

GAMEPLAN — OF THE — GREATS

How 14 Elite Grapplers Dominate —
And What You Can Steal For Your Own Game



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S.M.A.R.T. Athletics, Inc.

Introduction

This guide represents the author's own independent analysis of publicly available information about these athletes. It is not affiliated with, endorsed by, or connected to any of the grapplers featured.

Inside, *Gameplan of the Greats* gives you the strategic thinking behind how the best grapplers in the world actually use their techniques. What positions they prioritize. Why they make the choices they make. How they see the mat differently from everyone else.

These aren't biographies. Every chapter is built around one question: what can you actually take from this grappler and use?

Each chapter covers a different grappler with a genuinely distinct approach. That's intentional. The goal isn't to show you fourteen versions of "be aggressive and hunt submissions." It's to show you fourteen different ways of thinking about grappling — and let you find the one that fits your body, your temperament, and your game.

Game Plan 1: Helio Gracie

The Father of Fighting for the Weaker Person

Who He Is and Why He Matters

Every grappler on this list trains in a system that Helio Gracie made possible. Gordon Ryan's leg lock entries, Marcelo Garcia's butterfly guard, John Danaher's positional hierarchy — all of it traces back to one foundational idea: a smaller, weaker person can defeat a bigger, stronger one through leverage, timing, and technique.

That idea didn't come from theory. It came from necessity.

Helio Gracie was born in 1913 in Brazil and was, by his own description, physically frail. When his brother Carlos began teaching judo techniques adapted from Japanese judoka Mitsuyo Maeda, Helio couldn't execute them. The explosive throws and physically demanding movements his brothers did easily were beyond him. So instead of accepting that limitation, he rebuilt the entire system from scratch around one question: what works when you have no physical advantages?

His answer was ground fighting. Not standing up where size and strength dominate — but on the ground, where a man on his back can use his legs, hips, and body weight to control someone much bigger. He didn't just modify judo. He invented a new art.

The Core Philosophy: Leverage Is the Equalizer

Helio's filter for every technique was ruthlessly simple. He said:

"Always assume that your opponent is going to be bigger, stronger, and faster than you — so that you learn to rely on technique, timing, and leverage rather than brute strength."

This wasn't inspiration. It was an engineering rule. Every technique had to pass one test: can a 140-pound man use this effectively against a 200-pound man? If the answer required strength or speed to make it work, the technique didn't make the cut.

This is what separates Helio from every other grappler on this list. The others built systems for high-level competition against opponents of similar size. Helio built a system for the worst-case scenario — where you are physically outmatched and your technique is all you have.

Three principles came out of that philosophy:

Break posture before everything else. An opponent with good posture is dangerous. An opponent whose posture is broken — head down, weight forward, base gone — is vulnerable. Helio's guard game was built entirely around this. Before any submission, before any sweep, the first job is always to destroy the opponent's structure.

Defense before offense. Most modern coaching pushes constant attacking. Helio taught the opposite — be safe first, then attack when the moment is genuinely right. A patient grappler who can't be finished is far more dangerous than an aggressive one who takes unnecessary risks.

Conserve energy over time. Helio fought matches that lasted hours. His 1932 match against wrestler Fred Ebert lasted nearly two hours before police stopped it. His 1951 fight against judoka Masahiko Kimura lasted thirteen minutes before Kimura secured an armlock that Helio refused to tap to until his corner threw in the towel. Surviving against physically superior opponents required never wasting a single movement.

His Signature Positions and How He Used Them

The Closed Guard as a Weapon

Before Helio, lying on your back with your legs around an opponent was seen as a losing position — something you did when you were in trouble. Helio recognized that from closed guard, a smaller fighter could control a larger one, break their posture, and attack submissions that the top person had almost no answer for.

His guard centered on pulling the opponent's head down and forward, removing their ability to post, strike, or base out. Once posture was broken, the opponent was stuck in reaction mode — trying to recover their base — which opened sweeps, triangles, armbars, and chokes. The key was that Helio never rushed. He broke posture, felt the opponent's reaction, and responded to what they gave him.

Hip Movement and Angle Creation

A still guard is a dead guard. Helio understood that the bottom player has to constantly move their hips to create angles, prevent the top player from settling their weight, and open paths to submissions. His guard was never a holding pattern. It was a constant series of small adjustments that kept the top player perpetually off-balance.

This applies everywhere on the ground. Whether in guard, under side control, or escaping mount — the grappler who moves their hips controls the fight far more than the one relying on arm strength and frames.

Mount Control and Patient Finishing

From mount, Helio preferred suffocating, patient control. His 1934 fight against judoka Taro Miyaki tells the story perfectly. Helio held guard for twenty minutes, moved to mount, then applied a choke that Miyaki refused to tap to and eventually fell unconscious from. He wasn't hunting the quick finish. He was grinding, waiting, and applying pressure until the submission became unavoidable.

How He Won

Helio fought professionally throughout the 1930s and 1940s in vale tudo — early no-rules fights that included punches, kicks, and all grappling. His opponents routinely outweighed him by 30 to 80 pounds. He faced boxers, wrestlers, judoka, and catch wrestlers.

The record shows not that Helio always won — he didn't, especially as he aged — but that a 140-pound man with excellent technique could compete evenly with much bigger fighters. That proof of concept is the foundation of the sport you train today.

The Street Reality

Of everyone on this list, Helio's approach translates most directly to a real confrontation. The others built their games for high-level competition. Helio built his specifically for the scenario where you are outweighed, outmatched, and technique is all you have.

The posture-breaking emphasis is especially valuable. In a real fight, an opponent with good posture can punch you from the top. An opponent whose posture is broken cannot. Helio made posture control the first priority not as a sport strategy — as a survival strategy.

The patience principle matters too. Most street confrontations are decided by who panics first. A grappler trained in Helio's controlled, patient approach is far less likely to make desperate, energy-burning mistakes when things get stressful.

What You Can Steal

Break posture before you attack anything. If you're in guard and you attempt a submission against an opponent with their posture intact, you're working against yourself. Make posture destruction your first job every time you're on the bottom.

Move your hips constantly. A still guard gives a passer a stable target. A moving guard does not. This is the most underdeveloped skill in beginners — hip movement from the bottom position.

Be safe first, attack second. Helio's patience wasn't passivity. It was the discipline to wait for a real opening rather than creating unnecessary risk by attacking too early. The grappler who cannot be submitted has all the time in the world.

Key Drills

Posture Breaking Repetitions — From closed guard with a partner, focus only on breaking their posture. Don't attempt any submissions. Pull their head down, disrupt their base, feel them try to recover. Hold the broken posture for three seconds, release, and repeat. This drill isolates the most important skill in closed guard.

Hip Escape Flow — From under side control, practice continuous hip escapes with no goal of reversing position. Focus purely on keeping your hips moving and preventing your opponent from settling their weight. Movement is the point.

Patience Rolling — Give yourself one rule during rolling: no submission attempts until you have successfully broken your opponent's posture or disrupted their base. This forces positional awareness before submission hunting.

Game Plan 2: Rickson Gracie

The Invisible Layer Beneath Every Technique

Who He Is and Why He Matters

If Helio Gracie built the house, Rickson Gracie lives in the walls. His contribution to grappling isn't a new technique or a new position. It's something harder to define — and for that reason, far more valuable to understand. It's the layer of skill that exists underneath every visible technique, making the difference between a move that works on a resisting opponent and the same move that gets stuffed.

