

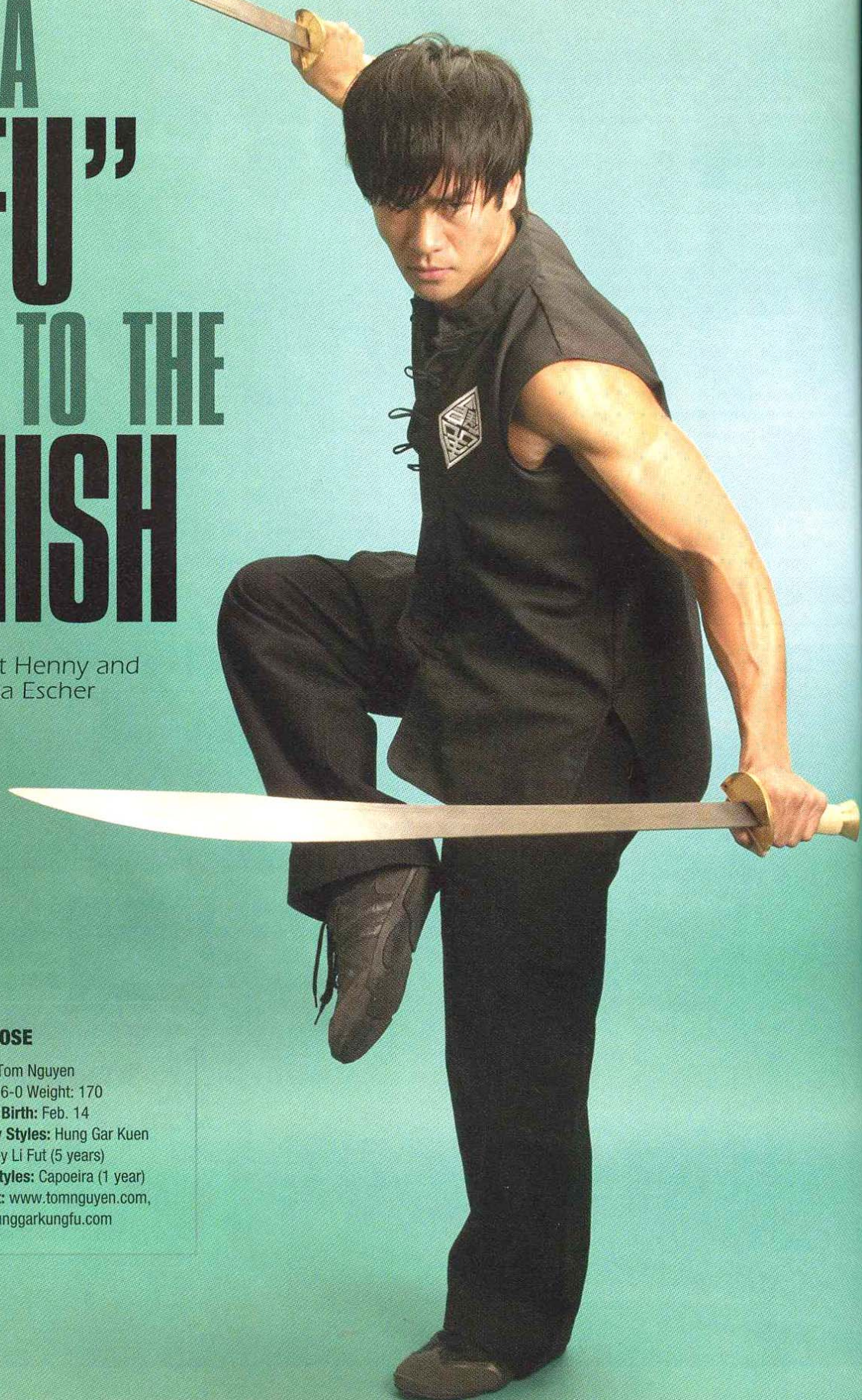
TOM NGUYEN MADE SURE HE WAS READY
WHEN MTV2 SEARCHED FOR AMERICA'S
BEST MARTIAL ARTIST

A “FU” FIGHT TO THE FINISH

By Robert Henny and
Ursula Escher

UP CLOSE

Name: Tom Nguyen
Height: 6-0 **Weight:** 170
Date of Birth: Feb. 14
Primary Styles: Hung Gar Kuen
and Choy Li Fut (5 years)
Other Styles: Capoeira (1 year)
Contact: www.tomnguyen.com,
www.hunggarkungfu.com

