

My first encounter with Mario Napoli was around 6 years ago when I attended his workshop at Recontres Jasnieres. For me it was one of these moments when something clicks which changes your perception on what you've been doing up to that point in time. Although I didn't have the time or physical requirements to devote to his ongoing training regime his teachings led me on a totally different path. (Although I've never told him until now.)

Since then I've spent many pleasant hours in Mr Napoli's presence, enjoying his unique brand of story-telling in a number of European locations, usually in the company of a good wine or quality malted whisky.

At the recent Push-Hands meeting in Hannover, Germany I suddenly realised (yes I am a little slow sometimes to mix business with pleasure) that he would make an interesting interview subject. After a few emails back and forth I feel we've achieved a little taste of the man, his skills, and his unique approach to the arts. This being the case it is by no means a substitute for being with the man in person.



On meeting Stanley Israel his main teacher

"I went to his school and everybody was busy doing what they were doing and Stan was sitting at a table reading a book. I was really, really, really, really interested in finding out..... I wanted to push with him. I said to myself I really want to push with him, I don't care how it is, if it feels weird, I'm outta here, because I'm not here to join anything, I want tai chi. I remember going there, I sat next to the table.... It took me a while to pick up the courage... a guy you don't know.... He's some sort of special guy... bla, bla, bla. So I remember standing up, sitting down, standing up sitting down...., going to the window... until eventually I got enough courage, about 15-20 minutes later I got enough courage. So he's sitting across from me, he had his reading glasses on and I said to Stan, "Stan, hi. I didn't mean to disturb you (and I remember him looking up at me from the glasses) if you don't mind, if you have a chance, if you want to, if you like, maybe later on when you're free, after you've finished the book.... Do you want to push a little? He looked me up again, over the glasses and said, "Sure, no problem, do you want to do it now?" – "Yeah! Okay! Good! Fantastic!" So I remember as I was walking to the place do do the push hands I remember saying to myself, "if you push him just once, if you move him just once, get outta there." Where we were to push was right next to a door and I thought to myself, if I push him once I'm just gonna say thank you and I'm outta there. So I remember, my back is to the wall and we did one round of the push hands form and I remember that the first time we did the round we went back and forth, like we always did and I thought to myself, no, no no I can't do this, I'm being lulled into doing nothing, I've got to do something. So when it was his turn to come around to push me I decided to myself, this time I'm going to stop him and if I stop him, it's time to go. He comes towards me and I did everything I could to stop him. I braced myself and he just kept coming. I had this posture, as such, and I noticed.. it wasn't that it was an immovable that was coming towards me and it didn't seem to be breaking me, but it was breaking my joints. It was folding my joints and after my joints were folded and his hands were on my body it was just Boom! And he slammed me on the wall! Still not convinced I thought, okay he slammed me but now I'm going to push him and if I move him this is my excuse to get outta tai chi forever, once again. I've seen them all now. Then it was my turn to push him and I thought, I'm going to push this man. As I put my hands on him to push he moved in such a way that I was not able to maintain my centre and I fell to the side, losing my balance. Then it was his turn again to push me and this time I knew that he was strong and I'm really, really bracing myself and the same thing happened. My joints folded and again I hit the wall. Now I was gonna push him again and I knew that maybe he was going to take me off to the side and I thought I can't go to the side so I got really close to him and when he started going to the side I grabbed him and I pushed him. He went down, he disappeared and I went up. That's when I decided (you know I was a kid) that I found my teacher. This is the guy that's going to teach me tai chi. I knew that beyond any shadow of a doubt. Being that I'd seen other people, and I met some good people, two of them in particular, but I just didn't get it. But something happened when I put my hands on this guy. He could stop me at will and he stopped me at will. He was able to move me at will and I could do nothing to him. It makes sense. So the next day I was a student, literally the next day. I went to class four times a week for the next two years and we pushed every night. I would just go, forget about the class, just go straight to Stan and say, "Let's go push." He never said no."

