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World Oyama Karate

Honbu Newsletter

Issue 21 - May, 2009

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BEGINNING.....

Once Upon A Time...

By Founder Saiko Shihan Y. Oyama

On May 2nd, we held another successful American Cup Knockdown Tournament at Samford University here in Birmingham. However, in the days leading up to the tournament, there was a point where we faced the possibility of having to rearrange everything at the last minute.

The swine flu made its way to Alabama in the last days of April. We got a call from the Director of Campus Recreation alerting us to the possibility that the university board of directors may shut down the campus. All high school and junior high school sporting events had already been cancelled statewide. When Sensei Dale and I met with the director on May 1st, he said it was 95% likely that everything would go ahead smoothly as planned...but you never know. In the end, everything was fine and the tournament was a great success. All the participants showed great spirit and inspired the crowd with their fighting.

But this tournament wouldn't have been a success if it weren't for those who contributed their time and financial support. It's easy for branch chiefs and black belts to offer their support in words. But when it comes time for action, not everyone follows through. I realize the bad economy has really impacted almost everyone. But those with true loyalty and passion for this organization still managed to find a way to offer their support. All your efforts to support the tournament and this organization are very much appreciated.



Saiko Shihan with all Champions and Tournament participants



入門

Once Upon A Time.....

***MY KARATE MEMOIR**

In the last newsletter, I talked about my early days of training and how I failed my Black Belt promotion twice. A lot of students enjoyed hearing about my early days and asked if I'd share some more about my Karate history.

When I began Karate at Mas Oyama's dojo, I had no desire to be champion or to earn a Black Belt. In newsletter #15 (Fall, 2007) I shared some memories about my very first day at the dojo, but I want to give you a little more background history on how I found myself there in the first place.

Of my siblings, I'm the youngest, with two older brothers and an older sister. My oldest brother, Hiroshi, was the first of us to study Karate. He trained with Mas Oyama in the days before Mas Oyama had an actual dojo. He graduated from Rikyo University with a degree in English literature. He and my sister were always strong academically. My other brother, Soshu, and I weren't exactly bad with academics, but most likely it would be faster to find our names in the class rankings if you started counting from the bottom up, not from the top down. Hiroshi attended college on a scholarship playing American football. (In Japan, as in most other countries, "football" refers to soccer. Since the "football" we know here in the U.S. originated in this country, it is referred to as "American football" in Japan). At 6' 2", Hiroshi is the tallest in our family. Soshu is next at about 6', and my sister is about 5'6". I usually list myself as 5'7", but there has been some discrepancy on this point with my wife (see the previous newsletter).

Anyway, when I was young, my father had his own successful business making cookies and pastries. At the end of World War II, times were tough in Japan. My father would take in young guys who showed ambition and worked hard. He'd take them under his wing and give them odd jobs to do. He'd have about 15 – 20 guys helping him out at any given time, and they were always coming and going. At one time, Mas Oyama was one of these young guys.

He'd sometimes babysit me or escort my mother into town to make sure she was kept safe from any trouble. At Kyoto University, a very prestigious college, there was a biology professor named *SO-NEI-CHYU*. He was extremely intelligent, but was also a grand master in the *GO-JU-RYU* style of Karate. Mas Oyama studied under him during these early years.

*** JAPANESE PRO-WRESTLING PIONEER**

After Hiroshi graduated from college, he had a hard time finding a job. One day, Mas Oyama approached him and said, "This is a new, international world. I'm going to go into the jungles of Taiwan to make a documentary about Karate training and surviving in the wilderness. I want you to be in it."

To put this into context, you need to understand that the general mood of Japanese society immediately following World War II was different than it is today. Today, everyone is driven, working tirelessly and always chasing one thing or another. But in those days, most people had the attitude of "what will be will be; whatever's going to happen will happen anyway". My innocent brother had never heard someone talk about things the way Mas Oyama did. All his ideas were bigger than life; his vision wasn't confined to ordinary, daily life, but rather as limitless as the universe. Hiroshi listened with rapt attention as Mas Oyama went on about how "the world is at peace now. It's a time of infinite possibility. Culture is important. We need to expand the reach of Karate culture."

Mas Oyama was very smart in his approach to introducing the world to Karate. This was in the days before TV was commonplace and way before the internet. The best way, then, to reach a large audience was through film. If someone were to say the same things today, probably nobody would take them seriously. People talk big all the time, but when it comes time for action, there's no money or anything else tangible to show for it. But Hiroshi's mind whirled with thoughts about making a movie, becoming famous, facing the jungle and getting rich.