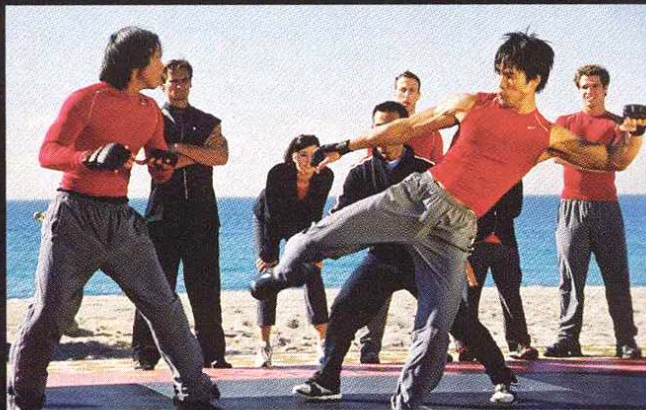
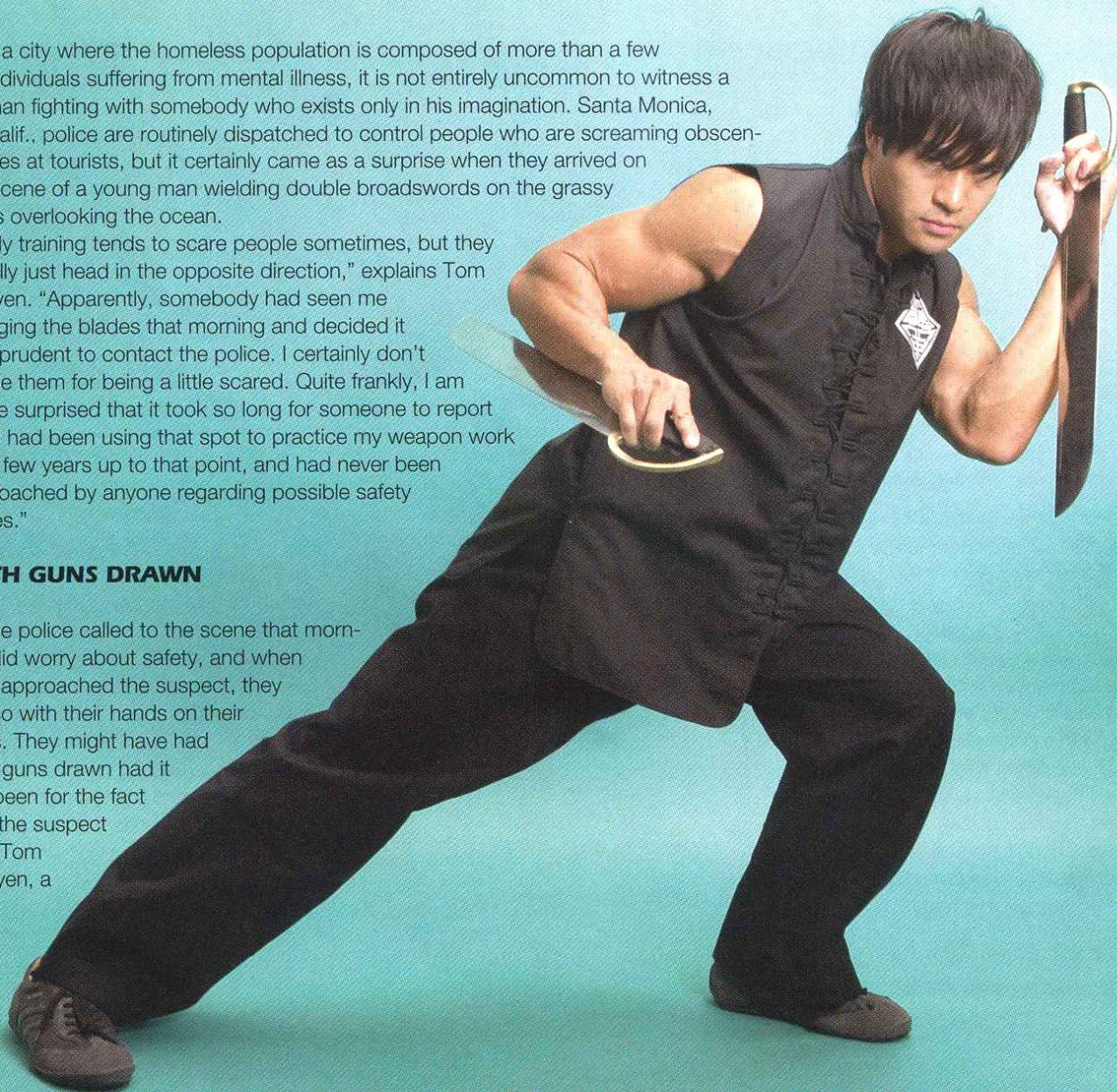


In a city where the homeless population is composed of more than a few individuals suffering from mental illness, it is not entirely uncommon to witness a man fighting with somebody who exists only in his imagination. Santa Monica, Calif., police are routinely dispatched to control people who are screaming obscenities at tourists, but it certainly came as a surprise when they arrived on the scene of a young man wielding double broadswords on the grassy bluffs overlooking the ocean.

