

# Mob Justice

In the untamed world of martial arts entrepreneurs, online vigilantes are making their own rules

Sean Treanor

---

**R**ick Tew's Martial Science will teach you "what it takes to be a modern ninja." After two weeks of living and training at ninja camp you'll get Level One certification. You'll also be out \$500.

That is not enough training to teach ninja, of course. For that you need the more intensive two-month program in Thailand (you are responsible for travel expenses). As a student instructor you will spend two months as an assistant teacher at ninja camp. The cost of this privilege may vary. If you work hard you will advance to Level Two and you will be ready to open your own amateur club.

You'll want to be able to train people past Level One so you'll need another two months in Thailand training at the teachers camp. When you're done you'll be at Level Three and more than halfway to instructor.

If all this is too much for your wallet, you can get a lucrative career as an assistant instructor in one of Rick Tew's Martial Science schools. Of course, you must be willing to relocate to Europe. Salary will be discussed after you've committed to training. It doesn't do to discuss such things with outsiders.



If this sounds unappealing you may not have what it takes to be a modern ninja. Thousands of students do, however, whether with Martial Science or another program. Rick Tew's program is a typical example of the way many martial arts schools entice students to pour time and money into a fantasy that may never be realized.

You could also try George Dillman, who will train you to knock out an opponent with your mind at one of his famous weekend seminars for \$395. Dillman can knock out an opponent from over 10 feet away. It may not work, however, if the victim touches the roof of their mouth with their tongue, or raises one big toe while pressing down with the other. Ideally, the victim should be a student of George Dillman's.

You could learn from the mysterious Ashida Kim whose library of \$15 martial arts pamphlets carries titles like *Path of the Shadows*, *Cloak and Dagger* and *Ninja Mind Control*. Beware you don't use his secrets unwisely, or his astral spies will make short work of you. They also don't take kindly to looking into Ashida (a Caucasian)'s real name. The most that can be said is one Radford W. Davis holds the copyrights to his books.

Does all this sound like so much bull? Prove it.



Martial arts practice in America is entirely unregulated. There is no central body that issues standards, no set of accepted practices, no communication between different styles. State and local governments have nothing to say about who is and isn't a martial artist. After all, consumers are free to make their own decisions.

Many apparently decide that martial arts training should be just like martial arts movies. They want to learn secret fighting techniques, deadly skills that will make them invincible. They want ancient techniques to impart incredible powers that years of athletic training will not. An entire industry has sprung up to feed this fantasy.

Unfortunately, it can be very hard to tell the difference between fantasy and reality when studying an ancient, esoteric and exotic discipline. Not many people have any idea what martial arts training should consist of. There is almost no agreement within the martial arts establishment over what is effective training and

what is not. Consumers are either clueless or in active pursuit of a Hollywood daydream.

Investigation is expensive and the market is too small to attract much media attention, aside from cinematic mythmaking. The mainstream martial arts magazines have never made investigative journalism part of their repertoire. George Dillman, the mental KO king was *Black Belt Magazine's* instructor of the year in 1997. There is simply no money in exposing these martial arts entrepreneurs. Some people, however, are willing to do it for free.

Bullshido.com, the Internet's largest general interest martial arts forum was set up in 2002 for just that purpose. Bullshido tries to use crowd-sourcing and citizen journalism to investigate and expose the worst of the martial arts phonies. Its founding goal was to be "a virtual meeting place and sounding board for a grass roots movement to restore ethics and realism to systems shrouded in misinformation and irrational mysticism."

Six years later Bullshido boasts about 73,000 members and 4,000 website visitors a day. It has many forums with varying levels of moderation and vulgarity. Its flagship is the Martial Arts Investigation forum where members volunteer their time to out martial quacks and loonies in their community. All claims are suspect, without independent verification. All volunteers are expected to provide evidence for their accusations, video if possible. If verification isn't possible then accusations are not republished on Bullshido's front page. Instead they hang in the air unproven and undisproven. Everyone is anonymous, except the target.

