

This is a gripping memoir which doubles up as an insightful deep dive into the world of entertainment and sports by a journalist who identified the phenomenon of MMA fighting as well as one man's journey to discover who he really is.

**Halina Watts** (*Sunday Mirror*)

Fiaz Rafiq and I bonded over Bruce Lee. His interview-heavy books on Lee, Muhammad Ali & Arnold Schwarzenegger and pioneering coverage of full combat 'cage' sports was impressive. Like Lee, he was a small-boned kid, and saw martial arts as an avenue. His passion became his life's work as a writer. No one else covers MMA with such insight. Now, he spins out his unlikely life story with entertaining energy, verve, sincerity and passion.

**Alex Ben Block** (*The Hollywood Reporter* – former editor – veteran showbiz journalist)

An inspiring story of a kid who discovered his path in life – and success – through his passion for Bruce Lee and the martial arts. Highly recommended.

**Matthew Polly** (*New York Times* bestselling author)

Fiaz knows exactly how to get to the heart of every story seamlessly – and telling his own is no different. A must read for fans of combat sports, MMA and Hollywood.

**Ellie Henman** (*The Sun*)

He (Fiaz) studies his subjects and does his homework so much that he can't go wrong. Fiaz studies the person – like he studied about me, Bruce Lee, Muhammad Ali, Arnold Schwarzenegger, and all those guys. And he knows more about the person than the person knows about himself.

**Royce Gracie** (Three-time UFC champion/legend)

**FIAZ  
RAFIQ**

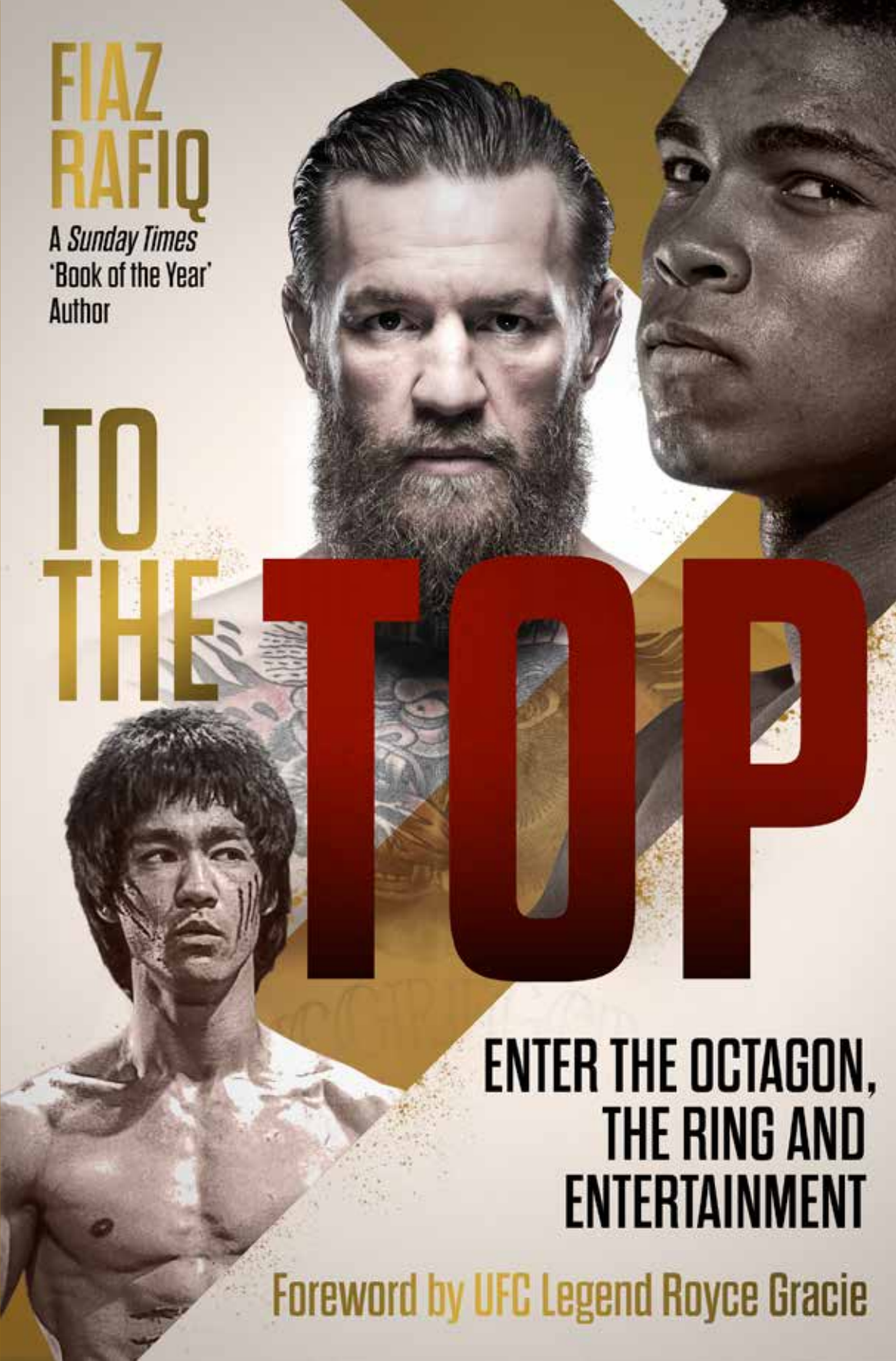
*A Sunday Times  
'Book of the Year'  
Author*