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So, Mas Oyama, my brother, and another guy trained in Mas Oyama's backyard. They practiced Kata, fighting, and did *makiwara* training. Month after month, the documentary kept getting postponed. Then one day, Mas Oyama said he and his wife were going out of town. It wasn't unusual for them to leave town for a couple days. However, this time, they didn't come back. A week passed, and they didn't return. Then a month, and another month. My innocent brother's dreams of stardom exploded. Eventually Hiroshi and the other guy had to find another way to make a living.

Hiroshi was strong and physically powerful (he played linebacker in college), but his personality was and still is very calm and easy-going. Just like me, he's very quiet and introverted. (Don't laugh, that description fits me perfectly!...Well, OK, maybe we are a little bit opposite). Even so, he somehow found his way onto the pro-wrestling circuit. My

father had a friend, a publisher, who was close to *Rikidozan*. *Rikidozan* was a former sumo wrestler who had gained tremendous notoriety and fame in the pro-wrestling world. His matches would often pit him against Caucasian wrestlers who he would knock out with his signature "Karate chop". He was a pioneer in the pro-wrestling world. People would crowd around small TV sets to watch him. You can still watch footage of his matches on YouTube today.

Back in those days, most people couldn't afford a TV. The only place most people had access to one was in coffee shops. Whenever some big event was broadcast, the owners would shut the curtains and charge admission by selling their drinks at a higher price (about 50 cents). There were no plasmas or flat screens, or LED's or high-definition broadcasts. The TV was about 12", analog and black and white only.



American Football in Japan!?! Hiroshi (#55, first from left, standing) with some of his teammates.

I remember being about 7 or 8 years old, dreaming of the day when I could pay for a 50-cent glass of orange juice and watch the TV. A couple of times I was able to do it, and it was the highlight of the year. I can still remember watching *Rikidozan* wrestling some Caucasian guy who was fighting dirty and breaking the rules, and then all of a sudden *Rikidozan* knocked him out. Sensational!

Anyway, my father's friend suggested that Hiroshi try professional wrestling. He set up a meeting between my brother and *Rikidozan* at *Rikidozan's* office. *Rikidozan* was already very successful. He owned his own modern building, several stories high (Mas Oyama at that time still had just a house. He hadn't opened his

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dojo yet).

At their meeting, *Rikidozan* just looked Hiroshi over with his powerful eyes and eventually growled, “So, you got guts?”

“Yes sir,” my brother answered.

“OK, done!” *Rikidozan* yelled for his trainer, and the man came running in. *Rikidozan* turned to him and said, “He’s starting to today! Get everything he needs straightened out!”

Hiroshi spent about a year on the pro-wrestling circuit. In the U.S., many professional wrestlers were ex-football players. But my brother was the first professional wrestler in Japan with a background in American football. The media took an interest in him, and he was featured in a couple newspaper articles. I was so proud.

But, as I mentioned before, Hiroshi’s personality wasn’t exactly suited for professional wrestling. After a year, he changed directions and went into the field of business. Thinking back now, I wonder why he got into Karate and pro-wrestling in the first place. He’s not a fighter; his demeanor is the opposite of what one would expect of a professional wrestler. Times were tough back then, though. Work was scarce; maybe he did it to survive; maybe he had no other choice...

* TEENAGE WISE GUY PHASE

Around the time Hiroshi became a pro-wrestler, my parents started having a lot of conflicts at home and eventually divorced. I stayed with my mother. We lived in a small one-room apartment on the edge of Tokyo. Our living quarters were private, but we shared a common kitchen and bathroom with the other tenants. She always worked 2 or 3 jobs to pay our bills and for my schooling, which meant that I was often on my own when I came home from school. So, I’d go out and roam the streets with my friends. We’d go around making trouble, sometimes getting into fights. When I was about 13/14 years old, my two older brothers had shown me some ba-

sic techniques (*seiken*, *mawashi geri*, *hiza geri*) so I could protect myself in the street. I didn’t really train, but as I’ve said before, I had natural physical ability and coordination, so I caught on fast.

When I was 15, my friends and I would hang out around the *pachinko* parlor. *Pachinko* was and still is a very popular game in Japan (you can find out all about it on the internet). The best way to describe it is a blend of a slot machine and pinball. However, the payouts are in prizes, not cash. The *pachinko* parlor was an ideal spot to hang out because, unlike a café or coffee shop, you didn’t have to buy anything—we could stand around for free.

Pachinko attracted all sorts of people, especially various shady and sinister characters. Mambo music was all the rage back then and all these guys (including us) would wear tight mambo jeans and stick their chests out as they strutted around in groups. One day, I was standing outside the *Pachinko* parlor waiting on my friends. I saw two guys I’d never seen before. They appeared to be in their early 20’s; a couple of thugs with mean faces. I started eyeing them, wondering what they were doing in *my* territory.

When they saw me, they came up and said, “What’re you looking at?”

I just answered, “I’m not looking at you...”