Ten moderators who review its 500 to 1,000 daily posts police this faceless mob. They seem to believe that those moderators are best who moderate least. "We don't pre-screen our comments," says Samuel Browning, one of the site's attorneys. "We don't have an intelligence test for our comments."

In the spirit of the Internet age, Bullshido's staff believe that their cause is best served through robust, open, uncensored and anonymous debate. All sides are given an opportunity to speak, so why should anyone be silenced even if they are childish, vulgar, offensive or disrespectful? If you can't stand the heat, maybe you shouldn't be portraying yourself as a mighty warrior. What kind of kung fu master can't beat off a mob of masked inquisitors?

Some subjects handle the pressure, provide documentation and join the discussion. These are usually the ones with nothing to hide. Others lose their cool completely.

And then there is Milton Wallace.



Milton Wallace may be a professional martial arts instructor in San Jose, or maybe Hayward. He may be a renowned street fighter; he may train with Ultimate Fighting Championship stars; he may be a former trainer for the San Jose Sharks. He may be a government agent. He may live with his mother; he may live on a military base.

He might be a liar and a fraud or he might be the victim of a campaign of character assassination. Or he may be a little of both.

Milton is enormous—280 pounds bursting from a frame that barely breaks 6 feet. The former bodybuilder cultivates the look of a bouncer with a shaved head and Oakland Raider's jersey. He speaks in a deep voice with the clip of a city dweller. He has played hockey his whole life but now he is focused only on martial arts training. He works as an algebra teacher “a little bit here and there” to bring in extra cash. He hints he doesn't really need the money because of his lucrative, and highly secret, government contracts. As evidence he produces a battered business card that says “Secret Service” on it.

Milton says he doesn't mind being “a little bit of a mystery to the rest of the world.” Despite the controversy and the humiliation he has endured, he insists that “some things will need to remain secret.” When he calls, his number is blocked, or he calls from payphones. His mail goes to a P.O. box. Milton is very skeptical about letting people in. “Getting to my door entrance would be quite difficult,” he says, “My pits and rots love the taste of strangers, and my hollow points are sure to finish them off.”

Milton's resume of training includes a UFC fighter, a Wing Chun grandmaster, two Kickboxing studios, an anonymous Israeli traveler and “The U.S. Government, Army, Marines & The Secret Service: Classified Training.”

With this pedigree Milton teaches MMA at the California Training Center in Hayward, California. He estimates he has around 30 students. Milton claims he keeps no money from his teaching; he

donates his salary to the Tae Kwon Do school he rents space from. He does it, he says, because martial arts is “who I am.”

And it is. Milton has given himself over to a constructed identity, to being Milton the fighter. Milton the fighter trains 16 hours a day. He has a non-profit that provides scholarships to martial artists. He has special access to government facilities in secret locations. He is part of a secret Martial Arts fraternity. “Do you realize,” he asks, “there are certain groups of martial artist who train underground to prevent the arts from reaching people like (Bullshido.com)?”

So who is Milton? He may be an algebra teacher and part-time MMA trainer, but online he’s a lightning rod.

Google Milton Wallace and you find two very different images of this man. One is a video of him breaking bricks with his palm. Teenagers and young children watch, rapt. An old woman beams benignly. The crowd applauds when he is done. He jokes with them. He looks relaxed and confident.

Online, Milton under the sobriquet Mid-Knight Tiger is able to give full rein to his need to self-aggrandize. His Myspace and Youtube accounts are part temple, part infomercial advertising and hailing his martial prowess. Like most people Milton treats the social networks as a resume with no need to provide references. The best possible light is put on his biography, social and economic status, and most of all on his martial skills. But the Internet is changing. With the growth of social networking people increasingly have enduring online identities that can follow them across the web. And increasingly the personalities that people display online can come to haunt them in the wider world.

The other link is entitled “Milton Wallace: The stench of Bullshido is strong with this one.” What follows is 56 pages—550 posts—investigating Milton, challenging him to a duel and ultimately accusing him of lying, cowardice, mental instability and fraud.



In March 2007 Milton is challenged on statements made on his Myspace page and Youtube videos. He has claimed that he has a 500 to 0 fight record. He has claimed that he is a trainer of pro-athletes and professional fighters. He has claimed that he trains

high-level government officials. These claims have come to the attention of the fraud busters at Bullshido.

