

Grandmaster George Lepine: Bringing Native Fighting Arts into the Global Arena

By Master Guy Edward Larke

Growing up in Canada, I grew up believing martial arts were something only practiced in the Orient. Years went by and my mind and my vision expanded, and I saw arts like Greek Pankration, French Savate, and Russian Sambo. Moving to South Korea, ironically, really made me look to the entire world to see what different civilizations had developed over the centuries.

One of the biggest influences that drove me to study was visiting the Chungju World Martial Arts Festival held in the scenic city of Chungju every two years now. It is run by an international organization called WOMAU, or the World Martial Arts Union, which seeks to educate, propagate and in the end, use the arts to bring peace to our troubled world. A unique aspect of this international, yet Korean-based, organization is that many of the powers-that-be are NOT Korean. The chairman especially caught my attention as a tall, very charismatic Canadian with a wry smile and a very commanding presence. The art he represented was another almost invisible yet very important part of the international martial culture.

From acting as the foreign press liaison at 2017 events for both the WOMAU meeting and the festival, I became even more aware that I still truly know so very little about the world in which I live. That goes alongside the indigenous arts which remain hidden. I pledged myself to seek out as many of these as possible. The first is the very Canadian art of Okichitaw, and its protector (and my martial arts brother), Grandmaster George Lepine.

GEL: When/ where were you born?

GM Lepine: June 5th, 1962.
Manitoba, Red River Territory

GEL: Could you give a little family background?

GM Lepine: Oh boy, a true loaded question, but here we go. I would be considered a Plains-



Metis-Cree-Assiniboine indigenous person from Manitoba. I grew up on the prairies embracing my indigenous history, identity, and culture. I am the descendant of Ambrose Dydime Lepine, who was a well-known indigenous leader from the 1800s. In 1870 Louis Riel's provisional government appointed my grandfather the Adjutant General to administer justice in throughout the southern native territory in Manitoba, and a few weeks later he was subsequently appointed the head of the military (Captain of the Buffalo Hunt). Louis Riel chose Ambrose as the Military Chief because of the respect he commanded among the indigenous traders, trip-men, trappers and buffalo hunters. There is a quote well known to him that describes him as "a man of prodigious strength



standing fully six feet three and built in splendid proportion. Reputedly a skilled plainsman, he was assumed to have been the natural leader of the soldiers of the resistance.” These buffalo hunts help build our position and dominance in the plains, and my ancestors organized them very well and executed them with military precision. Probably why I turned out the way I did. The Elders call it “blood memory”; our history is in our DNA. My mother and grandmother would always say that Ambroise continued to live through me, as I looked similar to him, was the same height and was built the same way as him. I have experienced him speaking to me through various times and ceremonies throughout my life, that’s for sure.

GEL: Did your family have any experience in fighting arts (you mentioned your uncle a few times)?

GM Lepine: Well, I come from a long line of indigenous hunters and warriors. There is a very famous fight that I was reminded of known as the Battle of Pilot Mound, which truly defined our place in the Plains and in history, which occurred in the mid-1800s. As for myself, I started learning traditional games, wrestling, weaponry and combat techniques well before the age of 13. I also grew up learning how to hunt, track and trap when I was a kid from my father and uncles. Thinking back, I was firing a rifle and dropping game around the age of 11/12 and skinning those animals. I also learned how to effectively survive in the bush, along with the tactics necessary to remain there for some time if ever required. Looking back, I realize now how fortunate I was to have these teachings, especially given the fact that I live in a large urban center now. If I were to identify specific family members

that truly influenced me in the combat arts, I would have to say that it was my uncle Ted, uncle Ed, and uncle George. These men broke things down for me, and I looked up to them for that knowledge and experience as a young boy eventually growing up in the “North End” of Winnipeg, MB. The north end of Winnipeg was (and still is) a tough part of the city. During my young teenage years, I would always leave the house on alert and always watching my family or my various friends’ backs. It was just the way of growing up in that part of the inner city. We eventually moved out of the area, but my upbringing there really toughened me up and provided a sense of street smarts that I would have never experienced without living there. I tell my students that I saw a fight on the streets every week and sometimes twice a week. Some of my students have never even seen a vicious street fight. (I hope they never do.) I’m sure that the experience I had growing up helped build my protective and combative character, I’m sure of it.

