



Speed BREAKING

World-Record-Holder Leif Becker Has Mastered the Newest Art of the Martial Arts

by Terry L. Wilson

PHOTOGRAPHY BY RICK HUSTEAD

In a time before neon *nunchaku* and custom-designed uniforms, those who practiced the martial arts did so primarily as a means of self-defense, as a way to protect themselves against armed and unarmed attackers. Using the empty hands to penetrate or pulverize an enemy's bamboo chest plate required rock-hard knuckles and a stonelike edge on the side of the palms. To perfect their chopping and striking techniques, those ancient warriors would practice smashing a variety of inanimate objects. Their sole purpose was to hone their natural weapons for combat.

Today, breaking is less an art of war

and more an evolved event designed to display the power that can be generated by the hands and feet. It's often the most popular part of demonstrations and competitions. In fact, breaking is starting to emerge as a stand-alone sport in which martial artists seek to devise new and exotic ways of smashing everything from blocks of ice to bricks and baseball bats.

The newest star in the breaking world is Leif Becker. He'd built a name for himself long before he stood in front of the cameras at Universal Studios Hollywood during *Black Belt's* 1st Annual Festival of Martial Arts, where he and

Team Bergamo Schick Quattro put on a demonstration that enthralled thousands. The highlight was Becker's attempt to set a world record by busting 487 boards in 60 seconds.

The 3/4-inch-thick pine boards, each of which was hand-checked for defects, were placed five-deep atop stacks of cinderblocks that stretched for nearly half a city block. Like a thoroughbred struggling to get out of the starting gate, the 33-year-old Becker paced until the stopwatch started. Using his right hand like a jackhammer, he blazed past each bundle of boards, leaving nothing but kindling in his wake.



Fifteen minutes of fame: A television reporter hams it up for the camera while Leif Becker and Team Bergamo Schick Quattro perform.

Fifty-nine point nine seconds later, the *tang soo do* black belt had pulverized his way into the history books. “The record is recognized by the International Sport Karate Association, as well as the United States Breaking Association,” he explains. “When I originally went to break the world record, I called Guinness and they said they were no longer recognizing that event. Mike Reeves, the previous world-record holder, is the only person in the Guinness Book of Records. Regardless of who does what in the future, Mike is the guy in the book. That’s why I had to

find an organization that would recognize and sanction my break.”

The heart of this story isn’t the fact that Becker broke enough boards to build a bungalow in less than 60 seconds or that his name is scrawled on a scroll until the next guy shatters his record of 487. No, the heart of this event is as old as the martial arts itself: self-development.

To perfect his breaking ability, Becker examined the traditional striking techniques of East Asia, then updated them so they would meet the needs of a 21st-century martial artist. He identified two components as essential elements: building the body to accomplish the task at hand and modifying the mind so it’s able to will the body onward until

The aftermath: In the wake of Leif Becker’s speed break at Black Belt’s 1st Annual Festival of Martial Arts, nothing but kindling is left.



the job is done.

First, the physical. Any scientist will tell you that the principles behind breaking are basic: The force of a strike is directly proportional to the velocity and mass of the fist. Increase velocity and/or mass, and more destruction results.

In general, the road to higher velocity is paved by exercising the muscles involved in the execution of the breaking technique. Most traditional martial artists rely on repetitive *kata* practice, free fighting and weightlifting, but Becker also incorporates high-level cardio routines in his workouts. Outputting explosive energy over longer periods may not be necessary for the average breaker, but for the feats Becker undertakes, it’s a necessity.

The mental component of Becker’s preparation revolves around Peak Performance Training, which is a form of neural linguistic programming. “Top Peak Performers always look for what is best in everything and every situation,” says martial artist and Peak Performance trainer John St. James. “I have worked for years with Mr. Becker. He’s embraced the concept and used the skills to achieve great things.”

“Peak Performance Training is the balance of yourself and development within yourself,” Becker explains. “My failure used to come [from] a lack of balance within. The break at Universal Studios was my fourth attempt. On the third attempt, I tied the record, and the second attempt was one of my worst showings—all due to a lack of balance within. I overtrained physically but didn’t allow myself to adjust emotionally and spiritually to gain that inner sense of strength.

“That’s when master St. James began working with me, helping me prepare myself mentally and set goals.”