A crowd of enthusiasts leaps into action, digging, demanding and challenging. One member contacts Milton's instructors. Another contacts the sports franchises he claims to work for. Some try to find his address, but are stymied by his P.O box. Some who know his area use landmarks from his Youtube videos to triangulate his school's location. Members start dropping by at random times to see if he's around.

Milton is offered the opportunity to respond. He tries to defend himself by giving ground. His 500 to 0 fight record is on the ice as a hockey player, he admits. Okay, he's a fight trainer for hockey teams, not MMA fighters. Well... he has students who are MMA fighters. That is to say he's a conditioning coach loosely affiliated with MMA. Actually, he later admits his main connection is selling herbal supplements to athletes.

As he answers his attackers, the crowd cackles:

*Rubberduck:* Now my neighbours think I've gone mad, since I can't stop laughing to that shit. Sweet Mary, Mother of God, my beginners class people throw better kicks than this "sifu".

*Asriel:* Look at his sidekicks!!!!

*Lu Tze:* He ticks all the boxes, even down to the shit, wimp lo (we purposely trained him wrong, as a joke) students.

*Blindfury:* I don't know what you guys are talking about. I'm calling this guy up for lessons NOW!

Milton is getting a torrent of hate mail now. Some no doubt comes from Bullshido members and some from malicious people drawn to his vulnerability. Some are both.

The thread has now been up for a week

Milton starts getting threatening and racially explicit comments on his Youtube videos. He shuts down the comments.

The thread has been up for two weeks.

The battle lines become extremely confused. Much of the hate mail Milton is getting seems to come from his supporters who cannot believe that Mid-knight Tiger is really the Milton Wallace they respect. It's possible that Milton is making dummy accounts and sending himself hate mail to muddy the waters (it has been tried before).

For a man who has built an identity around maintaining an aura of mystery there are no good outcomes. Milton seems to grow desperate, issuing challenges and then backing down.

Fifteen days into the hunt Milton is offered a way to burnish his credentials—a duel. He can surrender his good name or meet a stranger who goes by the name of Red to fight for his honor. The crowd calls for blood.

Milton brags in emails to Red:

*You ever been shot? I have more than once, and I have not been the same since then! My vest saved me again... Bullets bring out the worst in a man's soul when they enter your body. Don't get any funny ideas that I want to shoot you, but I will protect myself if you are one of the skin heads that emailed me.*

Milton threatens him:

*The last guy I punched in the head had a concussion for three months... I didn't mean to do that, but a fight is a fight. He also reported a large dent in the right side of his chest and a collapsed lung. If I hit him on the left side, you know what's next.*

Milton starts issuing ridiculous conditions for the fight. At first he seems to demand a \$100,000 purse. Then he explains he can no longer fight for money for legal reasons. He will only face off if Red is willing to first go against one “Sifu Ross” who is Milton’s original Kung Fu teacher. Red must come alone.

“We can only get military clearance for only one person,” Milton explains. “You do know that this will be held at a military location. I need your number first because a member of the Secret Service will be investigating you. Without that information, it ain’t happening.”

The fight never happens.

Milton alters his Myspace page. He pulls down most of his YouTube videos. He disables comments on those that stay up. He stops responding to e-mails. Milton disappears from the Internet for half a year. Then in May 2008 he puts up a video called “Real Snipers ENDING the Bullshido! Lol! Anger management class!!” For 2 minutes he fires handguns and rifles on a frozen pond.

“I’m back,” he says.

A few days later another video goes up. Milton is shirtless on a raised platform. A man checks his eyes and teeth. Checks that he is steady, checks his breathing. The man nods and Milton walks into

his first cage fight. The crowd screams to pounding drums.

The fight is short and brutal. Milton's sidekick serves him well, exhausting and slowing his opponent. The takedown is swift. Milton grabs his opponent's shoulder hitting him again and again in the face. The man staggers, falls back. Milton is on top of him, pounding. The man tries to roll over to shield his face. Milton rolls him back and slams him until the referee stops the beating. "That's what he gets for opening his mouth last night!" shouts one of Milton's friends.