GEL: What were you like growing up? Were you a dreamer, thinker, etc.?

GM Lepine: I was a dreamer. I recall as a young boy living in a remote community, looking up at an airplane flying high overhead one day and said to myself that one day I would be on those traveling all over the world. I also remember the stories that were given to me by my grandmother, father, and uncles about our history and always dreamed of how we lived and conducted ourselves on the plains. Being able to hear and experience some of these stories in our indigenous language (Michif-Cree) only helped solidify my belief and culture. These were very impacting for me. I knew that one day I would be a leader of some sort and help people learn and truly experience our culture and history. When I was growing up, the old ones would refer to us as “Otim-pm-suck.” It is a Cree word which means “the people who own themselves.”

GEL: What was the paradigm of martial arts at that time? How did it catch your eye for the first time?

GM Lepine: If I go back to recall one defining moment for me, it would have been with my

uncle Ted when he and I were together on the land and walking along the shore of Lake Manitoba. I was listening to him talk about how we use to use birch bark for making canoes and containers. As he pointed to the birch bark trees along the shoreline, he suddenly stopped and crouched down grabbed a piece of washed-up wood and simply said, "Looks just like a Notini-to win-mistik, doesn't it Georgie?"

My face must have looked a little puzzled, as he went on to explain the find to me. We both crouched down (I simply followed him) facing each other, and he laid the wood on the sand, picked up a twig and spoke about the gunstock war club. His story went on about how it was used and that it was a feared weapon in our history and drew references and diagrams in the sand around the wood (which I recall now could be conscribed as a war club). My uncle talked about how the weapon was made, how it was carried and even showed me a couple of ways it was held and moved to hit something. I could only imagine as a young boy what it would be like to be in a war party. Oh, how good I could be with this weapon if I practiced. This was a very impacting moment in my life as a future martial artist. When I think of martial artists at the time of being an influenced boy, I believe that I was more a fan of Chuck Norris than that of Bruce Lee, or more of a fan of Bill "Superfoot" Wallace than that of Jackie Chan. Regardless,

I knew that my life would take me into martial arts, and since that time, it has never left.

GEL: What was attractive about Asian fighting arts to you?

GM Lepine: For me, it was the technique of speed and the use of kicks in a variety of ways. As a young boy, I still recall how fascinated I was when I would see the power of what a human could do (whether from a magazine, book or in a movie), particularly about brick or board breaking. The power was amazing, and I wanted to learn that.

GEL: What was your first formal Asian fighting arts class?

GM Lepine: It was Japanese Judo, and it would have to be when I was around the age of 13 or 14. It was taught at a local high school near our home in Winnipeg, MB. The classes were closed (in-camera), and you had to be invited and screened for the class. There was no charge for classes, but you had to commit to it or someone else could take your spot. It was with Master Oye. (I can't recall if he was a yodan or godan at the time.) who was well known by my father and mother.

GEL: What was the training like?

GM Lepine: Brutal and fantastic. I recall the harsh mat work, the rolls, break falls, throws and, of course, the sweaty bruises and good laughter at times. I stuck with it for quite a while (around three years into my late teens) and ended getting tested to my 2nd kyu (brown belt). Then the bug of Tae Kwon Do hit me.

GEL: What inspired your love of Tae Kwon Do?