"My training tends to scare people sometimes, but they usually just head in the opposite direction," explains Tom Nguyen. "Apparently, somebody had seen me swinging the blades that morning and decided it was prudent to contact the police. I certainly don't blame them for being a little scared. Quite frankly, I am a little surprised that it took so long for someone to report me. I had been using that spot to practice my weapon work for a few years up to that point, and had never been approached by anyone regarding possible safety issues."

WITH GUNS DRAWN

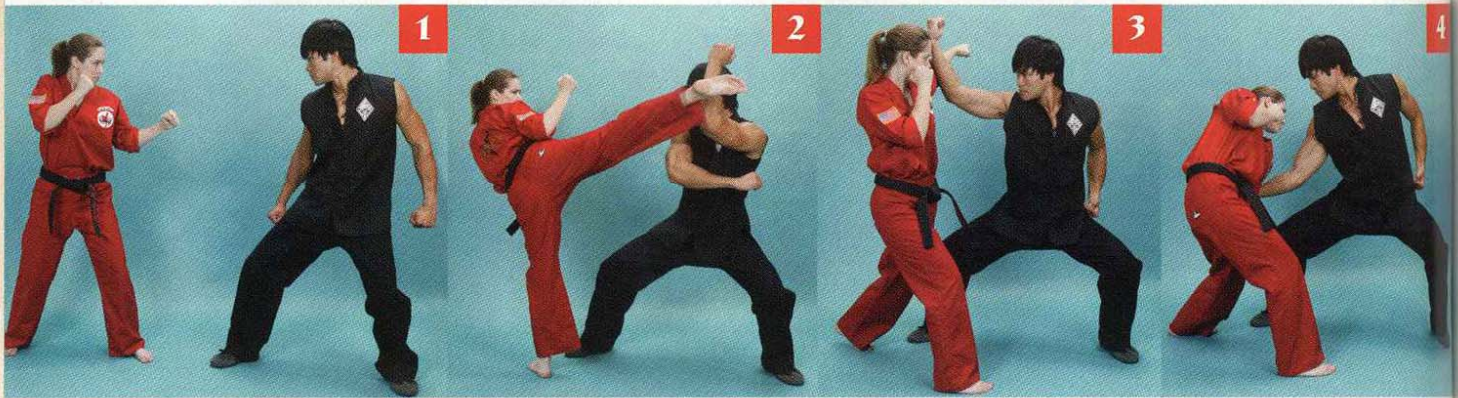
The police called to the scene that morning did worry about safety, and when they approached the suspect, they did so with their hands on their guns. They might have had their guns drawn had it not been for the fact that the suspect was Tom Nguyen, a



THE "FINAL FU"

"The Final Fu" is a daily martial arts competition series pitting fighters from various martial arts disciplines against each other by combining challenges and semi-contact pointfighting. The goal is to discover who has the ultimate martial arts skills. The fighter with the highest total points scored at the end of the final week of the series wins the competition and becomes "The Final Fu."

The host of the show is actor and martial arts superstar, Ernie Reyes Jr. (*The Rundown*, *The Last Dragon*, *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles* and *Red Sonja*). "The Final Fu" is created/produced by Amanda DeSeta and executive produced by Carol Eng and Justin Rosenblatt. In the series' first season, 30 athletic young martial artists between the ages of 18 and 30 represented various arts by demonstrating their skill, endurance and agility. For more information on the show, visit www.mtv2.com and www.finalfu.com.



The attacker, Michelle Mix, throws a high roundhouse kick (1-2). Tom Nguyen twists to his left and raises both arms to cover his head and body. The attacker immediately follows up with a reverse punch (3) that Tom blocks with a backhand downward motion (4). Tom drops the attacker's head with his left forearm (5), then delivers a right uppercut (6). He follows with a rake to the face (7), which clears the way for an elbow strike to attacker's exposed neck (8).

muscular, athletic ringer for Bruce Lee, and the city was Santa Monica—a seaside residence for many an actor.

"Luckily, I was as quick with my thinking as I was with my combat steel swords," Nguyen notes. "I told them that I was an actor and I was just practicing with my stage props prior to filming. By the time I finished explaining my story, I'm pretty sure they were convinced they recognized me from the movies. I had to put the swords away, but at least my weapons didn't end up in an evidence room and I didn't end up in jail."

