



American Legends: The Life of Chuck Norris

Charles River Editors

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“Whatever luck I had, I made. I was never a natural athlete, but I paid my dues in sweat and concentration and took the time necessary to learn karate and become world champion.” – Chuck Norris

A lot of ink has been spilled covering the lives of history’s most influential figures, but how much of the forest is lost for the trees? In Charles River Editors’ American Legends series, readers can get caught up to speed on the lives of America’s most important men and women in the time it takes to finish a commute, while learning interesting facts long forgotten or never known.

It is not uncommon for a culture to create intricate mythologies around its combat arts champions, but those celebrity fighters who have produced enough tangible accomplishments to merit such adulation are generally limited to a few in each generation. In the second half of the 20th century, boxer Muhammad Ali commanded such reverence, and in the martial arts, two stars have primarily reestablished the entire combat genre for the international movie-going population. In terms of raw popularity, Chuck Norris represents the West.

Whereas Bruce Lee developed a cinematic market by attaching scripts and formulaic plots to his masterful athleticism and martial arts skills that are still considered exotic to many Westerners, American Chuck Norris built his resume with little fanfare or sense of peripheral fantasy by studying and mastering the Korean karate form Tang Soo Do and by dominating in international competition for six consecutive years. Along the way, he came to study numerous related styles as well, attaining advanced black belt degrees in several. In a fighting career of approximately one decade, Norris was considered all but unbeatable for the last 8 years, and once his skills reached their peak, he held every significant major world title available in his weight class, as well as some without any weight distinction. Only after retirement was he redirected into the martial arts film industry set against uniquely American landscapes, where he created iconic characters and memorable combat scenes for several more decades.

In contrast to Lee’s fame, which emerged from a Chinese version of martial arts entertainment laced with tinges of the superhuman, Chuck Norris was karate’s verismo artist, with his characters based on the realities of actual tournament and military experiences. His films capitalized upon the preexisting model of the American international male persona, both as it was and as he and the studios believed that it should be. In this way, Norris followed in the footsteps of Gary Cooper and John Wayne, with the addition of martial arts as a spur to the action. Critics have derided the quality of his acting from the onset of his career, but Norris has always maintained that his interest in acting was for the messages he intended for viewers, and he has never expressed a moment’s care for the pundits. A master of the paramilitary underdog and lone law enforcement officer film, his career would come to an apex with the television series *Walker, Texas Ranger*, a household name among viewers for nearly a decade and one that rivaled such classics as *Gunsmoke* and *Bonanza*.

Not the sort to occupy his time with either second-guessing an issue or playing devil's advocate, Norris has parlayed his fame into a forum from which he speaks openly of his conservative religious, political, and personal principles as an outspoken member of America's far right. As an athletic icon, he is heavily involved with numerous charities, including the cleansing of the American school system of illegal drugs, and in the building of confident, self-assured citizens who are secure enough to resist the urge to respond to daily burdens with violence.

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