**TO  
THE**

**TOP**

**ENTER THE OCTAGON,  
THE RING AND  
ENTERTAINMENT**

Foreword by **UFC Legend Royce Gracie**



**TO  
THE  
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**ENTER THE OCTAGON,  
THE RING AND  
ENTERTAINMENT**

**FIAZ RAFIQ**



# CONTENTS

Foreword . . . . .	9
Preface . . . . .	12
1. Crazy Obsessions. . . . .	15
2. It's a Man's World . . . . .	26
3. Feeling Despondent . . . . .	36
4. The American Dream . . . . .	51
5. Enter the Gracies. . . . .	63
6. Returning to Los Angeles . . . . .	72
7. Enter the Journalist . . . . .	85
8. UFC Assignment . . . . .	97
9. Realer than the UFC . . . . .	108
10. The Giants. . . . .	113
11. Hollywood, Here We Come! . . . . .	122
12. Home Sweet Home . . . . .	136
13. MMA Hits the Mainstream. . . . .	143
14. Ringside & Brock 'The Beast' Lesnar . . . . .	154
15. UFC 105 Encounters . . . . .	162
16. Boxing Vs UFC: The Tyson-Gracie Challenge . . . . .	173
17. UFC, Royals & Rich Arabs . . . . .	184
18. Mike, Managers & Me . . . . .	194
19. Muhammad Ali Encounters . . . . .	204
20. From Martial Arts to Movie Magic . . . . .	215
21. I'll Be Back. . . . .	228
22. From Hospitality to MMA Chaos. . . . .	239
23. Adventures in New York . . . . .	252

24. Las Vegas . . . . .	259
25. Canada: MMA Mad. . . . .	267
26. The Massive MMA Fiasco . . . . .	274
27. I'm No Terrorist . . . . .	279
28. From Racism to Road Rage . . . . .	294
29. Mr Rocky . . . . .	300
30. Bruce Lee: Enter the Ring . . . . .	310
31. Enter the Octagon . . . . .	316
32. Old School Meets New . . . . .	322
33. Challenging Conor McGregor. . . . .	331
34. Tough Man Tales . . . . .	343
35. Notorious. . . . .	351
36. Meeting with an Underworld Figure . . . . .	362
37. The Perils of Sports Fame . . . . .	370
38. Michael, Matt & Martial Arts. . . . .	377
39. A New Direction: New World . . . . .	384
40. Flying High . . . . .	395
41. A Tumultuous Year . . . . .	409
Epilogue . . . . .	419
Afterword. . . . .	421
Acknowledgements . . . . .	428

## CHAPTER ONE

# CRAZY OBSESSIONS

AS A young kid growing up I was profoundly influenced by the late, great Bruce Lee. The King of Kung Fu made an everlasting impression on my life. No, I didn't grow up in the 1970s at the height of the kung fu boom. I was a child of the 1980s, a decade that saw great socio-economic change due to leaps in technology and advances in globalization. The world was rife with conflict, from the Cold War, to the Falklands War, Iran-Iraq and the Soviet-Afghanistan War. Pop sensations Michael Jackson, Madonna, Prince and Wham were selling millions of records. Action heroes Sylvester Stallone and Arnold Schwarzenegger were competing for the number-one spot at the box office. And Mike Tyson was obliterating every opponent put in front of him. It was a time when larger-than-life heroes were the norm, but I became obsessed with a small, ultra-lean Chinese guy who'd died almost a decade before.