Rickson is Helio's son and is widely regarded as the greatest jiu-jitsu practitioner who has ever lived. People who trained with him describe the same experience: he was doing something that looked like normal jiu-jitsu but felt completely different. Positions that should have been escapable weren't. Submissions that should have been blockable landed anyway. He seemed to be playing a different game than everyone else on the mat.

He calls it Invisible Jiu-Jitsu.

The Core Philosophy: Feel Over Technique

Every other grappler on this list can be described by what they do — which positions they prefer, which submissions they hunt, which systems they run. Rickson resists that description because his contribution isn't about what he does. It's about how he does it.

His central teaching is that there is a layer of grappling skill that cannot be seen — only felt. It works through weight distribution, timing, connection, and constant small adjustments. A grappler with this skill and one without it can perform the exact same technique and get completely different results. The invisible layer is why.

"The invisible aspect of jiu-jitsu is by far the greatest and most interesting. Because it is not based on what I see. It is based on how I feel it. You may see the same guard position, but you feel different if you put pressure here, if you lie a little more here."

This isn't mysticism. It's precision — the same kind of fine motor skill that separates a great surgeon from a competent one.

The Two Pillars: Base and Connection

Base

Base is your structural stability as a platform. It is how well you can deliver and absorb force while staying balanced and in control. A grappler with strong base can't easily be swept or off-balanced. More importantly, they can apply force — through weight, pressure, or submission mechanics — without losing their own position in the process.

Most grapplers think of base as something you either have or don't in a given position. Rickson treats it as an active, constantly managed skill. He is always adjusting his weight, always monitoring his center of gravity, always redistributing pressure in response to his opponent's movements.

Connection

Connection is the quality of physical contact between your body and your opponent's that lets you feel their intentions before they fully commit to a movement. It is not simply grabbing or holding. It is a specific type of contact that creates a shared loop between two bodies — where you feel what they are about to do rather than reacting to what they have already done.

When you are poorly connected, you feel your opponent's movements after they happen. You are always one step behind. When you are well connected, you feel their weight shift before they move. You respond in real time. The difference in outcome between these two states is enormous.

Invisible Jiu-Jitsu in Specific Positions

From Top Position — Making Your Weight Suffocating

One of Rickson's most documented applications is from side control and mount. His principle: concentrate your weight into a single point of contact, making the bottom person carry a load that feels far heavier than your actual bodyweight.

This is a physics problem. Distributed weight across a large surface area is manageable. The same weight concentrated into a small area is crushing. By adjusting the specific angle and point of his hip and chest contact, Rickson made opponents feel pinned by a force beyond his physical size.

From Closed Guard — Posture Breaking Through Feel

In closed guard, Rickson built on Helio's posture-breaking foundation but added the invisible layer. Rather than mechanically pulling an opponent's head down, he monitored their posture through connection — waiting for the precise moment their weight shifted forward, even slightly — then accelerated that movement instead of fighting it.

Side Control Survival From the Bottom

Rickson's teachings on surviving bottom side control are among his most practically useful. His core idea: never be completely still, never commit fully to one escape, and use the opponent's focused pressure against them. When a top player concentrates pressure to prevent one escape, they create openings for another.

The Breathing Factor

Controlled breathing under pressure is both a physical tool and a connection tool. Physically, it preserves energy and keeps muscles relaxed — which allows for the fine adjustments that invisible jiu-jitsu requires. A grappler who is gasping and tense cannot make those adjustments. A grappler who is breathing controllably and relaxed can.

This is why Rickson always emphasized staying relaxed — not as a coaching cliché, but as a mechanical requirement for the skill he was developing.

The Street Reality

Invisible jiu-jitsu is particularly valuable in real confrontations because real fights are governed by exactly the conditions Rickson's approach was built for: stress, adrenaline, physical disadvantage, and an opponent who is not cooperating.

Grapplers trained primarily on technique memorization find that stress and adrenaline degrade complex techniques significantly. The invisible skills — base, connection, weight distribution, breathing — are actually more durable under stress because they are built on simpler, more automatic responses.

What You Can Steal

Practice weight concentration deliberately. From any top position — side control, mount, knee on belly — experiment with shifting your weight to smaller and smaller points of contact. Notice how your opponent responds differently to distributed weight versus concentrated weight.

Develop connection awareness. During rolling, notice the quality of your contact with your opponent. Are you gripping? Or are you connected? Gripping uses tension and blocks sensitivity. Connection uses relaxed contact that preserves your ability to feel.

Breathe on purpose. Make one deliberate decision: breathe out when you apply pressure, breathe in when you recover. This single habit, maintained consistently, will improve your ability to feel and respond more than most techniques will.

Key Drills

Weight Concentration Side Control — From top side control, have your partner attempt to hip escape continuously. Your only job is to concentrate your weight into one point — your hip against their hip — and adjust that point as they move. No arms for holding. Weight only.

Connection Guard Drill — From closed guard with both grapplers relaxed, have the top person make small weight shifts without attempting passes. The bottom person's job is to identify each shift through feel — not vision — and move their hips in the opposite direction before pressure is established. Start slow. Build speed as sensitivity develops.

Stress Breathing — During your hardest rolling rounds, make a deliberate effort to exhale on every application of force. Exhale when you sweep. Exhale when you escape. Exhale when you submit. Breathing under stress is the foundation everything else sits on.

Game Plan 3: Marcelo Garcia

The Man Who Made Attacking From the Bottom an Obsession

Who He Is and Why He Matters

There is a specific type of grappler that Marcelo Garcia made obsolete: the competitor who pulls guard to survive. Before Marcelo, the bottom guard position was widely understood as a defensive necessity. After Marcelo, it became somewhere you went to hunt.

Marcelo Garcia is a four-time ADCC champion and five-time IBJJF world champion. He tapped opponents at ADCC who outweighed him by 40 or 50 pounds. He submitted world champions from the bottom against people who could see his entire game coming and still couldn't stop it. Eddie Bravo called him the BJJ messiah.

The Core Philosophy: The Guard Is Your Weapon, Not Your Refuge

Marcelo's departure from conventional guard play was about attitude before it was about technique. Where most guard players think defensively, Marcelo thought offensively from the moment he hit the mat. His guard was not a holding position. It was a launching platform.

The core strategic insight: the best guard passing defense is not a good guard — it is an attack from guard that makes the pass irrelevant.

His Signature System: How Everything Connects

The Butterfly Guard as Foundation

Marcelo's butterfly guard — both feet hooked as insteps under the opponent's thighs — was the hub of his entire game. From butterfly, he could sweep in either direction, shoot to single leg X, enter the arm drag to take the back, or threaten the guillotine when opponents tried to pressure forward.

Each option fed the others. An opponent defending the sweep gave up the arm drag. An opponent defending the arm drag gave up the sweep. An opponent pressuring forward walked into the guillotine. You cannot take away all four options at once.

The Arm Drag: His Master Key

If one technique defined Marcelo's career above all others, it is the arm drag. You cup the opponent's tricep or wrist, pull it across their body, and simultaneously rotate around behind them. The entry is available from almost any position — standing, seated, butterfly guard, half guard — and the result is back exposure every single time.

Marcelo hit the arm drag on world champions so routinely, from such obvious setups that opponents could see it coming, that it became a running joke in match analysis. People knew it was coming. He hit it anyway.

