

Pushing North

Since I studied under South Carolina's Shihan Albert C. Church, Jr. and had several students in Texas, I developed a lot of friends in the lower states and was struck by how they playfully used the term "Yankee" to refer to people north of the Mason-Dixon line. No Yankee I know would even think of calling someone from the south "Rebel" in the same way. Rather than go off on name-calling and archaic attitudes left over from the most deadly war in American history (I have atypical opinions on this, I'll wager, but that is for another venue), suffice to say I recognized that for most "southerners" the term "Yankee" applies to those who would have worn blue uniforms circa 1865; however, for those just north of the Mason-Dixon line, "Yankee" refers to New Englanders (occasionally New Yorkers, but mostly New Englanders).

If you come from New England, however, "Yankee" refers either to a resident whose family has been in New England for a more than century or, more specifically, someone from Maine. It seems that the term keeps being kicked northward as one travels up Route 95. I don't think Maine residents called those from Caribou or Van Buren "Yankees," but you never know about Mainiacs.

There seems to be a tendency in human nature to push something up (or down) a scale until it either joyfully includes you or leaves you joyfully excluded. Just because you exaggerated a deduction in your 1040 form last year, that doesn't mean you are a tax cheat. Only those who exaggerate regularly are really tax cheats. Those who exaggerate regularly think that only those whose income is substantially north of average can be called tax cheats, and they are given the upgraded name Evaders. Those with higher incomes feel only corporations can truly evade since they themselves are simply trying to keep what they legitimately earned. Corporations hire a bevy of tax attorneys to find every legal loophole in the law so, as far as they are concerned, they are neither evading nor cheating. Only those they employ can do that.

And so, understandably, martial artists always feel that their style is (pick an adjective here:) pure, original, valid, self-defense-worthy, powerful, etc. They see flaws in other systems, but seldom in their own. As they improve, they get a little more tolerant and recognize that the system, although it can be flawed or incomplete, is less determining of quality than is the instruction, that is, some instructors are too strict, too lenient, or too centered on what doesn't really matter. Still later, realizing now that those instructors were limited by both their own teachers and by the systems they studied, martial artists can admit that it is really the individual student who determines his own quality. They can admit that because, by now, they are aging and nursing recurring injuries that prevent them from doing the back-over flips and Jackie Chan wall-climbing they set out to do as idealistic novices. It is only realistic to admit one's deficiencies. After all, it is not the instructor or the style that decided to practice those

tornado kicks on an unforgiving surface. They have only themselves to blame. If only they had chosen the right style when they were young!

I don't really mind playfully being called a Yankee anymore than I mind my European friends calling me a typical American. They are seeing something that conforms to a stereotype. I don't think I am typically stereotypical, so their categorization of me says more about them than it does me. I would object, however, if they thought that somehow that being a northerner or an American, I had somehow chosen the wrong system or the wrong instructor. One should, in my humble opinion, be proud of one's style, accept it as one does one's ethnicity, and then forget about it altogether in favor of the thing martial arts style and instructors are supposed to have in common: personal development.