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Ok, guys, I'm here today with John Denninger. Guys, John is the best-selling instructor in the entire BJJ Fanatics store and he's by far the best-selling one. So today I'm going to ask him a ton of questions here about how he started Jiu-Jitsu, how long it took for him to start becoming well-known in Jiu-Jitsu, and a lot of stuff. So I think it's going to be something very interesting for all you guys, because I can see that nowadays he's the Jiu-Jitsu instructor that everyone is talking about. So let's start here, John. First, thanks so much for being here. My pleasure. Yeah. So, John, where are you from? I know where you're from, but I think many people probably don't know. I actually have a rather strange family background. My father was an Air Force pilot, initially in the Royal Air Force during World War II, and he's a New Zealander. He went back to New Zealand after World War II and became involved in the Royal New Zealand Air Force. In the 1960s, New Zealand and Australia fought alongside the United States in the Vietnam War. And so Australia and New Zealand had military representatives who worked in Washington DC to coordinate the military effort between Australia, New Zealand, United States, and other countries which assisted America in that conflict. And my father was posted in Washington DC. I was born in 1967 during that time. So I was born in the United States, but within a very short period of time I was taken back to New Zealand to be raised. So I have New Zealand parents, so New Zealand citizenship, but born in the United States, so American citizenship. So I'm a dual citizen between those two nations. And when did you move to America? Because you went to New Zealand? I went to New Zealand. I spent all my time in Australia and New Zealand. And when I was completing college, I was doing a master's degree in New Zealand at the University of Auckland. I began applying to Ph.D. programs in the United States. I was accepted to Columbia University to study philosophy. I had been to America once before on a vacation for just a few months and loved it. I couldn't make up my mind which I liked more, California or New York, I loved them both. But I was accepted to Columbia University with a full scholarship, so that was a big advantage. And I began studying at Columbia University in 1991. I came here for a full semester in 1991, and it was obviously a big change for New Zealand. And I began studying at Columbia. Cool. And when did you start Jiu-Jitsu? And did you finish your Ph.D. over there? Or did you Jiu-Jitsu? Yeah. When I first came to Columbia, I was on a full scholarship, but of course an academic scholarship is not much money. And I quickly found that New York City was an expensive place, and I needed to supplement my income. I had worked as a balancer in New Zealand, and I was walking down Amsterdam Avenue one night when I saw an older gentleman being rather soundly beaten up by a much younger and more powerful-looking man, and I intervened on the older fellow's account. And he looked up at me and said, who are you? And I said, I'm John from New Zealand. And it turned out he owned a nightclub on Amsterdam Avenue, and he had been trying to reason with the guy and take him out of his club and got attacked. And so he said, why don't you take a job? So I did, and I started working as a balancer. I worked at a large variety of places. When you work as a balancer, especially in those days, this was long before the time of licensed dormant back then. It was completely like the Wild West as far as balancers go. You just showed up and worked and got paid at the end of the night in cash. I worked with a variety of places with a large number of very colorful characters, and I enjoyed it. It was fun. It was literally the exact opposite of my day job, which was teaching at Columbia University and then working as a balancer in New York City at night. So it was an interesting time. And I quickly found that many of my preconceptions about martial arts were in need of severe modification. I had always had a very low opinion of grappling arts as martial arts. I grew up in a time in the 1970s and 1980s where martial arts were synonymous with striking arts. So in the 1970s, you had the Kung Fu and Karate revolution. In the 1980s, you had the crazy ninja revolution. You had all kinds of things which were the hot martial arts at the time, and they all involved mostly punching and kicking. And I remember occasionally I would see the Olympic Games, and you would see wrestling and judo. I'd be like,

