

Recontres Jasnieres 2007

A 20 year celebration - by Ronnie Robinson

Late July saw the 20th anniversary celebration of Rencontres Jasnieres (RJ), staged in the camp site by the lake, near the little village of Marcon in the Loire Valley, France. Conceived by Serge Dryer it was by far the biggest and most popular tai chi event in Europe drawing many eminent, and not so eminent teachers, students and practitioners from all over Europe and a few from further afield, America, USA and elsewhere.

Bob booked the flights, rented the car and along with his wife Lynn and a good few students I joined them for the big event. Bob had taught at RJ for most of the 20 years providing entertainment by way of his acoustic guitar and good spirits (Scotch and ebullience).

Wednesday 25

We arrived a few days early, borrowed tents (Bob from Epi van de Pol (NL) and I from Loni Liebermann (Germany) got set up and said a few hellos around the campsite. Isabel Boutiere (France, who I last met in Zhongzhou, China) lent me a hammer and some positive encouragement for erecting the tent. Epi's good lady, Alice made me a much-appreciated coffee and eventually with the expertise of Lynn the tent was in position. Epi returned from his workshop with one of his esteemed teachers, Peter Ralston (USA) who was remarkably sociable. We shared a wine before dinner which was co-hosted by Bob's students and the Lille crowd, namely Monique, Lisa et al. Bob unfortunately took control of the barbeque and set the sausages sizzling over the high flames and succeed in cremating the outsides whilst the insides were raw. After a second batch by Alisdair Scott and I the food was eventually palatable. En route to the al fresco feast I bumped into my old friend Mario Napoli (Italy) who, with his two sturdy students joined us. I last saw Mario at Nils Klug's push hands meeting in Hannover (www.push-hands.de) in February. Mario continues to be a joy to be with as we shared a few hefty glasses on wine and the best of the sausages.

Thursday 26

The next morning I awoke around 8.00am as the sun warmed up my tent. Bob and his people had already set off to begin the long process on rehearsing for the big parade which was planned for the Saturday afternoon. I meandered down for a shower passing on the way to talk with a few good friends from Germany, Holland. After a breakfast of cold croissants and hot coffee I set off through the gate to walk by the lake. I passed Lauren Smith (Germany via USA) who was teaching. Lauren is probably one of the top tui shou players in Europe and we spent a couple of days together at Cornelia Gruber's (Switzerland) chalet in the Swiss hillside where, along with Bob, Epi and Joppe Dounes we ensured a Spartan night fuelled by only fondue and wine. The next morning Lauren and I pushed for some time and, for me, and many others, it was an unusually humbling experience. (I first encountered Lauren in 2000 when I was a guest of the German Netzwerk's at their annual gather, that time in Waldenberg, Germany.) Humour, rhythm and relaxation are his most commendable qualities.

A little farther on I sat quietly by the lake harmonising my breath with the ebb and flow that the light breeze created on the water in the warm sun. Once settled I spent a couple of hours waking my weary body with a series of warm-ups and qigong routines.

Back in the campsite the fields were filling up with Taiji players from various European locations gathering for the weekend pilgrimage. Nils Klug had arrived from Hannover in his trusty old Volvo and invited me to lunch at his hotel. A tasty omelette and salad over a cold beer gave us time to discuss various European Internal Arts matters, he being the Chairman and I the Secretary of the Taijiquan & qigong Federation for Europe (www.tcfe.org). The main topic was the forthcoming TCFE Congress Forum which Nils was to host as an adjunct to his regular Push Hands meeting which would be in its 8th year.

Serge Dryer



2 – 3 hours later we returned to the campsite where I was delighted to see the arrival of Ken van Sickle (New York, USA) and his new wife Victoria. I first met Ken 5 years ago at the 1st Cheng Man-Ching (CMC) Congress Forum in Peragaux, France, hosted by exiled Englishman, William Nelson. Ken, who was responsible for most of the photos and film we see of the late Professor, is always a pleasure to be with. He was twice a guest at Tai Chi Caledonia (www.taichicalledonia.com) where his exceptional swordplay and wonderful



Lauren Smith



Ken van Sickle

story telling, illustrated by many interesting images from his personal collection of CMC, were wonderfully received. Prior to RJ Ken was in Germany exhibiting 50 years of his photographic work. (www.sinnobar.com).