Along with the video Milton posts a statement:

*I STAY HUMBLE! Thanks to all the people who believed in me... Anyone who still wants to believe Bullshido.com needs to really think about the false bullshit they print on that site. This video proves Bullshido.com to be WRONG again.*

Bullshido has no response. The investigation, as far as they are concerned, is finished.



Something about Milton in person seems as ungainly as his reputation. He is clearly steady at rest but he leans forward and sways when he walks into Buffalo Bill's Brew Pub in downtown Hayward. At the table he sits awkwardly on his elbows, leans close and talks loudly. He is as imposing as his braggadocio implies but his face is surprisingly full, almost cherubic. He looks like he should be a friendly man. Yet he is as arrogant as he is self-conscious.

He does not make eye contact, nor does he look at the floor. He stares around, not darting his eyes but looking slowly from side to side as he answers questions with long stories about his training, his education and his public life. He will not talk about his family at all.

He has secreted agents around the bar, dedicated students who are ready to intervene at the first sign of trouble. They only show themselves when the interview is over.

Milton's pride will not let him admit that Bullshido got to him. He swerves from placid indifference to smoldering rage depending on how the question is raised.

Ask him what he thinks of Bullshido and he offers anger in the guise of analysis.

"People should know how to approach people professionally,

that's the most important thing. That's why you're sitting here and those guys are sitting at home twiddling their thumbs. Who are they to make demands?"

But ask him how he feels about Bullshido and he refuses to rise.

"I'm not one to have time to play around with people like that, so... I'm not looking for a fight but I'm not backing down either. I don't start fights, I-I-I end fights."

Does it bother him that so many people have seen the offending article?

"That doesn't bother me because those people don't have 100 percent factual information. They have nothing. Did I cause that? They caused it; they wrote it. I didn't. And I know for a fact that some of them might have shown up (to fight) but after they saw me warm up, they didn't want to have nothing to do with that. Doesn't bother me whatsoever.

What practical impact has Bullshido's investigation had?

"My lawyer is on top of it right now and we're just waiting for them to slip up a little bit more... They just keep printing that stuff and leaving it out there and they're just leaving themselves open to (a lawsuit). There's a reason why Bill Clinton autographed a book and signed it. To me. Personally. I have a copy of it... I'm not going to go into details about it but Bill Clinton is one of my fans for a lot of reasons, not just martial arts."

Were the Youtube videos he posted this year vindication?

"I'm not gonna say it was vindication against Bullshido. But it felt good to do that too, to prove them blatantly wrong."

Milton will not say he bears any anger towards Bullshido. He claims to hold them in disdain. Online, on the other hand, his Myspace and Youtube profiles have turned into virtual screeds against Bullshido and their hypocrisy.

*I have proven Bullshido.com to be mostly a bunch of unprofessional assholes who don't have enough brains to run a decent website. Haters like Bullshido.com are all eating shit now that I have proven them wrong. People can believe anything they want, but the proof is in the videos. Most of the people trying to leave negative comments from Bullshido do not have even one single video to prove they even seen the inside of a gym. I don't even read the bullshit they print on that site because real fighters like me have*

*no time to waste fucking around on the computer.*

It is hard to sympathize with Milton Wallace. He does not welcome pity and disdains offers of help. But underneath his unpleasant façade he has a real grievance against the site that sought to cut him down to life size.

“When someone comes to you online and won’t give you their name saying let me see your credentials, that’s no different than someone coming up to you saying let me see your bank card; let me see your driver’s license. Let me see your address where you live and you don’t know who the heck it is, you know?”

Demanding to see a teacher’s certification is not the same as demanding to see a driver’s license of course. One should be on public display; only a proper authority can demand the other. But how many of us would hand over our credentials to a masked interlocutor? How many people would give out any personal information at all to a threatening stranger online? How many people, innocent or guilty, would submit their case to mob justice?



