



Shoot-Wrestling Inside!

Inspired by Kung-Fu

© January 25, 2021, **Franco Vacirca**

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Japan is known as the "Land of the Rising Sun", and along with Okinawa, Thailand, and California, one of my top favorite destinations to train various martial arts. As you may know, Wrestling has a long tradition in this country, and I am not just thinking about Sumo and Jujitsu (Jiu-Jitsu). It has been here before the new Mixed Martial Arts era, and some of the most famous and successful professional wrestlers in the world have been living here. Some of their most successful students have developed new fighting styles, organizations, and events.

Before joining the famous Gracie Garage in Santa Monica, I did not give "Grappling" the same importance that it has today for me. At the end of the 80's I increasingly participated in various (Jeet Kune Do) Grappling seminars with my brother Demetrio, among others with Sifu Larry Hartsell, a direct disciple of Bruce Lee and the absolute expert in Grappling within the Lee-Inosanto JKD lineage.

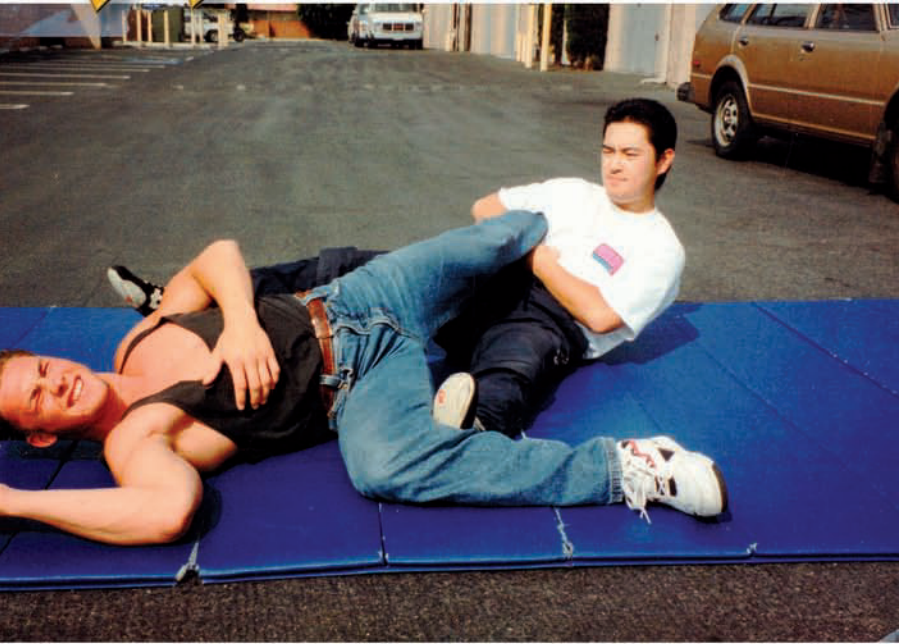
Master Franco Vacirca Yorinaga Nakamura







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The turning point: Shoot Wrestling!

As a young man I was more interested in combat sports, and I also spent a lot of time in the gym working on my cardio and lifting weights. The gym belonged to the older brother of my friend Remo Michel. At that time, I was heavily into Wing Chun Kung-Fu, however, the very first time I entered that gym was when my friend Marcel Landolt, an excellent Light- and Full-Contact Fighter, invited me to get some training with him. I liked the training with Marcel so much that I trained with him for quite a while, which also helped me a lot in Muay Thai Boxing under Ajarn Chai Sirisute.

Remo was not only there for the members behind and in front of the bar, but also had his own vision and business idea, which he would implement quite soon. Since he was also a bouncer, he soon started his own security company (called Safe-Guards, which he later renamed to General Security Services). His professionalism, great commitment and the right vision made him a top security expert and one of the most successful young entrepreneurs in our city. During different phases, I had the great honor to be allowed to impart my knowledge at his side, as a self-defense instructor. That enriched me not only professionally, but also privately very much.

I still remember very well, when we stood outside the gym after our morning strength training and talked about God and the world. Remo had just done a training trip in California and told us about his experience. Suddenly he mentioned the name Yori (Yorinaga) Nakamura, the instructor he had trained Shoot-Wrestling during that training trip.

But who is Yorinaga Nakamura?

Nakamura came to Shoot-Wrestling (today also known as Shooto) in 1984 after training in various martial arts and joining the prestigious "Tiger Gym" under Master Satoru Sayama (the founder of Shooto). Thanks to his ambition and hard training directly with the master himself, Nakamura had already become an instructor at the Tiger Gym just one year later. In June 1986, he participated in the first official Shooto tournament, where he won all four fights in a row and was crowned champion.