I first encountered Bruce Lee when I was ten years old. I remember the day vividly. It was 1985 and I was at a family friend's house with my brother and two neighbour friends. To keep us kids entertained the family friend's nephew slipped a videocassette of *Enter the Dragon*, Bruce's only Hollywood action film, into the chunky VCR. Back in those days there was no such thing as DVDs, let alone a streaming platform that instantly granted access to hundreds of films from Hong

Kong or China. It was the era of the classic videocassette, chunky silver-and-black video players, and going to the local video shops to scout out something that looked promising. As a matter of fact, many TVs were made out of wood, and today's teenagers would have been appalled by the size of the screen on which we had to watch Bruce's dazzling choreography. But still, what I witnessed that day was just totally mesmerising.

Never before had I been exposed to such an amazing depiction of the human body in motion. Bruce himself looked almost unreal, stripped of all fat and as lean and dangerous as the preying mantises that fight early in the film. By the finale, he's dispatching multiple fighters with deadly fists and feet, looking utterly believable, in contrast to the slow-motion choreography of most action films and the telegraphed punches of Rocky.

I was hypnotised: I had just been introduced to this phenomenon and was eager to learn more, but to my dismay I was quickly told that this diminutive-looking guy who beat the hell out of 20 fighters at once had vanished from the face of this earth. *What?* I thought to myself. *No, he can't have. I've just had the most remarkable experience of my life and you're telling me this deadly fighting machine is gone!* It was beyond belief. Sadness tinged the exhilaration I felt at seeing Bruce's balletic performance, but from that day onwards my whole life would change completely. Things would never be the same again.

Not that it was easy to get my kung fu fix. After my first introduction to this different kind of action hero, whenever *Enter the Dragon* was playing on TV, I would have to sneak down from my bedroom to watch it, as my own family hadn't yet bought a VHS player. This was problematic because this all-time classic was always on late at night at around 11pm, and had a few scenes that most parents would have doubtless thought of as inappropriate viewing – for me it was more than that because watching a movie late at night wasn't something we could do. I was supposed to be in bed by ten, and

## CRAZY OBSESSIONS

so to overcome this barrier, I would slowly sneak down the squeaky stairs to get my fix of the Little Dragon.

This was no easy task, believe me. It would take me about ten minutes to get downstairs because I didn't want to wake anyone up and get caught in the act by my parents, yet I'd want to get downstairs as soon as possible. The epic opening fight scene with Bruce and Sammo Hung, a skinny guy and a fat man battling it out in what resembled an MMA setting, was one of my favourite fights in the film. You have to understand that one of the consequences of breaking rules at home included getting a good hiding. Still, I was prepared to break the rules over and over if I had to. Another key thing I had to do to avoid getting caught was to keep the volume level low – just loud enough so I could detect what the actors were saying. Take into account that back in those days there were no remote controls, which was always a pain because you had to get up from the comfort of your seat to adjust the volume. Fortunately, I had pretty good ears, and so somehow I got away with it every single time. Whether my parents were aware that I was sneaking down or not, I will never know because they never mentioned it, or questioned me.

As I've mentioned, we never had a VCR in those days, and so, though I was itching to watch the handful of other movies Bruce had made, I had no access to them. Instead I would find solace through conversing with a friend in school who understood my Bruce Lee obsession. As others played soccer or talked about who won the game over the weekend, my friend would relate the storylines of Bruce's other films and how the kung fu master would kick arse as I eagerly hung on to his every word. I needed more Bruce. It felt like being deprived of something. I felt like a drug addict wanting to feed a habit.

