



Jiu-Jitsu as a Path of Growth

Dear readers

Welcome to the first (but not last) article by Maryam Kegel. She is a strong woman who has not only chosen Jiu-Jitsu as a path for personal development, but is also very good at writing about it.

I got to know Maryam during training sessions in Berlin, where she convinced me right from the start that she was serious about learning Gracie Jiu-Jitsu.

Not only in Berlin, but also in Gandia (Valencia) at our annual summer camp, she proved that she can achieve her goals as the only woman on the tatami under the hot Spanish sun.

At the BJJ & Surf Camp on Fuerteventura, she had female support, but she also knew how to support others, which showed me once again that she has the right spirit for Jiu-Jitsu.

As a woman, it's not easy in martial arts, we all know that, but you shouldn't make a big deal out of it. In my opinion, martial arts are not just for one group of people. Martial arts, and therefore Jiu-Jitsu, are for everyone who is willing to work on themselves.

She has been writing her (online) book "Schwarzglut" for some time now, which can be found at [geschichten_mit_maryam](https://www.instagram.com/geschichten_mit_maryam/) on Instagram. I highly recommend reading it.

I would like to thank Maryam once again for this great article and hope to read more about her perspective on Gracie Jiu-Jitsu soon.

—Franco Vacirca

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Am I in the right place?

This was the question I kept asking myself two years ago, every time I stepped onto the mat. Me – an insecure woman, without any martial arts experience. Around me: men and women from different weight classes, at least ten years younger and significantly more experienced.

I injured my knee within the first month. Is Brazilian Jiu-Jitsu really something for me?

In this article, I want to share how I found the answer to that question – from a deeply personal perspective.

Today, Jiu-Jitsu is for me not about gender, age, or physical strength. It's a journey toward myself, and I would like to share that journey with you.

My Personal Experience as a Woman in Jiu-Jitsu

Insecurity persisted, even among the women on the mat. I'm underweight and over 40 years old, while many of my training partners are ten, sometimes even twenty years younger. You feel those differences especially at the beginning. They can undermine your motivation and give rise to considerable frustration. What kept me going, what motivated me to stay and persevere, was inspiration: Sandra!

Strong, successful, in my weight class. She was already one step ahead, wearing a blue belt (she wears purple now) – and she wasn't afraid to spar with men!

Meeting her was proof of what my coach, Maurice "Mo" Wollny GJJ black belt and the owner and head coach of the Panda Gym in Berlin, always said: "It's not about strength – it's about technique."

I kept showing up. I chose to see the bruises on my body not as injuries, but as signs of progress.



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Growth on the Mat

"Patience, timing, precision – the three core principles of our Gracie Jiu-Jitsu," says my coach, Mo. Progress didn't come all at once, but slowly, in small and steady steps. I started paying attention to the details: a clean clinch – and really understanding it. Never underestimate the power of the hips! A solid armbar here, a successful escape there – and always: practice, repeat, refine. Precision grows with every repetition.

The dynamic training not only promotes technique but also trains instinctive reactions and thus improves timing. Everything begins to come together.

A key moment for me was overcoming my own limits. Limits I had created in my head: "I'm too old for quick reactions," "I'm too weak for a hip throw," "I'll never manage that escape..." – but those sentences weren't reality. They were just thoughts. I had to face the challenges – and I did, one by one.

Of course, I owe a lot to my coaches and experienced training partners. Their patience, knowledge, and support made my development possible.

None of these steps happened overnight. They grew over time – and they continue to grow. Today, this process isn't just part of my training; it has slowly become part of my lifestyle.

Not Everything Is Beautiful – Social Experiences as a Woman on the Mat

Jiu-Jitsu is a close-contact martial art. It's about control, leverage, and holds—everything in tight proximity. That makes it difficult for many women to feel comfortable at first. I want to be honest: not all my experiences were pleasant.



Maryam Kegel **Franco Vacirca**



Many men were respectful, helpful, and collegial right from the start—they made me feel welcome. But others were not. I encountered training partners who felt triumphant about picking “a girl” up and throwing her to the ground. My coach had to remind everyone often: “Don’t use 100% of your strength against smaller opponents!”

