



Introduction to BLIND GRAPPLERS

How it all started...

One day, one of the mothers who had her little daughter Sussi in my class at the Gracie Zurich Dojo approached me with the question: "Franco, I have a son who is two years older than Sussi, but he is blind... Sussi is always talking at home about the cool training she has with you, and I was wondering if I could bring him to you for a trial in Jiu-Jitsu?"

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She did not have to wait long for my reply: "Yes, of course, if you (and he) would like, I can also offer you a private (one-to-one) trial lesson, and you could watch the class and let him decide if Jiu-Jitsu is the right way to start with Martial Arts. Monica immediately liked the idea and my offer, and we arranged a day for her son Markus to have a trial lesson with me.

About a week later the boy and his mother visited the Dojo and after a very short verbal introduction about me and the roots of our Jiu-Jitsu method, we decided to dress up with our Gis and go to the Tatame.

At that time I had a (more or less) teaching plan for Markus, although I must admit that it was the first one, I taught under these physical restrictions. But I was also very excited to see if my plan would match the boy's expectations. Thank God our two goals for this introductory lesson were almost the same. The boy's goal was to give me a "hard time" as he later told me - laughing and asking Monica if he could join my Dojo for good and get more lessons the same week.

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My aim was to give my new young Jiu-Jitsu friend a more normal environment. Before joining the Dojo, I talked to him about training with other kids and how he would feel. From my side, I liked the idea so much that I offered him to train with me privately first, to get some basics and not feel lost when he started training with the kids group. The boy, the parents and I - we all expected some situations that Markus would face in the open group training. But to our great surprise, every one of the kids wanted to train with Markus and teach him his best move. The boy enjoyed it so much that I did not have to wait for other blind children - from different age groups - boys and girls - to come and practice Jiu-Jitsu with us.

Pure Jiu-Jitsu for EVERYONE, and yes, for the blind...

The program for the blind kids is based on pure Gracie Jiu-Jitsu the way with teach it, which I have been studying for over 35-plus years. Since 1995, I have run my own Dojo (Gracie Zuerich), offering Brazilian Jiu-Jitsu as taught by Grandmaster Hélio Gracie and my mentor, GM Pedro Hemetério.

In my program "Blind grapplers" I use (almost) the same material. Some people think that I have had to modify some techniques, but the truth is that Gracie Jiu-Jitsu works perfectly for blind people without any modifications. Only recently I begun to talk more about this unique project because I wanted to give myself enough time to evaluate me and my Dojo in connection with the "Blind Grapplers" project taught since 2014. My well-established and strongly growing Gracie Concepts® network (est. 1995) around the globe also allows me to share this program with other affiliate Dojo partners and beyond.

Upon certain point, I wanted to share my "Blind Grapplers" project with my other students, and I created some "games" to introduce my work. Believe me, this was the breakthrough... It was amazing to see how adults and young people "play" with each other would when you ask them to train completely blinded in Jiu-Jitsu.



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The EGO in Brazilian Jiu-Jitsu...

"One of the core teachings of Masaaki Hatsumi, the founder of the Bujinkan Dojo and heir to several traditional Japanese martial arts (including Togakure-ryū ninjutsu), is the concept of: Kansei (感性) or "Intuitive Sensitivity"

Hatsumi Sensei places great importance on developing intuitive perception and natural movement rather than relying purely on strength, technique drills, or rigid forms.

This idea reflects his deep understanding of timing, distance, rhythm, and the feeling of a situation. He often emphasizes that you shouldn't fight strength with strength. Rather, "Feel" the opponent. Move freely. Adapt naturally."

For Bujinkan martial arts practice, this means not relying on prearranged kata but adapting spontaneously and training the body and mind to respond intuitively under pressure.

Most importantly this means letting go of ego and control to allow true movement to arise. Hatsumi Sensei believes that real mastery comes when you transcend technique and flow with the situation, something he often refers to as moving into "zero" or "kukan" (空間, the space) where you are fully present, yet untouchable.

This reflects not just martial arts effectiveness, but a philosophical approach to life rooted in flexibility, awareness, and balance."