In the following years he also trained with Toru Mitachi, at that time the first Jun Fan Jeet Kune Do instructor in Japan. Then, in January 1989, he decided to travel to the United States to train with Dan Inosanto. At the Inosanto Academy in Santa Monica he trained so intensively that he became the Shooto instructor and was also teaching various Jun Fan JKD lessons as well.



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Off to Los Angeles, in search of the Shooto master!

When Remo was in Los Angeles, as mentioned above, I was once again at an intensive training in Madrid, visiting my JKD/Kali-Silat teacher at the time, Jose M. Fraguas. Sifu Chema (as we students called him) was also the editor of the Spanish martial arts magazine "Cinturon Negro", which was later continued by my good friend Alfredo Tucci until today.

When I returned from Madrid and decided to fly back to Los Angeles in Autumn, I remembered the interesting conversation with Remo about Yori Nakamura and Shoot-Wrestling. Sifu Chema had already written several articles about Shoot-Wrestling and Yori Nakamura, so I knew exactly where to look for.

After landing in Los Angeles, I soon found out that Nakamura was not only active at the Inosanto Academy in Santa Monica, but also at the IMB Academy with Richard Bustillo, and so I went to the IMB Academy the very next morning. On this said morning, however, it was not Sifu Yori who was standing in front of us, but one of his younger and talented Shooto assistant trainers. I liked the training so much that I not only signed up for classes at the IMB Academy but also trained at the Inosanto Academy at the same time.

Back home in Zurich, the new learned Shoot-Wrestling arsenal was integrated into our JKD-Grappling training, which caused a bit of discomfort in our existing group. Shoot-Wrestling (or "Grappling" in general) were not equally welcomed by all members. We end up having two different JKD training groups. Some preferred the "Trapping" techniques more, while others found "Grappling" so versatile and exciting that later it helped us to create our very first Gracie Jiu-Jitsu group.

Shoot-Wrestling training methods in our VB concept!

During my intensive training to learn authentic Gracie Jiu-Jitsu under Mestre Pedro Hemetério in Sao Paulo, I used some of the Shooto training methods, to mention the following:

- I realized the true value of great Grappling – fine technique instead of brute strength, and the importance of recognizing Grappling as a "part of the whole".
- Muay Thai plays an important role in Shooto, and to make it work even better, it has been modified to the needs of the Shooters.
- Training methods like the "Lock-Flow" – practicing different submissions in a kind of "natural" chaining of movements, and the "Blind-Training" – practicing the techniques blindfolded, were also applied in our lessons.

Since I had to fly back and forth from Zurich to Sao Paulo or Los Angeles, I, or rather we, needed our own method so that we could practice and teach what we had learned correctly at home. So, you could also say that thanks to Mestre Pedro and Sifu Yori our own "Vacirca Brothers" Gracie Jiu-Jitsu teaching method was born.

The origin of Shoot Wrestling and who is Satoru Sayama!

Shoot-Wrestling is one of the first Mixed Martial Arts (MMA) systems with deep Japanese roots. Like some variants of Kickboxing, Shooto allows punches, kicks and knee strikes against the whole body. However, Shooto also includes throws and ground fighting, with numerous variations of submission techniques such as chokes, arm, leg, and foot locks, etc.

Due to the large and varied amount of fighting techniques, the Shooter must acquire a comprehensive knowledge, so the training is also hard and intense. The punching and kicking part are mainly learned through Thai Boxing. Muay Thai has been modified to allow grappling and throwing in Shooto fighting. Most Grappling techniques come from "Catch-As-Catch-Can" Wrestling, Russian Sambo, and Judo. Today some Shooters practicing also Brazilian Jiu-Jitsu, it may well be that various techniques from BJJ are used as well.

Sayama had learned Catch-As-Catch-Can Wrestling from the great Karl Gotch, a well-known German wrestler, and Russian Sambo from Victor Koga, a Russian-Japanese master, and under the well-known Toshio Fujiwara, he learned Muay Thai Boxing.

When he was still one of the most popular wrestlers in Japan, around 1983, he decided to retire from professional Wrestling to work on his fighting system and organization. A year later, he opened the (Super) Tiger Gym. Super Tiger is the name he used as a professional wrestler.

The Homecoming of Sifu Yori...

When I was in Los Angeles in 1994, I found out that Sifu Yori had returned to Japan because he wanted to take care of the spread of Jun Fan Jeet Kune Do and had founded the IUMA (Inosanto-Methods Unified Martial Arts Association). In the same year he received the title of "Associate Instructor" under Dan Inosanto, and he became the highest ranked Jun Fan JKD instructor in Asia.