Eventually, I found a way to get my fix. At weekends I would go, along with another friend who shared his enthusiasm for the martial arts master, to the house of a friend who we coaxed into sitting through the films. Renting a Bruce Lee video, which at that time cost only 50 pence, became a weekend ritual. I had specifically



## TO THE TOP

taken out a video club membership at a local video rental store just to do it. And if you checked my rental record, you'd find that other than *Enter the Dragon*, *Fist of Fury*, *Big Boss*, *Way of the Dragon* and *Game of Death*, I never rented any other film from the store. Sure, I occasionally enjoyed other Hong Kong kung fu flicks, but most if not all of these were cheesy with laughably trite scripts, compared with the intensity of Bruce's output. I'm sure the owner had become aware of the pattern because a number of times he gave me peculiar looks when I visited the store. Why they never showed these movies on TV – other than *Enter the Dragon*, Bruce's only Western effort – was beyond comprehension to me. Everyone I spoke to got fired up with an intense emotion whenever they watched this lithe Chinese man on screen. No other actor on the big screen, no matter how popular, came close to the persona this fighter possessed, a feeling that's never been replicated.

I feel that sometimes someone filters into your life and their influence is so palpable that it leaves an everlasting impression. It certainly happens with crazy Elvis fans and Michael Jackson devotees, but for me Bruce Lee felt different. He wasn't just a performer, but someone who lived his life by a certain philosophy, a certain code. I had become totally consumed and it became an unhealthy obsession, affecting every area of my life. I was a Bruce Lee convert salivating for more. I had a burning desire to learn every single thing possible about this Chinese-American. From *Enter the Dragon* onwards, for me, it was Bruce Lee 24/7 – no question about it.

I'll be honest, there have been times throughout my life when I've thought, *What if Bruce Lee had never existed? What would the world be like? What direction would my own life have taken?* I have actually thanked God, who created this man, a man who not only brought joy to my life, but to millions of peoples' lives around the globe. He was the epitome of cool, a symbol of male vigour and hope to people who couldn't hope to compete with traditional jocks. No matter what problems you were facing in life, watching Bruce was a sanctuary for

## CRAZY OBSESSIONS

you as you took delight in watching him take on endless obstacles in the four-and-half films he had churned out in the two years that made up his truncated career. We all need something in life that helps us forget our problems for a while, and for me it was Bruce.

\* \* \*

Growing up, I never particularly had an affinity for reading in school. In fact, I never was inclined to study much at all. However, once Bruce Lee came along I developed an interest in literature relating directly to the martial arts. From the age of ten, I would religiously visit the local library in town with my brother and my next-door neighbour and borrow books relating to the oriental arts. Bodybuilding books – specifically the ones written by Robert Kennedy, who was a well-known Canadian bodybuilding author – also caught my attention. Eventually, I developed a voracious appetite for the written word. Being a young teenager finding a path in life, in my ‘reading sessions’ I took delight in the mini step-by-step pictorials more than the text. Some kids grew up reading superhero tales which helped them cope with adversity, but the antics of Batman and Superman never invoked my interest. I got my thrills from learning everything I could about my hero and martial arts when I was growing up via the medium of print.

In my second year of high school, in 1989, when I was 13, it dawned on me that martial arts magazines existed. I remember coming across *Combat* magazine and its competitor *Martial Arts Illustrated* on the shelves of WHSmith in town, and being immediately entranced by this new source of information. I would religiously save my bus fare so I could purchase the monthly *Martial Arts Illustrated*, which at that time cost £1.25. Well, I say that, but sometimes it was financially beneficial to stand there and flick through the pages, read, look at the actions pictures and shove the copy back on the shelf, often placing it in the wrong pile. This strategy was seemingly implemented by many like-minded people – at least it seemed that way from the mismatched nature of the shelves.

## TO THE TOP

Bruce was more than a martial artist. His mind and intellect – he studied philosophy at the University of Washington – eventually influenced me to a great degree. He once wrote, ‘Many people live only for their image. That is why whereas some have a self, a starting point, most people have a void because they are so busy projecting themselves as this or that. Wasting, dissipating all their energy in projection and conjuring up a facade, rather than centring their energy on expanding and broadening their potential.’ Similarly, he told an interviewer, ‘It is easy for me to put on a show and be cocky and then feel pretty cool. Or I can do all kinds of phony things and be blinded by it. Or I can show you some really fancy movement. But to express oneself honestly, not lying to oneself, that is, my friend, very hard to do.’ He believed that imitation was not the path and he advised his students to find their own way and not be blinded by followers. Certainly, this concept of finding your own way was derived from the writings of the great philosophers he read about, but he implemented the philosophies into his art and teachings – and, as he advised others to do with his art of jeet kune do, added what was specifically his own.