The X Guard and Single Leg X

When Marcelo introduced the X guard at ADCC 2003 — inserting himself under Renzo Gracie and making him do the splits — it was a position most grapplers had never seen. He positioned himself directly under the opponent with one of their legs on his shoulder and his own legs pushing the other away, creating a structure from which sweeps in any direction were immediately available.

The Marcelotine: The Submission That Punishes Escape Attempts

Marcelo's guillotine variation — gripped high on the wrist rather than the conventional forearm grip — became so identified with him it acquired his name. He caught it as opponents tried to escape from his top half guard. He gave just enough space for them to start moving — and when they moved, he snapped the choke. The submission was the reward for the escape attempt, not a separate attack.

The Street Reality

The arm drag is one of the most effective techniques available in a real situation — particularly from the clinch on the feet. Dragging someone's arm across their body and taking their back from standing requires almost no strength, cannot easily be muscled out of, and puts you behind the opponent with both hands free.

The guillotine from the front headlock position also translates directly. It's available whenever an opponent bends forward — when they tackle, shoot for a takedown, or trip and reach out.

What You Can Steal

Make your guard immediately threatening. The moment you establish any guard position, your opponent should be thinking about defending — not planning their pass. One real weapon changes your entire guard game.

Learn the arm drag from everywhere. It works from standing, seated, butterfly, and half guard, and the result is always back exposure. If you drill only one technique from this chapter, make it the arm drag.

Use escape attempts as submission setups. Next time you are on top in half guard or mount, have the submission ready when the opponent moves into it. This shifts your thinking from holding a position to trapping someone in it.

Key Drills

Arm Drag to Back Take Repetitions — From butterfly guard, establish an underhook on one side, cup your opponent's opposite tricep, pull it across their body, and rotate to their back. Start with light resistance. Drill until the movement is fluid and automatic, then gradually increase resistance.

Butterfly Guard Dilemma Drill — From butterfly guard, have your partner try to pass in three ways: driving forward, posting their hand wide, and pulling their arms back. Your job is to identify which is happening and execute the right counter — guillotine for driving forward, arm drag for the posted hand, sweep for pulling away.

Submission-on-Escape Drill — From mount, set up your armbar but hold it. Let your partner push your hips. The moment they push, complete the armbar. From half guard top, set up the Marcelotine grip but hold it. Let your partner attempt to escape. The moment they move, finish the choke.

Game Plan 4: BJ Penn

The First Complete Fighter and His Revolutionary Top Game

Who He Is and Why He Matters

BJ Penn was operating in two worlds at once — pure jiu-jitsu competition at the highest level, and MMA at a time when nobody had figured out how to make elite jiu-jitsu work in a cage against opponents who could also punch, kick, and wrestle.

Penn received his black belt after only three years of training — something that had essentially never happened before. He then won the IBJJF World Championship, becoming the first non-Brazilian to do so. He became UFC lightweight champion and defeated welterweights in an era where that size disadvantage was supposed to be impossible to overcome.

The Core Philosophy: Fluidity Over Structure

Penn didn't have one signature position the way Marcelo had butterfly guard. What he had was a quality of movement that made him impossible to categorize and therefore almost impossible to gameplan against. His transitions between positions were so smooth and unexpected that opponents found themselves in mount without being able to identify how they got there.

His Signature Top Game

The Half Guard as a Passing Tool, Not a Stuck Position

Penn's key insight: half guard from the top is not a position to escape. It is a position to use. Where most fighters tried desperately to free their trapped leg when caught in half guard — burning energy, creating scramble opportunities — Penn recognized that half guard gave the top player specific advantages. With one leg trapped, the bottom player's ability to hip escape and create frames was significantly reduced.

The Chair Sit: Penn's Signature Guard Passing Technique

Penn's most distinctive passing technique — still rarely seen in MMA — is the chair sit. From top half guard with one leg trapped, Penn would sit back on the trapped leg, like sitting back in a chair. This locked down the bottom player's ability to knee shield, shrimp away, or insert a butterfly hook. All of their defensive tools were removed at once.

From the chair sit, Penn had two clean options: swing his free leg over into full mount, or take the back when the bottom player tried to turn away from the pressure.

The Leg Weave and Dope Mount

When opponents inserted a butterfly hook to create space and attempt a sweep, Penn trapped the elevated leg and wove his own leg through it, elevating over the hook and dropping directly into mount. The bottom player's most natural defensive reaction became the worst possible outcome for them.

His Guard Game

Penn's closed guard was a genuine submission threat, not a holding position. In his instructional work, Penn made a point that cuts to the core of fighting from the bottom in any context: striking from your back rarely finishes fights. The only reliable way to end a fight from the bottom is a submission.

The Street Reality

Penn's top game translates with particular directness to real confrontation because his passing system was developed specifically for the MMA context — against opponents who could punch, who were resisting with full intensity.

The chair sit specifically addresses one of the most dangerous real-world ground situations: being on top in half guard with a resisting, potentially striking opponent. It doesn't require fine motor control of a complex submission. It requires weight, positioning, and the ability to read one simple defensive reaction.

What You Can Steal

Stop treating half guard top as an emergency. If you are on top in half guard, you are not losing. You are in a position with specific offensive options that don't exist in full guard.

Learn to read the butterfly hook reaction. When your opponent inserts a butterfly hook, your first reaction should not be to fight it. It should be to recognize the leg weave opportunity.

Think submission from your back, not strikes. If you are on the bottom in closed guard, your goal is posture control followed by submission entry.

Key Drills

Chair Sit Mount Entry — From top half guard with one leg trapped, practice sitting back into the chair sit position, locking down the bottom player's movement, then swinging your free leg over to full mount. The key detail is sitting back rather than pulling the leg free. The chair sit works through weight, not strength.

Leg Weave Reaction Drill — From top half guard, have your partner insert a butterfly hook on command. The moment they do, execute the leg weave — trap their elevated leg, weave through, and come to mount. Drill this as a pure reaction, not a planned sequence.

Closed Guard Posture Break and Attack — From closed guard bottom, practice breaking your partner's posture until their head is at chest level, then immediately enter either the armbar or the triangle. No submission attempts before posture is fully broken.

Game Plan 5: Eddie Bravo

The Rebel Who Solved Guard Control Without a Gi

Who He Is and Why He Matters

In 2003, as a brown belt, Eddie Bravo submitted Royler Gracie — one of the most decorated Gracie family competitors of his era — at ADCC using a triangle choke from his rubber guard system. It was the proof of concept for an entirely new approach to no-gi guard play.

Traditional closed guard was built around gi grips. Without those grips, the conventional closed guard lost most of its controlling power. Bravo asked a different question: what if you used your leg instead of your hands to break and hold the opponent's posture?

The Core Philosophy: Posture Control Is the Problem

In no-gi closed guard, your opponent's biggest advantage is their ability to posture up. The rubber guard solves this differently. By bringing one leg up and over the opponent's arm and around the back of their head — Mission Control — you trap their posture mechanically rather than muscularly. Their head is locked down by your leg, your arm is free, and they cannot posture up no matter how strong they are.

The System: How It Works

Mission Control — The Foundation

Once in Mission Control — leg over the arm and behind the head, far arm controlling the opponent's wrist — the opponent is effectively trapped. They cannot posture up. They cannot freely use the arm that is captured. From here, Bravo's system branches into a flowchart of attacks based on how the opponent reacts.

