

Spotlight on Axe Brazil

BY JEANNE JU

Have you ever been in the Sub on Tuesdays and wondered where that funky, rhythmic music was coming from? Well, if you found out that it comes from Brazil, you'd demand some explanation to quench your curiosity.

The music you hear is only a part of the Axé Brazil Academy's classes in the Brazilian martial art

Capoeira. Led by Master Geraldo Carvalho, students learn about the history, the music and the game that is this unique combination of martial art and folklore dance.

While most martial arts have attack, defence and counterattack, *Capoeira*, in some movements, involves all three at once. "We don't block kicks, we get into the kick to defend and counterat-

tack," asserts Geraldo.

Capoeira originated as a form of self-defense used by Brazilian slaves. When slavery was abolished in 1863, the newly freed slaves, unable to find work, organized into gangs and used their martial art to steal from people. The gangs got out of hand so the Brazilian government banned the practice of *Capoeira* altogether; in some places the form evolved into a dance form to escape persecution.

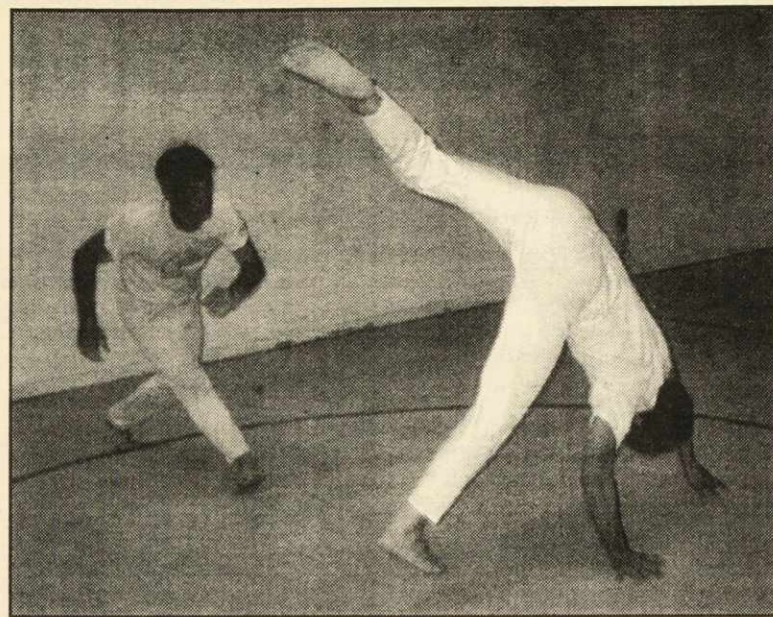
Even before the gangs, however, *Capoeira's* link to music and dance had helped it avoid unwanted attention. The slaves, when practising in their bunk houses, had a system to not get caught: when lookouts played a certain kind of rhythm, people inside changed their style to a samba dance to disguise what they were doing. The foreman who approached the slaves' quarters took a look inside and thought, "Ah, they're just having fun!" explains Geraldo.

At the beginning of each class, Geraldo teaches students the history of the sport and of Brazil, and how to play various musical instruments of *Capoeira*, including the *berimbau*. After thirty minutes of warm-up, depending on how the class is prepared, power and resistance exercises and one or two different kicks are taught. Then, students engage in playing the game of *Capoeira* inside the *roda*, an area encircled by those participants playing the musical instruments and those watching.

Geraldo's philosophy is to teach students to respect themselves. "Before the *roda*, I tell them not to kick each other, to apply what they have learned and make everything comfortable," he says. They then kneel down and shake hands before cartwheeling inside the circle and starting to play.

"Not every school is the same," says Geraldo. "When people get into the *roda*, you can see the philosophy of the master: if the students kick each other, the sport isn't taught the way it should be."

Though there are no competitions at the international level, national competitions are held in Brazil. Tests are done to receive



cordels (the equivalent of belts) in which there are ten levels in total, ranging in the colours of the Brazilian flag. Geraldo has been studying 23 years and has reached the white and green *cordel*, master of first degree level.

Whenever students pass a new level, they play with the masters from Brazil who are swept to the floor. This symbolizes that when they do fall in future, they will be able to stand up and walk again. Explains Geraldo, "This is part of the philosophy."

Capoeira is gaining popularity at Dal. "In 1988, I started promoting *Capoeira* in the Maritimes and I am among the first to bring the sport to Canada. I was one of the first who opened a school," says Geraldo.

"Since I have opened here at Dal [in September 1994], I've been getting more and more students, not only from Dalhousie, but people from the community as well — especially students from high school."

Students range from six to thirty-nine years of age.

"Anyone can start. I encourage them to increase flexibility through various exercises, but I don't push them too much. You build up flexibility over time with training."

Proud of his Brazilian culture, Geraldo feels he is bringing a more positive image of Brazil. "I feel like I am an ambassador of the Brazilian culture because I have to respect and know my culture before I teach about it," he says. "Brazil is not the negative images we see on TV, there is so much more culture."

Students learn more than just kicks; they learn history, music, art, dance and sport. Participants Sean Brennan and Mike Thomas believe anyone can learn *Capoeira*. Brennan regards *Capoeira* to have a more friendly and fun approach to learning a martial art. He explains, "I was in Tae-kwon do before I discovered this. I fell in love with the combination of music, acrobatic moves and mentality."

With two years experience under Geraldo, Mike Thomas has found that he enjoys the workout. He explains, "*Capoeira* keeps you in shape, and builds stamina. I like the moves and self-defence. It's all in the mind; if you really want to learn something, then you just go through the challenges and work hard."

"I would like people to drop by and try it, try one class, or watch," encourages Geraldo. "I would be pleased to have different people training with us. Dancing, martial arts, or no backgrounds, are welcome — young and old."

Axé Brazil trains Tuesdays at 6:30 p.m. in the SUB and Saturdays at 5 p.m. in the King's College gymnasium.

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