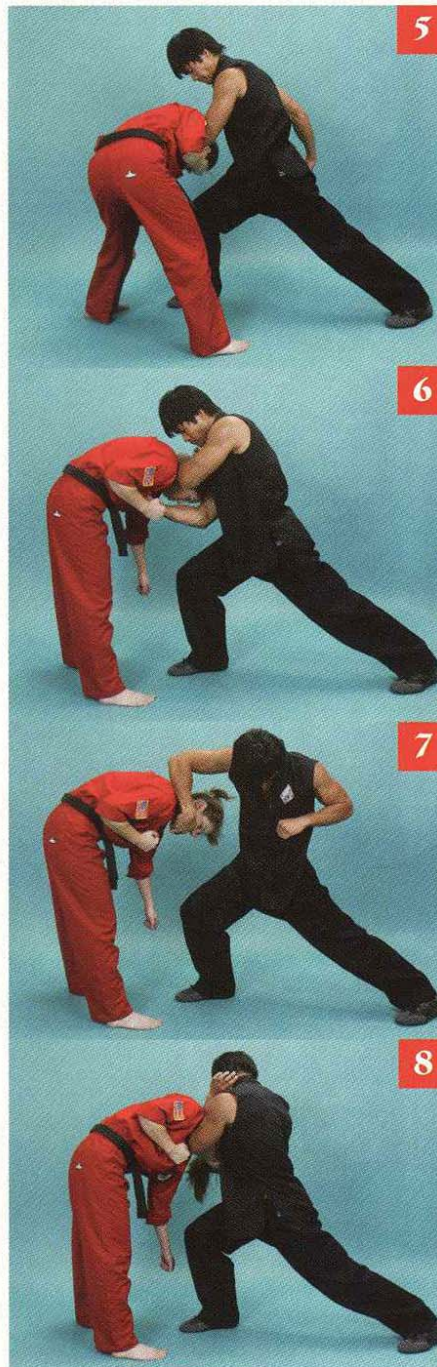
When confronted with the fact that some, if not all, of his neighbors think he is insane and dangerous, Nguyen responds with a wry smile.

"I guess I'm a little bit of both," he says. "I am certainly insane in the way that I train, both in terms of the techniques I use and in how many hours I apply toward developing my craft, and my training regimen is dedicated to ensuring that I become increasingly dangerous... but only to those who threaten or challenge me."

"THE FINAL FU"

Challenge him is exactly what MTV did when they proposed a television show promising to pit a multitude of martial arts styles and fighters against each other, culminating with one ultimate winner who would be crowned "Final Fu."

"When I discovered MTV2 was producing a television show for young martial artists from different styles to compete against one another, I thought it the perfect opportunity to expose the



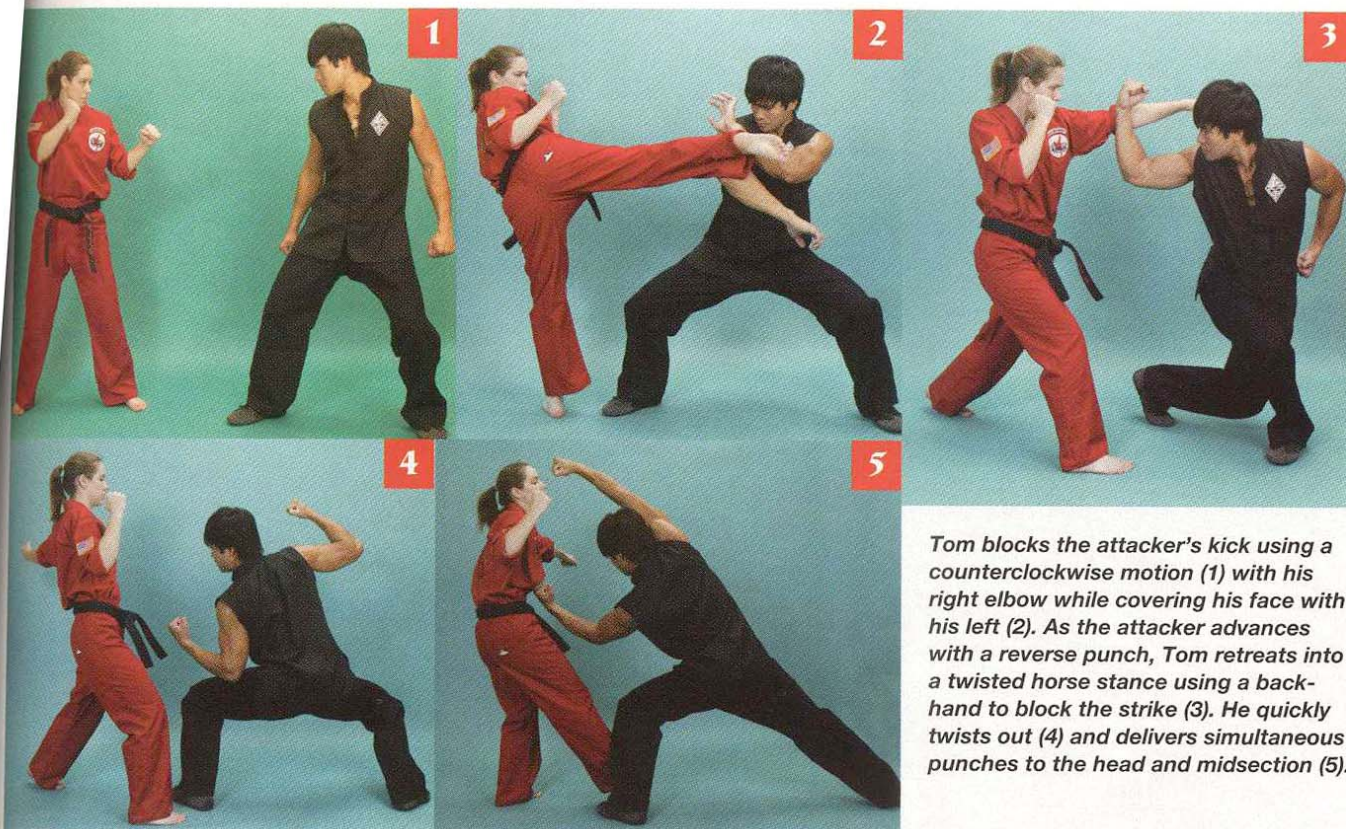
great classical arts," he insists. "I walked in thinking I could win the competition with power alone; against the other competitors of various styles, I was easily the most powerful. But a well-rounded martial artist is one that combines power with agility, speed, flexibility and a sound strategy. I competed with the best of the best. Everyone on the show was an amazing athlete. The competitor who ends up being the 'Final Fu' is a well-deserved winner."

