

No-Rule Wrestling

Brazilian Jiu-Jitsu

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When I was 8, I routinely finished making my bed by karate chopping the thin bedspread into submission under my pillow. That was the extent of my martial arts training until I recently ventured into Richmond Brazilian Jiu-Jitsu and Self-Defense Academy on Broad Street to take a Brazilian Jiu-Jitsu (BJJ) class.

Owner and head instructor Eric Burdo, a brown belt, put me at ease as much as possible given that I had read that chokeholds, submissions and takedowns were involved, not to mention rolling around on mats entangled with a sweaty stranger.

Brazilian Jiu-Jitsu is grappling on the ground. In the early 1900s, Mitsuo Maeda emigrated from Japan to Brazil and taught Jiu-Jitsu to the Gracie brothers, a Brazilian family who added street-fighting practicality. Their techniques give BJJ practitioners leverage over bigger, stronger opponents.

After a sweat-inducing warm-up of calisthenics and stretching, Burdo worked with us on extricating ourselves from a theoretical opponent who has control of us on the ground. Pressure to my neck from Burdo's forearm notwithstanding, I felt empowered by the calm, workmanlike vibe of the place, and eventually, parts of me I didn't know I had did things I didn't know they could. Slowly and systematically, I wriggled myself out from under him, applying a forearm to his neck, another to his ribs, slamming my feet on the mat for leverage, and even kneeing him in the torso, among several other feats of flexibility.

Brazilian Jiu-Jitsu combines flexibility with flexing and works both muscles and mind as students learn a vast arsenal of self-defense techniques. The first class is free, so there's nothing to lose but some calories.