The Submission Flowchart

If the opponent tries to pull their head free, the triangle becomes available. If they try to free the trapped arm, the omoplata opens up. If they flatten out and do nothing, the gogoplata is there. Bravo spent years mapping these branches and naming each position — New York, Chill Dog, Dead Orchard, Cocoon — giving students a shared language to navigate the system.

The Lockdown: His Half Guard Weapon

Bravo developed a half guard system built around the lockdown — a leg entanglement where you triangle your legs around the opponent's trapped leg and extend, controlling their hip. From the lockdown, his system includes the electric chair sweep and the meathook back take.

The Honest Assessment

Bravo's system has genuine strengths and genuine limitations. Mission Control genuinely solves the posture problem in no-gi. The submission options from the position are legitimate. But the rubber guard requires significant hip flexibility. Getting to Mission Control against a resisting, experienced opponent takes skill and timing.

Treat the rubber guard as a posture control system worth understanding rather than a magic position that beats everyone.

The Street Reality

For real-world situations, the rubber guard has limited direct application. The flexibility required and the time needed to establish Mission Control make it impractical in a fast, unpredictable confrontation.

What transfers is the underlying principle: mechanical posture control beats muscular posture control. The lockdown from half guard has better real-world application — it prevents the top person from striking effectively and creates a stable base from which to work.

What You Can Steal

Understand the posture problem. Even if you never use the rubber guard, Bravo's diagnosis is correct. In no-gi closed guard, posture control is your first job. How you solve it matters less than understanding it is the problem.

Learn the lockdown as a half guard tool. It controls the opponent's hips, prevents them from driving through, and sets up sweeps that are genuinely difficult to defend.

Think in systems, not positions. Whatever guard you play, ask yourself: what do I do when they do this? What do I do when they do that? Building that map makes your game far more consistent.

Key Drills

Mission Control Entry — From closed guard, practice breaking your partner's posture down, then bringing your outside leg up over their arm and around behind their head. Do

not rush to submissions. Just drill achieving and holding Mission Control against light resistance.

Lockdown Hip Control — From bottom half guard, establish the lockdown and have your partner try to drive forward or free their leg. Practice maintaining the lockdown and feeling how it controls their hip movement.

Flowchart Rolling — During rolling, pick one starting position — rubber guard or lockdown — and commit to working only from that position for the round. When your partner escapes, reset. This forced repetition builds the familiarity that makes the system work under pressure.

Game Plan 6: Rafael Mendes

The Wizard and the Art of Doing Less to Achieve More

Who He Is and Why He Matters

Rafael Mendes won six IBJJF black belt world championships in the featherweight division. Watching him grapple, you get the consistent feeling that he is doing far less work than his opponent and achieving far better results. That feeling is not an illusion. It is the point.

Mendes built his entire game around economy of motion — the idea that the best technique is the one that achieves the maximum result with the minimum effort. He famously abandoned conventional strength training during his final world championship runs, relying exclusively on sport-specific drilling. His reasoning: if the technique is precise enough, you don't need extra strength to make it work.

The Core Philosophy: Every Inch Counts

Mendes built his competition philosophy around a motto that became synonymous with AOJ: Every inch counts. At elite competition, everyone is strong, fast, and knows the fundamental techniques. The margins that determine who wins are precision gaps — whether a grip is two inches too low, whether a hip angle is five degrees off, whether timing is half a second late.

His Guard Game: The Berimbolo and Back Take System

The De La Riva Guard as the Starting Point

Mendes' guard game was built primarily around De La Riva guard — one foot hooked around the opponent's lead leg from the outside, the other foot controlling their hip. From De La Riva, he had two primary paths: the berimbolo to take the back, or the leg drag to pass from the bottom.

The Berimbolo: Back Take Through Inversion

The berimbolo is an inverted movement from De La Riva guard. With the DLR hook deep, Mendes would place his other foot across the opponent's torso, then roll sideways and invert — spinning underneath the opponent while keeping the hook — until he came out behind them with back control established.

The Reverse De La Riva and Kiss of the Dragon

Mendes also used the Reverse De La Riva guard extensively — where the hook goes inside the opponent's leg rather than outside — entering from there into what he called the Kiss of the

Dragon, a position where he gets underneath the opponent's legs entirely. From Kiss of the Dragon, back takes and sweeps are immediately available.

His Passing Game: Floating and the Leg Drag

Mendes' guard passing style was described as floating — a low, controlled approach where he denied grips and maintained a specific body position that prevented opponents from establishing hooks or frames. He kept his knees together in a low squat position while working around the outside of his opponent's guard.

The leg drag — dragging the opponent's leg across your own hip and then driving weight through to pass — became one of the most popular techniques in modern grappling largely because of Mendes' success with it.

The Street Reality

Mendes' game is heavily gi-based in its specifics. What transfers completely is the philosophy. Economy of motion matters enormously in a real fight. A person who moves efficiently and wastes nothing will outlast a person burning energy with imprecise technique — regardless of which specific moves either person uses.

What You Can Steal

Eliminate waste from your movement. Pick one position and spend one training session moving in it as slowly and precisely as possible. Notice every unnecessary movement, every grip that isn't doing anything. Eliminating those wastes makes everything more efficient.

Learn the leg drag as a passing concept. Even a basic understanding of the principle — pin the leg, kill the hip, drive through — gives you a passing option that works against a wide range of guards.

Deny grips before they form. The moment you let someone hook your legs or grip your ankles, passing becomes a fight. Moving before those grips form makes passing much easier.

Key Drills

De La Riva Control and Sweep — From De La Riva guard, practice getting the DLR hook deep and using it to control your partner's lead leg. Work sweeps in both directions until you can feel which direction their weight is going and respond accordingly.

Leg Drag Entry — From a standing passing position, have your partner play De La Riva guard. Practice attacking the non-DLR leg, dragging it across your hip, and pinning it there. Hold that position for three seconds before completing the pass.

Precision Passing Round — During rolling, give yourself one rule: you are not allowed to use strength to pass. If you feel yourself muscling a pass, stop and reset. This forces you to find the precise angle and timing that makes the pass work without force.

Game Plan 7: Gordon Ryan

The King — Engineering Matches Before They Start

Who He Is and Why He Matters

Gordon Ryan is the most dominant no-gi grappler in the history of the sport. He has won ADCC multiple times, including double gold in the absolute and his weight class. He has gone undefeated in professional competition since 2018. He has submitted some of the best grapplers on earth — repeatedly, reliably, often in exactly the way they knew was coming.

What Ryan brought to grappling is a complete, documented, teachable engineering approach to winning matches. He doesn't just compete. He engineers victories.

The Core Philosophy: Inevitability Over Improvisation

Ryan's philosophy is built around making outcomes inevitable before the match starts — through preparation, strategic planning, and the removal of as much uncertainty as possible from every exchange. He does not rely on improvisation when things get chaotic. He relies on having already mapped the chaos.

He studies opponents. He identifies their strongest positions and removes those positions from the available options. By the time he steps on the mat, the match is, in his mind, already decided.

His Signature System: The Back and the Strangle

Why Back Control Is the Destination

Ryan treats back control as the ultimate destination in the positional hierarchy — the position where the person being controlled has the fewest options and the controller has the most. He controls both hips and shoulders simultaneously. His body triangle removes hip mobility. His hand fighting system — the straight jacket — addresses every grip the opponent might use to defend.

