The Russian martial art is regarded as one of the most effective fighting systems on the planet, and its popularity is largely due to the efforts of Vladimir Vasiliev!

By Robert W. Young • Photos by Robert Reiff
In a natural, nonthreatening stance when confronted by an attacker (1), as soon as the man starts to close the gap, Vasiliev drives a front kick into his quadriceps—not to damage muscle tissue but to temporarily ruin the leg’s ability to support him (2). Because he’s not out to hit the assailant (3), as a follow-up, Vasiliev can deliver a light strike to the back of the head or neck to disorient the man (4). From that position, it’s relatively easy to control him (5).
**Looks Should Be Deceiving**

Systema places great importance on your starting stance in a self-defense situation. “It has to be a natural and straightforward body position,” Vasiliev said. “As simple as it seems, it is essential [to pose] no threat to the opponent. Your actions will be unexpected, inconspicuous and a lot more effective.”

“There are times when deliberately unusual and less-natural body positions are needed in confrontations, but these would be assumed for tactical and strategic reasons to manipulate your opponent into the behavior you need.”

How are you supposed to know which position is best for a given adversary and assume it in time? The oft-repeated attribute known as situational awareness, Vasiliev said. “In systema, we have many exercises to specifically develop awareness of your opponent and your distance from him. You should feel comfortable to act, and there should be no excessive tension.”

I asked Vasiliev to demonstrate how that natural stance works. He stood there, seemingly unprepared for what was about to come his way. The opponent closed the gap and initiated his attack. Vasiliev’s response entailed kicking him in the thigh—which dropped him like a sack of potatoes—and landing a punch to the back of the neck on the way down.

“You kick his quadriceps not to damage the leg but to debilitate the muscle so it can no longer hold up the person,” Vasiliev said. “The kick is not hard, but it’s precise so that even in light shoes or bare feet, it will be effective.”

“As with all systema strikes, you must hit unexpectedly so the attacker is shocked but not in pain or anger. Pain and anger can cause him to strike and punch needlessly. If you hit properly, he will be off-balance and will fall onto you. This is very convenient for your further control. You now have a choice of finishing moves—again, not to injure him but to disarm him.”

Another way systema exploits the power of deception was revealed in a self-defense sequence in which Vasiliev dispatched a man who was about to un-cork a haymaker. “The opponent prepares for the strike—there is no need for you to change your position yet,” he said. “While he approaches, take a small step to the right; this should be done exactly with his movement so he will not see it. Raise your right arm—be sure to choose a trajectory he won’t see from his viewpoint. Keep your shoulders down so he won’t be able to tell what your intentions are and adjust his strike accordingly.”

**Backup Plan**

That ability to move in a way the opponent doesn’t detect enables systema practitioners to intercept attacks before they reach maximum power, and that’s one of the smartest ways to fight.

“Backup Plan

As the opponent prepares to kick here, you make a small step to the side during his movement. Do not wait for his full kick; as soon as his knee is up, he has collected himself and is concentrating on the forming kick. He is vulnerable; it is a good moment to hit.

“Hit the muscles not to destroy them but to debilitate them and switch them off temporarily. This way, the leg is no longer functioning to support the body. An accurate hit causes the leg to give. He will no longer be able to kick or strike with his hand.”

The goal, Vasiliev teaches, is to gain control of the assailant using economy of motion and unpredictable techniques. If that fails, however, you’ll likely need to be able to take a punch before you can implement a backup plan—which is precisely why systema training devotes so much time to staying functional while you’re taking enemy fire.

“No matter how good you are, you will get hit,” Vasiliev said. “Maybe it’s because you didn’t see the strike. Maybe it’s because you moved into its path. Maybe it’s because it was more powerful than you anticipated.”

In a previous interview published in *Black Belt*, he explained his rationale using an incident he’d seen replayed ad infinitum in his schools: “A new student joins in. We begin a mass-attack drill where everyone comes to the center of the gym and is hitting in all directions. Right away, the new guy gets punched on the head, turns to see who did it and gets ready to hit him back. At that moment, he receives a punch from the other side, and, with anger building, he turns to that side, his fist ready to fly in that direction. And then he is hit again from the opposite side. Finally, he realizes that ‘punch for punch’ doesn’t work in a mass attack, so he exhauses and starts punching those who are close by and not those who hit him.”

“Unfortunately, most of us have an...
almost automatic response: When a strike touches us, we immediately go to retaliate. This is caused by pride. Systema training for taking punches deals directly with this pride.

The only way to minimize the effect, whether immediate or long term, is to handle impact the way you would hand a punch. This means that you need to properly control the incoming pressure on your body. The incoming fist causes tension, and that tension creates more fear. The resulting fear manufactures even more tension and so on. Breathing, Vasiliev said, is the way to stop that from escalating.

That’s why systema teaches practitioners to use minimal force in self-defense situations.

**INTERCEPT THE KICK:** The assailant (right) rushes forward and attempts to kick Vladimir Vasiliev (1). From his natural stance, Vasiliev uses his left foot to hit the side of the man’s knee and begin rotating his body (2). Using his right hand, the systema instructor puts pressure on the opponent’s left arm to further disrupt his balance and to give himself the option of delivering an unobstructed blow to the face (3). As the opponent falls, Vasiliev controls him with his right leg (4). He can use the leg to cushion his fall, thus making sure the man doesn’t hurt himself when he hits the ground (5-7), or he can continue the counterattack by placing his knee under the falling foe’s head (not shown). Systema philosophy encourages practitioners to use minimal force in self-defense situations.

**STRIKE THE THIGH:** Systema stylist Vladimir Vasiliev (right) assumes a natural stance in front of his opponent (1). As the man readsies a kick, Vasiliev takes a small step to his left (2). It’s crucial for him to act while the opponent is still concentrating on his attack because he’s more vulnerable. Vasiliev uses his left fist to strike the lower part of the man’s inner thigh (3). Unable to use that leg for support, the opponent can’t stand or complete his punch (4-5). Off-balance and helpless, the adversary can be hit again, if necessary—a strike to the cheek, rather than the bony parts of the face, will protect the defender’s fingers from damage (6). Note how Vasiliev steps slightly to the left to prevent his chest muscles from becoming too tense and to allow his right arm to punch freely.

**THE MAN BEHIND THE MARTIAL ART**
I have had the privilege to interact with many great martial artists over the decades—men who have honed their skills through determination, rigorous training and full-contact experience. To describe Vladimir Vasiliev as simply the best one of them gives him a disservice. His movement, his physical ability, the deep internal relaxation he has cultivated—all are attributes associated with a true legend. But the road he has taken to get there is not one many could have traveled.

As a highly decorated member of the Russian special-operations group known as the Spetznaz, Vasiliev trained under such men as Col. Mikhail Ryabko, founder of systema. While doing that, Vasiliev experienced things that would be difficult to justify even within our highest-level military systems. Of course, in actual combat.

Despite those brutal hardships, he is the most gentle of men. He’s humble, sincere and filled with a genuine desire to share his amazing art as if it were a gift. The system he teaches is profound and unique, as much a map of the human condition as a martial art. If I were to say Vladimir Vasiliev is simply the most decent human being I have ever met, I think that would be the most accurate description. His martial art, if you have been lucky enough to experience it, is purely an expression of that.