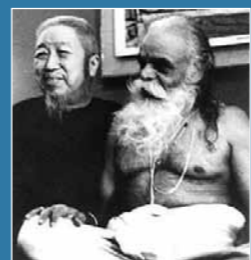


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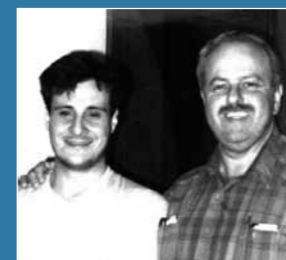
an interview with MARIO NAPOLI

by Ronnie Robinson

Cheng Man Ching & Swami Bua



A young Mario with Stan Israel



Stan in action



Ed Young & Herman Kauz



Tell me about your background in martial arts and tai chi in particular detailing what attracted you to the respective arts and why you chose your particular direction.

Like many people of my age I was initially stimulated by the proliferation of kung fu movies, predominantly featuring Bruce Lee. I started karate lessons with Leonard Antonucci, who was a student of Cheng Man Ching, and of Hatha yoga. I began by learning karate, tai chi and yoga. This eventually led me to work with Stanley Israel who became my principle teacher.

I'm now embarrassed to say that the main thing that attracted me to tai chi then was my laziness. After watching the slow motion form I thought cool no work! Later when I met Stan Israel I realised just how wrong my original

thoughts on tai chi were!

Could you clarify how you divided your time between these various pursuits and how you managed to practice these disciplines, which had differing principles, at the same time (if this was so)? Could you also give an outline about what it was that stimulated you to continue training in the respective arts?

I eventually, stopped doing karate, after starting tai chi chuan - a decision which didn't exactly put a smile on Lenny's face. I remember hearing him, muttering under his breath or maybe out loud, I can't remember now... that I was going to be the last guy that he was going to teach tai chi chuan to, before they make their karate black belt. Eventually Lenny made a deal with me, to

keep me training in karate. The deal was that he would continue teaching me tai chi chuan but I must work on getting my black belt - thinking back I must have driven that man crazy....

Also at the same time, I started doing Hatha yoga. In its practicality, Hatha yoga is simply the best body and mind training around. - The deep stretching, opening of the joints, working on the soft tissues, fascia, massaging of the internal organs, lengthening muscle fibres, proper body alignment plus Pranayama (breathing pressure-work) are the best to be found anywhere. Hatha yoga, does what tai chi chuan promises to do. In other words when we hear about tai chi for health, what they are saying is to train on what I've just said above. Done correctly, tai chi chuan is Hatha yoga without the punching and kicking.

Which teachers have inspired you and why?

Quite a few really: Firstly my Hatha Yoga teacher, Swami Bua. Hatha Yoga is a great experiential science. If the truth be told, if it wasn't for my need to grapple and such, I would have been very happy just doing Hatha yoga! Then Stanley Israel, my tai chi chuan teacher and friend - what can I say about him - he taught me tai chi chuan! Before him I was in no man's land concerning this art. I just could not get it! I was lost, demoralised and had quit tai chi chuan... I only went back to it because I heard how good he was, particularly from his friend Lenny Antonucci. I heard that he just started teaching again so I figured I'd give tai chi chuan one last try. We just hit it off instantly. After just touching him I knew he was the one who was going to teach me. He made

it sound, look and feel so easy. It was very refreshing and I felt as if I understood everything he said explained and showed! - He made it fun for me to go to class. The work was hard but I just took to it like fish to water. The best way I can explain Stan and his teaching is with these three examples:

We had many, many debates and Stan would always say to me, "Why? Why are you so confused?" It began soon after a pushing lesson when he said to me "Mario, just push" and I would say, "What do you mean just push? I mean I can push this way or that way." Then he would repeat "Just push" and I would again say, "But what do you mean just push? I may just end up shoving? With your "Just push." And shoving is wrong, right?" "He would say, "Right! Shoving

is not good but "Just push."" I would reply with. "As you can see I can't push correctly, it's not my fault, I'm doing my best, people are telling me this and that or I'm doing it all wrong. ... understand???" Then he would once again repeat "Just push!" and I would say, "Are you telling me, it's OK to be wrong?" Then he said, "All I'm telling you to do is just push!"

