

In the previous issues of MAI I have been documenting various aspects of our Indo trip. Much of the time was spent researching lesser known martial forms for our new book on Indonesian martial arts, to be published early 2006. Both of us had heard about traditional Sundanese wrestling, but always seemed to come up blank when trying to research it from London. You can imagine, therefore, just how excited we were when we got the chance to train and learn first hand under an ex national champion.

It was day 6 of our 40-day fast, which by now was well and truly beginning to kick in. We had, via the local Olympic wrestling club, got the details we had been looking for, a traditional Benjang Gulat (Sundanese Wrestling) camp. It seemed that in West Java this native grappling form was alive and well and flourishing with many participants. The district of East Bandung called Ujung Berung is the home of this system and every year it plays host to the Annual Open Benjang Championships, drawing wrestlers and crowds from all over the region.

Benjang has been around for well over 2 centuries, and while still under the Dutch occupation, it could be seen and heard played within the local communities. Usually after harvest times a party was held and Benjang was displayed, this

was also to thank God for the good crop. Part of the reason that the Ujung Berung society chose this form of expression was that it was cheap, not requiring any props or equipment, it was also very useful for training physical and mental powers, especially for fighting for freedom from the Dutch Colonials. To date no one really knows who founded the art, but reason has it that it came from Sumatra, which also has its own grappling forms, which in turn came over from ancient Persia.

We arrived in Ujung Berung at about 8.45am. After a number of unsuccessful attempts to find the Benjang office, we finally were directed to the correct place. It seems everyone wants to be helpful and will often make up directions even

if they don't have a clue. I'm pretty sure in our case it was often to get a close up view of westerners, who are pretty rare in these parts. Upon entering the office with our interpreter Rudy, Steve and myself had to catch our breath. Talk about smoke in the air. Inside the room were five gentlemen talking away, all of them smoking Kretek cigarettes like chimneys. Personally I find smoking totally offensive, but you soon get to understand that it's customary for men to smoke in Indonesia, and if you cant handle that then you have no place being there. In any case Steve and myself had sat through many nights red eyed as Guru Ma taught us, in between lighting up and smoking her favoured tobacco. Rudy introduced himself to the man sitting behind a desk, then in turn introduced us and spoke of why we were there and what our intentions were. You could see his face



adventures
in Indonesia

Part 3
**The Lost Art Of
BENJANG
GULAT**

By Johnny Silmon and Steve Benitez

45 minutes it was my turn. Training started fine but every time I was put into a position my natural instinct was to strike, but of course I could not. Time after time I was grappled to the floor and it was obvious this guy was trying to take me out as he landed on me and kept winding me so I began to give some back. We got into one position where neither of us was giving any ground, and just as he went to sweep me I slipped under and around him putting him into a choke and pulling him to the ground. He quickly began to panic and I was forced off him. The teacher had a go, to which I simply said via Rudy 'Oh I forgot chokes weren't allowed', to which Steve winked at me as if to say 'He'll think twice about doing that again', and of course he didn't do it again.

Later that evening was the tournament and I'll quote the 'Paying the Price' article "...we were invited that evening as special guests to the Annual Open West Java Benjang Competition, which drew competitors from all over the region as well as crowds that exceeded more than 3000, and asked to perform our Kembangan as well as compete in the tournament. I have to admit I did have some reservations but Steve was all for it, and coaxed me into stepping out. Talk about getting major butterflies! Being up there in the raised canvas ring, playing to live music, in front of not only a knowledgeable crowd but also important local dignitaries and many Silat Guru's, made me feel very exposed. Steve on the other hand seemed to revel in the occasion. Still, it was an incredible experience being right there in the thick of it, in one of Sunda Silat's spiritual homes. Shortly after we sat down to a standing ovation the M.C called for 'Mr Steve' to come to the stage. Steve climbed into the ring and was told to perform his flower dance, at which point a very well conditioned local wrestler also got into the ring. Steve donned the mandatory blue shorts, while his opponent wore red. They met in the centre of the ring and then the bell rung and the action began. It was a great tussle with Steve taking his opponent down with a hard pull behind the neck, and then shortly after his opponent taking Steve down with a sweep. It got to a bit of a stalemate at that point but as they stood there in a low clench, each trying to find an advantage, Steve circled in with his hips, right hand around the other's neck and left arm under his armpit with right leg extended, the guy just fell right over and flat onto his back. Blue corner, 2-1 victory."

I remember the look from Steve as he sat back down after his victory, a look that told

me this was no game but the real thing. I was then called up, and made my way through the large crowd up the ring stairs and then into the ring itself. Adrenaline was surging through me as I performed my kembangan but I just felt totally paralysed. A fairly huge guy got into the ring and started challenging me but thought better of it once I was stripped down to the blue shorts I could barely fit into. I would be the first to admit that I was not the most conditioned at that point and I'm sure I could hear laughing from the crowd. It's at times like those that you just want the ground to swallow you up, but alas there was no place to hide. Another wiry and lean athlete got into the ring and stripped down straight away. Once we shook at the centre of the ring and the bell rang we locked horns. I must have outweighed him by a good 3 stones but try as I might I could not move him, it was only as he stepped into me that I pulled him back hard and he fell to the ground, scoring for me. No sooner had he got up, he slipped from behind lifting me and smashing me to the ground. 1-1. I knew what I wanted to do and that was to sweep him once I was in close enough and I managed to pull it off.

Another 2-1 victory but much closer. Unlike Steve, I was totally exhausted by the end of that couple of minutes and actually wanted to vomit, but didn't, and he was laughing so much as I staggered back to my seat and fell into it. We had done it, made history as the only two westerners to have ever fought in a traditional Benjang competition in its native home and won. We heard that the following week there was a big

“Unlike Steve, I was totally exhausted by the end of that couple of minutes and actually wanted to vomit, but didn't, and he was laughing so much as I staggered back to my seat and fell into it.”

write up in the local papers about our exploits.

Benjang Gulat is a very demanding system when trained correctly and although perhaps not the most effective for all-round self defence it does have some highly effective technique. For conditioning it is second to none, and both Pendekar Steve and myself are very excited about the Benjang classes we will be holding in the new year at EastWest Studios, anyone will be warmly welcome. Also

look out for our as of yet untitled Silat book due to be out in the new-year that will feature, amongst other things, the art of Benjang Gulat in detail.