Suddenly, they grabbed me and took me around the building to the parking lot. This being Tokyo, the parking lot was small and used for *bicycles*, not cars. I was so scared. I thought they were going to kill me. I tried to plead with them, tell them I wasn’t looking at them, but it was no use. I could feel my heart pounding furiously. One guy watched the street, and the other pulled me by the arm to the back of the building. It seemed like they’d do this type of thing plenty of times, which terrified me even more. All I could think about was how I could run away.

They were so confident that they were going to teach this little kid a lesson. Like an eagle with a mouse in

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its talons—no escape. At one point, the one holding me said something to the one watching the street. While he was talking, he let go of my arm for a second. That was my moment. With his head turned from me, I tightened my right fist and punched him as hard as I could in the face. I struck him just above the left eye. He wobbled back and forth for a couple seconds before crashing to the pavement in slow motion. As he hit the ground, blood starting spraying from his head. I couldn't believe it. I just stood frozen with my eyes and mouth wide open.

The guy watching the street stared at me, just as shocked as I was, with the same expression. We just looked at each other for a second, which seemed like an hour.

“Wha-what happened!?” he cried.

“I-I don't know. I'm scared.”

He started charging toward me, closer and closer. I was a deer caught in his headlights. I stood frozen, bracing myself. When he got about a couple feet away, I put out my hands to stop him and drove my right foot into his groin. He doubled over and slowly sank to the ground. I couldn't feel my legs, but somehow I managed to start running. I ran to the front of the building, looking for my friends, but they still weren't there. So I ran home and hid in the apartment for a couple hours.

Later that day, I went back and found my friends outside the *pachinko* parlor. I told them the story and we went back around the building. By that time, the two guys had left, but there was still blood on the ground from the one I punched in the face. I was so pumped up about knocking them out with one shot each. I recounted the story over and over again, and it grew bigger and bigger each time I told it.

In the days and weeks following, my friends and I would go back to the *pachinko* parlor every day, ready to fight in case those guys came back looking for revenge. But they never showed up. I figured they must be too scared of me to come back.

* MEET THE DETECTIVE

After a couple months, once life had gone back to normal, a letter arrived at our apartment. From the police. Addressed to me. It said that I needed to come to the police station on such-and-such date to speak with Detective so-and-so. I was terrified at the idea of going down to the police station, but even more than that, I was terrified of my mother finding out, so I just threw the letter away. My 15 year-old brain decided this was the best way to take care of everything so that nobody would find out.

A week later, another letter came. I threw it away. Then, same thing the next week. I threw that one away too. I figured if I just kept throwing them away, eventually the police would forget. But the police never forget.

One night, a little past 9 o'clock, there was a knock on our door. My mother opened it. “Yes?”

A man in a suit and glasses was standing there. He showed his police ID and said, “Ma'am, we need to speak with you.”

“Wh-what?” My mother was in total shock.

“Your son was in a fight a while back and sent someone to the hospital. We sent a notice three times for you and him to report to the police station, but you never responded.”

“We never got a letter! Nothing like that ever arrived here!” She was frantic, completely taken by surprise. I stood at the edge of the room, trying to make myself invisible.

The detective looked past my mother, at me, and answered, “No, you definitely received the letter. Most likely, someone threw it away before you saw it.”

I was caught. This was the end. I was going to jail. No more school, no more friends, no more anything. My life was over. My mother started fainting. The detective tried to reassure her. “It's not that bad,

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Japanese pro-wrestling pioneers. *Rikidozaon* (seated center, right of man in sunglasses) and his staff. Hiroshi is front row, second from left. Also pictured: *Endo* (in sunglasses. Judo champion). *Yokozuna Azuma Fuji* (to right of *Rikidozan*. Sumo wrestling grand champion).

really. The other two guys involved are adults, much older than your son. Your son's still a juvenile. There's just a few details we want to know for our report. We need you to bring him to the station tomorrow to answer a couple questions."

"Yes, sir," my mother answered. After the detective left, my mother cried and cried...and cried.

Many times before, teachers and parents had made similar visits to our apartment, complaining to my mother about me fighting and getting in trouble. My mother would have to apologize and I'd but on an Academy Award-worthy performance. "I'm so sorry, sir. I'll never do it again." "I'm really sorry, mother. I promise this will never happen again." Usually this act would be enough to get me off the hook until next time. But when I gave my speech to the detective at the station the next day, he just shot me an icy glare.

He went on to tell us why they wanted to talk to me in the first place. It turns out that the 2 guys I fought at the *pachinko* parlor were later caught committing a robbery. One of them had stitches over his left eye. During questioning, the detective asked what had happened. He answered that this really big,

mean guy had attacked him. "I was just minding my own business, and this guy beat me up for no reason."

