

How (and Why) to Get Good at Leg Locks

Data-Driven Jiu-Jitsu 04: Rapid skill development.



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Aoki Lock at the ADCC European Trials — Warsaw, Poland — Photo by [BoroJitsu](#)

If there's any aspect of Jiu-Jitsu I confidently think of as myself "really good at", it's locks.

But just 3 years ago, I had only ever finished one leg lock in competition — a straight ankle lock at purple belt that I really just cranked and got lucky on. My opponent was n

and probably afraid of getting hurt. Either way, I didn't really know what I was doing.

It wasn't until 2021 that I really started using leg locks in competition. I don't believe I became a truly "high-level leg locker" until about midway through 2022. In this article, I'm going to show you how I did it.

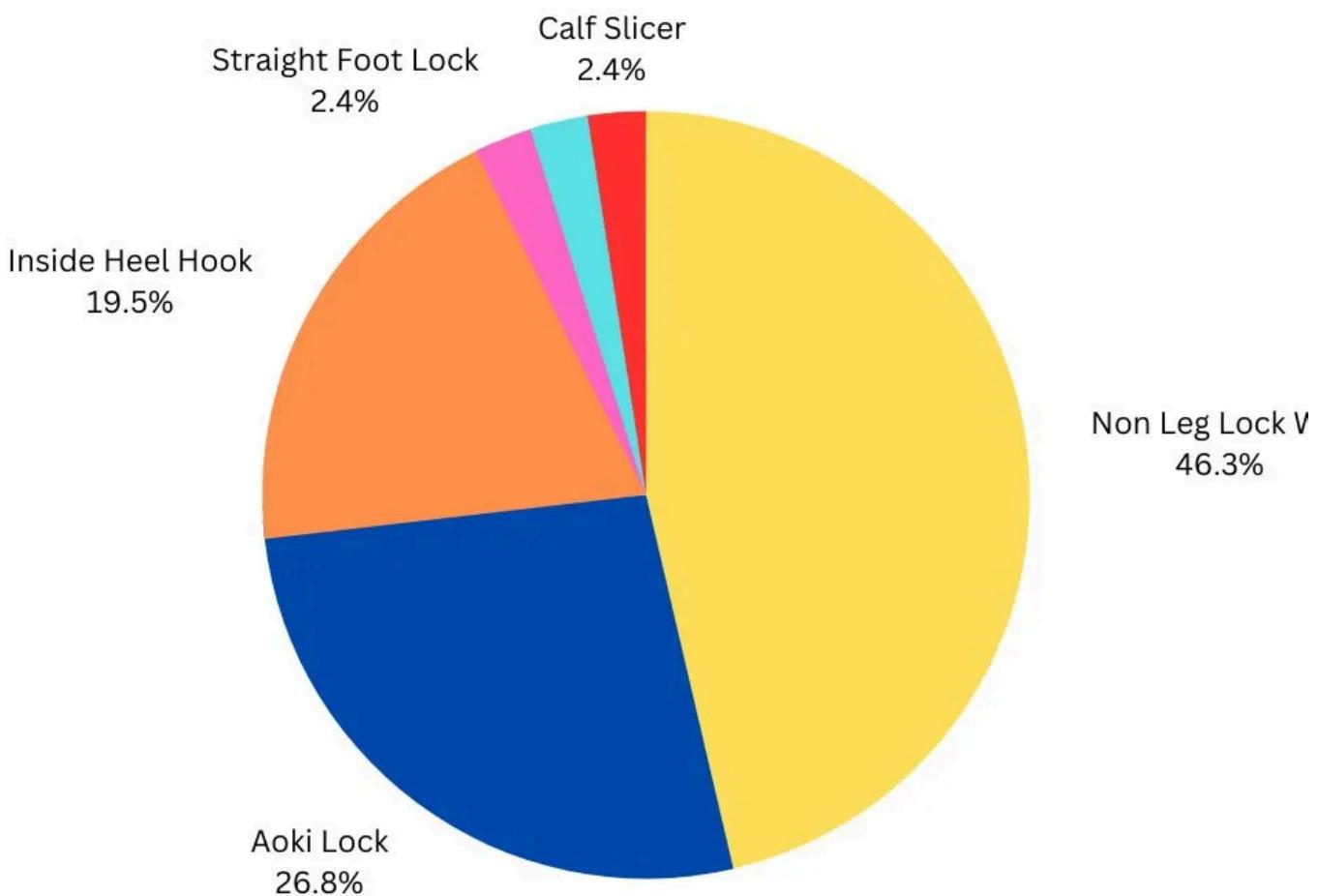
I recently took an inventory of my matches over the last 2 years and calculated a few things from my stats — I've been keeping stats throughout the entire time I have been competing in BJJ — just to see exactly how prevalent leg locks have become for me in recent memory.