This year's RJ was different for me in that I was here for the 1st time not as a teacher. Being in the role of a regular customer gave me a very different perspective of the event. Around 4.00pm I went to the organisers tent (A.R.A.M.I.S. (www.aramis72.fr)). I endured some consternation over food tickets which it seems weren't reserved for me, despite sending four unanswered emails confirming my intention to attend. It was suggested that I visit the canteen and try to see if there were tickets available for me, once everyone else had been taken care of. It seems that I was not alone with this difficulty. I understand that the organisation of food has to be carefully pre-planned but given I always ate at their canteen and given it was their 20th time there one may have thought that they would be in a better position to deal with a few extra customers – perhaps it's just how things are in France.

After dinner we returned to the campsite had a few wines, listened to Bob's music and finally crashed out I know not when.

Friday 26

The early morning exercises were just too early for my liking but I made the 10.15 slot with Mario. It's a few years since I had a chance to work with Mario and I particularly like his direct, clear approach. We worked on recognising the difference between a push and pull and how to stay rooted when the pressure came. My partner for most of the session was Nils who was also hosting some workshops in Hannover with Mario.

Mario is one of the few westerners who has gone to Chenjiagou Village, home of Chen style tai chi, and beat them at their own game. He was a close student of Stan Israel, one of Cheng Man-Ching's close students, and is one of the few people from the CMC tradition who has competed against all styles highly successfully. For anybody who is genuinely interested in competition push hands they could do a lot worse than train with Mario. His training is tough but highly effective for those who have the necessary dedication.



free-pushing



Nils Klug



open to all

The highlight of Jasnières for most of the participants is the three hours free-pushing every afternoon. The spirit is open and creative; at least this is the stated mission. Over these many years I've seen all manner of approaches, attitudes and assertions regarding this art but sadly I see less development in terms of what we are supposed to be doing than I think is possible. I'm delighted to engage with anyone who asks and hope, somewhere during our interchange, that I can learn something more from each encounter. Unfortunately for me, and I guess many others, not everyone has the same notion. I don't mind being beaten, in fact I welcome defeat, then it allows me an opportunity to consider what happened, where I lost contact, where I got stuck, anything that's sending these signals

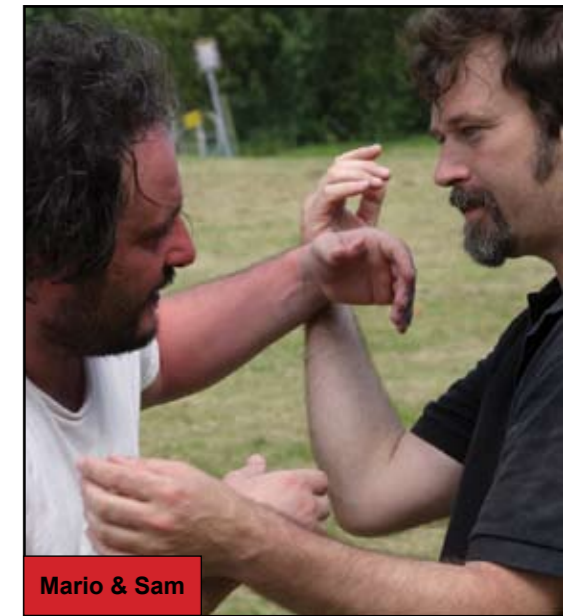
is particularly welcome. However, in many of the encounters you get gripped and held, when you push to someone directly in their centre, they push their centre back towards you, they resist, tighten up push your push away, in fact anything that lets them stay upright and in control.

Control, there's an interesting term. Why do we feel the need to be in control? I guess we all have our natural defences that create a barrier within us and in many cases they are a necessary mechanism for survival. But let's be serious, we are supposed to be working in a spirit of open exchange. If we are clear about the rules of engagement then we have a firm platform on which to work. Push hands is a training exercises, it is supposed to train us in

the principles of tai chi. Basically if a force comes we move with it, not against it. Simple procedure. If the force is too strong, fast or direct to allow us to neutralise then ask your partner to go a little slower, a little more gently and see where it is you're getting stuck. None of us are out to fight here, if you want to fight than make that the rule and fight but don't pretend to be exercising tai chi principles when you are pushing the push away, resisting, hanging on or fighting back. I don't mean that we should simply stand there and let the push go through us, or knock us over, try to ground, try to evade, try to bring your partner out of their centre, but do it with dignity and respect.

Over the course of the weekend I talked with a number of eminent instructors who had considerable experience gained over many years, unfortunately they all agreed with me that less than 10% of the people pushing were actually doing tai chi! Sad isn't it.

