

# HEART OF THE LION

**felipe alves de souza interviewed**

**F**elipe Alves de Souza, 29, is one of the UK's most popular and enthusiastic instructors of Brazilian Jiu-Jitsu (BJJ). Born in Rio de Janeiro, he defies the usual fighter stereotype by being a vegetarian and a Brazilian who likes the cold English weather. He is head of the Brazilian Jiu-Jitsu School, based in London. Seymour Yang went to meet Felipe to talk about his academy, his charity work and how the kids are taking to BJJ.

"I don't think I could ever kick a man in the face when he is kneeling down." Felipe Alves de Souza explains why, unlike many of his fellow masters, he could never enter a cage fighting event. "I mean, you need a certain type of..." he reaches for the right words, I suggest aggressiveness. "Yes, I don't have the aggressivity for it."

Whatever Felipe may claim, he is, in many people's eyes, one of the top three or four Brazilian Jiu-Jitsu (BJJ) instructors currently in the UK. Behind the easy going and genial persona of this devout vegetarian, there hides a strong competitive streak and the brains behind one of the fastest growing BJJ academies in the UK.

## FROM SUN AND SAND, TO RAIN AND DRIZZLE

At the age of 21, Felipe was awarded the coveted rank of black belt by the instructor who first introduced him to Jiu-Jitsu as a gangly thirteen year old. Master Jose Henrique 'Leao' Teixeira, a sixth dan black belt under the famous Gracie Barra organisation, is still a major influence. "My teacher has always been an important person in my life, I wanted to keep a link with his work, that's why I named my place after his academy, Escola De Jiu-Jitsu, which translates to Jiu-Jitsu School, and I also chose the lion for my club logo, which is what his school uses" he explains.

After gaining his black belt and finishing his university degree, a desire to explore new horizons brought Felipe to the UK in 2002, to work beside his mentor's good friend Mauricio 'Motta' Gomes. He cheerily remembers revelling in the novelty of London's cold and wet winters. "Well, you know, in the beginning it was really fun, the cold in winter, everything so new to me and for the first two years it was so fun. But yes, now [laughs], not so sure!"

The late 1990s and early 2000s saw the establishment of the first handful of BJJ academies - Gracie Barra, run by Mauricio; Alliance run by Roger Brooking; Carlson Gracie, run by Wilson Junior, and several others. The success of Royce Gracie in the early UFCs ensured a small but informed group of students to begin with. In 2004, Mauricio's son, a certain world champion known as Roger Gracie,



FELIPE ROLLING WITH HIS YOUNG PRODIGY, JAY HERRIDGE

established the Roger Gracie Academy (RGA) in Ladbroke Grove, London and Felipe became one of the founding instructors there.

Over the following years, the number of people wanting to learn BJJ exploded and the academy grew larger and larger. But unbeknownst to his students, relations between Felipe and the academy were breaking down. He declines to give the exact details but it was clearly a troubling time for him... "Yes, it was really tough, I was disappointed with certain things. I don't know why such things were happening to me, I want to think that that is just the way life is and, you know, no matter how hard it felt for me, how complicated it was, how tough things got that year... I don't regret one moment now."

In 2007, Felipe quit his post at RGA,

much to the shock of his students and many in the BJJ community. "I did not make a big deal out of it, like calling students behind their backs and saying 'hey, come train with me, don't train with them,' and this and that. That's really not my style. So I just left and, of course, it caught people by surprise."