The answer is "VERY prevalent".

In the last 2 years, I've had 61 matches — all of which have been in no-gi black belt open-rank divisions. I've won a lot of those matches, but 24 of those wins have come via leg lock. That is a disproportionate amount of leg locks.

In the last 2 years, about 39% of my matches have ended with me submitting my opponent via leg lock. 11 from Aoki Lock variants, 8 from inside heel hooks, 2 outside heel hooks, a calf slicer, a toe hold, and a straight foot lock.

Here is a pie chart breaking down the different finishes, with a separate section for non-leg lock wins:



A breakdown of my last 40ish wins — since February 2022.

Let's dive into why leg locks are important, and more importantly, how you can get really good at them really fast — based on the tried and true methods that I've used over the last several years.

Why leg locks?

The reason I think that leg locks are an important part of BJJ to focus on getting good at is because the leg lock game can be an equalizer. It can allow you to beat people who are better than you and more athletic than you.

I said something at brown belt that I think is a concept worth testing:

If you can get to the top 5% of leg lockers, you can get into the top 1% of Jiu-Jitsu.

I don't really have any hard data on this and it's not necessarily exact, but the idea that you can use leg locks to beat people who are better than you is prevalent still in BJJ today. This is what the original Danaher Death Squad guys did before they were all well-rounded and could win just by smothering people.

The leg lock (if you're far better than your opponent at it) is the easiest path to victory — it levels the playing field.

Also, if you want to compete at a high level, you need to have good leg locks.

If you don't compete at a high level, you can rack a lot of victories by having dangerous leg locks. The level of leg lock offense is significantly above the level of leg lock defense at the mid to lower levels of competition.

This means that if you're okay with leg locks, you'll be dangerous. If you're good with leg locks, you'll be extremely dangerous.

How to learn leg locks

If you're still not sold on the value of learning leg locks, perhaps learning just how effective it is to become good at leg locks will help you.

I cover the fundamentals of learning leg locks in my instructional on Jiu-Jitsu X — which is in my opinion one of the most comprehensive and easily digestible leg lock instructionals out there.

[You can check it out here.](#)

While I can't really teach you moves in written form, I can teach concepts, and that is exactly what we're doing with this newsletter. We're going to look at some of the most important concepts in leg locking and how you can master them faster.

I'm going to try to make you a better leg locker over the next 1800-ish words — without you even trying a technique or going to the gym.

Let's begin:

The different types of leg locks.

There are twisting leg locks, straight leg locks, and counterattacks, which fall into both categories.

There are leg locks from the top position and there are leg locks from the bottom position.

I'm not going to list all of the different leg locks for you ([but you can check out the table of leg locks I like to do in the table of contents on my JJX course for free](#)), but I am going to list out all of the different positions you should be looking to learn leg lock and entries from.

Here we go:

1. Seated Guard (mostly internal entries)
2. Supine Guard (mostly external entries — includes false reap, DLR, etc)
3. Half Guard
4. Closed Guard
5. 50/50
6. Cross Ashi (Saddle — whatever you prefer to call it)
7. Outside Ashi
8. Standard Ashi/Single Leg X Guard
9. Passing the supine guard.
10. The Reap (pathway to the Z-Lock, one of the most dangerous leg locks out there)

This is really good enough to get you started, and you can check out my different systems from there in the leg locking course above.

I'm not going to plug the course anymore but I am going to link a view free videos from it throughout this article. [If you want to learn the leg game fast, check it out](#) – and then apply the following concepts.