The interesting component of the show's format, which wasn't divulged to the competitors until the day of filming, is that it was much more a contest of stylized showmanship than a battle of power. "Final Fu" was not attempting to mimic the full-contact format of the UFC or cage fighting; rather, it wanted to focus on a scoring system wherein judges deducted points for strikes that were deemed excessive.

"It was a challenge to change my technique to learn to score points instead of striking to maim or injure," he states. "A goal of hung gar kuen, which is my focus, is the use of extreme force to end a conflict as quickly and with as few moves as possible. I trained every day for five years to unleash strikes of unbridled force, and then I had one day to throw out all of my fighting instincts and hold back on my strikes. Admittedly, I had trouble ensuring my strikes would not be deemed excessive by the judges."

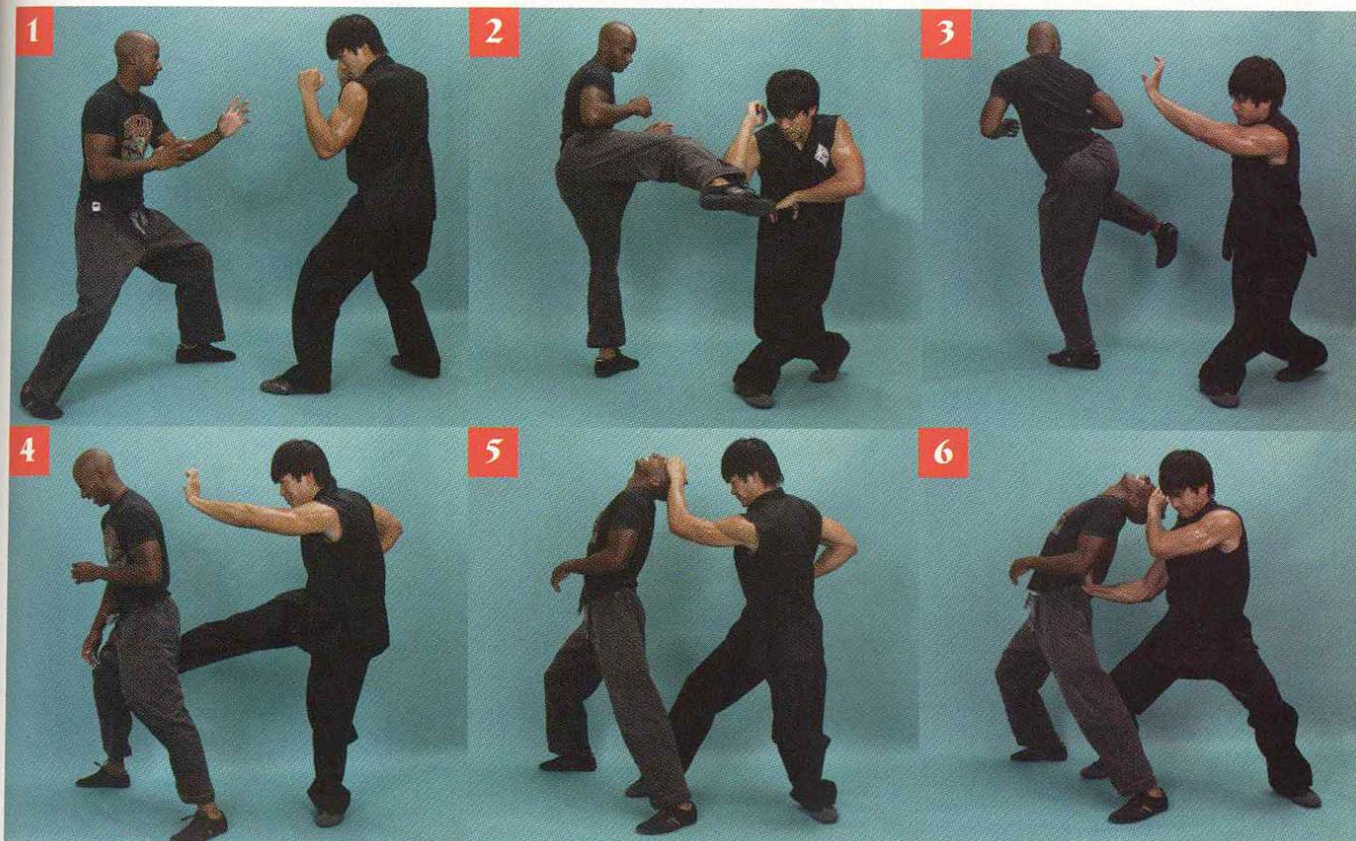
HOLLYWOOD CALLING?