GM Lepine: I remember I just turned 18 and was watching a Tae Kwon Do demonstration at Memorial Park in Winnipeg on a beautiful day. Although I had been doing Judo for a while, I was always mesmerized by the kicking arts. This demo was put on by KS Cho Taekwondo College, and they had several black belts demonstrating, but what blew me away was watching Master Cho do some amazing stuff. One involved kicking a cigarette out of





someone's mouth and the other breaking two bricks like they were nothing. This demonstration solidified my interest in that area, and I immediately found myself drawn into the art and Master Cho's Taekwondo College.

GEL: Could you tell us how your experience with it was?

GM Lepine: Tae Kwon Do provided me with a great sense and understanding of structure and achievement. The experience for me was remarkable and life-changing. I certainly increased my cardio and flexibility. But it is also really providing a clear awareness of the capabilities of the body and mind as well as the destructive force a human could do to another person. When I was going through Tae Kwon Do training in the 80s, it was becoming more and more of a competitive sports gearing towards the Olympic movement. Although I liked sparring and competed quite successfully, I was more drawn to the philosophy and determination that the art displayed, especially from Master Cho. He became like a father to me. I had some great experiences up to my 5th dan black belt, and to this day I still retain that personal relationship with (now) Grandmaster Cho.

GEL: What were the other arts you studied?

GM Lepine: When I moved to Ontario in late 1990, I was advised to seek out a Hapkido master known as Inn Suk Pak and consider training with him. Master Pak and Master KS Cho were good friends, and after we met, he immediately took me under his wing as one

of his senior students. (I believe my reputation back in Manitoba had a little to do with this.) I seemed to progress quite quickly in his system known as Taekeukdo Hapkido and found myself at black belt level in a very short time. I trained with Master Inn Suk Pak and his main instructor Master Hyung Lee well into the 1990s and ended grading up to 5th dan.

GEL: What did you take from them?

GM Lepine: I truly believe that I am the person I am today, as a direct result of the positive impact that these arts have provided me. As a person who has worked professionally in the field of law enforcement and protective services, I have dealt with situations that martial arts have provided me with the skills to deal with critical situations, whether they may have been physical altercations or in the area of one's mental health. I would also go on to say that if it weren't for my personal experience from these arts, then I would have never been able to effectively structure and develop a form of achievement process for our indigenous combat art of Okichitaw. Our main challenge as with most indigenous arts is that they have always been usually taught through an oral means of engagement (verbal teaching). Learning these other forms of martial arts has given me the knowledge and education to effectively structure and document our system so that our future indigenous generations and others who could have even imagined learning Okichitaw can now do so. This could have only happened as a result of my own experience with the Korean arts and their respective knowledge keepers and teachers.

GEL: What was it about the Korean arts that inspired you?

GM Lepine: I was always moved to see that these Korean masters could inspire people, whether they were young or old. Elements of health, fitness, flexibility, positivity and the gift of confidence regardless of the situation were all impacting factors that I learned from these Korean masters. I respected that, and I went on to mirror that same behavior and attitude in becoming an instructor myself. I would also note that my first Korean master (KS Cho) was

a mentor for me. He supported me emotionally to feel proud of my community and heritage as an indigenous person, even though we have (and continue to do so) gone through so much negative history. It



Indigenous culture, health, and well-being. Okichitaw truly fit into these categories, and I felt confident that the opportunity was now available for me to begin this journey.

was Master Cho that was with me continuously to ensure that I continue to practice, develop and eventually teach Okichitaw. If it wasn't for him, his encouraging words and confidence in me, I'm not sure where Okichitaw would be now.

GEL: When did you finally decide to dedicate yourself to Okichitaw?