## BJJ SCHOOL

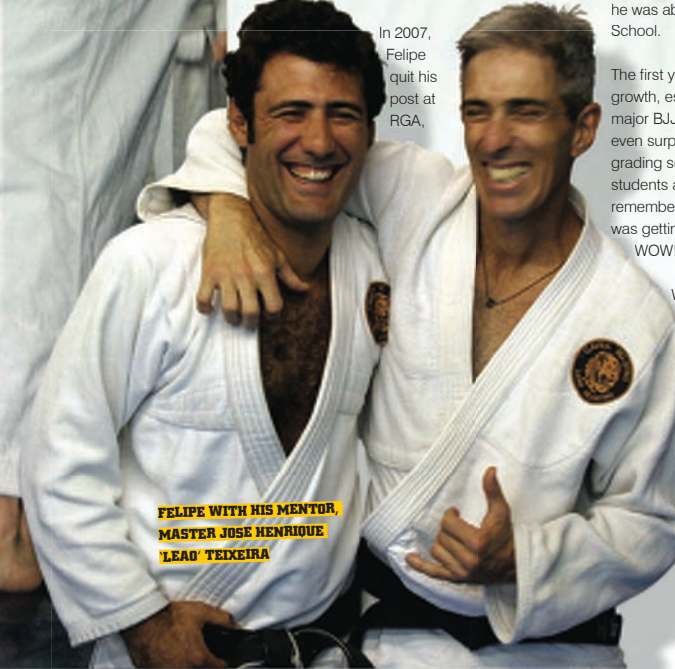
Now out of a job, Felipe began to teach by himself, renting a couple of spaces in sports halls around London. It was a good time to do so. The explosion of BJJ meant it wasn't long before he was able to launch his own academy - BJJ School.

The first year of its existence has seen rapid growth, establishing the academy as one of the major BJJ groups in the UK, a phenomenon that even surprises its founder. A photo of the summer grading session in July 2009 showed nearly 100 students and instructors lined up for the shot. "I remember standing back as the photographer was getting everyone ready and saying to myself, WOW! Have we really done that well?"

With size comes competition success. At the 2009 BJJ British Open in Birmingham, BJJ School competitors won an impressive haul of 22 medals. Not bad for a team barely 16 months old at the time. The team have set their sights higher for next year, aiming to make inroads at the prestigious IBJJF European Championships in Lisbon in January.

Does the competition success of his students drive Felipe to consider step-

**"I always said to myself, my goal is to win the world championships (Mundials) at black belt and, a couple of times, I came so close to doing that. So I would love to continue competing, but right now, my mind is too focused on building up BJJ School."**



FELIPE WITH HIS MENTOR, MASTER JOSE HENRIQUE 'LEAO' TEIXEIRA

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**DANIEL AGARD,  
GOLD MEDALLIST**

ping back on to the mat again? "I always said to myself, my goal is to win the world championships (Mundials) at black belt and, a couple of times, I came so close to doing that. So I would love to continue competing, but right now, my mind is too focused on building up BJJ School. If I put my name down I don't think I will be at the same level as those guys who are training 24/7. So I don't like to put my name to anything and not be able to do the best that I can."

Many would like to see him compete again. His strong attacking style and technical all round game mark him out as a serious contender for more success. In 2005 he was third in the world and in 2006 he was second in Europe [see competition highlights below].

## YOUNG WARRIORS

It is the kids' classes that Felipe is most renowned for. As we talk, one young boy runs over. "Thirty-two!" he cries. Felipe smiles. "Thirty-two years until you get your red belt!" the boy is beaming. Felipe, who has been a black belt for eight years, has set the youngsters a task to calculate a simple sum. No mean feat while being thrown head over heels and drilling 'armbar' joint locks.

There's an easy going atmosphere in the kids' classes. They think they are playing around and having lots of fun. To the seasoned observer, they are honing skills that will see them through their BJJ journey into tough adult competitors.

The young grapplers, who range from four to sixteen, travel from all over London and



**THE JUNIORS WITH THEIR  
EUROPEAN CHAMPIONSHIP  
MEDAL HAUL...**



**...AND THE SENIORS WITH THEIRS**

even further afield just to join his classes. And he has a knack of nurturing talent. eleven-year-old Jay Herridge, for example, has been training under Felipe for three years and has already accumulated an incredible twelve BJJ gold medals. Jay is just one of over 60 young juniors under Felipe and his team of instructors at BJJ School.

"Team" is definitely the defining characteristic of the philosophy behind BJJ School.