The Straight Jacket Strangle System

The straight jacket is a methodical approach to breaking defensive grips and establishing the rear naked choke against a fully resisting opponent. Rather than simply pulling the opponent's hands away, Ryan's system identifies specific grip sequences that create dilemmas. The opponent is forced to choose between defending two threats simultaneously. Defending either one gives up the other.

Pressure Passing

Ryan's guard passing style is often described as floating — methodical movement around the guard that denies the bottom player grips and constantly threatens to establish a dominant passing angle. He does not fight through guards. He moves around them until the angle for the pass is unavoidable.

The Engineering Mindset in Practice

Ryan's preparation for specific opponents is documented in his competition breakdowns. He identifies patterns, builds a match plan around funneling the match toward vulnerabilities and away from the opponent's strengths. The match is not a mystery he solves in real time. It is a problem he solved in training weeks before.

Training Philosophy: Intentionality Above All

Ryan is consistently vocal about intentional training. He has said explicitly that he will not count a technique or position as part of his game until he has hit it in competition. He trains with specific goals for each session. He drills sequences until they are automatic rather than drilling techniques in isolation.

The Street Reality

Back control is the single most dominant position in any grappling context — sport, self-defense, or otherwise. A person on your back with hooks in and arms working toward your neck is in a position that very few people can escape from without training specifically for it.

The engineering mindset applies everywhere. A person who has specifically prepared for likely threat scenarios and drilled responses until they are automatic is far better prepared than one who expects to improvise.

What You Can Steal

Make back control your primary goal. Pick a training period where every time you achieve a dominant position, you attempt to transition to back control. Make it an obsession.

Create dilemmas, not direct attacks. When you attack, ask yourself: what does my opponent's most natural defense give me? If defending the submission they see coming gives you something else, you have a dilemma attack.

Prepare specifically, not generally. Before your next competition, identify one specific pattern in your likely opponent's game and build one specific counter to that pattern.

Key Drills

Back Control Retention — From back control with both hooks in, have your partner attempt to escape using their most natural method. Your only job is to maintain both hooks, control their hips and shoulders, and prevent them from turning into you. Do not attempt strangles. Pure retention.

Strangle Dilemma Drill — From back control, establish a seatbelt grip. Have your partner grab your choking arm with both hands to defend. Practice the two-option dilemma: if they grab with a two-on-one, enter the arm triangle from the free arm side. If they use a single defensive grip, finish the rear naked choke.

Intentional Position Drilling — For one full training session, pick one specific position you want to improve. Every time you roll, work to get there. If you don't get there, reset. Every session has a specific goal, not a general intention to get better.

Game Plan 8: Garry Tonon

The Lion Killer — Submission Hunting as a Complete Lifestyle

Who He Is and Why He Matters

Where Gordon Ryan engineers matches with surgical precision, Garry Tonon throws himself into the fire and trusts his technique to survive. Tonon is an ADCC medalist, five-time EBI champion, and founding member of the Danaher Death Squad. He was one of the primary athletes through whom Danaher's leg lock system was road-tested in high-level competition.

What makes Tonon genuinely distinct is his specific answer to a question every submission grappler faces: when your first attack doesn't work, what do you do? Most grapplers disengage, reset, and attack again. Tonon transitions to the next attack without leaving the exchange.

The Core Philosophy: The Fastest Path to the Submission

Tonon asks one question when approaching any grappling situation: what is the fastest path to a submission from here? Not the safest path. The fastest path.

"Why would I spend 15 minutes trying to pass someone's guard if the legs are right there for me to submit?"

The critical nuance: this approach only works because Tonon's submission defense is exceptional. He can afford to enter risky positions because he trusts his ability to survive and escape if things go wrong. The philosophy requires both a willingness to attack and an equally developed ability to defend.

His Signature System: Transitions Between Attacks

The Leg Lock System

Tonon's primary submission system is built around *ashi garami* — the leg entanglement position from which heel hooks, kneebars, and ankle locks all originate. He enters *ashi garami* from everywhere: standing, from the guard, from scrambles, and through the *Imanari* roll — a rolling movement from standing that lands him directly in leg entanglement.

The Back Take Connection

Tonon's most important strategic concept is the connection between leg locks and back takes. When an opponent defends a leg lock by rolling away, they often expose their back. Tonon drills this specific transition until the defense against his leg lock automatically delivers the back position.

The Scramble Advantage

Tonon specifically seeks scrambles — chaotic transitional moments where both grapplers are moving and neither has established control. He has drilled scramble situations so specifically that he is more dangerous in chaos than in stable positions.

The Street Reality

What transfers directly is the scramble training and the transition mentality. In a real ground situation, things will get chaotic. The grappler who has drilled chaotic positions handles real-world chaos better than one who has only drilled technique from cooperative starting positions.

Leg locks in general also deserve mention for self-defense. A heel hook or kneebar on a resisting attacker can end the confrontation immediately. They work regardless of size difference and require less strength than upper body submissions to apply.

What You Can Steal

Know what your defense gives up. For every submission you attempt, ask: when my opponent defends this, what position does that create? Drill that transition specifically.

Train the scramble deliberately. Most grapplers avoid scrambles because they feel out of control. Spend time entering scrambles on purpose and identifying the submission entries that arise from them.

Develop your submission defense alongside your submission offense. Tonon's aggressive attacking game works because he trusts his defense. If you want to attack more aggressively from risky positions, you need to drill escaping those positions equally hard.

Key Drills

Ashi Garami Transition Chain — From inside ashi garami, have your partner defend the heel hook by rolling toward the leg. Practice the transition to outside heel hook position as they roll. When they defend the outside heel hook by straightening the leg, practice the kneebar entry. Drill this three-position chain until the transitions happen automatically.

Imanari Roll Entry — From a standing position with both grapplers upright, practice the Imanari roll entry to ashi garami. Start slowly, focusing on the specific body mechanics. Build speed only after the mechanics are solid.

Scramble Submission Drill — Start from a deliberately unstable position — both grapplers on their knees, neither in control. Begin moving and scrambling on a signal. The only goal is to find and attempt one submission entry from the scramble before it stabilizes. Reset and repeat.

Game Plan 9: Mikey Musumeci

The Chess Player — Winning Matches Before They Start

Who He Is and Why He Matters

Mikey Musumeci is a five-time IBJJF black belt world champion and ONE Championship submission grappling champion. His coaches describe him as a chess player who decides on his winning move before the match begins — and then engineers the board until that move becomes available.

Most competitors react to what their opponent does and try to outperform them in the moment. Musumeci decides what he wants to hit before the match starts and baits his opponent into the exact reaction that makes it available.

The Core Philosophy: Predetermine the Win

Musumeci has been direct about this approach in interviews. His goal when competing is to work on a specific position and hit a specific submission. He won't count it as fully legitimate in his game until he has performed it successfully in competition.

His matches look deceptively simple. He hits submissions from positions that seem like they should be well-defended. The reason they aren't is that his opponents are defending what they see — the obvious attack — while Musumeci is getting what the defense of that attack gives him.

His Guard System: Built for Back Takes Above Everything Else

The Berimbolo System

Musumeci is the most decorated berimbolo practitioner in the history of competition. His berimbolo system is built in layers — the basic entry, then the entire response tree from there. Every defense has a specific counter that leads back to the back take. He has mapped every common response and has a prepared answer for each one.

