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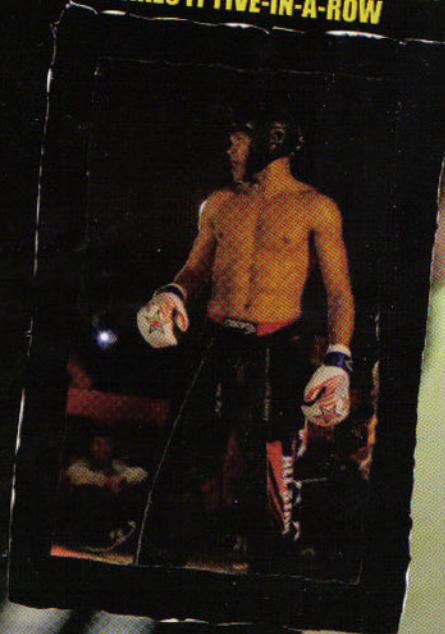
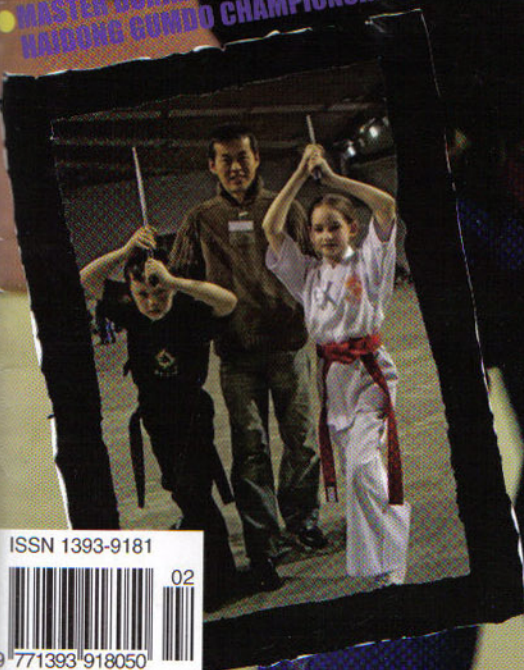


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## MASTER FILLIPO FUSCO - THE UNLIMITED MAN

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**F**ILLIPO FUSCO IS PERHAPS one of the most mysterious and enigmatic characters in Irish martial arts today. Surrounded by legends, myth, hype and rumour, the hard craggy features and outdated photographs are all I had seen of this man. All I heard had been hearsay and speculation about his vast financial fortune, his early years, and ability to single handily, at 50 years-old, take out an entire gang of Dublin's hardest thugs - allegedly fighting continuously for over an hour and-a-half.

It took me over a year to get an interview with Fusco, and when I did, he was nothing like I expected. In a very traditional Italian fish and chip shop in what is considered one of the toughest parts of Dublin, Meath Street in 'The Liberties', I look at the walls. They're covered in old photographs of a serious fighter, in strong conflict stances. I smell the warm comforting blend that made me smile so much on a Sunday evening, the unique combination of salt, vinegar, oils and batter.

There are three people behind the counter serving excited young men, a younger gentleman in his 30s or so, a kindly looking older woman with greying hair, and a pleasant smiling older man that reminds me somewhat of sheriff Amos Tupper from one of my mother's favourite TV shows, 'Murder She Wrote'. I ask if Fillipo Fusco is about. In heavily accented English, the 'sheriff' of the chip shop laughs and bellows: "But I'm Fusco!" Taking me to a staff room in the back, away from the busy sounds of the chipper, he sits me down and tells me the story of his life.

### A taste for Parisian Judo

Born in Italy, just outside of Rome, Fusco left the country at just 15 and-a-half, with only a few hundred in his pocket. He made his way to Paris, alone and eager for adventure. He took a job as a construction worker and while there became friendly with three fellow Italians, two of whom were Boxers and the other a Judoka. Out of deference to his father's wishes that he not become involved in fighting, and perhaps in sympathy to his heritage, Fusco decides to focus on Judo and wrestling.