One of the core tenets of his philosophy was to know yourself. Why would Bruce pursue philosophy? This is a question I’d wanted answered for my own personal satisfaction ever since I came across this as a young man. ‘My majoring in philosophy was closely related to the pugnacity of my childhood,’ Bruce once said. ‘I often asked myself these questions: what comes after victory? Why do people value victory so much? What is glory? What kind of victory is glorious?’ With the assistance of his university teacher, who advised Bruce when he was about to select a subject, he chose to study a subject that he believed would explain what man lives for. ‘When I told my friends and relatives that I had picked philosophy, they were all amazed about to select. Everybody thought I had better go into physical education since the only extra-curricular activity that I was interested in, from my childhood until I graduated from my secondary school, was Chinese martial arts.’

## CRAZY OBSESSIONS

By and by you came to realise that the late kung fu master, the man with a physique to die for and an iron fist, was an extremely intellectual human being. He perceived a direct application of philosophy to a physical art form. Furthermore, he was an ardent follower of self-help writers, Napoleon Hill and Norman Vincent Peale being two of the more prominent ones to influence him. When I learned about Bruce's reading habits I wasted no time in collecting more books from his inspirations as I strove to train my mind as much as my body in emulating the late kung fu master.

Flicking through martial arts periodicals, the adverts for clothing, equipment and tomes caught my attention as much as the photos of martial artists performing high and flying kicks. The martial arts was an industry in itself, I would soon come to realise. I got into the habit of ordering goodies from the mail-order adverts. Mind you, literature wasn't cheap and as a young teenager I didn't have a lot of money.

I would also have to have my purchases delivered to a friend's house instead of my own address. I had a tendency to keep my hobby and passion a secret, like a scared little boy. For some odd reason I found it a taboo subject to broach. In my house, even asking to stay out late could prove troublesome. We grew up in a disciplined home where extra-curricular activity was not on the menu. Telling my parents I'd become obsessed with this strange man from Hong Kong would have been like being in an Italian restaurant but asking for Chinese noodles. It seemed that other kids' aspirations were supported by their parents, but I was deprived of that privilege. This can have an indelible impact on a kid's development. It feels like the other kids have been given an edge, a head start in a race, and you can't start your run until they're halfway to the finishing line. How are you going to triumph against someone when you're way behind because you are being held back? It's a feeling that stayed with me into my adult years, but later it would vanish.

Still, if you look at this from a more optimistic angle, if you lack support and encouragement while growing up, it can boost your

motivation. And as a consequence you're determined to prevail in life. So it can work both ways. Some people have things given to them on a plate, but they lack commitment and that all-important relentless drive, and so they never make it, they never achieve their goals. Whether I had support or not, I feel I had a natural tendency and passion for pursuing what I wanted in life, sure that nothing was going to hinder my progress. No one was going to extinguish my dreams because of my sheer tenacity.

There are countless success stories about successful people who had it hard, but still had their dreams manifest into a reality through sheer force of will. These are the kind of stories and lessons that offered me inspiration. I'm a big believer in making your own destiny. I find it rather disappointing when I hear people say, 'Well, it's not going to happen to me.' In life no matter what you pursue, I firmly believe in that it doesn't matter where you come from – whether it's a small village in Asia, like the one my parents came from, or a big bustling city in the West – you've got a brain, two arms and two legs just like most others, so you can pursue something in life and achieve your goals.

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Growing up, there was a small muscle store – that's how I thought of it – near my house. The magazines displayed in the window would always attract my attention when I passed, my only window to a world that I barely knew existed. *Muscle & Fitness* and *FLEX* (the Bible of bodybuilding) were the kings of the iron-pumping periodicals. Bodybuilding's most recognisable personalities and champions graced the covers of these glossy magazines, which were an inspiration to the fans and fanatics alike. With an ever increasing fervour for learning about the stars and champions of the sport of bodybuilding, I familiarised myself with the big names of the era – Lee Haney, Shawn Ray, Dorian Yates, and Lee Labrada, a small-statured bodybuilder who gave hope to others' more modest muscle-building efforts. Rachel McLish, who merits

## CRAZY OBSESSIONS

special historical significance in the sport of women's bodybuilding, Lenda Murray and Corey Everson – the latter actually appeared in Jean Claude Van Damme's *Double Impact*, in which she showcased her high-kicking martial arts skills – were the female stars.