what are these guys doing? That has nothing to do with fighting. They're not punching and kicking each other. And so I always thought these things were a waste of time. Then when I actually came to the United States, and for the first time I started working with talented wrestlers in bouncing situations, I quickly saw that their grappling skills were extremely useful in real fights, in fact, significantly more useful than my striking skills. And I was greatly impressed by this. So just working around wrestlers and judo bags gave me this first sense of, man, what these guys do is impressive. Their ability to control people was truly noteworthy. Around that time, a graduate student, a friend of mine at Columbia University, came into my office hours one day, I was just finishing talking to some students, and he said, I've started doing this thing, it's called Brazilian Jiu-Jitsu, and I thought you might be interested because I know you work as a bouncer. And I was thinking to myself, Brazilian Jiu-Jitsu, what does that even mean? What the hell is that? Jiu-Jitsu is Japanese, what the hell is Brazilian Jiu-Jitsu? And he explained to me it was mostly fighting on the ground. Now, I knew enough about these wrestlers that most of what they did was tackle people down to the ground and pin them down on the floor, so fighting on the ground, that sounds interesting. But most of the people I worked with had been wrestlers who were interested in pinning people. And he was telling me, no, no, we don't pin people, we submit them. We put them in strangleholds and arm locks, and it's much more powerful than pinning them. And this sounded very interesting to me. Now, at the time, I used to lift weights as much as I could, and I think at that time I weighed around 230 pounds, and my friend was at most 150 pounds, and pretty delicately built. And he said, I'll tell you what, why don't you try to hold me down in a pin, and I will try to escape. And I was like, you? I'm twice your size, it's not even going to be fair. And I remember we closed the door of the office in the philosophy department. He got down on the floor, and I put him in a headlock, and I held him on the floor. Now, he started squirming and moving left and right, I had no idea what he was doing. Bear in mind, he'd only been training for two weeks. So this is a guy half my size who'd been training for two weeks, no more. And I was really having a hard time holding him down. I didn't know anything about ground fighting in those days, but I knew he was coming around behind me, and that's not a good thing. And I was squeezing with all my might, I was pulling and retching on his head, and I could feel he was slipping out, and my arms were getting tired. And then finally he did slip out, and I had to quickly scramble back up to my feet, and he got away, and I was thinking, if that was a real fight, I couldn't have held him down. He would have got away. And this is a guy who's been training for two weeks, and he's half my size. And I thought, you know what, I'd better check this out. So I went down, and it was Hendo's, but before Hendo got there. So it was Hendo's assistant, a guy called Craig Cooker, who was teaching. And he used to teach no-gi classes, mostly. And you would teach a one-hour class, you would come in, you'd learn three techniques, and you'd do some sparring, and that was it. I remember, I was big, so my first day I came in, and I did okay with the white belts, because I was a big guy, but I got crushed by the blue belts. Now you must remember, this is 1995. I think at that point, there were maybe three blue belts, one of whom was Matt Serra, and one purple belt. And that was pretty much the entire east coast of the United States. So we're talking about a time where you didn't even see black belts. There were these mythological creatures that would occasionally come in from Brazil. But even to see a blue belt back then was unusual. We all had white belts, and we all started off like that. And that was my start in jiu-jitsu. I remember within two weeks, I had strangled, I think, like six people unconscious at work. I used to work in some pretty wild places. And I remember the first time it happened, I was like, wow, this is like a superpower, this is crazy. But it was incredible how quickly and how efficiently just the most basic elements of jiu-jitsu made a difference in performance, in terms of controlling completely unruly and out-of-control patrons in some pretty serious situations. But it was just a huge revelation to me just how effective these grappling arts were. And it was incredibly impressive. You must also remember that back then, other people had no idea what jiu-jitsu was. Nowadays, if you get into a bar fight,

everyone knows what jiu-jitsu is. People don't believe anymore, but back then, it was incredibly easy. And then, how long it took for you to become like well-known in jiu-jitsu? From the day you started teaching, and which belt you started teaching? I actually started teaching relatively early. There's a reason for that. When I first came in and started training, the main senior students of the school were Hikaru Omeda, Matt Serra, and Rodrigo Gracie. And they did a big part of the teaching at HENZO's. And at roughly the same time, all three had left to open up their own schools and pursue their own careers. So HENZO, of course, was still fighting in Japan at this time. So he had many responsibilities in terms of teaching time, but he also had his fighting, his athletic responsibilities. So he came to me one night and said, John, could you teach? At that stage, I was one of the main training partners of the three mentors that I just mentioned. So they were training with me a lot. And I was very, very fortunate that I