Micro-drilling.

For any leg lock (or joint lock or even some chokes), the most important part is “the bite”. A weak joint lock doesn’t work.

“The bite” is that initial pressure that when applied makes your opponent go “Oh s that hurts!”

If you can’t secure the bite, your joint lock won’t work.

So how do you improve your bite-getting skills? Microdrilling.

Microdrilling is a training method that I was taught by my coach, Jeff, that basically allows you to get dozens of reps at securing the most important parts of executing certain techniques in a very short time.

Here’s a free video that I recorded that will help you understand the art of safely securing the bite on your partner.



This will allow you to become a dangerous leg locker from almost anywhere.

Have you ever seen the way that riflemen drill?

Maybe not, but you've probably seen Forrest Gump.

Remember in Forrest Gump when Forrest is in the military and is able to assemble rifle in seconds?

If you're not really feeling up to listening to me talk this morning (I get it), watch the clip instead. You want your leg locks to work like this:



Mastering complicated techniques requires obsessive drilling, right?

Sort of.

I typically like to do 3 or 4 rounds of micro-drilling that are 30 seconds long. In that time, I can get 10-15 reps of each technique I practice.

In 2 minutes of drilling, I can get between 40 and 60 reps!

After your microdrills, it's time to "go live".

Training with varying resistance.

Once you start to understand the art of micro-drilling, you'll find that it applies everywhere in BJJ.

I use micro-drilling to improve my guard passing, back control, wrist locks, and much more. I use it in every technique I want to learn because *it works*. It makes the

important movements that you need to do to be really good at certain techniques practically unconscious.

After you start to understand this, it's time to test your leg locks a bit.

You do this by training "live" with varying levels of resistance.

When I was living in Chicago, we'd have one training session per week that was essential "Leg Day", where we'd do a series of position sparring rounds that were focused on the different leg engagements.

There were rarely any injuries on this day because the ego level in the room was very low and everyone was more focused on getting better than proving anything, and we all got really good at leg locks. If anything, this way of training was really easy on the body compared to things like wrestling, EBI overtime, or guard passing.

It was after about 6 months of training this way that I felt my leg locks reached a new level. Although I didn't train with any "famous grapplers" or grapplers who were world champions, I trained with a room full of solid leg lockers (and focused on leg locks). Because of this, I became (in my opinion) a world-class leg locker.

There's also a sort of mid-range that's essential for improving new skills. Flow rolling with someone who you're levels above. Back in Chicago, I used to do a second session in the afternoons after my hard morning sessions where I'd work my leg locks at a much slower pace than during the hard morning sessions.

The way I've recreated this in Austin is by doing one 10-minute round from a leg engagement every other training day, and then by practicing my leg locks on some of the scrappy blue and purple belts in the room. This allows me to continue to improve my leg locks without actually having to go full speed all the time.

Drilling the 3 aspects of leg locks.

Drilling is key when it comes to learning leg locks.

You need to drill the 3 aspects of leg locks:

1. Entries
2. Control
3. Breaking mechanics

Let's look at each of these components individually.

Entries

This is the aspect that people tend to drill the most, but it's not necessarily the most important.

Most people spend a lot of time drilling their leg lock entries from the guard. Things like the false reap, K guard, single leg X, Kani Basamis, etc. These different entries great and it's good to know not just a few, but all of them.

It's imperative that in your effort to learn leg locks, you drill the different types of entries, but also don't ignore the less common leg locking position, like entering legs from the double pull or from the top.

Some guys who have great leg locks from the top who I recommend checking out are Damien Anderson, PJ Barch, and Keith Krikorian.

If you want to learn the false reap, check out Kieran Kichuk or Craig Jones's instructionals on it. For K guard, I'd recommend Lachlan Giles.

Control

This is something I do pretty well and I don't think a lot of people spend a lot of time teaching it.

The time that I've spent focused on controlling leg entanglements has been crucial me having continued success with leg attacks over the last few years — even after I become sort of known as a leg locker.

I focus a lot on controlling my opponent in various leg entanglements. I focus on making sure that I am able to hold the position long enough to have submission loc at my opponent. If I'm unable to hold control, the leg entanglement becomes a sweeping position.