Training in an old hall daily for four years he earned his black belt in Judo. After this he moved to Ireland arriving in his early 20s, where he took up Kenpo Karate in Baggot Street, Dublin. However, having grounded himself in Judo he didn't enjoy the rigidity of Karate, and left after about two years or so, moving into light-contact Kickboxing. This he felt was far more fluid, and was the missing component he felt absent from his Judo training.

### Own style of Mugendo

After a few years Fusco began competing and training with Yugoslavian champion Peter Madgic, and noted Irish martial artist George Canning. It was George Canning, and his brother Joe Canning, who were the first to introduce the sport of Kickboxing into Ireland and Fusco became heavily involved with them in the early years. Later he went on to develop and launch his own style of Mugendo ('Unlimited Way') Kickboxing which he called 'Stylando Mugendo'. At this time Fusco began performing both national and international shows, and developing the early forerunners of Kickboxing championships, introducing titles and belts, including early European and world titles.

Having achieved international success with competitions and displays in Italy and Spain, Fusco tells me that he began to concentrate on developing the Irish aspects of Kickboxing notably in Limerick, Kilkenny, Galway and Belfast with instructors like Stewart

Beattie, and in Sligo with men like Michael McDermott, president of the All Styles Kickboxing of Association (AKAI) for over 10 years.

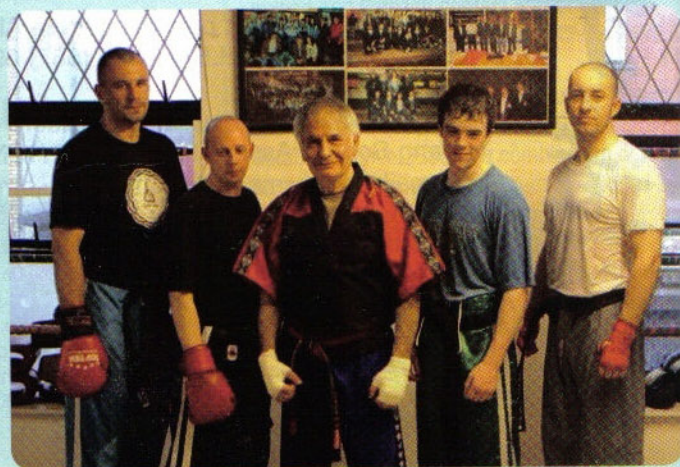
Fusco told me how he promoted his brand of full-contact Kickboxing and established a network of clubs around the country. Uniquely, once a student achieved a black belt rank, he told me, that the student would stay with him as he taught him how to teach others, and then with incredible generosity he (Fusco) would help in establishing that instructor in his own club. I know of no other instructor to so actively participate in the success of their students and the growth of their sport.

Some of the black belt instructors who came out of Fusco's Meath Street gym include: Ken Mili of Dorset Street, Richie Carton of Pearse Street, and Jimmy Upton, who now runs his own successful Kickboxing group, Global Kickboxing. Black belts currently training and instructing in Meath Street include: Christy Stringer, 2nd dan, and George Valentin, Kevin Doyle and Catalin Popescu, all 1st dans.

### Welcome to WAKO

And still that wasn't enough and Fusco sought out the accreditation of the World Associations of Kickboxing Organisations (WAKO), where he was recognised as a 7th dan black belt. He also became a referee for the organisation and over the years has traveled through Europe, America and Russia to referee and represent Ireland in international competitions.

George Canning, Sean Dent and Fusco then came together to



7th dan black belt Master Fillipo Fusco (centre) with his black belts at his Kickboxing gym in Meath Street, Dublin. Left-right: George Valentin, 1st dan, Christy Stringer, 2nd dan, Kevin Doyle, 1st dan, and Catalin Popescu, 1st dan.

organise the Irish Kickboxing Federation (IKF), of which Canning was made president with Fusco as the vice-president and Dent acting as secretary. The purpose of the IKF was to highlight and promote the code of full-contact Kickboxing across Ireland and to organise teams to compete at both national and international level.