had these three working with me on a daily basis. They were all three world champions. And I was, I think at this stage, a blue belt. And it started with me teaching introduction classes. At that time, the class format was just one big class. It was just a three-hour class. You came in at six and it finished, ostensibly it finished at nine, but we all hung out until 11. So it was like a five-hour class. And all levels came in at the same time. So a complete beginner could go with one of the best guys in the United States. And the result was predictable. Most people got crushed. The attrition rate was just, it was just absolutely frightening. So I played with the idea of starting an introduction class where white belts could roll with other white belts so they didn't just get crushed on their first day. So I started, along with Sean Williams, a good friend of mine, a beginner's class. And I know Hinzo was very happy with the beginner's class. And then I started teaching main classes, usually morning, afternoon classes, and whenever Hinzo was out of town, the evening classes. So it was a lot of teaching. And I loved it. At that time, I was thinking there was more joy. Which belt were you wearing? I believe I started as a purple belt. I'll have to check my books on that. It was a while ago now. But I believe it was purple. And again, this is a time when there weren't that many black belts in the United States at this time. And I was in the gym a lot in those days. Literally all day, every day, teaching private. So I was learning rapidly, and I was developing a good reputation as a teacher. I always found that my most pleasurable experiences in Jiu-Jitsu came from helping other people get to their goals in the sport. So it was natural that I should gravitate towards teaching with that kind of mindset. And then how long it took until you started becoming well-known in the Jiu-Jitsu world and MMA world and everything? What was the flip? Probably the thing which made it happen more than anything else was the appearance of George St. Pierre as a student. He was fighting locally in local Canadian shows. And he would come in, usually on weekends. He would come in on a Friday night. He was working as a garbage man at the time. And he would come in on a Friday night. Garbage man? Yeah. Train Friday, Saturday, Sunday, Monday. And how long he would drive or travel to? It's a six and a half hour drive from Montreal. You see when someone wants something. He didn't even have a car back then. He would take the bus. Now the bus is like a nine hour bus ride. So he would go from Montreal to New York. Train. Nine hours bus. And then nine hours home. And he did that for a long time. People say it's a long road to the top. Well, that guy took a long road, let me tell you. I look back and I can only just say my greatest admiration to him.that guy. He's just a remarkable human being, a dedication to do that. You know we sit around, I complain about the four-hour train ride to Boston, that's a relaxing train ride. He's doing six to nine hours on the bus and he's doing this every weekend and then training the whole time. Hard, hard training and then going home and he's a garbage man. It's not like he's a wealthy man at this point. He just had this unshakable faith that at one point he would be a world champion and he had the unshakable conviction that the greatest investment you can ever make in your life is in yourself. That's impressive. You may not have much money but just invest in yourself. Everyone else invest in it, I want this, I want that. You know what? The best investment you can ever make is in yourself. That's great. He lived that. He didn't just say it as a phrase, he did

it. That's very cool to hear here. How much hard work it takes for someone to become what GSP is. Also see how much hard work it takes for John to become what John is. He's doing that since, when did you start? 1995 I think. 1995, so now we are in 2018. John, I mean like... So it's 1994, yeah. 1994, okay. I think one of the reasons that people buy so much from you is one, because you articulate better than any other instructor. I think a lot because your background in philosophy, you know how to articulate in a different way. I think two, in my opinion, I don't know, maybe I'm wrong. I think you were kind of like a new type and new generation of instructors because before all the instructors were the guys who competed a lot and then they retired of competition and become instructors, right? That's true. And in your case... Yeah, I never competed. You never competed and so you were like this new style of instructor. So I think many times when people buy your instructional videos too, they can see more similar things between them and you than between them and that crazy athletic competitor who... Interesting. I think that might make sense, right? Yeah, yeah. I think there's always this thing, you know, who makes the best instructor? Is it the guy that's been there and done everything, you know? A criticism which is often leveled at someone like me is, you know, this guy's never actually gone out and done the things that he teaches. So what qualifications does he