After many months of this, back and forth of what I call our Abbott and Costello routine, of me coming up with all types of scenario, where I could not understand this "just push" idea, of his.... We ended up striking a bargain and the bargain was: I would do whatever I thought he meant, to the best of my ability, and if I was wrong he shouldn't take it as a lack of trust on my part, or that I didn't listen or didn't care. And

“It was the first time that I realised what his idea of hard work meant. After I began to do OK, with this push hands thing, he used to make me do free-style push hands with a row of people. My job was to stay in the ring and play with as many people as possible. One day I did the whole row, without losing once! There were about 15 people.”

that it was his responsibility and his alone, to correct me and not assume the worst. Because I was to abandon all thoughts I had of what was right or wrong and “just push” and do whatever it meant to me that day! He said “OK, you push and I will do my job to correct you as you progress along and I won’t assume that when you are doing it wrong, it’s because that you do not listen or cannot learn or are not paying attention. So we shook hands and that was it - I no longer held any baggage of what pushing the tai chi chuan way meant and it was his job to correct....

The other example was the hard work part.

It was the first time that I realised what his idea of hard work meant. After I began to do OK, with this push hands thing, he used to make me do free-style push hands with a row of people. My job was to stay in the ring and play with as many people as possible. One day I did the whole row, without losing once! There were about 15 people.

So what did I do when that happened? I sat down naturally! I was satisfied that I’d beat them all without losing. He walked over to me and said, “What are you doing?” So self-satisfied I said to him. “I did them all Stan, so now I’m just chilling.” He said, “Did you lose?” I said “Hell no! I wouldn’t b e

sitting if that happened!!! - I beat them all”, and then jokingly I said “I’m the king of the hill!!!”

He said, “okay kid, do it again, and see how long you last this time around.” So I went back and did some more pushing ...after I lost, once I’d beat maybe 7 or 8 people, I sat down again and was now really tired. Stan once again came over and said, “Well?” So this time I said, “Wow you are really a good teacher, now I understand what you wanted me to do. I mean beat them all and was ready to relax but no!! - You being smarter then made me do a bit more. Wow, you’re a really good teacher I replied! He then answered with “Should you not try and finish the line?” I said, “I don’t think I can I’m really tired!” He said “Try.” So I did. (Somewhat reluctantly I may add.) Eventually I did the whole line again and this time I was really tired! So I stopped! He came over to me again. This time I was ready for him and said, “OK, OK, you’re smart. You pushed me to do what I alone could not do. Okay I was wrong and quite some way before I should have been.” All he said was, “Did you do the whole line again?”

I said yeah, I didn’t cheat! So again he said, “Do it again!!!” I looked at him, as if to say, “Are you CRAZY??!?! But I listened and went back again. This time after 3 or 4 guys I almost vomited. I was dead. I stopped. Yet again, but just to relax, I mean I had plans to go back later and do more, but not now. I remember he just gave me a look! I quickly said, “Stan not my fault I almost vomited!” He said “So did you vomit?” I said, “No but almost!” He told me, “S e e that garbage pail, w h e n , and if, y o u

gotta vomit do it there! NOW do more!!!” So I did, and yes this time I did vomit. So after vomiting I sat, again, and yes he came over again, and said “Did you vomit?” I satisfyingly said, “Yes, Stan I did and yes you are the smartest guy around because without you I would have quit long ago, and you made me go so much farther than I would have done alone. So now I’m going to enjoy this well deserved break.” All he said was, “Did you vomit? Good! Go over and do

the line again!!!!” That was when I realised that this guy was a bit of a nut!!!!!! But I did listen and did some more. - Don’t ask I really don’t remember what happened..... All I remember was that I was way beyond exhaustion!

When I started to develop some ability Stan, would make me do, just one exercise, be it a particular push or a throw, or a sweep or just entering, fitting in whatever the technique was, I would just train it, with no variations, all day long. It’s not easy I tell you, I mean just one thing for about 2 hours, your brain just starts to scream!