As I immersed myself obsessively in my hobbies and cultivated a penchant for the martial arts in particular, taking things to the extreme was nothing unusual for me. I believe I was born an extreme, obsessive person. Eventually, it would become my biggest asset in life, but my obsession did get me into trouble several times. In English, for instance, I was once caught reading a bodybuilding magazine under the table once. Eventually, my teacher threatened to bring my interests to my parents' attention, which scared me more than you might think. I don't think my parents would have understood why I was reading about scantily dressed men and women in a magazine. Eventually, I was let off with a warning. Many years later I consoled myself with the fact that even the great Arnold Schwarzenegger had his fair share of arguments with his parents when he was growing up obsessed with a sport that nobody really cared about. Still, I was always careful to hide those periodicals under my bed at home.

More serious was the fact that I took to regularly sneaking a nunchaku, a small weapon, into school, which I tucked under my jumper. I was very lucky one day when I got into an altercation after English class that my friend had my pair of 'chucks'. On another occasion I beat up a boy named Craig, who had to be hospitalised because of a broken nose and ribs. The fight lasted under ten seconds as I hit him with multiple head butts and round kicks to his ribs. He couldn't do anything. Had this illegal weapon been found, there would've been grave consequences. By the way, I had all the justification for resorting to a fight and would never fight to hurt anyone unless it was for self-defence. But he had been giving me the attitude for a while and for no reason provoking me.

Martial arts and physique personalities were undoubtedly famous in their own worlds, but even the mainstream general public, who

didn't follow these sports, had some sort of reverence towards these alpha males and females. At the same time, bodybuilding and its adherents more often than not received negative press from the mainstream media because of the stigma of drugs attached to the sport and its athletes. Steroids were part and parcel of the iron-pumping game, and of course still are. These glossy, colourful publications were littered with supplements and nutrition adverts, aimed at convincing readers to part with their hard-earned cash by claiming that the over-muscled athletes featured next to them used nothing else. Whether these products worked or not is another story, but those well-placed adverts certainly caught my attention.

Suddenly I was enticed into trying out natural supplements. I kept it simple. I was an advocate of vitamin C because Bruce Lee consumed 1,500 mg of it every day. We had these free purple coloured free multi-vitamin tablets prescribed from the family doctor. My whole family was on them. So, I had this pill every day thinking it would make me invincible and strong. Protein is essential in building muscle, and if you're an athlete you should consume plenty of protein, the experts claimed. Well, I did for a while, but then I stuck to natural milk, drinking three glasses daily in the vain hope of becoming a superman.

It wasn't long before I was put off supplements, or should I say 'magic pills', after I survived a near-death experience in my mid-teens. I had ordered GABA (gamma aminobutyric acid, a naturally occurring amino acid) capsules from a company via mail order, which was one of the main avenues you used to buy supplements in the days before the internet. Now they are stocked in Walmart and TESCO, but back in the day things were a lot tougher. Anyway, after gulping down some capsules they had an adverse affect. I became extremely ill. Well, worse than that. My whole body felt 'dead'. A doctor had to be called. I felt like I was on the verge of leaving this world. I had an allergic reaction to the pills, and my brain and body felt like a sponge. I was hallucinating. The doctor said I had one of the most severe allergic reactions to the capsules he'd ever seen. Well, after

## CRAZY OBSESSIONS

that unfortunate episode I took an oath that I would never take something like that again. And I never did. I was relieved enough that I was going to live. I became very wary of supplements. I valued my life more than any amount of muscle I might put on. Stories of bodybuilders dying after taking steroids had been circulated in the specialist press and it was petrifying. But I never took steroids and was never tempted to experiment at any cost whatsoever.

To be honest, although I ventured into the world of supplements, I never seriously continued taking them on a long-term basis, one reason being that they were too damn expensive. How could a kid afford them? And as for how some people could sustain their habit on a monthly basis, throwing away their hard-earned cash on the hopes of muscle, was beyond my comprehension. So, it was short-lived for me. At the time, one big company was publicising its products like no one else. The company seemed to have caught on with consumers and attracted a loyal following, even breaking into the mainstream in terms of customer base and distribution. The martial arts and bodybuilding bug had hit me hard by now. It was infectious. And nothing and nobody was going to cure this infection.