance, can be used to dislodge him or pin him down.”

For more information on Tactical Advantage training visit

www.tacticaladvantage.co.za

Our experts:

Morne Swanepoel is the founder and president of Combatcoaching.com. He is one of the most qualified Jeet Kune Do (high performance street fighting and self-defence) instructor’s in the world and delivers nationwide training workshops.

Dieter Winkelmann heads up the Gauteng-based Tactical Advantage Self-Defence institute, which specialises in corporate self-defence workshops. Dieter served in the SAPS Reservists for ten years and also studied under the Grand Master of Ninjutsu, Dr Masaaki Hatsumi in Japan.

Bob Davies is the founder and director of the Durban-based Wu-Shin Chi-Dao Foundation for self-development. He has been teaching and training in the martial arts for more than 30 years and was awarded his Springbok Colours for Karate in 1984. He also happens to be the man who trained Leigh Wiltshire. Want to beat off an armed mugger with an unrolled newspaper? Bob Davies is your man. For more information visit www.wushin.co.za.