To ready himself for his big day at the *Black Belt* festival, Becker worked with Ralph Bergamo, head of Team Bergamo. Best-known for their spectacular martial feats on ESPN, the Bergamo breakers hold a number of power-breaking records.

Becker’s regimen consisted of cardiovascular training to prepare his body



The payoff: Leif Becker's new world record is recognized by the International Sport Karate Association.

for the eruption of energy required to run the gauntlet of wood. "We really focused on strength and conditioning to develop my endurance for a 60-second maximum burst," he says. "Building the physical factor was just as important as building my mental ability."

Becker also did a bunch of old-school breaking as part of his weekly workout. "Although there aren't many scars on my hand from *makiwara* training, the bones

in my right hand are as hard as a rock," he says. "I'd break 50 or 60 boards in a day and never feel it. I'd do about 300 strikes a day on wood or concrete to condition the bones in my hand."

Is the record holder worried about abusing his body for the sake of 15 minutes of fame? Not a bit. "At this point in time, I've probably broken 5,000 boards with my right hand, and it doesn't faze me a bit," he says. "While that kind of training is important, I think the most important thing is developing your technique. It's technique that gives you speed and accuracy."

The third-degree black belt claims the key to being able to sustain the requisite speed and accuracy is self-confidence. "After 20 or 30 seconds, my muscles will begin to fatigue, so it's imperative to be mentally determined to do what has to be done," he says. That often involves using trial and error to find out what he's capable of, then crystallizing in his mind the notion that he'll accomplish his goal.

To discover what kind of setup worked best for him, Becker rehearsed with boards piled to different depths. "The first time I attempted to break the record, I did 100 stacks of five, and on the second attempt, I did stacks of four," he says. "Each time, I fell short of breaking the record—although I did tie it once on


The fans: Breaking has become one of the most popular parts of martial arts demonstrations and exhibitions.



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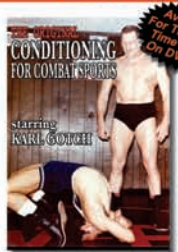
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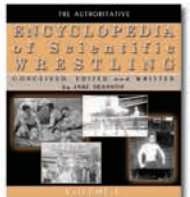
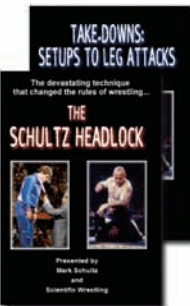
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The glory: Reporters from a Los Angeles TV station and newspaper pelt Leif Becker with questions after his world-record break at Black Belt's 1st Annual Festival of Martial Arts.

national television."

That took place in May 2004, just after he was invited to showcase his skills on the *Late Show With David Letterman*. An entire New York City block was shut down in front of the CBS building. Surrounded by hundreds of onlookers and a television audience of millions, the Connecticut-born black belt took his best shot at the record.

"That was one stressful day for me," he says. "I felt good about the break, but at the end of 60 seconds, I didn't know what the final count was. There was a lot of commotion during the official count, and after the commercial break, I found out that I was just one board short of breaking the record. I tied it [with] 415 boards."

To bolster his confidence to the level needed to blast through that extra board, Becker and Team Bergamo began preparing for the next attempt, which would come 14 months later at the *Black Belt* festival. The plan worked—and then some. In the end, he felled a phenomenal 487 pieces in less than a minute.

Despite the fact that the empty-hand arts are no longer used regularly on the battlefield, breaking remains an essential part of training, Becker says. "It's a true test of a martial artist's effectiveness. It tests your skill level and makes you do

things correctly. For example, if your follow-through isn't focused, or if your form is poor and you hit an object without proper power and speed, your break will not be successful. So breaking gives you the chance to perfect your techniques."

It's also invaluable because it teaches the secret of success in the striking arts: snapping the wrist. When effected the moment before contact is made, the snap creates tension, boosts follow-through and enhances power. Couple those benefits with a knowledge of body mechanics and a sense of focus, and you'll be unstoppable.

"It doesn't matter if you're breaking boards, cement, coconuts or baseball bats," he says. "You have to break through mentally because without the proper mind-set, failure is imminent." Most of the injuries in speed breaking occur when a martial artist fails to focus on what he's doing, he adds, and once learned, that lesson can lead to success in all facets of life.

About the author: Terry L. Wilson is a freelance writer, filmmaker and martial arts practitioner based in San Diego. For more information about him and Leif Becker, visit <http://www.blackbeltmag.com> and click on Community, then Black Belt Authors.