I even met men who refused to roll with women—for various reasons, such as religious convictions or jealous girlfriends.

Another aspect of training is the unavoidable physical contact with sweaty partners, whether men or women. No matter the season, after a roll you’re carrying not only your own sweat but also that of your partner. Sometimes, during grappling, sweat drips from your opponent onto your face—that can feel unpleasant.

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But this is reality. If I ever need to use Jiu-Jitsu on the street for self-defense, the fight won't be pleasant or beautiful either. I'm here to fight, to learn, to grow. And anyone who doesn't respect that hasn't understood what it's about.

Jiu-Jitsu Is Not Male!

Even though women are often a minority in many training groups, I don't see Jiu-Jitsu as a "male" sport. In my gym, around 30% of the members are women—but that says nothing about the nature of this martial art. Jiu-Jitsu has no gender.

The challenges I face—struggling with my own body, overcoming fears, training with partners from different weight classes—are challenges men also face. Not every man finds a training partner in his own weight class. Sweaty bodies are uncomfortable for everyone.

What truly matters is attitude: mutual respect, technical growth, and a willingness to develop—regardless of gender.

A Network Built on Humanity – The Team as a Second Family

Jiu-Jitsu is an individual sport—but you don't grow alone. Without a supportive environment, many of my achievements wouldn't have been possible. In my case, it was the network around Franco Vacirca that carried, motivated, and strengthened me.

It's not just about techniques or belt promotions, it's about how you're seen and supported as a person.

Franco treats everyone with respect, patience, and genuine humanity—regardless of their level or gender. That creates an atmosphere where you feel safe enough to work on yourself.

Other experienced team members also showed me again and again: what matters here is not who you are or where you come from, but that you're willing to learn and grow.

This sense of trust and belonging made me loyal. I personally felt welcome right away at the camp in Gandia. In Fuerteventura, I saw how Franco spontaneously and warmly integrated new participants into the training—even though they weren't part of Gracie Jiu-Jitsu. The same happened again later in Berlin.

I know I can count on my team—not just during training, but also when things get difficult.

This kind of community is rarely one of the reasons why Jiu-Jitsu has become so much more than just a sport for me.



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What Is Jiu-Jitsu For?

During the thirty-minute randori sessions at the end of class, I sometimes take a short break—not out of exhaustion, but to observe.

Watching others isn't just educational, it's also fascinating to see how differently people move.

Some roll dynamically, enjoying the flow and the control. Others go straight for the submission—efficiency is their priority.

Conversations with training partners reveal many reasons for practicing Jiu-Jitsu.

For some, it's about self-defense in real life. For others, it's about athletic ambition, the joy of movement, or simply feeling good in their bodies.



Maryam Kegel Franco Vacirca





Some train to improve reaction speed, refine the coordination between mind and body, or simply to challenge themselves.

But in the end, all these paths lead to one common goal: personal development—both physical and mental.

The philosophy of Jiu-Jitsu, like that of many martial arts, lies in acting correctly at the right moment. Whether we train for tournaments or for the pure joy of movement, Jiu-Jitsu strengthens us. It makes us fitter, more alert, more aware—physically and mentally.



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Final Thoughts – A Journey That Continues

What began with uncertainty has now become part of my strength. I've learned to assert myself on the mat, to push past my limits, to be patient, and to stay committed. But above all, I've learned that it's not just about technique or belts about growth, character and humanity.

Jiu-Jitsu has given me new confidence—not only on the mat but also in everyday life. When I feel uncertain walking down the street, I remind myself: "You've learned how to defend yourself. You can think clearly and react quickly. What should you be afraid of?"

Today, I draw inspiration from many—regardless of rank or age. What they share is this: they remained true to the path—with humility, respect, and discipline. I don't know where this journey will take me next. But I know I'll keep going. And I will follow in the footsteps of my role models—step by step, with respect and discipline.



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