As for his ability, he could stand there like a mountain and I was never able to move him over. Believe me I tried and tried. He was also able to not be there, as if he was like a cloud and I could never reach him nor find him.

I also worked with Herman Kauz, William Chen, and Zhang Lu Ping.

Can you give an overview about what these various teachers offered you and what it was that you really got from Stanley that made everything about it so special?

After Lenny moved away I took the ‘B’ train straight to Manhattan, met and studied with some of Cheng Man-Ching’s students which eventually led me to William CC Chen and Herman Kauz. However, these two teachers were different, (from the rest of the CMC crowd I was studying with in those days) Herman and Chen taught, moved and acted differently, and that confused me a bit so I left them, thinking that they were not doing CMC, or good tai chi chuan, but rather some variant form of it. Herman Kauz was a CMC senior student who was also a Hawaiian national judo champion, as well as being a karate champion. From what I hear the karate teachers he studied with changed some of the ways they did things, precisely because of Herman, they simply could not stop him. So they had to adjust. He was a serious all round, martial arts man. What I remember about Herman was how easily he could disturb your balance. He had incredible timing and uprooting ability.

I remember that when I told Herman that I was leaving him, he did all he could to make me change my mind and stay and have faith in his method, but (dumb as I was) I left him - and for weaker teachers. Well that’s what I thought then - at least until I met and became a student of Stan Israel. With Stan it was love at first touch...his teaching, eventually made me understand that both Herman Kauz and William CC Chen were doing CMC Style tai chi chuan and that they were both exceptionally gifted practitioners and teachers. That is why I continue to champion both of these teachers whenever I get the chance - it’s kind of my way of saying sorry to them, for not having faith in them back then.

As for Lu-Ping - I met him, while studying with Stan. What I can say about Lu-Ping is that he was

a gifted martial artist a “hitter”! The funny thing was initially I didn’t get his TCC either. However this time it took me just 2 weeks to realize that he was somebody to study with. Now while I was never a student of his, for some reason he liked me, and would always show me things when I would see him.

Zhang Lu-ping was skilled (he has since passed away) in many form of Chinese martial arts, including many styles of tai chi chuan. His forte was his ability to strike, punch, kick etc., like no other I have met. His timing was also superb. People talk about spiralling and three dimensional movements - well Zhang was the man where you could see all these things at work.

Since Stan and Zhang passed away William CC Chen is the person whom I closely observe/study to help my tai chi move along.

What have been your personal and professional successes in this work?

Personally I’ve had a few goals that did not mature, (One too many accidents) so it cut short my training. But as a teacher I have done OK with a few students in helping them get somewhat strong and healthy.

But you did go to China and win a competition at Chen village (Chenjiagou) beating the locally trained champions. How did that come about and what kind of training did you do to prepare?

It all came about rather innocently. I initially saw a video of the competition in Chenjiagou and I said

to myself, I can take these guys. Soon after, some folks came to our club, to hang out and play with us. They had just come from this tournament, and talked about how hard it was, how good the Chinese were, and then they added that they and their teacher did only the B level division, and that their teacher won. Around the same time I read on the internet about the champion at that competition and his teacher’s sons who could flip anyone here, in the United States, like pancakes - quicker then we can say pass the syrup. Then someone called Mike Sigman, who’s a self-proclaimed tai chi expert, actually dared me to go and find out for myself how great these Chen folks were! (Actually Mike, was telling everybody that he was going to go and give it a try himself, but backed out at the last minute.) So I guess he thought people would be as afraid of this tournament as he was....So, what can I say, I went on his request!

If the truth be told I never trained specifically for the Chen competition. We always trained hard on our own, it was our way. We had a small but dedicated group and many people would come around to practice with us; wrestlers, judo players, TCC teachers and such. Our game was simple - we did free-style push hands, in a circle. The rules were simple -throw the guy down or out of the circle and you’ve won.....that it! Pulls, trips, throws, body shots and such were allowed. Punches and kicks were not allowed - we added those when we did san shou training. So if you won, you’d stay on the mat, for as long as you won. Lose and you’re off the mat - that was it!!! We would train 3 times a week for about 3 hours a session. Also, around that

time, I had fixed my knee, which had been badly injured, so I would go to judo as well - that’s why I didn’t need to practice for anything in particular or do extra special training for the competition. We were already doing a lot of regular serious training.

