

THE RULES OF HOLLYWOOD

## When It Comes to Suffering for Your Art, Don't Duck

By Jeremy Pollack, Jeremy Pollack is a Los Angeles-based writer and producer as well as the director of the upcoming feature film "Chandler Hall."

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Documentary filmmakers have it tough. While the guys in the make-believe movie business can get away with a three-month prep and two-month shoot, we may spend years on the photography alone. We have to dive headfirst into the lives of our subjects, getting to know them intimately and earning their trust, no matter the perils. When the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences gave "March of the Penguins" an Oscar earlier this year, it was probably as much about the frostbite the French crew risked following a bunch of birds around Antarctica as it was about the movie.

I knew the work could be dangerous—I'd seen "Super Size Me"—but I wasn't nervous when I set out to direct my first documentary, even though it was about champion martial arts practitioners. I wasn't afraid when the executive producer told me just before filming began, "Try to get involved, Jeremy. It'll be good behind-the-scenes footage for the DVD."

We began at the Paradise Warrior Retreat Center, at a three-day training seminar in Simi Valley with the likes of Benny "The Jet" Urquidez, a kickboxer; Sifu Eric Oram, a kung fu master; and Ultimate Fighting Championship title-holder Chuck "The Iceman" Liddell. They were running through some Chinese boxing exercises when Oram suggested I try them. With the executive producer's words ringing in my ears, I pulled on a pair of gloves, shoved in a mouthpiece and strode onto the mat. Within seconds Oram had split my lip. It hurt, sure, but my first thought was: Did the cameraman get it on film? He had. I smiled and tasted blood.

Another shoot took me to Las Vegas, where I met five-time Ultimate Fighting Champion Pat Miletich. Aside from fighting, Pat's passion-turned-career is training martial arts instructors for police departments and the military. On this day, he was supervising a certification course in the use of stun guns, specifically, the M18L Advanced Taser, capable of delivering 50,000 volts of electric shock. Every officer in the training session had been blasted with the allegedly nonlethal Taser when Pat, very calmly, told me I had two choices.

"You can either run and we'll Taser you and you'll fall on your face," he said. "Or you can stand here and let us catch you. Either way, you're gettin' Tasered." I picked option B—what was the point in making a dash for the exit?—and learned that the Taser can, in fact, be nonlethal. Every muscle and orifice in my body contracted so sharply that I felt like a cellular supernova ready to implode. But I lived. And it was on film.

One day, we spent some time at Hayastan Mixed Martial Arts Academy in Hollywood.

Gene LeBell, a god of the judo world and a martial artist whose autobiography is called "The Toughest Man Alive," was there. As we wrapped up, he looked at me and said: "The director may not leave my studio without first being choked out."

For those of you unfamiliar with the term "choked out," it means to be strangled by someone who applies pressure to the carotid artery, thereby cutting blood flow to the brain. LeBell is known for this sort of thing. At 73, he's as charismatic and as sadistic as ever; people come from all over the globe just to get strangled by this man and earn a patch that states, "I got choked-out by Gene LeBell." Obviously, I was going to have to earn one too.

The cameraman set up the tripod. Gene's thick forearm curled gently around my neck. All I remember after that is catching a glimpse of the ceiling and hearing Gene's distant voice, as if in a dream, barking: "He'll wake up soon." Viewing the footage later, I watched my lifeless body fall limp against the ground like a puppet cut from its strings. It was a terrible thing to see. Thank goodness it was on film.