

UNTIL NOW, THERE HAS BEEN ONLY ONE TO BEAR THE NAME DARTH...

BY SCOTT CHERNOFF

Since *Star Wars* first exploded out of the screen in 1977, we have known Darth Vader as the singular embodiment of the mysterious Sith Lords, the powerful warriors who wield the dark side of the Force with brutal precision and unwavering loyalty to the highest of all Sith Lords, the evil Emperor himself. To put it simply, there was only one Darth casting an imposing shadow over the *Star Wars* universe, and there sure as heck didn't seem to be room for any more.

But now, that's all about to change. Every bit as frightening and ruthless as the Darth Vader who stormed onto the Rebel Blockade Runner in a cloud of smoke and a hail of blaster fire in *A New Hope*, and—like Vader—bearing his own uniquely sinister visage, Darth Maul leaps into Episode I with both ends of his double-sided lightsaber blazing, ferociously focused on no less than the fall of the Jedi and the destruction of the Republic itself.

Yet lurking behind the striking make-up and sweeping black cloak is an unassuming first-time actor who now finds himself at the precipice preceding the flight from his relatively anonymous status as an International martial arts champion, soaring instead toward what is likely to be global recognition and a permanent place in the prequel pantheon. Just 24 and living in London, where he moved as a toddler from his native Scotland, Ray Park is currently experiencing the calm before the storm.

"All my life, I've always wanted to be in films," Park told the *Insider*. "My background is in martial arts and gymnastics, and before *Star Wars* I was a stunt double. I think I'm pretty lucky, and I want to be ready for everything. I really want to take off, and hopefully I might have a future in the film industry."

Well, he'll certainly have the exposure. In *Star Wars*: Episode I *The Phantom Menace*, Park is featured prominently as the punishingly relentless Darth Maul, one of the most formidable foes the Jedi have yet faced. The role requires not only a menacing and memorable screen presence but also the near-balletic fighting skills of a martial arts expert, both of which Park possesses. He holds a second degree black belt and has racked up competition championships and medals in Great Britain for his Wu Shu style, in addition to his fourth place finish in the 1995 world championships.

"Wu Shu just means 'martial arts' in Chinese," Park explained, "but in the west it's a style. It's a nice sort of art to look at. It's a non-contact sport, very much like gymnastics—you're on the mat and you do a sequence of moves. But it's also very explosive and has lots of leaps and somersaults and high kicks."

He took up the sport when he was just seven years old, inspired in part by his father's idolization of martial arts icon Bruce Lee, a Wu Shu master. "My dad always wanted to do martial arts, but he didn't want to do Karate or Tae Kwon Do, because his hero was Bruce Lee and he liked the way he moved. I always wanted to fly when I was a kid and do all those high kicks like in the movies. When we moved down to London, I saw this guy in the park doing all these kicks and punches and somersaults, and I said to my dad, 'I want to do that.'"

Lee was an early influence, but there are others. "I was really into Bruce Lee movies when I was younger," Park said. "I watched all his movies, and all of Jackie Chan's movies. I like Jackie Chan—I used to have all his movies, still do really. I also like all the Jet Li films. It was all the Wu Shu style."

But it wasn't only the glamour of the movies that attracted Park to the Wu Shu. "It was a way of life for me when I was younger," he said, noting the depth of the philosophy behind the art. "It kept me focused and gave me something to aim for, and just to be a part of something. I believed in it, the way of it. I was going to China or Malaysia all the time and learning Chinese, learning the culture and meeting new people."

Park learned other skills as well, such as kick-boxing, Tae Kwon Do, and even "a bit" of fire-breathing, but he devoted most of his energy to Wu Shu, the style that would ultimately lead him directly into *Star Wars*: Episode I. "There are so many years of training," he explained. "The more you train, the longer it takes to get a certain degree. You don't just get it every year—it could be every five or every 10, so you have to study very hard."

But through all the studies, Park was always aiming for the silver screen. "I really liked doing the martial arts, and I was really into movies all my life," he continued. "But I never actually got the time to go to drama school, because I was training eight to nine hours a day. I had to make it in a different way. I took my sport seriously, so I thought I'd pro-

NEW NAME

RAY PARK EMBODIES THE DARK SIDE AS EPISODE I VILLAIN DARTH MAUL