As for the tournament itself.... while I did enjoy it... and it was head and shoulders above any other tournament that I’d previously seen, it was still nothing special, as tournaments go - regional green belt to brown belt level players. Now I’m not being cocky or anything, but when a guy with only one good knee, suffering from dysentery and not eating any food for 4 days, wins the whole thing... well it should tell you something...and that is that tai chi push hands is China is nothing special.

Over the course of the bouts I beat a tall Chinese fellow and a big Russian guy. Then I beat a Beijing shau jiao, tai chi champion. I’m sorry I can’t remember his name, but I do remember he was the personification of the gentle giant, truly a nice man, he even raised my hands after our fight and rooted for me to win in the final bout, then hung out with me for a while afterwards. I also beat the two sons of Wang Xi’an; Wang Zhan-jun and Wang Zhanhai who were All-China National Push Hands champions. I beat the first one in the finals the other one forfeited the match, saying that he was in no shape to play me. In the main I was treated well afterwards, with most of the people there seeming to like the fact that I won. They all treated me well. However, it was all made clear when the Chen officials went out of their way to put me down. Instead of being





smart and saying yes, see anybody can enter our competition, and everybody has a chance of winning. Instead choose the lower road, the road of denial. I guess they felt really bad that a foreigner, sick and all, showed them how it should be done.

What are the core aspects of your teaching and practice and how have they changed over the years.

I believe in creating a solid foundation, the body needs to be strong, healthy and flexible, first. My training regime for regular tai chi practitioners, consists of learning and practising standing postures, which helps to build a strong body whilst teaching them to relax (sung and sink). Then we learn and practice what I call the moving postures; learning to separate yin and yang in these postures. This provides good training for the legs whilst loosening the waist and gathering strength from the ground. Form work and push hands are where I emphasise neutralizing, exercising the leg and waist and training rooting ability.

For younger players, who like to train hard, I add free push hands play and all that comes with it. (pulling, throwing sweeping etc.) They also practice san shou and full contact with a resistant opponent. - I'm not into the Chinese pyjamas and sipping tea scene.... all my students (young and old) work. I'm a let's take this body out for a ride kind of guy. The younger crowd they gotta work hard, no excuses. They gotta build a strong foundation to create a strong body. - Not too many last unfortunately.

How do you feel about all the various approaches to the Cheng Man Ching tradition?

I don't think the question is correct. What I think is that not all tai chi chuan, (no matter the style) is taught with a martial mind, and I guess I can live with that, but I do believe that the martial side of TCC is too small and not given enough consideration and is in danger of dying off.

I agree other styles have various ways in which they are practiced but don't you agree that the CMC tradition, at least in the earlier stages, was practised mainly by people who had little or no knowledge

or interest of martial arts and, as such, it became tarred with the 'soft' approach system?

Well those were the times we lived in. You know peace signs, flower power and all that. So yes many of them did go to Professor Cheng for lessons and got out of it just want they wanted. I remember Stan Israel commenting once that he saw folk there who would practice standing on their head, but Stan also said that if Cheng saw that you practiced, listened, practiced and used your grey matter he would always show you more and more stuff. It was up to the individual, I guess he treated people like adults. So I don't believe that all who went to Cheng were solely into the hippy scene.

So there were a number of serious martial artists working with Cheng, who obviously did so because they got results?

My understanding, from talking to folks, and knowing some of them personally, is that Cheng had quite a few students with Karate, judo and jiu jitsu, backgrounds. Three of his senior students had black belts in judo and jujitsu (Mort Raphael, Stan and Lou Kleinsmith. Herman Kauz was also a very experienced martial artist who had also quite a few Goju Ru and Shotokan black belts. Lenny, my first teacher also was a karate black belt which he gained from the craziest Korean in New York at that time. This guy used to beat up his students when they fought full-contact. I remember talking about him to Stan, who knew him well and Stan told me that the guy was crazy. He eventually went back to Korea - you guessed it, no more students!