Watching Nguyen train, it is no surprise that MTV chose him as one of the

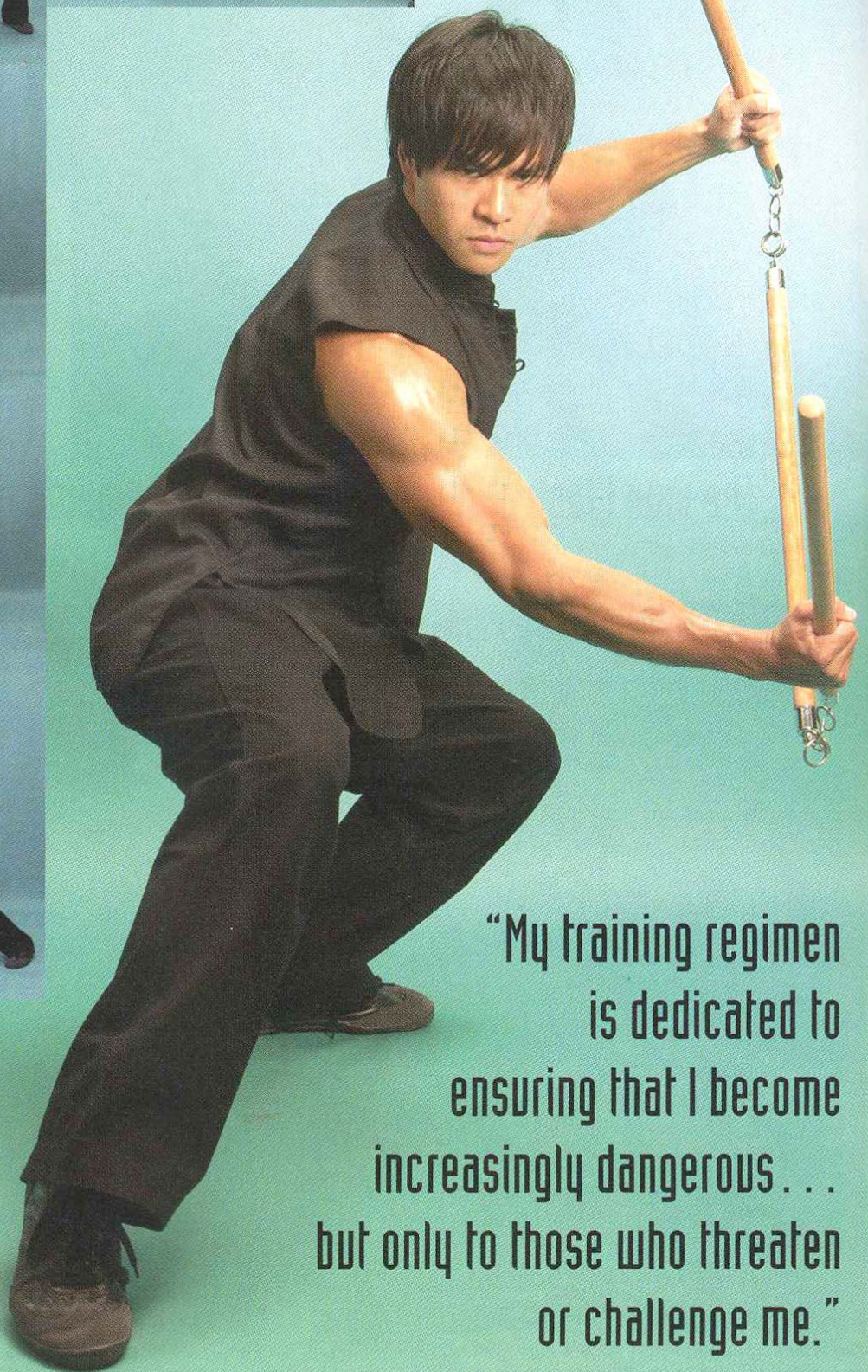
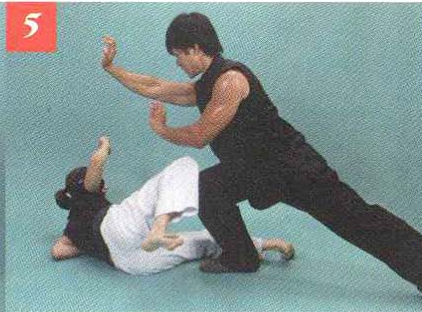
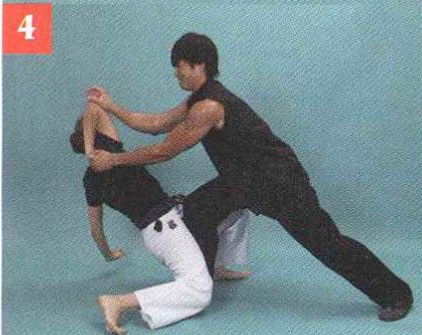
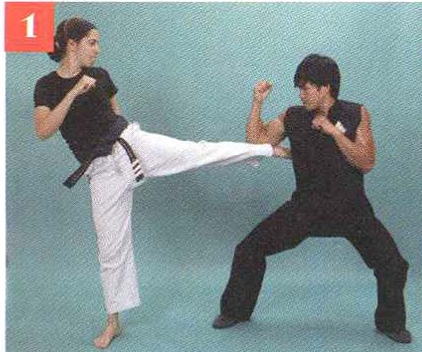