have? How does he know what it's like to step on the stage if he's never done it? Yeah, yeah. I mean like I don't agree with those guys who think like that because if you see on every sport, I mean like not even like 50% of the coaches are like ex-successful players, right? Some of them are, but most of them... It's unusual though, yeah. Yes, so... I think the thing which many people perhaps overlook is that what wins matches for an athlete is skill. But most people don't distinguish between skill and knowledge, okay? An athlete needs skills. But I also need knowledge. A coach needs knowledge. You can transmit knowledge, okay? Skills have to be practiced and learned. Now you can have skills but not have knowledge. I know plenty of people that have tremendous skills but they can't articulate that to another person. Whereas knowledge is propositional. It's a set of sentences and propositions which can be transmitted through language to another person. The great attribute of coaches is knowledge. The great attribute of athletes is skill. And there's a relationship between the two but they're not the same. Oh yeah. And more than anything, a coach has to be a transmitter of knowledge and an athlete has to be a builder of skill. And they're two different things. And there's a sense in which you can be very good at one and not be good at the other. You see that a lot in fact. So when you understand that distinction between knowledge and skill, then it's a little easier to understand how someone could be effective as a coach without necessarily being an icon in the athletic area of the sport. I got it. And changing the subject a little bit. Every time I see your Instagram or I see something about you, half of the comments is about your techniques and the other half is about you wearing rash gear. You always wear rash gear, right? You realize it was a time before the rash gear. I think I might be the first one to ask you this question. I have seen you writing about it but nobody's asking you this. So what's this thing like? You must understand rash guards didn't always exist. I don't think they even became popular in jiu-jitsu until around like 2000. It started at ADCC. I think people started wearing rash guards and people were like, what are they wearing? It's like, aren't those what surfers wear? Because of course rash guards were designed for surfing, not for grappling. So when I first came, I wore the same kind of things as you. But as I started wearing rash guards, I started thinking that these things are much more efficient than regular t-shirts for training purposes. Like regular t-shirts stretch, they take forever to dry, they smell bad after a while and rash guards don't seem to have any of those problems. They're much more comfortable, they last considerably longer and as I started working, more and more people would come and just give me rash guards. They'd be like, hey John, you like rash guards, wear this. And I just had this never-ending supply of rash guards. And then one day I'm thinking, why would you wear a t-shirt rather than a rash guard? There's literally not a single advantage that a t-shirt has over a rash guard. In terms of comfort, durability,

ability to make you warm in cold weather and yet cool in hot weather, they're infinitely superior. I can't think of a single reason why I would prefer to wear a t-shirt over a rash guard. So I started wearing them home at night and people are looking at me like I'm a freaking freak. Who the hell is this guy? What's he wearing? And then eventually I just, t-shirts just got phased out. And I work at one thing, I don't own a single t-shirt, but I just have this infinite supply of rash guards. And people, here's a new rash guard, John, try this on. And there it was. I just no longer had a need for it. Things got really crazy though when I started going out on dates and rash guards. That was a problem. That's when I knew I had definitely lost my mind at that point. Fortunately, I'm still out there, I don't get many dates, so it's not too much of a problem. But yeah, it was just this gradual overtaking where one thing just got phased out by another. I think something more efficient came along and I'm more about efficiency. Yeah, I mean like each one has the things you are using. But the other day I was reading an article that, for example, Mark Zuckerberg, the founder of Facebook, he always wears the same t-shirt every day. Really? And it's not the same t-shirt but it has like 100 t-shirts that are exactly the same. Did he give a reason why? Yes, it's a very good reason. He doesn't want to spend time picking which t-shirt he's gonna wear. It's more efficient. Of course, if he wore a rash guard, he'd be more efficient. And how much worth is his time, right? It's true, yeah. So he doesn't want to spend time with that. But anyway, but John, last question. So I remember one of the days you came here, I dropped you in the train station. It was like 10 p.m. You would get home like, you would get in New York City 2 a.m. and you'd get home like 2.30 a.m. or 3 a.m. or whatever. And then while I was driving you, I asked you like, and John, what time is your first class tomorrow? And