I've done this by training with varying levels of resistance against partners who hav varying skill levels and varying objectives. I have a lot of experience trying to leg-lo people who are trying to do nothing except escape my leg entanglements.

If they do escape, I work on immediate follow-ups, like sweeps, transitional leg entries, and “wrestling up”.

Like this clip here.

chrismwojcik



A post shared by [@chrismwojcik](#)

If you like studying leg locks in competition and want to study someone who I studied for control, watch Eddie Cummings' highlights. Eddie was probably the most underrated grappler of his time, he had incredible entries, and a lot of his opponent merely tried to disengage with his leg attacks, which forced him to put a lot of emphasis on control.



If you cannot control someone's leg, how can you submit them?

Breaking mechanics

This is the coolest part of leg locks, once you get good at it.

You almost feel like a sorcerer — you can break someone's despite applying very little pressure due to your understanding of "the bite", your understanding of leverage, and perhaps most importantly, your understanding of the human leg and the different situations where it's weak and easy to injure.

Breaking mechanics are also the most underrated part of leg locks (if you're a competitor) in my opinion, because your leg locks won't have any validity if they do work when the lights are on. **You need to know how to break shit.**

This is the part that you need to drill slowly and safely too, but that should go without saying. All leg attacks should be applied slowly in the training room, with a heavy emphasis on control.

Here are the 3 main ideas that grapplers should think about when trying to improve their leg lock-breaking mechanics for things like ankle locks, heel hooks, and Aoki locks:

1. For a good bite in general, you want to get your partner's toes just past the arm
2. To reinforce the bite, tuck your elbow into your ribcage. Kind of like an oblique (side) crunch.
3. Drive with your hips in the direction that puts the most pressure on the joint (it changes based on the submission you're doing and the angle you're doing it at).

God, isn't teaching Jiu-Jitsu with words hard?

Here's a video that will help you understand it a bit better:

jiu_jitsu_x



A post shared by [@jiu_jitsu_x](#)

I don't know of anyone else who has taught leg lock-breaking mechanics in the form I have (besides maybe Danaher, but at least you don't need to watch my instructions on 2X speed), and this video will help give the concepts I just wrote about a visual representation.

Other leg locks, like toe holds, calf slicers, and knee bars require slightly different concepts for control and breaking, but if you can get the heel hook down, you can definitely learn the concepts for these locks.

If you focus on leg locks through the lens of the main concepts above, you'll be able to remove a lot of the guesswork from your training. You should, by now, have a framework to learn leg locks — whether you buy my instructional (or one of the other great leg lock instructionals on the market) or not. You should have somewhere to start, which, as I'll explain in the conclusion, is really the key to it all.

Closing Thoughts

I didn't do any leg locks up until the Covid-19 pandemic in May of 2020.

I didn't hit a heel hook in competition until April of 2021.

I wouldn't say I had a natural aptitude for leg locking.

What I did have an aptitude for was guard play, meaning that it was a fairly seamless addition for me to go from playing guard in gi BJJ and looking for sweeps to playing guard in no-gi and looking for leg locks.

If you're someone who has a natural aptitude for passing (or you simply prefer to attack the legs from the top position), I'd recommend you check out some of the guys listed above who are notoriously dangerous leg lockers from the top. You can then reverse engineer what I've managed to do and become a well-rounded leg locker who can finish leg attacks from anywhere.

The goal is to start learning something new from something you already know.

But really, no matter where you decide to start learning leg locks from (you need to start from something you already do so it doesn't feel too foreign), you need to learn the 3 foundational principles of leg locking that you've read about today:

1. Entry
2. Control

3. Breaking

As you gain a better understanding of these principles, you will then start to train leg locks with varying levels of resistance and out of varying situations. This is how you go from a novice to an intermediate leg locker and an advanced leg locker to a very good one far faster than most people think is possible.

And that, really, is the goal of all of these long-form pieces.

Thank you for reading another edition of “Data-Driven Jiu-Jitsu”, a new-ish monthly segment of The Grappler’s Diary where I try to break down a complicated concept in BJJ in a long-form piece.

Thanks for reading and I’ll see you later this week 😊



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