Tom blocks the attacker's kick using a counterclockwise motion (1) with his right elbow while covering his face with his left (2). As the attacker advances with a reverse punch, Tom retreats into a twisted horse stance using a backhand to block the strike (3). He quickly twists out (4) and delivers simultaneous punches to the head and midsection (5).

“The way I look at it, if you’re not busy making yourself better, you’re making yourself worse.”

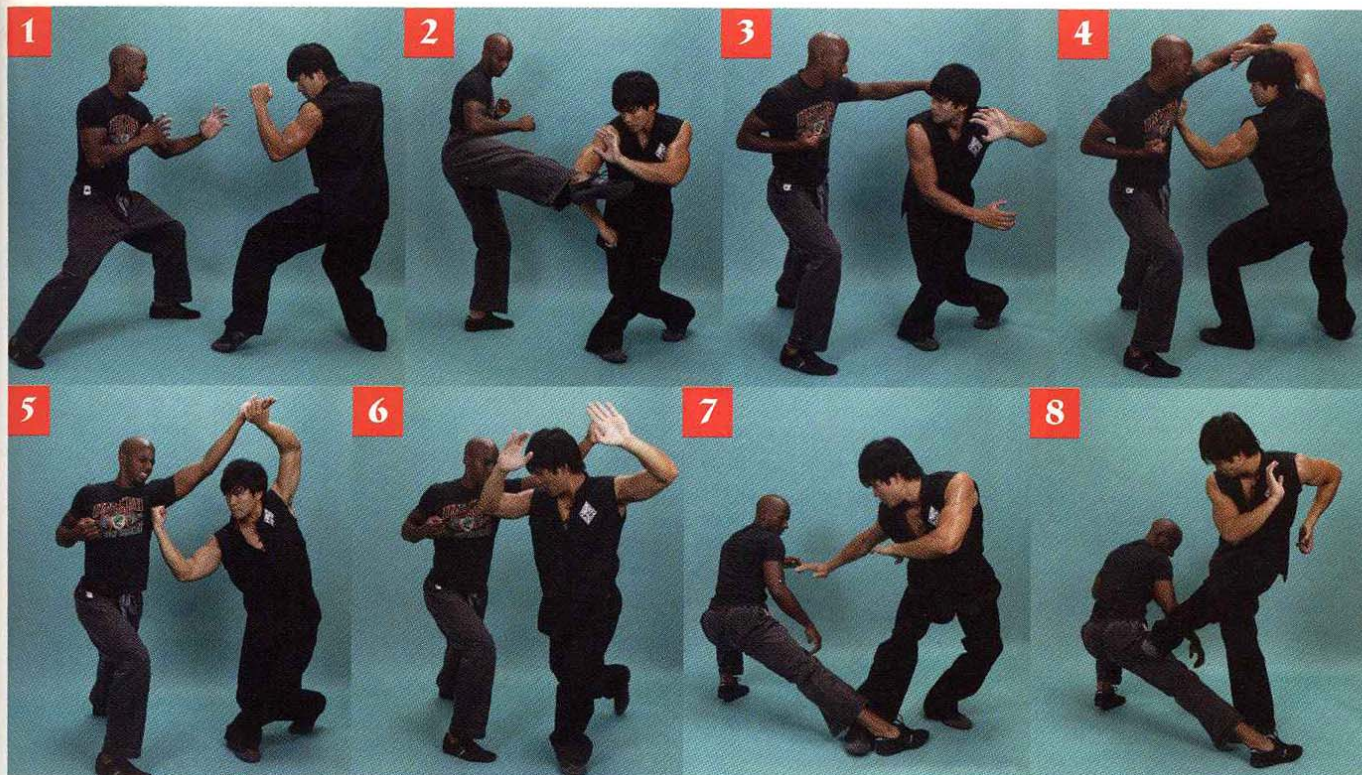


The attacker, Jabari Pride, aims a kick toward the midsection. (1). Tom sinks into a twisted stance to block the kick with his right elbow (2), hooks the attacker's leg, and pulls back to spin him around (3). After delivering a kick to his groin (4), he finishes by grabbing the attacker's forehead (5) and smashing his back with a vertical punch (6).



Tom blocks a side roundkick with his elbow (1) and then traps Ursula Escher's punch in a double chopping motion (2). He sinks his stance to unbalance the attacker (3), locks the attacker's wrist and elbow and leans forward to throw the attacker to the ground (4-5).

“My training regimen is dedicated to ensuring that I become increasingly dangerous . . . but only to those who threaten or challenge me.”



Tom twists and blocks the attacker's low kick (1-2). The attacker follows with a left punch (3). Tom simultaneously blocks and throws an uppercut (4), then twists his stance and grabs the attacker's arm to deliver a second uppercut (5). Tom steps forward (6) and sweeps the attacker's front leg (7). He finishes with a kick to his leg (8).

contestants. At 6 feet, 170 pounds with nary an ounce of body fat, he looks like he was plucked from a martial arts movie set instead of from a computer terminal, where he holds down a job as a 3-D artist for the video game world. While his everyday job might be that of a computer geek, Nguyen is much more of a "Bruce Lee in training" than he is a Bill Gates.

"People mistake me for an actor all the time, which I take as a compliment. I guess, in a perfect world, Hollywood would come knocking and I could use my martial arts as a full-time job," he relates. "I got a late start in martial arts, and most guys were getting their black belts before I knew what a reverse punch was. But from the moment I walked into that community center and got my butt kicked by Sifu Vernon Rieta, I was hooked. I knew I would strive to one day dedicate my life solely to kung-fu."

