



► *Jacob Spangler (standing), who works in AAA Loading at Park 48, during a Jiu jitsu class.*

# A gentle art

## Jacob Spangler makes a change and takes on martial arts

**A** year into his thirties and Jacob Spangler made an unpleasant discovery—his once mighty metabolism, the devourer of countless hamburgers and pizzas, was starting to become a shell of its former self.

It was time to make a change.

"I was feeling a little out of shape," said Jacob, who works in AAA Loading in Building A at Park 48. "I wanted to find some kind of hobby to get back into shape. I'm not much of a sports guy, so I didn't want to play on a softball team or something like that."

Instead, he chose an activity that seemed totally out of character for someone as soft-spoken and laid-back as Jacob—martial arts.

That was almost nine years ago.

Not only has he improved his physical health through martial arts—specifically Japanese JiuJitsu—Jacob has also found a way of life and a community that has become an important part of who he is. And now that he is a second-degree black belt, Jacob is in a position to give back to that community. In 2021, he became an instructor at the same gym he has called home for nearly a decade.

### The "gentle art"

June 23, 2013, was the first time Jacob set foot in his martial arts gym—an act that took some building up to on his part.

*"Jiu jitsu is way more hands-on. Those guys were sweating and throwing each other on the ground. That kind of piqued my interest right there."*

— Jacob Spangler, AAA Loading at Park 48

"At first, I drove past the place two or three times and always made up some excuse not to go in—'I'll go tomorrow,'" said Jacob, a Bloomington native and graduate of Bloomington High School South. "Then, after finally getting up the nerve to go in there, I saw all these people with their high skill levels and was kind of overwhelmed by it. I thought, 'I'll never be like that.'"

Up to that point, most of what he knew about martial arts came from what Jacob had seen in movies. As a result, he initially began training in karate, one of the most well-known of the martial arts in the United States. Within a couple of months, though, he realized that this discipline—with its emphasis on "katas" (detailed patterns of movement sort of like tai chi)—was not going to give him the type of physical challenge he was seeking.

He didn't have to look far to see what, to him, was a much more compelling alternative. A Japanese JiuJitsu class was also held in the same gym.

"It looked a lot more intense and interesting," Jacob said. "JiuJitsu is way more hands-on. Those guys were sweating and throwing each other on the ground. That kind of piqued my interest right there."

JiuJitsu, which translates into English as "gentle art," is a defensive fighting discipline, with some attack elements as well. Participants learn throws, strikes, kicks, and techniques for disarming assailants who have sticks, knives, or guns. Judo, a branch of JiuJitsu, is contested in the Summer Olympic Games.

So, after three months of karate, Jacob told his teacher he wanted to switch to the JiuJitsu class.

### Learning to fall

JiuJitsu sank its hooks into Jacob pretty quickly. His initial apprehension about trying the new discipline was replaced by a desire to get better.

"I was nervous that those guys were going to twist me into a pretzel or whatever it is they did," he said. "I really had no idea what they were going to do, but that was my biggest fear—that I was immediately going

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to get my butt kicked and then go crawling out of it, then that would be the end of that. But my teacher told me that we would just take things slowly and not really ramp up into anything too extreme until I got used to it and comfortable."

Jacob realized that if he wanted to be able to fully enjoy JiuJitsu, he was going to have to make some changes in his life outside of the gym. At his coaches' urging, he began swimming, running, and lifting some weights several times a week. He also overhauled his diet.

As his overall fitness improved, Jacob began to hold his own on the mat. He also experienced a breakthrough that allowed him to take his skillset to the next level.

"When I got over the fear of injury—I mean, there's always a fear of injury—not to sound arrogant or anything like that—but after I learned how to fall, that's when I really started to enjoy JiuJitsu," Jacob said.

Other than the occasional sprained wrist and black eye (usually accidental or self-inflicted), he has remained injury-free over the last nine years.

"I've never had my heart torn from my chest or anything like that," Jacob said, with a laugh.

### "Give it a try"

Beginning practitioners of JiuJitsu start with a white belt. Every six months they can take a test to earn the next color of belt. For each level they are given a syllabus with certain curriculum—strikes, throws, sweeps, takedowns, etc. that must be perfected—from both their left and right sides. The tests take place in front of a council of grand masters from different gyms in central Indiana.

The ultimate goal for many is to earn a black belt. But your progression doesn't have to end there. There



are additional degrees of black belt which can each take a couple of years to achieve. Individuals who reach second-degree black belt status are qualified to become JiuJitsu instructors.

Initially, Jacob's plan was to stop testing after receiving his black belt. He'd still keep training, but wouldn't be continually pushing to reach that next level.

His teacher had other thoughts, though. In Jacob, he saw someone who's dedication to the sport and calm, patient demeanor made them an ideal candidate to help spread JiuJitsu to others.

"I think that he saw that I'm not really a butthead about things," Jacob said. "I think he saw that I could get along with people."

With that encouragement, Jacob continued on, earning his second-degree black belt status in 2021—a year later than he had planned as testing sessions were put on hold during the pandemic.

He now serves as his gym's JiuJitsu instructor one day a week (his teacher handles the other day the gym offers JiuJitsu classes).

The transition from student to teacher was a smooth one for Jacob.

*"My teacher says this—one of the biggest challenges is walking through the door the first time. So, what I always tell people is to just come on in and give it a try."*

*— Jacob Spangler*

"As a first-degree black belt you kind of get used to helping your fellow students," he explained. "You see somebody trying something and you go over there and help them. And I already knew all of the people in the class, so it wasn't like I was stepping into a class full of strangers and trying to teach them. It's a great group of people to work with."

A not-yet-two-year-old son at home, combined with his teaching commitments, means that Jacob doesn't have quite as much free time to devote to his own practice of Jujitsu. But it's a sacrifice he is more than happy to make to share the sport he loves with others.

"Jujitsu has given me the desire to give every other aspect of my life 100% and not slack in my life goals," Jacob said. "It's changed my life for the better, so if I can help someone else with it, that's good too. It is great for me to see people enjoy it and come back. Everyone is welcome. We have people of all ages and genders."

"My teacher says this—one of the biggest challenges is walking through the door the first time. So, what I always tell people is to just come on in and give it a try."

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▶ Jacob is pictured with his teacher David.