The detective made a note to find this guy who was going around attacking people for no reason. But in the end, it was just me, a 15 year-old kid. The detective told my mother and me that I wasn't in trouble, but I had to stop fighting. The direction I was headed was going to create a lot of problems for me in the future if I continued on this path. I put on my best apologetic face, but inside I was thinking to myself, "Are you kidding me? I was just protecting myself. These guys are thieves, criminals. I'm not a criminal! Don't you guys have more important things to do than harass me and my mother?" Those were my feelings at 15 years old. Now I'm #\$\$%@ years old, but still feel like that detective should've said I did a great job standing up for myself and beating up those two punks...but I'm not entirely sure.

* BAIT (30 cents) AND SWITCH

After this incident, my mother talked with Hiroshi and Soshu. Hiroshi told me, "You have too much free time on your hands. You need to do something.

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You should study Karate.” By this time Mas Oyama had his dojo in Tokyo. But it was on the other side of town. Getting there would require me to get on the local trains, and transfer lines multiple times. It would take about 45 minutes to get there—a pretty big journey for a 15 year-old kid. I told Hiroshi that I couldn’t do it because I had no idea how to get there or where it was.

Soshu’s approach was a little different. He was already a black belt and assistant instructor at Mas Oyama’s dojo. Soshu said, “You’ve got real talent! You knocked those guys out with one shot, that’s great! Wow!”

“You really think so?” I asked.

“Definitely. Karate would be a piece of cake for you. Most people have to train two, three years... five, six years to get a Black Belt. But I think you could set a new record! Maybe *less than one year*. (Keep in mind that, as I wrote in the last newsletter, I failed my Black Belt promotion twice). You can jump kick, soar through the air, take people down, just like superman. I knew it! I knew you were talented!”

“You really think so?” Listening to Soshu made my head swell bigger and bigger.

“Yeah, you could probably jump over a couple cars.”

“Seriously?”

“Well, maybe not cars, but you could do jump spin kicks, break boards. You could break 5 or 6, no problem, because you knocked those guys out with one shot.”

I was so happy to hear my brother talk like that. But I still wasn’t sure if Karate was for me. I wasn’t excited about going some place where people would always be telling me how to stand, when to move, what to do. I enjoyed my freedom. But then Soshu said something that pushed me over the edge. “If you train with me, I’ll give you an allowance.”

My eyes popped open. “Really?”

“Yeah, I’ll give you 20 cents. 30 cents...sometimes 50 cents.”

“OK, I’ll go!” The reason I said yes was because for 10 cents I could buy one *kope-pan* (the cheapest type of bread roll) and for 15 cents I could get artificial peanut butter to spread on it. But for 20 or 30 cents, I could buy a really good *koroke* (deep-fried potato) to put in the bread and make an incredibly delicious sandwich. I might even be able to buy a *menchi katsushu*, which was like a *koroke*, but also had a little bit of onion and ground beef mixed in. The taste would be heaven, better than any filet mignon. Even now, if I close my eyes, my taste buds can still remember that divine taste and my mouth will start to water.

I started training in Karate when I was 14 years old, but it wasn’t in an actual dojo. Hiroshi taught me basic techniques so I could protect myself. This was the point when my Karate history began. The first technique I learned was a *kin geri* (groin kick). He also taught me *seiken gyakuzuki* (reverse punch) and *uraken* (backfist).

My brother told me, “If you’re at a close distance, nobody expects a backfist. You hit ‘em with that, then kick the groin and run, run, run.” He also taught me *mae geri* (front snap kick) and *mawashi geri* (roundhouse kick).

We practiced *Sanchin Dachi* stance, a little bit of *Zenkutsu Dachi*, but mostly *Kumite no Tachi* (fighting stance). I also tried to copy him as he did a couple of the *Pian Katas*. But some of the movements I found really strange, especially *Kokutsu Dachi*. The movements looked strange but also kind of mysterious.

So although my Karate history began at the age of 14, studying with Hiroshi, what finally brought me into the dojo at 15 years old was the promise of a *kope-pan* and *menchi katsushu* sandwich and my encounter with 2 punks at a *pachinko* parlor.

To be continued...

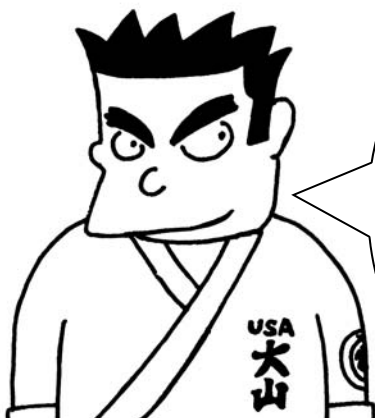


SUMMER CAMP 2009



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and Water.
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For More.

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