What are your views on the various events staged around Europe, the standard of teaching and the development of students ?

While I have been out of the scene for over 10 years but what I remember was, that is was not good, quite poor actually. Tournaments were mainly in the hands of people who didn't have the necessary the experience to run them. Yes, they meant well but that is not enough. In the United States the same people who started these taichi chuan tournaments also ended up killing them.

Mario teaching Hatha Yoga



How, in your opinion did they do that? - Please expand a little more.

Well many things started to happen back then:

The players started to get better than the officials (because they played!!!). We must remember that the officials were teachers as well, so their egos got hurt. As the game improved and got friskier, the officials didn't so they were unable to adapt. So their solution was do all they could to stifle the game: They changed the rules and made the sport sillier and sillier - stuff for 10 year olds. I used to wonder if they wanted to be kindergarten teachers. But nobody agreed with me back then! (Laughs). In the end it became a game of rules rather than a game to be played. When a 3 minute match lasts for 7 minutes or more, five of which involves judges discussing if it was a point or not, while the player stands there doing nothing! And we are not talking about moving push hands here! That they simply were too ignorant to even do, let alone officiate. It truly became a dog a pony show. And the lastly, this being America, some law suites scared the organizers and the end was near. Even now players are complaining. So much so, that some player's have even done a video (on YouTube) discussing the stupidity of some calls, rules and such. I guess the saying that you can't teach an old dog new tricks hold true here.

Chinese and Taiwanese tournaments fared a little better, but not by much. They also have a long way to go. I have always felt that TCC tournaments and players should be, and can be, as good as Judo players and their tournaments. The last time I looked we were not even close. I have come to the opinion that maybe the interest and/or experience is not there. Yes, some folk want to make this side grow and yes, some folks give some lip service to the martial side but in the end not much is happening. Maybe it has to be this way. I mean the young folks do have things like Judo, Thai boxing, Mixed Martial Arts, Brazilian Ju-Jitsu to keep them happy. It's just that I wish some of those guys would come to us - that's all.

I believe there are some good tai chi chuan teachers out there who are waiting to teach the sport fighting side. All they need is a chance and

“I think the problem is that there is too much information out there and people are getting confused.”

some free advertising, from you guys producing magazines. All we seem to get is health, spirituality and how this or that can somehow be a self defence technique. The sporting side has to be promoted heavily I believe.

What you think should be done, or what, in your ideal scenario would you like to see in terms of tournaments?

Hard to do here and now but I think the Chen tournament is moving in the right direction and I hope it grows. The mistake people make, the mistake that all tai chi tournaments make, is that the people running the show usually have little to no experience. They think that a push hands tournament should be like this or that, based on whatever book they have read that week... or what their teacher said. It should grow naturally, and it's the players that help this process along. As they get better they will do new things. Most of the time it's not about how it should look, but rather how it actually is, when you are under pressure by an opponent. Only experienced folk understand this.

Do you think all the essential elements are available to all practitioners these days or do you think there are missing links?

I think the problem is that there is too much information out there and people are getting confused. I remember an incident when I was training with Stan when he showed me a new move. After working on it for some time, I remember complaining to him but he immediately told me to relax and do the move a few thousand times first. Then if I still had problem with it ask him for some help. For the most part that's what's missing is the work. There is too much thinking, talking and philosophising and too little physical work!

What then would be the profile of your ideal student?

It varies, depending of age and ability and interest, to me, my ideal student is the one who has come to work out!

Do you have any ambitions left?

Yes, getting back in shape (from my injuries) and an opportunity to find a few motivated young folks to train....

Mario Napoli is currently based in Spain and working in various European locations. You can find out more by visiting his website at: www.laspeziataijiclub.it

You can also see a brief video of Mario discussing his teacher's abilities by visiting: www.martialartsvie.com/index-86.html

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