During my first trip to Japan one year later, Nakamura was standing next to the professional Shooter Yuki Nakai, also a top Sayama student. Both were there to participate in the first VALE TUDO JAPAN event with the participation of Rickson Gracie. As I was told from the Gracie team, Nakamura and Mestre Rickson had become good friends, this while Nakamura was still living in Los Angeles.

In mid-2016, Sifu Yori had to undergo an emergency surgery. The aortic dissection he was afflicted with was less than 5%, and surviving the upcoming surgery was already a minor miracle, as he later explained in his own blog. Thanks to the specialists who happened to be at the hospital for another operation, everything went well. The surgery allowed them to repair two tears in his aorta, but a third, which they could not fully repair, had remained. For this reason, he had to give up long traveling, and he decided to stay with his family in Tokyo.

Of course, he had to cut back on his sports activities. But with strong will and steady progress, he was able to slowly start his regular classes two years later. As he

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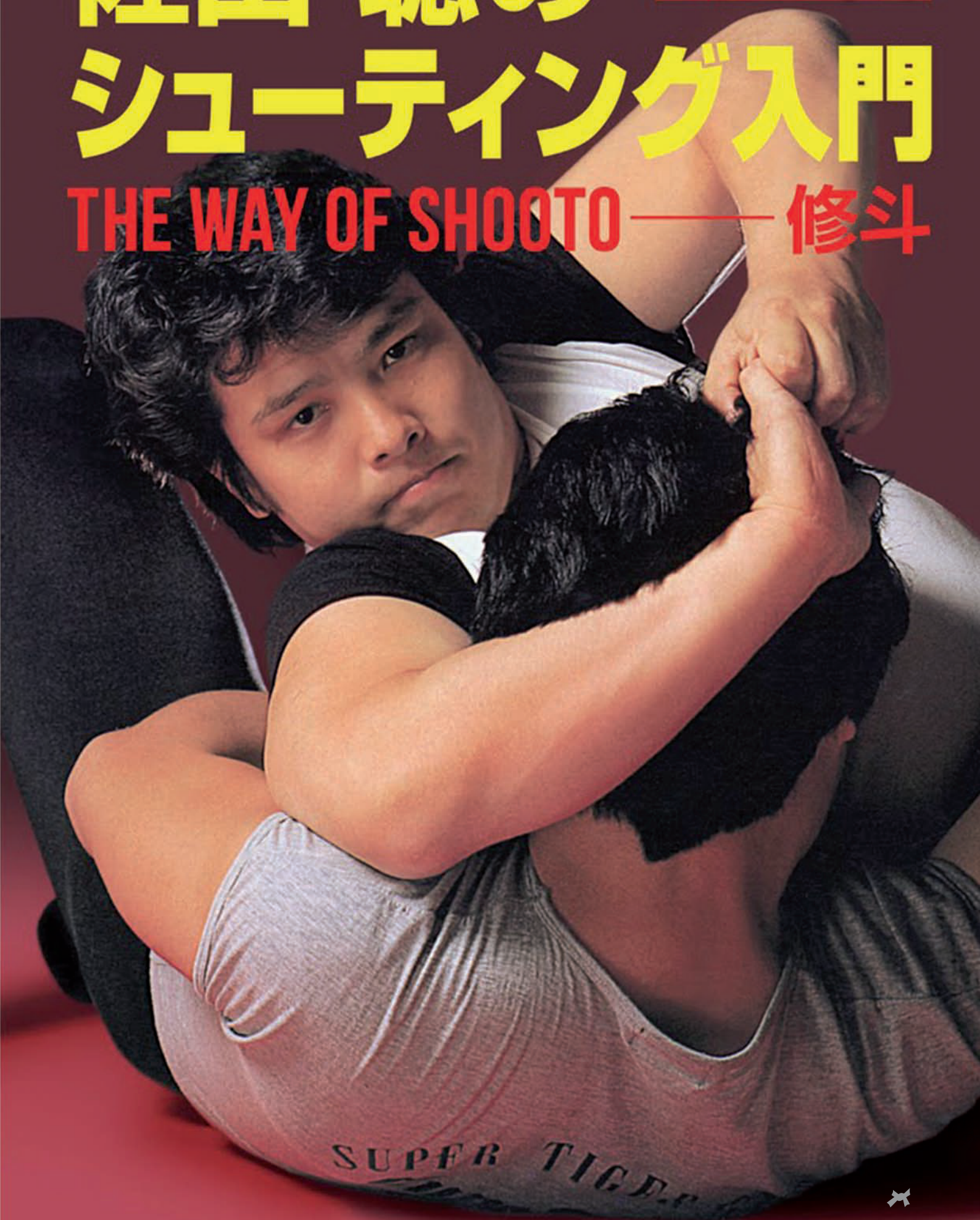


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THE WAY OF SHOOTO — 修斗





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himself described in his blog, although he had to be careful not to push himself too hard at first, he wanted to keep training because "...a bird is not a bird if it can't fly, a fish is not a fish if it can't swim, and a martial artist is not a martial artist if he doesn't train!"