They succeed in doing this and quickly expanded, bringing over America teams and hosting several competitions as well as taking Irish teams to compete internationally, always returning with medals and awards. With satisfaction Fusco told me they were mostly gold and silver. He continues on and tells me of his numerous clubs, gyms and business interests in his homeland of Italy, including his surprisingly comprehensive collection of film and television credits. With a casual manner he pulls out the latest issue of the 'Liberties' magazine and shows me with pride a series of article about him, and



more importantly a photo shoot of his chip shop, a staple of his community.

These are certainly excellent achievements and not to be underestimated, but I'm curious as to why a 69-year-old man, with several successful private businesses and a side career as a television actor (starring on shows like *Fair City* and *The Clinic*) is still actively involved in promoting and participating in Kickboxing. At this point a serious look takes Fusco's eye, and the tone of his voice changes.

### Grappling with gangs

Fusco, has spent over 45 years with his traditional Italian restaurant located in Meath Street. Not one of the safer parts of Dublin city, it's well known for gangs and illicit drugs trade. Fusco tells me one evening a gang of thugs entered his shop demanding protection money and threatening his staff. Grabbing one of employees by the throat, the gang demanded the contents of the till.

After an hour and-a-half the Gardai arrive to see a blood-stained Fusco still admonishing a beating to the gang. That night he thanked God for the skills he had learned and the ability to defend himself and his livelihood, helping to secure the safety of the community. Did Fusco really take on, and continually fight, a gang half his age for an hour and-a-half? I don't know. What I do know however, is that this conversation sparks a discussion of Fusco's true passion – his community.

Fusco is proud to tell me he has been part of the Meath Street community and the Liberty's since 1963 and, in fact, his proudest accomplishment is that none of his students – the countless children of his community – have turned to crime or drugs. He genuinely believes that one of the reasons that the Liberties has improved is because of the children's participation in the sport of Kickboxing.

### A Kickboxing community

He gives me the speech he gives to the children in his class: "Look boy and girl, never be impressed when your friends have lots of money. They may have taken it from your parents, your grandparents. They may have money now, but tomorrow they may be behind bars. Don't involve yourself in drugs, that gives the bad name to your family. Get a degree, a good job with a suit and you get respect that way. Keep yourself clean, have good record and you can have anything you want."

But Fusco feels any sport, not just Kickboxing, can provide the frame work for community development and teach respect and discipline to its youth, though he



*Full-contact Kickboxing coach and instructor Master Fillipo Fusco with some of his junior and seniors students at his gym in Meath Street, Dublin.*

certainly feels that Kickboxing has additional benefits. The role of the instructor he feels is not only to teach the martial arts, but is a way of living life and respecting your family and community.

He tells me he still sees those gang members who once threatened him, and he still serves them in his chip shop. For better,



*Master Fillipo Fusco (right) works out with 2nd dan black belt Christy Stringer.*

or worse, Fusco sees them as part of his community, and he feels that by setting an example of defiance, backed and supported by a traditional of combat and self defense, that he can inspire others to resist the influence of drugs and crime. Some have

come to him asking him to train their children, asking him to impart a discipline and opportunity they themselves feel they never had. However, Fusco is adamant that he has always been there for them, all they had to do was show up at his door.

In his final words before we part, that's what he stresses, what he reminds me of. He has been there offering his aid and support to his community for over 45 years, and he will continue to do so. He wants to continue teaching the same principals and education he found in the martial arts, a code of discipline and respect. Mugendo, he tells me, means the 'Unlimited Way'. This isn't just physical perfection or mastery of technique, but a lifestyle, attitude and philosophy. A philosophy that he lives every day, as he serves his community with, perhaps, unlimited compassion.

- Paul J. O'Brien is a fully qualified Acupuncturist and Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM) practitioner. He is also certified in Western Clinical Medicine, and holds additional qualifications as a fitness instructor, personal trainer, and Whole Body Vibration trainer. He is currently a Reality Based Combat instructor and dedicated martial artist having studied Shotokan Karate and other martial arts for over 15 years. O'Brien offers a FREE consultation service for readers of Irish Fighter at his Dublin-based clinic. For more information, or should you have any questions regarding your health or how best to treat injuries and illness, you can contact him on (087) 9019627, or through his websites at:
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