then you replied to me, 6 a.m. Bernardo. I'm like, 6 a.m.? Dude, don't go to that class, man. You're standing lower than me. There's no need to teach that. Sleep, rest and teach later. And then the way you replied was very, very cool and I'm never gonna forget. You said like, Bernardo, I have some students that they're very dedicated on training, so I gotta be very dedicated as instructor for them. So what do you think about it? How do you think about that? Because you were building all these champions, right? Like Gordon Ryan, Gary Tono, Nick Ryan and GSP where you were part of that and even like Chris Weidman as well, right? And when he won the UFC as well. So what's your mindset about this? Because many people, they want to be the best instructors, right? They want to be the best athletes as well, but they don't want to do what the instructors are doing or the champions are doing. So what do you think about that? Last question. Something which people often assume is that the coach is supposed to inspire the athletes, but what you always find in fact is it goes both ways. I'm at least as inspired by the people I coach as whatever effect I have inspiring them. And I believe they inspire me more than I inspire them. When you see the dedication that those, I call them kids, they're men, they're adults, that they bring to the table, what kind of person would I be if I wasn't inspired by that? When I see Nicky Ryan, 15 years old at the time, getting up at 5am and coming in to train, to be on time, trained so hard for hours at a time, every drill, everything done perfectly, and doing that through until 4pm and then going home with Gary Tonin and teaching all night and training all night in New Jersey. I would feel like a truly inferior person if I couldn't put in a similar effort. If they're putting in so much effort to get to their dreams and goals, what kind of person would I be if I showed up haphazard, late, uninterested, uninspired, in the face of their inspiring hard work? I'm lifted by them. And what I always find is that once one person gets lifted, everyone around him gets lifted. And there's a symbiotic effect where they keep lifting each other. And I believe my students inspire me hugely. I couldn't look myself in the mirror if I wasn't giving everything to a group of people who gives me everything. I would feel like a faded, like someone who was laying the team down. And in this sense, I've always been very blessed to have enormously talented and inspired students who were very ambitious and had great goals. One of the beauties about living in New York is you tend to get people who truly aspire to the top, who have made a commitment to come to this place, whether it be the Henzel Grace Academy, the Marcela

Garcia Academy, they've made a commitment to get there and give everything. And when you're around that kind of ethos, that kind of spirit, it elevates you too. Believe me, I've got a lot of physical problems. I've got a leg that even, you notice I'm sitting because I can't kneel. My knee is completely... There's a lot of days, you know, you wake up and your body is just literally on fire. My whole left side is on fire. And you're just like, man, I would love to just sit down and just do nothing. But then you're thinking, wait a minute, those guys are waiting and they've got dreams and ambitions and goals and they're looking to you to help. What kind of person would I be if I just sat down and said, no, I'm going to stay in bed. That's not the kind of person I want to be. So you just pick yourself up and you keep going. And there's a sense in which it keeps you healthy too. Like, you know, I know a lot of people who have a leg like mine who just kind of fell off and they ended up just doing nothing in their lives. You know, it's easy to say, well, you know, you've got a crippled leg and take it easy, you know, just sit down and relax. But when you have a sense of direction and a goal and you've got people around you who inspire you, you'll find a way to get through whatever problems you have, especially whatever physical problems you have, and just keep going. But as I said, I've always been very blessed to have talented and ambitious students who keep me active in the game. And always remember, my students are incredibly creative people. You know, it's not just a matter of me teaching them. They teach me a lot too. And all of them have made very, very important additions to what I do. When I teach the videos, I teach what I show them. But one day they'll show their own stuff too, and you'll be amazed at what they've come up with. They're highly creative, intelligent people, each one with their own personality, each with their own different approach to the game. But it's a relationship where they, as I said, they inspire and educate me as much as I do them. And I believe in everything you're saying because, guys, today we're here. It's 2.25 a.m. John woke up at 6 a.m. He taught his first class at Hansel's. He took a train 4 p.m. to Boston, arrived here at 8, and we are shooting videos since 8.30 p.m. until 2.25 a.m. So what he's saying is all true. So thanks so much, John. I appreciate it. Thank you.