When talking to Felipe about his academy, he uses 'us' and 'we'. He is careful to ensure his co-instructors get their due credit for the academy's remarkable rise to prominence.

He explains, "The instructors and I meet once or more times a week to discuss the academy and review techniques,

but these meetings are not too formal. I like to see it more as just a group of friends getting together, working things out, discussing ideas about organisation and how we move forward."

## SOCIAL CONSCIENCE

But success as a BJJ instructor was not enough for a man with a strong social conscience. At the same time as starting BJJ School, he started *Future Champions*, the charity that provides free BJJ lessons to underprivileged children in exchange for good school attendance and behaviour.

The idea began as a scheme in Brazil run by Felipe's instructor, Master Teixeira, to offer BJJ scholarships to children who lived in the local favela (slum areas). The project became a huge success, offering hope and direction to lives that could have been blighted by poverty, crime and drugs.

"Last year I started the *UK Future Champions* scheme and we now have 24 kids who come from underprivileged backgrounds, who would not be able to afford normal classes. These kids come from troubled areas and after one year, the school we partnered with are amazed by our results. The kids have improved their behaviour, have improved their scores, their concentration, everything...they actually want to go to school now because they have Jiu-Jitsu afterwards!"

The charity is so important to Felipe that he almost considered quitting BJJ School to concentrate on the charity. In the end, he decided the two aspects of his life could not be separated.



**FELIPE PRIOR TO HIS BOUT AT THE  
GRACIE INVITATIONAL AT SEMI**

A *Future Champions* promotional video on [youtube](#) [see link below] shows one mum proudly enthusing at how Jiu-Jitsu transformed her shy, withdrawn son into a confident young boy with high self esteem... "We only came to the country three years ago and he was always so scared of school and taking part in group activities... these classes made it smooth and easy for him, I must say, it is like magic."

For a man who espouses strong moral ethics, it's not a complete surprise that he is a vegetarian. When I ask him about his vegetarianism, he laughs, as if this is all he is known for. "You know, nutrition for fighters is one of the biggest lies going around - people just don't know what they are talking about."

With his degree in nutritional science, he explains how he concluded in his studies that most dietary advice given to combat athletes is completely wrong and he puts forward a convincing argument. "Everyone tells me I am going to lack protein, I am going to lack B12 and this and that, and I know 100 percent this is not true. I have studied all the scientific documents regarding this and when I have competed at the highest level, I have not suffered any lack of energy or strength due to not eating meat. I actually think I am a lot healthier than most of the other athletes because of being a vegetarian."

The motto at BJJ School is 'Strength and Honour.' With such a loyal and passionate group of students and instructors, it seems the upward rise of the academy will continue, ensuring its place as one of the major BJJ teams in the UK, and perhaps further afield.



"If you can say that Jiu-Jitsu makes you fitter and happier and maybe gives you a better relationship with your family because the class you just had was a good thing in your day, then great, my job is done."

**SEYMOUR YANG**

## FURTHER INFORMATION:

### WEBSITES

1. BJJ School: [www.bjjschool.co.uk](http://www.bjjschool.co.uk)
2. Future Champions website: [www.futurechampions.org.uk](http://www.futurechampions.org.uk)
3. Future Champions promo video: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UolQ7g123qE>
4. BJJ School photos available here: <http://www.flickr.com/photos/meerkatsu/sets/72157622288059349/>

### COMPETITION HIGHLIGHTS

- 2008.** Gracie Invitational - Black Belt Champion  
**2006.** CBJJ European - Black Belt Middleweight Silver. CBJJ European - Black Belt Absolute Bronze. Gracie Invitational - Black Belt Champion.  
**2005.** CBJJ Mundial - Black Belt Lightweight Bronze.  
**2002.** CBJJ Brazilian Teams Championships - Black/Brown Belt Lightweight Silver.  
**1999.** CBJJ Brazilian Teams Championships - Purple Belt Middleweight Gold.  
**1997.** CBJJ Mundial - Blue Belt Featherweight Bronze. CBJJ Brazilian Championships - Blue Belt Absolute Champion.