-April 6th, 2025, by Sean Askew (BKR BUDO)

Anyone who trains Brazilian Jiu-Jitsu knows that at some point in sparring, beginners (and advanced practitioners) can start using brute force instead of proper technique. Immediately the personal ego kicks in and shows its ugly side. I don't like the quote "You either win or you learn!", written by someone who is a loser from the start, at least that is my opinion. Imagine a warrior (like a Samurai) thinking like that! In western culture, losing is like a disaster and people want to have an "answer" for everything – including losing.

With the help of my brother Demetrio, I created a teaching method that has been used by all our Gracie Concepts® affiliate trainers and instructors for decades. The principle of Gracie Jiu-Jitsu is the basis of a program created specifically for our "Blind Grapplers". However, one of the most important elements used in training blind people - and not only - is our "Progressive Randori System" (short PRS).

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Gracie Jiu-Jitsu teaches you different ways of moving your body, and with “PRS” you will learn how to apply each technique under pressure and against different opponents and situations. Randori is often misunderstood and used incorrectly by many BJJ schools. In BJJ, Randori is often called “rolling”, which may sound “cool”, but it is not! In Jiu-Jitsu we do not “roll” at any time. In Jiu-Jitsu we learn to fight and defend ourselves. So I see no point in starting a sparring session by sitting on my butt and getting my opponent on top of me! For someone who is a big and strong person - or an athlete fighting against someone of the same weight and skill level - it may “work” at a certain point, but on the street with NO RULES and NO TIME LIMITS, under heavy conditions it will NOT work for sure... and now imagine a person who is also blind applying this concept! How would this tactic work for them? Guys let's be realistic and serious!

Martial arts for Blind people...

Yes, absolutely - and I tell you more: there is no better sport than Martial Arts for your children, regardless of any physical disability. Yes, it is a challenge! Gracie Jiu-Jitsu and other (real) Martial Arts are better than any other team sport because you must focus on yourself. He (or she) will learn to respect others, because without a training partner no training is possible, and no progress can be made.

Learning fighting skills (with Jiu-Jitsu or any other Martial Art) has been an integral part of human existence since the dawn of civilization. We have used such skills to survive! We always make the mistake of associating Martial Arts skills with traditional Far-Eastern fighting systems. We think of Asian countries like China, Thailand and Japan, but we forget that we have our own history here in Europe. Modern civilization has taught us that fighting is not the answer, but in some cases the only answer - to survive!

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Our long and extensive history of Martial Arts (Wrestling, Boxing, etc.) goes back several thousand years. However, let's not make the same mistake of thinking that the creation of Martial Arts is directly descended from the "meditation methods" practiced by Buddhist monks. The belief that several hundred years before Christ, traditions of meditation training in motion made their way from India to China is out of date.

We have romanticized Martial Arts with the aim of making it suitable for the cinema and bringing Western culture closer to "Asian" culture. Fighting is just fighting... there is nothing beautiful about punching someone in the face, kicking them in the leg and breaking their arm. We must name it, otherwise we make the same mistake again and lose the essence of what true Martial Arts is all about. Yes indeed, you will train "your mind and body", and your soul will be more reach, but it is fighting that we end up doing.

Jiu-Jitsu (or in more modern terms Ju-Jutsu, Tai-Jutsu, etc.) has always been associated with Samurais and Ninjas, a caste of brutal warriors and assassins from Japan. That is true! Kung-Fu (China) and Karate (Okinawa, Japan) have no connection with Samurais or Ninjas at any time in history. Jiu-Jitsu, as it was used after the Samurai era, is a much more modern "product" of the Fighting Arts schools (Bujutsu) in Japan, after the emperor's decision to close the traditional Fighting schools and promote "Do" (Japanese for "way") and support the creation of Aikido, Iaido, Kendo, Judo, etc. to promote Japanese culture and sports. There is no such thing as "magic" and supernatural powers in Martial Arts - it is often promoted to believe that warriors are some sort of superheroes. The high level of fitness of those who train is simply the result of in-depth knowledge, hard and consistent work. Movies and TV series of all kinds have played, and continue to play, a major role in popularizing Martial Arts of all kinds.