The K Guard and Matrix System

For no-gi and against opponents who have developed strong berimbolo defenses, Musumeci uses the K guard — a position where he controls one of the opponent's legs from below with his knee, creating immediate leg attack entries and back take opportunities without requiring gi grips.

The Baiting Strategy in Practice

Musumeci builds specific guard configurations that force predictable reactions. Then he executes the technique that reaction opens. He will establish a guard position that presents an obvious passing lane. When the opponent tries to take that lane, the passing attempt opens the berimbolo entry he already set up. The pass attempt was the trap.

The Street Reality

What transfers completely is the chess player approach. The person who has a predetermined plan and stays within it performs better under stress than the person improvising. Knowing exactly what you want to do, having drilled that specific thing hundreds of times, and being patient enough to engineer the situation until it is available — these skills apply regardless of context.

What You Can Steal

Pick one submission and build backward from it. Identify the submission you most want to add to your game. Work backward: what position do you need to be in? What guard leads there? What reaction from your opponent opens the entry? Drill that specific chain.

Use your first attack to set up your second. Your initial attack should not be your best attack. It should be designed to produce a specific defensive reaction that opens your best attack. If you are doing this deliberately, you are baiting.

Never let your guard be passed. Musumeci's zero guard passes at worlds is a trainable result. Aggressive offensive pressure from the bottom combined with well-drilled guard retention creates an opponent who must work constantly just to stay even.

Key Drills

Berimbolo Response Tree — From De La Riva guard or inverted position, drill the berimbolo entry. When your partner defends by turning in, practice the counter to that defense. When they defend by posting, practice that counter. Build the three-response tree until each branch is automatic.

Baiting Drill — From any guard position, set up an obvious attack — an armbar entry, a sweep setup — but hold it. Watch your partner's defensive reaction. The moment they react, execute the back take or submission that their reaction opened.

Guard Retention Challenge — For one full rolling session, give yourself one rule: your guard cannot be passed. Accept sweeps and submissions against you, but if your guard is passed, reset. This forces you to develop the active retention habits that underpin Musumeci's guard game.

Game Plan 10: John Danaher

The Professor — Organizing Grappling as a Science

Who He Is and Why He Matters

John Danaher has never won a tournament. He competed briefly in his early training years before a knee injury effectively ended his mat career. By the sport's conventional measures, he is not a competitor at all.

He is also, by wide consensus, the most influential person in the history of no-gi submission grappling. His athletes — Gordon Ryan, Garry Tonon, Craig Jones, Georges St-Pierre — became dominant not because they were born with extraordinary gifts but because they were trained with extraordinary clarity.

The Core Philosophy: The Sentence Matters More Than the Period

"The lock is just the full stop at the end of a sentence — it's the sentence that counts, and that sentence is control."

Most grapplers are obsessed with submissions. Danaher is obsessed with the sequence of positions that make submissions inevitable. He has articulated a four-step sequence: get the opponent to the ground; get past their legs; work through the positional hierarchy; apply the submission when control is complete.

The Positional Hierarchy: His Map of the Mat

Danaher teaches a clear hierarchy of dominant positions. At the top sits back control — the position where the controller is behind the opponent, both hooks in, with full access to the neck. This is the destination his entire system points toward. Below back control sits mount, then side control and knee on belly, then the various stages of guard passing.

Understanding this hierarchy changes how you think about every position. You are not just trying to win from wherever you are. You are always trying to move one step up the hierarchy toward the back.

The New Wave Escape Philosophy

Traditional jiu-jitsu teaches escaping bad positions back to a neutral position — typically guard. Danaher saw this as wasteful. The energy required to escape any pin back to guard is

approximately the same as the energy required to escape that pin directly into a submission attempt. If the energy cost is the same, why settle for neutral when you can reach dominant?

This gave birth to the New Wave approach — teaching athletes to escape bad positions directly into submission attacks rather than returning to neutral.

The Leg Lock Revolution

Before Danaher, leg locks existed in grappling but were treated as secondary. His question was simple: why would you ignore half the body? He built a complete leg lock system with the same structural rigor applied to his back control and escape systems — entries organized by position, control hierarchies within leg entanglements, finishing mechanics for every major submission.

How He Coaches: Principles Over Techniques

Danaher does not teach techniques first. He teaches principles — the underlying logic that makes techniques work — and then shows techniques as expressions of those principles. Grapplers who understand principles can adapt when those techniques don't work as expected. Grapplers who only know techniques are lost.

The Street Reality

Danaher's framework is deeply applicable to real situations. The positional hierarchy is not a sport construct — it is a description of how human bodies interact on the ground, and it holds in any context. His New Wave escape philosophy is particularly valuable: escape bad positions into counter-attacks rather than simply creating space and returning to neutral.

What You Can Steal

Think in sentences, not periods. Before your next training session, describe your game plan as a sequence rather than a list of submissions. The sentence is the game.

Learn the positional hierarchy explicitly. When you achieve a dominant position, immediately ask: what is the next step up the hierarchy from here?

Escape into attacks, not neutral. Next time you are stuck under mount or side control, instead of working to recover guard, look for the submission that the top person's pin creates.

Key Drills

Hierarchy Advancement Drill — From any starting position, give yourself one goal: advance one level up the positional hierarchy. From side control, go to mount. From mount, go to back control. Do not attempt submissions until you have advanced.

New Wave Escape Practice — From bottom mount, have your partner apply moderate pressure. Instead of working the standard elbow escape to guard, look for the leg lock or arm attack that the mount position creates.

Principles Rolling — During one rolling session per week, focus on applying one Danaher principle only. Single-principle focus builds understanding that random technique drilling does not.

Game Plan 11: Demian Maia

The Backpack — Turning Every Position Into the Back

Who He Is and Why He Matters

Demian Maia is the greatest BJJ practitioner in the history of MMA. He is an ADCC champion and multiple-time IBJJF world champion who submitted some of the best fighters in the world with rear naked chokes while fighting people who had specifically trained to stop him.

By the midpoint of his UFC career, everyone Maia faced knew he wanted the back. Their entire game plan was to not give it to him. He got there anyway, because his path to the back was not one technique. It was an entire system built around the principle that every position contains a path to the back if you know where to look.

The Core Philosophy: Everything Leads to the Back

Maia didn't win because he was athletic or fast or powerful. He won because he knew the back system better than anyone he faced, and because he was patient enough to walk every exchange down that path no matter how long it took.

This single-minded focus is something most grapplers never develop. They want to be good at everything. Maia chose a destination and built every road toward it.

His Path to the Back From Everywhere

From Turtle Position

Maia's most distinctive path is from turtle position. Most grapplers treat turtle as a problem: how do I flatten this person out? Maia treats turtle as an opportunity. He developed a comprehensive system for breaking down the turtle from every angle — front, side, and rear — and converting each breakdown into back control.

His key insight about turtle: patience and timing beat force. He does not try to muscle people out of their turtle. He waits for them to move. Movement creates openings.

From Half Guard Top

Rather than always passing to side control from top half guard, Maia frequently converted half guard passing attempts into back takes. When the bottom person tried to use their half guard to prevent the pass by coming to their side, Maia recognized that side-facing position as back exposure and immediately worked to establish hooks.