Sam Browning, the Bullshido lawyer, doesn’t have any problems with the freewheeling manner of Bullshido investigations. For him, it’s more democratic than a newspaper. “If you’re investigated in a newspaper you’re limited (in responding) to maybe one or two letters that come in. On the Internet your comments will end up getting about equal play as the original poster. We’re not like a newspaper that has limited space.”

With unlimited space Sam feels there is no need to edit comments for tone, or civility. The burden would just be too high and the cost prohibitive.

The shock of Bullshido is supposed to undermine the code of silence that its adherents see hanging over the martial arts. Many practitioners believe, as does Milton, that it is inappropriate to question anyone whose background in the art is deeper than yours. It is rude, and disrespectful to demand empirical evidence. A beginner cannot question a master’s technique until he can defeat him.

And this code of silence feeds the stereotypes that draw lost seekers to martial arts. Many beginners expect to be presented with techniques that seem counter-intuitive and therefore exotic.

They don't expect to understand for months or even years why they are learning what they are, the way they are.

The media plays into to this code of silence as well. "Publications like *Black Belt Magazine* are basically captive publications," says Sam. "Their circulations are too small to pay for them and therefore they rely on advertisements by the instructors to fund the magazine. There's no incentive for them to investigate the instructors who pay for the ads."

But Sam balks at the idea that what Bullshido is doing is journalism. "I think we do consumer advocacy. It's hard to say we're doing journalism on Bullshido. We do do some consumer reporting." This is true on the forums. On the front page however "... everything that appears has gone through a review process based on standards more comparable to journalism."

Indeed, Bullshido relies on empirical observation, corroborating evidence and a distrust of anonymous sources. Sam even claims that "most stuff coming out of Washington relies more heavily on anonymous sources" than the stuff on the front page of Bullshido.

This is true, if we ignore the problem of anonymous authors. We are asked to rely on authors who will not put their name to their work. The most prolific members of Bullshido are a bit like superheroes: working towards the public good behind a consistent, masked persona. But do we really want to turn consumer protection, and in the future other kinds of watchdog roles, over to masked vigilantes, however noble?

Bullshido and forums like it, such as the phony-vet busting forum on POWnetwork.org run on an undercurrent of anger. Bullshido carries thousands of testimonials from people defrauded and exploited by unscrupulous martial artists. Often the complaints come in humorous form, but the rage that its hardcore members feel toward martial arts phonies is palpable.

So this is an angry mob. A crowd of people with enough indignant passion to volunteer time and money to chasing down an enemy the rest of the world barely registers. This may not be the best group to look to for unbiased analysis.

There's little choice, however. At the moment, for all its many flaws, the Bullshido mob is the only guardian at the gate. It's hard to see how to organize a better option without more money, even if

the public at large showed an interest. Higher standards cost money. A lack of anonymity drives away those who are being asked to volunteer for hazard duty, exposing unscrupulous and often violent people. Better moderation requires more employees that the business model won't pay for.

So is the model working? "To a limited degree I'd say it is," says Sam. "We've had a lot of people who've abandoned their art because they realized it wasn't preparing them to fight."

Bullshido may be raising awareness consumer by consumer, but it seems to be doing little to discourage fraud. Milton Wallace, innocent or guilty, has a growing following in Hayward. None of the alleged frauds exposed by Bullshido have been ruined by the experience. The problem is that the openness, anonymity and lack of boundaries that let the site function make it far too easy to dismiss. Most people are so turned off by the tone of the site they will never venture to investigate. Others will discount the site's analysis, reasoning with Nietzsche that the better view is the one whose opponents are the most obnoxious. The very model that makes it possible may keep Bullshido marginalized.

Martial arts is a particularly egregious example of a tainted product because it is relatively marginal and poorly understood. Other services and goods, however, are proving impossible for modern consumers to navigate. Herbal supplements now have a strong internet presence with consumer forums similar to Bullshido's, if a bit more civil. From health care, to children's toys to education, more and more aspects of our commercial lives are proving too difficult or expensive for government and mainstream media to regulate. If the mass democracy of the Internet rises to face the oversight void, how many more people will be forced to face the online mob? And as the Internet becomes our primary research tool, how much more serious will be the consequences of failing before that masked tribunal?