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Blind (and partially sighted) people are often denied the opportunity to enjoy physical activity and its benefits. This is due to all kinds of barriers that the environment place in the way of blind people. Apart from the physical problems that significantly affect access to sporting disciplines, blind people face a few other problems, mainly in the form of a lack of qualified teachers and infrastructure.

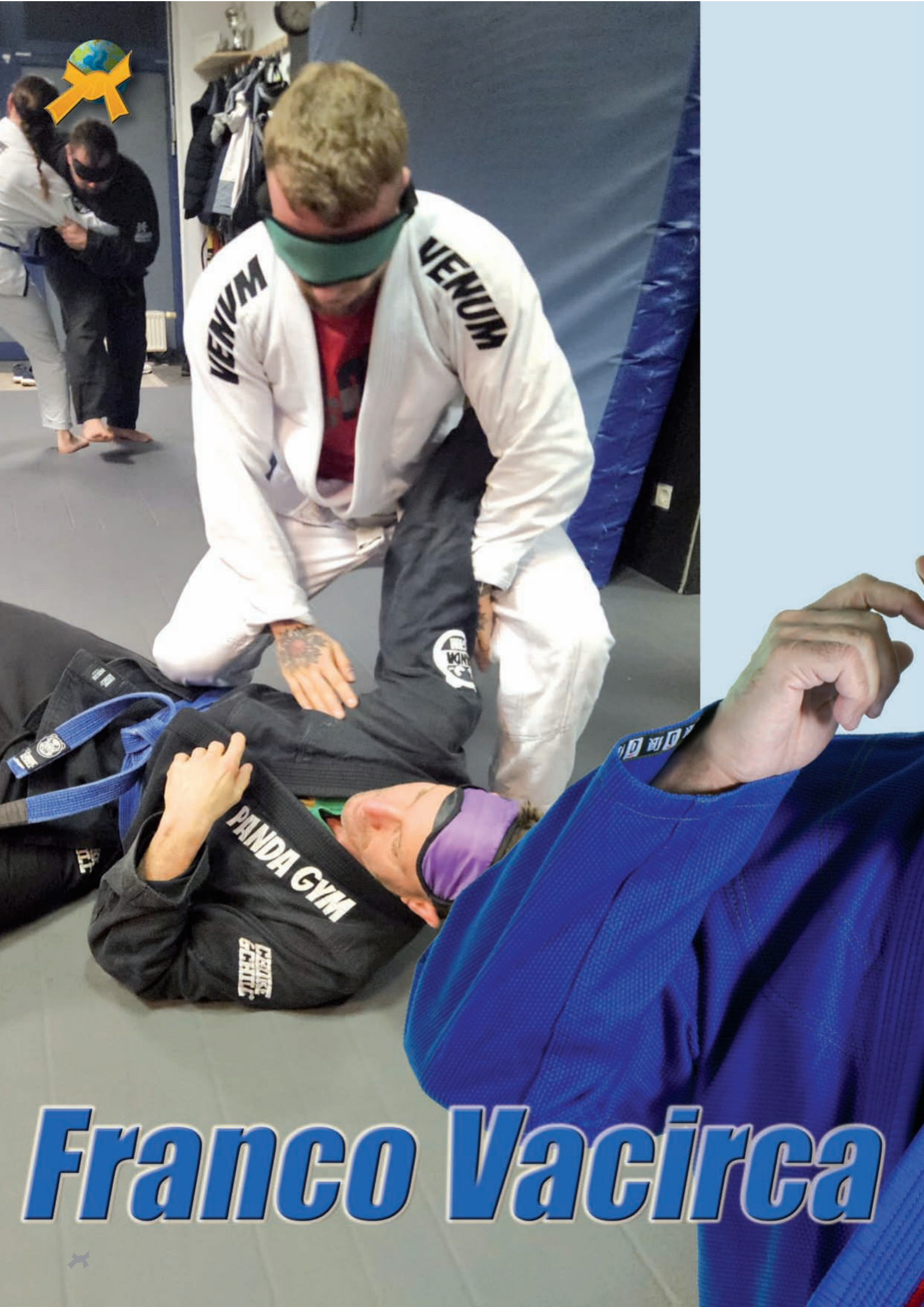
A blind person moves in a different way; the body is stiffened, and the person moves in a way that can be defined as "protective". The blind person will need much more time to feel ok and safe in standing, but with Jiu-Jitsu – the person will train also on the ground and have additional "support"; but again, the teacher must be profound with the techniques and positions taught in Gracie Jiu-Jitsu. However, blind people who experience such stimulation develop not only harmony in their movements but also a higher sense of self-control.