Remo Michel and his special experience with Yori Nakamura

I conducted the interview personally in December 2020.

Question: Can you first tell us a bit about yourself?

Answer: I am now 52 years old and was born and raised in Zurich. My father was already a boxer and so I had already learned in kindergarten what discipline, respect and responsibility mean.

Mom did not like the backyard crush training and wanted the little one to learn something less "brutal"...Judo was the solution, especially since the training place was only a two-minute walk from home. I think you know this place in Zurich Oerlikon very well too.

So, my journey in the universe of martial arts started over 45 years ago with Judo and classical Boxing...followed by Jiu-Jitsu, Wing Chun, Kickboxing, Muay Thai, Pentjak Silat, Krav Maga, JKD, Kali Eskrima, as well as some other systems with military or security background.

Until today I am interdisciplinary active. In the meantime, due to my job, the sporting idea has taken a back seat, and the focus is now on the holistic and functional self-protection of private and professionally exposed/endangered persons.

Q: Do you remember when and where you met Sifu Yori?

A: It was in the early summer of 1992 shortly after the riots in connection with the Rodney King case in Los Angeles. I was training in the gym with Dan Inosanto Kali Eskrima when Yori entered the gym. To explain, I was thinking of emigrating to California when I was younger and was there on a 3-month visa to explore.

Q: How did you come to train with him?

A: I saw him training with Dan and simply asked him if I could "do a bit" with him. With my background in Judo and Jiu-Jitsu, I basically understood what Shooto could be about (not that the name meant anything to me at the time) and I thought it could never hurt to learn more.

He was very affable and was immediately willing to show me in the following weeks in a few sessions the basic features and techniques, or rather to let me feel.

Q: Did you get Sifu Yori to take the photos, or did you "wrestle" with him to get him on the mats?

A: I used the much-vaunted Swiss charm! No, seriously, this was an unplanned action. I was just visited by a friend from Switzerland who had a camera with him (remember 1992, no Handy-cam or similar) ...he just came to pick me up at the gym and the idea came up spontaneously after the workout. So, we put some mats on the backyard, because the gym had already the next lesson and was occupied and we shot some photos.

Q: What did you take from Shooto, from the training with Nakamura?

A: In a nutshell: No one too small to be an efficient (ground fighter). Pure strength superiority in a fight does not mean that you will emerge victorious. Intuition, patience, decisive action and finally the necessary technique are good qualities to be successful, especially in ground fighting.

Of course, this was already clear to me before, but Yori showed me this again and again in a very impressive way, without ever neglecting his responsibility as a teacher to be lenient with impatient or over-motivated students. You could say Yori helped tame the dragon in me...and probably did not even realize it.

Q: Where do you see the strengths of Shoot-Wrestling?

A: As I said, I do not see myself as a real Shooto expert. I can only speak from my personal experiences with Yori. Technique, fighting understanding and intelligence are optimally promoted here. It does not require a powerful athlete's body, rather intuition and creativity are required.

It is a flowing story, without rigid concepts. Likewise, knowledge, or "weaknesses" of the human anatomy come to light here as almost nowhere else, once with Yori on the ground, you can experience this in a second in many ways.

Q: And what are the weaknesses of this fights system?

A: Well, weaknesses must be put into context, because without them, any statement lacks quality. So as a sport, it is "weakness-less" in that sense, because the opponent has the same rules. In street fight / self-protection context, it is just very, very "close range" and therefore not necessarily "safe" in the sense of keeping opponents away from you.

Q: In Europe you are certainly one of the very few who have trained directly with Nakamura in Shooto, and in Switzerland there are again much (much) less... What would you say, what has stayed with you most from Sifu Yori as a person and as an instructor?

A: As a person I perceived him very uncomplicated and open-hearted. After all, he was able to make an immediate connection with a stranger, despite language barriers. We understood each other within a short time and discovered frightening similarities in humor. As an instructor, he understood early on that no one wants to be lectured, but everyone likes to learn things.

Just think, we met when he was 29 and I was 25. In addition, I was superior to him in terms of strength, neither of which are particularly good prerequisites for a functioning trainer-student relationship in the classic sense. However, Yori has mastered this challenge with flying colors and I am incredibly grateful to have been able to benefit so much.

Q: Is there anything else you would like to add?

A: I thank you for the opportunity to talk about this experience and I enjoyed it very much to reminisce for a moment about the golden nineties. Also, I believe I heard that Yori had a health challenge and I would like to send him my absolute best wishes for his recovery!

Everyone stays healthy and strong!

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