As for Nguyen's formative years, he grew up on a steady diet of weight training and kung-fu movies before he ever combined his love of both into his study of hung gar kuen. Now, Nguyen subsists on a steady diet of exercise and chicken breasts, and instead of watching others perform kung-fu, he has

turned into the performer.

"I train a lot. I'm probably guilty of overtraining when it comes to weights, but I learned early on that what separates a dominant strike from a barroom slug is more than just speed and technique; it's power as well," he notes. "I usually lift six times a week in conjunction with my technique work, so my training has become somewhat of a full-time job. Okay, I overtrain, but as my workout partner says, 'If you're not busy getting bigger, you're busy getting smaller.' I think I have applied a derivation of that mentality to my life. The way I look at it, if you're not busy making yourself better, you're making yourself worse."

HEALTHY BALANCE

Adding up the hours spent at work, the gym and the studio, it would seem that Tom Nguyen has opted to eschew a social life for the dedication to his art form, but it appears he still manages to keep appointments with friends.

"There was a time when I was remiss in my duties as a friend, but I quickly learned that friends can be more unforgiving than a reverse punch," he says with a laugh. "I can always block the

punch, but I seem unable to escape the wrath of angry friends. Now, I try to keep a balance in my life. Interestingly, it is kung-fu that has allowed me to develop the mental state in which I can take on more responsibilities with less stress."

Judging by the skills and grace of this kung-fu artist, he will spend the upcoming months busy making MTV a better place to stop while channel surfing. And who knows? Maybe someone out there will discover that this guy is ready to take the jump from the small screen to the big screen. And if he does get the chance to make the jump, he can always add a couple of spinning back-kicks for good measure.

"Coming into the competition, I was concerned that I wouldn't do hung gar kuen justice," he admits. "I have so much more to learn and didn't want to come across as though I was the expert in my field. The competition humbled me in how little I truly knew, but it also emboldened me with the knowledge that although I may not be far along the path I have chosen, it is certainly the right path on which to travel. At least for me." 🐼

Robert Henny and Ursula Escher are Southern California-based martial artists and freelance writers.