From Guard Passing

Maia used the process of passing guard itself as a back-take opportunity. Any rotation the bottom player made to prevent the pass — any movement that turned their hips away from him — was a potential back take entry. He would abandon a guard pass mid-sequence if back exposure appeared, because the back was always more valuable than the pass.

From Side Control

When opponents turned to their knees to escape from bottom side control — one of the most common escape attempts — Maia was already transitioning to follow them rather than fighting the escape. By the time they completed their turn, he had hooks in and was working for the rear naked choke.

The Street Reality

Maia's system is among the most directly applicable on this list for real-world situations. The back is the most dominant position in any fighting context. The rear naked choke ends confrontations quickly and decisively. And his paths to the back — from turtle, from half guard, from side control — all arise from positions that commonly occur in real ground situations.

His patience principle also transfers directly. In a real situation, forcing the ground game creates explosions of resistance that can go wrong. Waiting for the movement and following it creates controlled advancement with much less energy and risk.

What You Can Steal

Pick one position and find the back take in it. Take any position you commonly find yourself in and spend one training cycle identifying every back take available from it. Drill those specifically.

Stop treating turtle as a stuck position. When your opponent is in turtle, stop thinking about how to get them flat. Start thinking about which direction they will move and what back take that movement creates.

Follow movement rather than force it. When an opponent escapes or turns, follow the movement because the movement is showing you the back take path.

Key Drills

Turtle to Back Take Drill — Have your partner assume a solid turtle position. Practice breaking it down from three angles — the side, the front, and behind. At each angle, identify the back take that their movement creates and execute it. Reset each time.

Half Guard Back Take Conversion — From top half guard, begin passing normally. Have your partner resist by turning to their side to prevent the pass. The moment they turn, abandon the pass and follow their hip rotation to establish a back hook.

Back Retention from All Positions — Once you establish back control from any drill, have your partner immediately attempt to escape. Your job is to maintain at least one hook and keep working for the strangle. Do not release the back just because the escape attempt begins.

Game Plan 12: Shinya Aoki

Tobikan Judan — The Grand Master of Flying Submissions

Who He Is and Why He Matters

Shinya Aoki has 47 career wins. Thirty of them are submissions. He has two gogoplata victories on his record — a submission so rare that most grapplers never attempt it in competition, let alone land it. He submitted people with heel hooks in MMA before most of his opponents knew what a heel hook was. His nickname — Tobikan Judan, Grand Master of Flying Submissions — was given to him because he would leap from standing directly into arm locks and triangle chokes.

The Core Philosophy: Forward Pressure and Unpredictability as Weapons

Aoki's philosophy is built on two principles. The first is constant forward pressure. He does not disengage. He does not back up to reset. He moves forward constantly, accepts uncomfortable positions as part of the path, and trusts his flexibility and technical range to find submissions from wherever he ends up.

The second is unpredictability through technical breadth. Most grapplers have a narrow technical vocabulary at elite level. Aoki is unusually broad. He submits people with gogoplatas, flying armbars, heel hooks, d'arce chokes, arm triangles, and rear naked chokes. His opponents cannot gameplan specifically around stopping one submission family because too many families are represented.

His Signature Techniques and How They Work

Flying Submissions From the Clinch

Aoki's ability to enter submissions directly from the standing clinch without taking the fight to the ground first was genuinely novel when he began using them. His flying triangle — leaping to wrap his legs around an opponent's head and arm from the clinch — and his flying armbar entries were and remain rare at high level.

These techniques work for Aoki specifically because of his physical build — slim, flexible, with long limbs — and his judo background, which gave him comfort in the standing clinch that most BJJ practitioners don't develop.

The Rubber Guard in MMA

Aoki was one of the very few MMA fighters who successfully used Eddie Bravo's rubber guard system in competition. His flexibility made Mission Control accessible in a way it simply is not for most fighters. From Mission Control in MMA, his free arm could strike an opponent whose posture and arm were controlled — creating genuine dilemmas.

The Gogoplata

Aoki's gogoplata victories illustrate his broader philosophy perfectly. The gogoplata is rarely seen in competition because most practitioners do not drill it and do not believe it is practical at high levels. Aoki drilled it, believed in it, and submitted multiple opponents with it. The lesson: techniques that most people consider impractical become practical when one person commits to drilling them seriously.

Leg Locks Before the Revolution

Aoki was using heel hooks aggressively in MMA before the Danaher-era leg lock revolution made them mainstream. He caught Eddie Alvarez in a heel hook by intercepting a body kick mid-flight and using the momentum to get the fight to the ground and the leg in position.

The Street Reality

Aoki's game has strong real-world applicability precisely because of its breadth and its clinch-based entries. Real confrontations frequently involve clinch exchanges before going to the ground. His ability to enter submissions directly from the clinch is a genuinely useful skill.

His forward pressure philosophy also transfers well. The person who keeps moving forward while the other person is reactive has a significant tactical advantage in any context.

What You Can Steal

Add one unusual technique to your game. Pick something you have never drilled and spend two months on it specifically. Aoki's breadth was built one technique at a time. You don't need twenty unusual techniques. You need enough that opponents cannot fully prepare for you.

Stop disengaging. In your next training session, commit to not breaking contact and resetting when an exchange gets uncomfortable. Stay in it. Look for what the uncomfortable position offers.

Drill clinch-based submissions. Even basic awareness of the flying triangle entry or the arm drag to flying armbar adds a dimension most training partners will not be prepared for.

Key Drills

Clinch Submission Entry — From a standing clinch with light resistance, practice the entries for the flying triangle — using your partner's forward pressure to jump and wrap your legs around their head and arm. Start with cooperative resistance, build to competitive.

Rubber Guard Posture Control — From closed guard, practice establishing Mission Control against progressively increasing resistance. Hold the position for ten seconds before attempting any submission. Comfort in the position comes before submissions from the position.

Submission Breadth Drilling — Once per week, drill a submission you almost never use. Not to add it to your competition game immediately, but to build technical awareness and options. Over a year, this habit builds the breadth that makes you harder to prepare for.

Game Plan 13: Craig Jones

The Leg Lock Revolutionary Who Made Passing a Weapon Too

Who He Is and Why He Matters

Craig Jones appeared at ADCC 2017 as a relative unknown and submitted his way to the final using leg locks. He nearly broke Gordon Ryan's arm in overtime. Since then he has won two ADCC silver medals, founded B-Team Jiu-Jitsu in Austin, and launched the Craig Jones Invitational, the highest-paying grappling tournament in the world.

What makes Jones genuinely distinct is that he did not just develop a leg lock system. He developed a complete game where his leg locks and his guard passing work together — each one setting up the other, each one creating threats that make the other harder to defend.

The Core Philosophy: Use Leg Threats to Create Passing Opportunities

When an opponent is afraid of leg entanglements, they do specific things. They keep their legs close together, avoid open guard positions, and straighten their legs to prevent ashi garami entries. Every one of these defensive adjustments makes their guard easier to pass. By establishing credible leg lock threats early, Jones forces opponents into a defensive posture that works against their guard.

His Leg Lock System: Z-Guard and Half Guard Entries

Jones is particularly known for his leg lock entries from Z-guard — the position where the bottom player uses a knee shield in half guard. Most top players treat Z-guard as a passing problem. Jones recognized it as a leg lock entry. From a Z-guard position on top, Jones enters ashi garami by attacking the exposed leg — the leg not protected by the knee shield.

