



## COMMUNITY SPORTS

# Sambo solution: martial artists have found something new

Discipline emphasizes fitness, flexibility and mental strength



*NIKE DESAUTES THE BELLINGHAM HERALD*

Cody Fielding, 42, top, from San Francisco, and Jarlo Ilano, 32, from Honolulu, face off in a Russian Sambo match as Sambo instructor Scott Sonnen, right, referees the match during a Russian Sambo workshop at the Bellingham Athletic Club on Jan. 13. Fielding won the match and was hired on as a full time instructor at the gym.

### TO LEARN MORE

Anyone interested in learning more about Sambo or circular strength training from Scott Sonnen may e-mail him at [sonnon@rmaxinternational.com](mailto:sonnon@rmaxinternational.com) or call 420-1180.

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**THE BELLINGHAM HERALD**

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Just about the time it seems there's little room for another new sport in Bellingham, along comes instruction in sambo.

Master instructor Scott Sonnon, a professional trainer from Bellingham, is so highly regarded in the world of sambo that competitors will fly thousands of miles to attend one of his workshops.

More than two dozen competitors — physically fit men from their 20s to their 40s and better than half from out of state — came to the downtown Bellingham Athletic Club to attend a sambo workshop Saturday.

Sambo is a version of rugged Russian-style mixed martial arts. It's a combination of judo, boxing, wrestling and kickboxing and a few more arcane self-defense activities from far-flung places like Uzbekistan.

Veteran and novice competitors alike seemed fascinated by Sonnon's instruction and leadership at the workshop. They alternately sweated, grunted, cheered and encouraged each other.

"I love the camaraderie of these weekends," said Sonnon's wife, Jodie, who won numerous gold medals in sambo in the late 1990s and now is a floral designer and the mother of their two preschool-age children. "The energy is absolutely wonderful."

As she spoke, San Francisco's Cody Fielding and Hawaii's Jarlo Illano competed in a rousing bout that had the room in a frenzy of enthusiasm. The competition went the limit — 10 minutes without a rest — and Fielding won on points.

There was plenty of punching, kicking and wrestling and both men refused to allow submission, which automatically ends a match. They wore face, head and mouth protectors, shin guards and gloves and needed the gear to avoid injury.

Still, two competitors share a deep respect for each other, Fielding said.

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"There's a separation between the art and violence," Fielding said. "(Sambo) is about exploration. Jarlo is my good friend and we're helping each other to explore our potential, to find something outside of ourselves." Fielding, a 43-year-old fitness trainer, said he prepared for the bout for several weeks in anticipation of Sonnon's request to put on the first demonstration of the day.

"Scott is a very special guy," Fielding said. "I've traveled the world and he's unique. He's one of the most challenging, creative and heart-driven men I've ever met."

Not only does sambo get its participants in good physical shape, it prepares them to face other challenges in life as well.

"Scott prepared this challenge for me because he knew it would force me to reach a higher level," Fielding said. "Any opportunity to train with him is a moment to really learn something. Whenever I come here, I gain the confidence that I can overcome any problem."

Sonnon explained it to the group in another way.

"It doesn't matter what culture you're from, there's always some sort of indigenous martial tradition," he said. "We fight not to kill each other, but to bring out excellence."

Bellingham's Soheil Ward, a 32-year-old bartender and bouncer at the Rogue Hero in downtown Bellingham, called the opportunity to learn sambo techniques from Sonnon "kind of like being able to learn Kung Fu from (the late) Bruce Lee."

"These guys here are incredible. There are guys here who flew in from everywhere just for the opportunity to train with Scott Sonnon," Ward said. "I've been waiting for this for months. I'd like to work with him as much as I can."

Sonnon, a former international sambo champion who served as U.S. coach for six years, achieved the Distinguished Master of Sport in 1999, making him one of the world's top sambo competitors and teachers. He competed with many of the world's best in Russia.

"Sambo is a Russian acronym for 'self defense without weapons,'" he said. "The main emphasis is on joint manipulation, although the rules are changing to protect the safety of the competitors."

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"The international wrestling association recognizes the wrestling involved to be the third international style, after Greco-Roman and freestyle. Sambo was first officially recognized in Russia in 1938 and was used by the KGB."

Two captivated spectators at the workshop, Kevin and Melissa Patterson of Bellingham, said both sambo itself and Sonnon's coaching style intrigue them.

"Scott can go around the world and get recognized, but around here nobody knows who he is," Kevin Patterson said. "But he really has incredible credentials and all these gold medals."

Patterson, owner of Patterson Collision Repair, said he's especially aware of his need for more and better exercise at the age of 28.

"I'm definitely noticing how my joints need attention," he said. "It seems like a great way to get into shape and to improve both strength and flexibility. There are so many variations to learn. It's a lot more than pushing weights, and it takes great coordination. These guys here are incredible athletes."

Melissa Patterson said much the same, pointing out the preventative measures of this unique form of exercise.

"I want to gain strength and learn injury prevention," she said. "We're reaching the point where we have a decision to make: to let yourself go or stay fit."

Jodie Sonnon, for one, decided to stay fit. In fact, that's how she met Scott.

"Scott was my first martial arts teacher, in Lancaster (Pa.)," she said. "I was just out of high school and my dad wanted me to take a self-defense course. I was a soccer player, but I had not had any martial arts."

The following year, she was a gold medalist at the national female sambo competition.

"There's just something about grappling, these subtle nuances when you're competing," she said. "People are either grapplers or they're not. These are really tough guys here today, but when you meet them off the mat, they're like puppy dogs. This is really a tribe and these people really support each other."