



The Martial Arts Journey

It was Retford Charter Day when James and I first met Master Andrew Blinston. We happened to be walking past his martial arts club on one of its open days and we stopped to have a brief conversation, enquiring about the club and what style of martial arts was taught. He invited us in but I decline, saying that although I was interested, perhaps we would return another time, when James was a little older.

The following February, James and I walked through the doors of Lynx Black Belt Leadership Academy for the first time. It was 2013, I was 44 and James was 6 years old.

I'd telephoned the Academy to enquire about joining and Master Blinston had invited us to attend a private taster lesson. This approach was a little different to what I was expecting, having done martial arts for a number of years when I was younger. In those days you just turned up and join straight in with a large class of students of varying experience and grades. Although we were both a little nervous, we were soon put at ease. We were both made to feel very welcome, with Master Blinston introducing himself, speaking of his martial arts background and showing us around the academy. I got the feeling straight away that he was a very proud and knowledgeable Master. He was very passionate about his students and his family run club, clearly explaining how the club membership operated and what was available to his students. He took us through a mini lesson and answered any questions we had. We joined that very evening.

James and I thoroughly enjoyed our new hobby - quality Daddy and James time. It also gave me the opportunity to get some well needed exercise. Something that I had neglected since becoming a father. Now here I was, being able to do both at the same time!

Training at the 'Dojang' came with so many additional benefits that I had never anticipated. I soon found out that it wasn't just another place to learn martial arts. Master Blinston always encouraged parents and children to train together but also happily welcomed individuals. There was such a varied age range, with many wanting to improve their fitness. Some were there to lose weight, some to learn self-discipline and others were there simply because they want to meet other people. There were 'Life Skills' being taught here that were not only relevant to James growing up but that I also found extremely useful. Respect, confidence, communication, trust, courage and passion, to name a few.

As our martial arts journey continued, so did our passion to learn. We simply couldn't get enough and we were averaging 5 lesson a week.

Graduations were always something to look forward to. We were reminded to not think of them as a test, but to treat them as an opportunity to show off the skills we had learnt, to impress our Master and to hopefully earn a new coloured belt. From the beginning, goal setting was an integral part of our training. Master Blinston often reminded us that success in anything, does not happen overnight but it starts with one small step.

Lessons were never repetitive or boring. There was a definite Taekwondo core structure but this was taught in such a varied way that no two lessons ever felt the same and we always came away feeling we had learnt something new. This variety kept us wanting more.

There were Seminars, Open Days and Special Event Demonstrations. Festival of Martial Arts days and even visits from Master Blinston's instructor, Grand Master Kim Yong Ho. With the End of Year Graduations and Award Presentations always being a favourite event. At this event Master Blinston, Mrs Blinston and Rhio reflected back over the Academy year and recognised and praised the achievements of all of its Lynx Family students.

In the September of 2015, after many months of copying us practising at home, James' little brother Jacob also joined the academy. He had only just turned 5 years old.

From that point forward three nights a week were reserved for 'The Boys' to go out training.

On the 21st November 2015 James and I earned our Black Belts. The day was both physically and emotionally demanding but at the same time tremendously rewarding. It was a massive achievement and a day that neither of us will forget. We were so proud of each other.

New goals were set and new challenges followed. Being a black belt within the academy family came with added responsibilities. The trust and respect, between both Master and student, had grown to a level where taking warm-ups and occasionally full lessons, became part of our enhanced training.

Our 2nd Dan Black Belt honour was achieved in 2017.

Jacob progressed through his belts admirably and had the added support of two Black Belts to assist him. He was always keen to improve on his previous grade after a graduation and used this as inspiration to reach his goal of Black Belt. This he achieved on the 10th November 2018 and was witnessed by many family members. It was a very proud moment for him and our family. Three Black Belts in the house!

There's one particular event from 2019 that needs a special mention. It was the James Bond Skyfall Charity Ball demonstration. Master Blinston and his family were approached and asked to perform a James Bond themed martial arts demonstration in front of over 100 guests, to open the nights events! With only 8 weeks to put together a self-defence demonstration, Black Belt students Mr Robert Machioszek, Mr Gary

Walker and myself were asked to assist and take part. There was nervousness, late evening rehearsals, aches, bruises and a feeling of 'are we really doing this' but also much laughter and camaraderie. Needless to say, on the night it was a complete success. Even now, if I look back at the video of the event, it gives me goosebumps.

Jumping forward to the present year and what a strange and difficult year 2020 has been and continues to be for everyone in general. We started the year training hard in preparation for James' and my 3rd Dan and Jacob's 2nd Dan Black Belt graduations at the end of March but then life was put on hold - COVID-19 was here.

I want to say that we have nothing but praise and respect for Master Blinston and his family for their determined hard work and dedication in keeping the art alive during this time. When full lock-down occurred, all martial arts clubs were forced to close their doors. Admirably, within days Lynx were up and running on social media, performing at least 3 live lessons, 4 days per week and also making all these lessons available to view throughout lockdown. Every week included a live Saturday morning brief from Master Blinston, keeping students informed on news and the following weeks lessons. Students were able to login and continue their training at home.

It was a steep learning curve for all and a totally different way of training. But it definitely helped us through lock-down, giving us a glimpse of normality. During lockdown we consistently logged in to 5 live lessons each week with our Master. Adapted graduations and seminars were also available to all students.

Training back in the academy was allowed to resumed in July, albeit in a very different manner to what we are used to. Questionnaires, temperature checking, hand sanitising, social distancing and the wearing of mask had become the new normal in both life and within our martial arts training. Yes, it lacks the contact that makes martial arts a contact activity but the way it is being delivered by Lynx Black Belt Academy is as good as it gets.

Our Black Belt graduations were rescheduled to the 10th October 2020 and I am extremely proud to say that we each achieved our goals. Surprisingly, this was the first time that we have all actually achieved a new grade together!

Whilst being students at the academy, James and Jacob both agree that they have grown not only in age and maturity but also in experiences. They feel that their martial arts training benefits them inside the academy and also in their everyday lives, they say they always try their hardest and are always keen to assist and share what they have learnt with other students. They are both feel very proud of their achievements.

Thank you, Master Andrew Blinston, for your guidance through our journeys and we look forward to following you through our next chapters.

Paul Oakes – 3rd Dan Black Belt

James Oakes – 3rd Dan Black Belt

Jacob Oakes – 2nd Dan Black Belt