GM Lepine: I can recall that it was in the early 1990s. What spurred you on to that decision? I was heavily influenced by Indigenous elders, who spoke to me about the importance of maintaining as well as regaining our culture, practices, and activities. They instilled their trust in me to teach and share the teachings of Okichitaw. I recall one elder saying to me, "George, you have to do this. No one else can. It has to be you. Our community needs to this." It was a very impacting moment in my life for me. I was personally going through so many changes and feeling an increased sense of indigenous empowerment to take Okichitaw forward. With the help of traditional knowledge keepers and support from the indigenous community, my path with Okichitaw was presented to me. As well, the 90s were a unique and waking time for indigenous people in Canada. We recently dealt with the "Oka Crisis," and then there was the Royal Commission on Aboriginal People (RCAP), which identified the incredible challenges we continued to face since confederation. The RCAP Report included 440 recommendations calling for sweeping changes to the relationship between aboriginal, non-aboriginal people and the governments in Canada. Some of the recommendations indicated the need to address

GEL: How does it resemble other arts?

GM Lepine: Okichitaw would be considered a combative system. It is all based on Plains indigenous combat practices that use a committed approach to physical engagement. Other martial arts that would mirror Okichitaw in some way or another would also be expressed similarly. Some martial arts such as Krav Maga, Silat, Sambo or other combative systems have some similarities, but I would have to say that very few of them focus on anything truly indigenous. Arts such as Matura from New Zealand or Correda Wrestling from Australia or Taiaha of the Maori all having an indigenous concept and cultural base within in them would more likely be in parallel with the teachings of Okichitaw than what we usually see within modern arts.

GEL: What is unique about it?

GM Lepine: Okichitaw is based on combative applications and practices of hand-to-hand close-quarter combat practices that were unique to the indigenous Plains. All hand and body movements are based on the adoption of indigenous impact weaponry such as the knife, the tomahawk, the short lance and the gunstock war club. All body mechanics and arm actions are applied the same, whether a weapon or empty hand is available. Primarily in native warfare, we relied heavily on our weapons, and it was not unusual for a warrior to be battle effective in multiple weapon disciplines. The diversity of weapon knowledge leads to a very imposing adversary and an exceptional understanding of human behavior and hand-to-hand engagements. Thus in modern-day Okichitaw, students continue to secure an effective understanding and physical

capability with all weaponry at early admittance to Okichitaw. This way the student effectively embraces the native body mechanics as a result of weapon used in conjunction with grabs, Indian wrestling all through committed approaches to self-defense or self-preservation as it was historically known within our communities.



Regular classes run an hour, and the student learns wrestling, throws, impact techniques and weapon knowledge. The advanced classes run for two hours and focus on the tactical applications of the system. Weapon throwing, combat use, and other combative practices are effectively learned during advanced classes.

GEL: How is training conducted?

GM Lepine: Okichitaw is taught within a martial arts school environment. We also engage classes on the outdoors which also involve indigenous-specific cultural activities. Tests are broken down into Solstices throughout the year, and all tests are conducted on the land. As far as classes, they are broken down into two types of classes. These are community classes and advanced classes. Community classes allow a large age range embraced through diversity to allow everyone regardless of your background, heritage, gender or race to experience and practice Okichitaw techniques, culture and history. Although some weaponry is introduced into the community classes, effective tactical weapon training is only conducted through advanced classes. A student first has to qualify to get entered into this training. We follow the same traditional practice and concept that was done historically within our tribal communities when young warriors began their training journey.

GEL: How can one start to study it?

GM Lepine: People can start anytime with Okichitaw. We always say that the hardest part of joining any martial art program is walking through the door. Our training lodge door is always open, and we encourage people from all walks of life to come in and try Okichitaw. We have had visitors to our training lodge from all over the world, and we are always welcoming and willing to share our stories. Our base is located at the Native Canadian Centre of Toronto at 16 Spadina Road Toronto, Ontario, Canada.

Master Guy Edward Larke has spent most of his life devoted to all aspects of the martial arts. He has spent the last 13 years working, studying, and writing in South Korea. He is the founder of Kisa-Do Muye (The Knight's Way Martial Arts) and Marketing. His column, Knight's Way, reflects on the economics of owning your own school and how marketing plays a role in running a successful business.