Sometime later my new found friend from Canada, Sam Masich (www.sammasich.com) came to join us. Sam had completed extremely successfully for many years at all the major American competitions. He came to me via Jill Heath, a fellow Canuck who I initially met at the National Qigong Association of America's (www.nqa.org) 5th Conference in Portland, Oregon. Jill had come and taught for us a couple of times at Tai Chi Caledonia (TCC) and had also hooked up when in Glasgow in her other life as a tour manager. Jill suggested Sam as a good candidate for teaching at this year's TCC and although the programme was all in place, with all teacher confirmed, I invited Sam as a weekend guest and gave him my push hands slots. Sam contributed much to TCC in many ways, his skill, knowledge and social ability more than fitted our annual event. Bob and I suggested he come to Jasnières and so he did. He pushed with a number of people and had problems with one individual whom he felt was not engaging in a health way. They had a disagreement and because the other didn't want to discuss what happened they separated hands less than amicably. I spent some time after talking individually to each party, trying to find an open way of communicating. Unfortunately I recommended to the other guy that Sam would be good for him to push with. The other guy I've met a few times at RJ, know him



Mario & Sam



The Big Parade



I push with Sylvan



across the countryside

to be a serious practitioner who loves push hands and through it would be interesting for him to play with Sam. Unfortunately once again, it seemed that he wasn't intent on playing but wanted to push Sam out. An unpleasant tussle ensued and both sides were somewhat displeased with the outcome of their meeting. Situations like these could well be avoided if some dialogue takes place before the encounter. A little discussion on the mutual terms of engagement allows both parties to be clear on where to go and how to proceed further.

The encounter above and a number of others over the course of the weekend prompted me to consider what we all want and where we are all heading with push hands. In many ways I despair but deep inside I try to remain hopeful. One thing for sure is that RJ provides a unique opportunity for people to play push hands, at all levels, for that it must be applauded. Another side of me thinks about the 20 years of the event and the stage we are at with push hands. For me most of the work that could be, and needs to be done is the inner work. We must be deeply honest with what we can do, what we can't do and where we want to go. Once we establish clear objectives then we have a platform for further learning. I would like to see some open space put aside at such meetings to allow us to discuss how we felt with the various encounters we had over the course of 3 hours free-play per day. If we can do this openly and creatively, without judgement, then I'm sure our growth would be much quicker and more fruitful. I made such a proposition to Serge Dryer who said to do it on the last day but because of various celebrations taking place I decided it would be better to wait until next years and try to have some real clear space for it. Let's see.

Saturday 27

The next morning I had enough of cold croissants so Sam and I headed off to Chateau du Loir for a decent hot breakfast at Le Clerc's café. A lovely bacon omelette, local sausages and good strong coffee served us both well. By the time we finished the morning workshops were over so it was back for the push hands at 3.00pm. Because of the Big Parade being held there was little more than 1 hour push hands and then we were asked to meet at the campsite gate for the big event.

Around 200 tai chi players, over 100 in costume made their way to the village square accompanied by a police escort to take care of the traffic. Clowns, jugglers, samba dancers and musicians sang and danced their way along the country road to the small square where they entertained each other with skits and dances. The spectacle was colourful and vibrant but unfortunately less than a dozen locals turned out for the show. Maybe it was siesta time, maybe they were off on holiday whatever the case the extravangza was enjoyed by the tai chi people. The parade continued on to the cellars of Fresno where good wine further fuelled the revellers.

Later that evening we gathered once more at the canteen for the evening party. Bob and the Bobettes did their thing much to the delight of all whilst Jean Luc Perot (Belgium) let off the tango dancing. Sam, Simon Carey-Morgan and a few of the guys chewed the breeze behind the hall for an hour or two before heading back to the campsite for further merriment in the shape of Bob and Sam's guitar playing and singing.

Sunday morning saw Sam and I escaping once more for a hearty breakfast and Sunday afternoon saw more push hands. One major disappointment for me

was the demonstration. RJ has always had a loose open spirit but I imagined we'd have some special shows lined up for the 20th anniversary. Not so. A few individuals did reasonable forms and then the push hands ensued. I did find a number of people that were good to push with and overall I greatly enjoyed the time there.

For the final closing ceremony Cornelia Gruber laid all the pots that she helped people to make, over the course of the weekend, in a big concentric circle around the field. People were then led around the circle until 2-300 were gathered together. This sense of community is something that is shared throughout the event and the camping situation lends itself well to casual connections which over the years have developed into long-term friendships. Without RJ tai chi in Europe would be much less than we have today. It has brought many, many people together, from mixed countries and traditions and allowed them to share and develop this art considerable. It has gone on to inspire events such as Tai Chi Caledonia, Push Hands Meeting and many others. For me this major milestone could be a good time to reflect and evaluate what the direction is, not only for RJ but for all the people who have connected through it.



Bob & the Bobettes!