The 50/50 System

Jones also developed an extensive 50/50 game — the entanglement where both grapplers have each other's legs wrapped simultaneously. Where many grapplers treat 50/50 as a stalemate, Jones built an attack-focused system that uses specific grip battles and weight shifts to gain dominant leg position and finish heel hooks and kneebars.

His Passing Game: Pressure Through Fatigue

Jones's guard passing philosophy is built around scoring through fatigue. He does not try to pass quickly. He applies continuous, grinding pressure that forces the bottom player to work constantly just to prevent the pass — and when they tire from that work, the pass becomes available.

His approach to avoiding leg entanglements while passing is also notable. He keeps his knees together, controls distance carefully, and works around the edges of dangerous positions rather than through them.

The Street Reality

Jones's leg lock system has direct real-world value. His Z-guard and half guard entries are available from positions that naturally occur in ground confrontations. The heel hook specifically is effective in real situations — it works regardless of size differential and creates immediate compliance or serious injury.

What You Can Steal

Treat your Z-guard as a leg lock entry, not just a defensive position. If you play Z-guard or knee shield in half guard, you are already in the starting position for Jones's ashi garami entries.

Use leg lock threats to change how opponents move. Attempt leg entanglements early — not necessarily to finish, but to establish that the threat is real. Notice how your partner's movement changes afterward.

Make your passing safe before making it aggressive. Jones's passing avoids leg entanglements deliberately. Before worrying about executing passes quickly, drill passing in a way that never puts your legs in dangerous positions.

Key Drills

Z-Guard Leg Lock Entry — From top half guard against a Z-guard (knee shield), practice identifying the exposed leg and entering ashi garami directly. Have your partner hold the Z-guard firmly. Your job is to find the leg lock entry without having to fight through the knee shield.

Stack Pass Grinding — From a standing passing position, enter the stack, get your partner's hips elevated, and hold the position for thirty seconds against their escape attempts. Do not try to complete the pass. Just hold the stack. Then attempt the pass when their resistance decreases.

50/50 Attack Drill — From 50/50 with both grapplers' legs intertwined, practice the grip battle for inside heel hook position. Have your partner actively fight for the same position. Drill winning the inside position from neutral 50/50 specifically.

Game Plan 14: Andre Galvao

The Most Decorated ADCC Champion — Wrestling Meets Jiu-Jitsu

Who He Is and Why He Matters

Andre Galvao has won ADCC six times, including four consecutive Superfight championship victories. He has ten IBJJF world titles. He is the head coach of Atos Jiu-Jitsu, which has produced multiple world champions across gi and no-gi.

What makes Galvao distinct from every other grappler on this list is where his game starts. Almost everyone else here built their approach primarily around ground work. Galvao built his around takedowns and the integration of wrestling into BJJ — and became one of the best takedown artists the sport has produced.

The Core Philosophy: Control the Fight From the First Second

Galvao's philosophy is built around controlling where the fight happens and how it starts. By controlling the takedown, he controlled the starting position on the ground. A takedown that lands in side control is a completely different situation than pulling guard and starting from the bottom. Galvao consistently started on top, in position, already threatening.

His Takedown System: Wrestling for Submission Grappling

Galvao consistently emphasizes that his takedown system is not standard wrestling. It is wrestling specifically adapted for BJJ and submission grappling, where the submission counters available to the bottom player change everything about how takedowns must be finished.

The Single Leg — Adapted for BJJ

A single leg takedown in wrestling is finished by lifting and controlling the leg. In BJJ and submission grappling, that finishing position exposes you to guillotine chokes, arm drags, and guard pulls. Galvao's single leg system addresses every one of these counters specifically — where to place your head to avoid the guillotine, how to maintain connection through a guard pull, how to finish in a position that immediately gives you top control.

The Double Leg — With Counter Defense Built In

His double leg teaching similarly integrates submission defense into the finishing mechanics. The positioning of his head relative to the guillotine threat, the angle of his hips relative to potential arm drags — these details are not afterthoughts. They are built into the technique from the beginning.

Arm Drag to Takedown

Galvao also uses the arm drag primarily as a takedown setup rather than a back take. From the arm drag, he enters inside single leg position and finishes the takedown. This connects his takedown game to jiu-jitsu clinch work that most practitioners already have some familiarity with.

His Passing Game: The Stack Pass and Relentless Pressure

Galvao's guard passing style is built around pressure and the stack pass — elevating the opponent's hips and legs over their head, compromising their base and mobility, then driving through to side control.

He combines the stack with leg drags — dragging the opponent's leg across his hip, which pins their hip mobility and creates the same immobilizing effect from a different angle. His passing style is described consistently as relentless. He does not take breaks. He applies continuous pressure and looks for the pass to become available through the accumulation of that pressure.

The Street Reality

Galvao's game has perhaps the strongest real-world application of anyone on this list. The ability to control whether a confrontation goes to the ground — and to go there on your terms — is enormously valuable in real situations. A trained BJJ practitioner who can also execute a reliable takedown is in a fundamentally different position than one who can only work from the bottom after being taken down.

His wrestling-for-BJJ approach is directly applicable. Real confrontations involve clinches, grabs, and attempts to get to the ground. A person who has drilled takedowns with submission defense built in is better prepared than one who has only drilled takedowns in a wrestling context.

What You Can Steal

Learn at least one takedown built for BJJ. Not a wrestling takedown, but a takedown that has the guillotine defense and guard pull counter built into its mechanics. Even one well-drilled takedown changes your entire standing game.

Start more rolls from the top. If you always pull guard, you are practicing being on the bottom. Spend training time specifically practicing getting to the top — through takedowns, through winning position from the clinch.

Stack and drag before you try to pass. Before attempting any guard pass, practice elevating your opponent's hips with a stack or dragging their leg across your hip first. These movements immobilize before the pass and make every subsequent pass easier.

Key Drills

Single Leg with Guillotine Defense — Drill the single leg takedown specifically from the position where your opponent has a guillotine grip. Practice the head position adjustment that removes the guillotine threat while maintaining the single leg. This is the BJJ-specific detail that makes Galvao's single leg system different from a standard wrestling single.

Stack and Pass — From a top passing position, drill entering the stack — elevating the opponent's hips and legs — holding it for five seconds against resistance, then completing the pass to side control. The pause after the stack builds the habit of establishing immobilization before passing.

Takedown to Top Game Combination — Drill completing a takedown and immediately transitioning to your preferred passing entry. Most people drill takedowns and ground work separately. Galvao's game works because the transition between them is seamless. Drilling the combination builds that seamlessness.

Closing Thoughts

Fourteen grapplers. Fourteen different answers to the same question: how do you dominate?

Helio said leverage. Rickson said feel. Marcelo said attack from the bottom. BJ Penn said fluidity. Eddie Bravo said solve the posture problem structurally. Rafael Mendes said precision. Gordon Ryan said engineer the match. Garry Tonon said find the fastest path. Mikey Musumeci said predetermine the outcome. John Danaher said build the sentence. Demian Maia said follow everything to the back. Shinya Aoki said stay forward and stay wide. Craig Jones said let your leg locks open your passes. Andre Galvao said control where the fight starts.

None of them are wrong. None of them are the only answer.

The point of studying multiple approaches is not to copy one. It is to understand what each person figured out and why it worked — and then build your own game with that knowledge behind it.

Go build yours.