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Are Martial Arts better Sports for Blind people...

"Your way of thinking will naturally change as you become more skilled. Therefore, just keep going."

Nagato Sensei (Bujinkan Japan)

I can assure you that yes indeed, Martial Arts are the perfect tool to get blind people into sports, and Gracie Jiu-Jitsu is the top of the food chain! Why am I so convinced? Because I have experienced several Sports and Martial Arts training sessions with blind people. Of course it is different for each of us because we have different needs. But we also have many of the same goals in life when it comes to learning Martial Arts or a Self-defense method.

Jiu-Jitsu at the top because it is based on close combat and one of the most important skills used is "leverage over muscle power". Technique is the key in Jiu-Jitsu and with repetition you will achieve perfection and automatism. Your reaction under pressure will be perfect, even if your opponent is much bigger and stronger than you.

In Gracie Jiu-Jitsu there is no age limit; men and women can start at any time. Because you learn to adapt Jiu-Jitsu to you, not the other way around. Translating Jiu-Jitsu from the Japanese, we can say that it is a "flexible – adaptable" Art of Defense, sometimes translated as "Arte Suave" (in Brazilian language), and in English as "Gentle Art".

Jiu-Jitsu is easy to learn, and the basic tools - techniques and tactics - are learned quickly. It covers everything from standing and ground aggression, against armed and unarmed situations. Because of its realism and natural movements, beginner Gracie Jiu-Jitsu training not only progresses in knowledge and skill but also becomes more interesting. While the complete Gracie System may have fewer than 600 techniques, many of these techniques work in different situations and under different conditions. Compare this to other Asian-based Martial Arts that have more than 3000-5000 (!) techniques to learn.

In Gracie Jiu-Jitsu you will never stop progressing and learning, regardless of the color of your belt. The belt color will tell you nothing but how long a person has been training. But it is not here to tell you "How many" techniques he or she knows. The belt is there to motivate you - but in the end, even a Black belt in Gracie Jiu-Jitsu will continue his journey by improving, sharpening and sharing his knowledge.

People in Gracie Jiu-Jitsu will develop a strong attitude. You will gain greater self-confidence and self-esteem. Your mental skills such as concentration and perseverance are part of the whole training. Respect and responsibility for yourself and your training partner is imperative. Progress will come through daily training, not just by showing up. You will be asked to work with your body and mind - fully focused and aware of the "here and now".

How I introduced our Regular members to "Blind Grapplers" ...

The introduction to our regular members to the "Blind Grapplers" project, was fun and exciting from day one! I have created various games and drills in a (natural) progressive method to introduce students to working with blind people and to experience themselves what it means to be, and exercises blinded.

Working with my young Jiu-Jitsu friend Markus and later other kids and teenagers in my "Blind Grapplers" courses and regular classes, I understood the benefits of bringing them together with my regular members at certain moment, however, and whenever they were ready and of course willing to try out new emotions and feelings.

One of my goals is to popularize my "Blind Grappling" project beyond our Gracie Concepts® network in Europe. I am more than willing to share my experience with anyone - just give me a call and let's talk about it. The Blind community in Europe needs more of the same (or similar) Martial Arts projects. Some European governments may even support you financially if you present a professional project. Do not take this mission lightly - make it professional, you will be teaching people with very sensitive needs. Always be professional when you start such a project. You will be putting Martial Arts and yourself into a very important project and many people around you will be willing to help you if the work you do is one hundred percent correct.

Keep it real!

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