

Jiu-Jitsu and adaptation

The doctors decided to amputate that mangled right leg. But Andre Glodzinski, then a white belt, had other plans for it

Still a white belt in Jiu-Jitsu at the time, Andre Glodzinski was preparing a chicken nugget dinner when destiny came a-knocking and changed his life forever. At the door, on that 27th day of May 1995, was an acquaintance who'd run out of gas. All he was after was a ride to the gas station nearest where they were in São Paulo. Two blocks away, though, a car careening down the wrong side of the road lost control in the curve and rammed into Glodzinski's motorcycle just where the Cia Paulista academy student's right leg was. Starting then, against his will, Glodzinski became a success story for adapting and overcoming adversity in Jiu-Jitsu. Having persisted with his training, he has now racked up gold medals at every belt and division, and now teaches in Sacramento, Calif. How'd he do it? GRACIEMAG seeks to find out in the following interview.

Between 1995 and the present, what was the worst moment for you?

At the start, when I woke up in the emergency room at São Luiz Hospital in São Paulo, the first question I remember going through my head is, "Will I be able to compete at the São Paulo State Championship and represent my team in a few days?" Clearly I couldn't. It was a lot more serious than I'd thought. There were so many difficulties, starting with the pain and not being able to sleep or move. That was when I started dwelling on another question: Why me? While I was going through all that, my family was in upheaval because my mom was being treated for stomach cancer at Nove de Julho Hospital. I got over it because I had no other alternative. As I hadn't died in the accident, I didn't have much choice.

Does overcoming such strife involve a certain stubbornness? Like, for example, ignoring that inner voice saying it's not possible, you can't make it, or even refusing to believe what the doctors are telling you? What was it like in your case?

Certainly. The group of doctors that treated me at the hospital (a vascular specialist, orthopedic surgeon, plastic surgeon, neurosurgeon, psychologist, etc.) decided that, in my case, it would be better to amputate the leg, as treatment would be really drawn-out and painful. They also said that what remained of my leg wasn't worth keeping. So my dad went to have a talk with them, and said "If there's any way to save the leg, that's the direction we'll take." After being hospitalized for almost three months I was sent home, and I still had metal rods going through my leg, a percutaneous-fixation frame. So I started the next part of my treatment, with a second orthopedic doctor, and he said that I wouldn't be able to bend the leg, and fighting was out of the question. Well, every time he'd say that, I'd be saying something else in my head.

You had less than a year of Jiu-Jitsu under your white belt at the time. Why did you persist?

I'd only done Jiu-Jitsu for eight months but it was already my favorite activity. In fact, it had been love at first sight. I'd already competed in Kyokushin karate and kickboxing before that, but as soon as I watched my first Jiu-Jitsu class and saw for myself my first armar at the academy in my neighborhood, I realized I was wasting my time with the other martial arts. For that passion, after almost three years of treatment, I put on the gi again. There was a long while there where I was consistently training twice a day, and managed to catch up to my old teammates at purple belt.

How did you tweak your Jiu-Jitsu to suit your new condition?

I believe the first step was to accept that I wasn't the same anymore and that I no longer had 100 percent of my capabilities. From that point on, I had to change my preferred side for a lot of positions. Nor did my brain let me post the leg on the mat when carrying out or escaping positions, so I had to think a lot about what I was going to do first, to slowly but surely lose my fear. Little by little I started posting on my right foot, and it worked. A lot of the time I'd end up frustrated about the lack of sense of touch, control, strength and mobility — especially in my right foot, which had been my most effective hook foot. I started training the other side and continued trying moves to the extent that I could. You end up not planning much, just dealing with the problems as they come.

What moves were you never able to get good at? Which did you specialize in?

I had a hard time playing half-guard and other positions that required using the foot as a hook. At that time Jiu-Jitsu culture stipulated that you were either a passer or a guard player, and I had an easier time passing. With a lot of training and stretching, I started becoming a good guard player as well, which came in handy to compensate for my stand-up game, which was affected the most. Ultimately, through adaptation or just style, the armar is now the submission that comes most naturally to me.

How did your teammates help you return? How can training partners help a crash victim to get back to Jiu-Jitsu or adapt to life in the dojo?

The best help I got was to get squashed up on a daily basis by my teammates, a lot of whom were already competitors and champions. I was kind of dogged. I filled myself with that defiance, refusing to accept my lot, trying to get better at something every training session. Most of what I learned came from my mistakes and own analysis. But I also learned from my masters and teammates, regardless of their rank, for whom I now care deeply about and respect. Something else that always helped me was to explain to a sparring partner what I'd done and where he'd gone wrong. Next time around he'd always be better at defending and avoiding the hold, and that helped me

improve my game. I always forced myself to find other ways of doing the technique, and I evolved as a result. It's the mantra I always try to bang home to my students: support is essential but you can't rely only on the others to get your Jiu-Jitsu to develop.

If you get a new student who has some kind of handicap, what do you teach him?

I'll tell him or anybody else that in Jiu-Jitsu there isn't just one way of doing things or a specific recipe. The recipe is whatever you yourself come up with, according to what you've got going for or against you. The only thing you need to get good at Jiu-Jitsu is a good academy and to continue showing up every day and not give up. Learn to make the most of the days where you go home happy and satisfied, as well as the days that were more difficult and challenging.

Ultimately, are limits and handicaps in the body or in the mind?

That'll depend on the day you ask me that question (laughs). During my entire journey, I always believed I could be a good fighter, with championship titles, one who could make up for my handicaps through other attributes. At the same time, I have to accept my lack of mobility, strength, sense of touch, and my hypersensitivity, all of which are a reality to me. One thing is for sure: today my mind believes that, on a good day, there isn't a fighter in the world I can't tap out. But maybe I'm just a dreamer. ☐

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