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World Oyama Karate

Honbu Newsletter

Issue 31 - June, 2012

Director's Journal

By Founder Saiko Shihan Y. Oyama

DREAM COME TRUE

MAY 6—DAY 1—DOJO

Finally, finally, my film begins shooting today! I've forgotten how many years I've waited for this day: Two years? No. Five years? No. Maybe ten? Fifteen? That sounds about right. Throughout that time, this project has been in my heart; sometimes on the back burner, sometimes on the front, but it's always been there inside me.



We finally started !

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I believe in this story, in its positive message of mine and my uchi deshis' experiences. Many people in the West view Asian culture as deep and philosophical, rooted in a mystical approach to life. Possibly because Eastern cultures have a long and rich history. Some people exaggerate the philosophical ideals of the culture and minimize the physical aspect. But the human body has not really changed over the millennia and without physical conditioning, all those philosophical wisdoms are meaningless. The main character of this story is thrown into a world of *action*. He has no time to think. In order to build inner and external strength, an Uchi Deshi's life is characterized by constant action. 99% of the time, thinking leads to excuses and plots to avoid life's rigorous demands. That's what I want to show the world, that training and sweat are the starting points for a richer life. You can't reach it by talking or thinking about it! You have to sweat!

Many people who inquire about classes at the dojo, particularly parents, ask if we teach manners, discipline, confidence, etc. I tell them if you start out teaching those things, your students will never get it. Those are bi-products of training; by pushing yourself physically and enduring rigorous training, you learn to be patient and humble and develop respect for yourself and others. The bottom line is that it starts with action.

I wrote this story and script to impart that on an audience. I also believed that Masa's story was one that could motivate many people. He was my last Uchi Deshi and I saw him transform during the time he spent with me. After I finished writing the Japanese version of *Uchi Deshi in America*, people liked it, so I began working on the script. Of course I had no experience writing a script, but I did anyway. I also wanted to write the novel and script in English, so I got Sensei Karl to help me. Once the script was finished, the next challenge was getting the movie

produced.

The first couple people I approached about financing the movie were very eager about the project, however, when it came time to put up the money, they pulled out. Time after time, people got on board with the project, but when it came time to produce funding, they invariably had some excuse as to why this wasn't a good time. Just like my students offer creative excuses to get out of training, they cited reasons such as family, business and so on as to why I should wait a little longer... Eventually I got tired of waiting and looked into other ways/people to finance the picture.

I half-jokingly told my students and family to buy lottery tickets. My wife actually won once. She only won \$5.00, but she still won. Sensei Dale, Senpai Stephanie and Senpai Tony have bought Florida lottery tickets for a long time now. Sensei Dale once won \$50.00, but that would barely buy lunch, much less produce a movie.

In the end, however, I met up with Scott Perkins. He was able to develop a reasonable budget and concrete plan for producing this independent film. Apart from his business sense and production experience, Scott had connections with people in Hollywood. Because of the quality of our story, we were able to interest a couple notable actors in our project: Cassie Scerbo from ABC Family and Disney Network, Masashi Odate from *The Last Samurai* and *Letters from Iwo Jima*, and Alex Heartman from *Power Rangers*.

Through Scott, we also managed to sign on a very experienced Director of Photography—Derek Bauer. He and a couple members of his crew brought truckloads of equipment with them from Hollywood. There was more camera and lighting and sound equipment involved in making this movie than I had ever anticipated. The Honbu Dojo was all but unrecognizable in its transformation into a

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Saiko Shihan and Derek Bauer discussing the next shot

movie set.

Early on, it was impressed upon me that if a motion picture is to have any real shot at success, it needs a well-known star's name attached to it. I have known Sonny Chiba since training with him in my early days at Mas Oyama's Kyokushin Dojo. He and I are friends, but he and Shihan Goda are very close friends. Since I'm also very close friends with Shihan Goda, I asked him if he would help me to get Sonny Chiba involved in our movie. This was about 4 years ago. The three of us would eat and talk together sometimes when I travelled to Japan. While I was there for the All-Japan Championship last October, I mentioned that we were trying to figure out who could play the role of Masa. Sonny Chiba took out his iPad and showed us a video clip of his son,

Mackenyu, a Kyokushin Brown Belt, fighting in a tournament. In the script, Masa is in his early 20's, having just graduated from college. Mackenyu had just turned 15. However, I felt that if we could have him play Masa, then we could also get Sonny Chiba to appear in the movie.

In February, Scott and I travelled to L.A. to conduct auditions. Mackenyu was there. He looked really young, but gave a great performance. So we changed the script to make Masa a high school kid. Next we had to find an actress to play Cynthia, which I discussed in the previous newsletter. I believe we made the right choice.

We filmed the opening scene first, which was Masa's dream and involved Sonny Chiba and I fight-

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ing with sword and tonfa while all the Black Belts looked on. Everyone, including me, was taken aback by the sheer volume of equipment that was crammed in the dojo.

(My original idea for this scene was that it took place on a beach shore at dawn, just as night was giving way to the morning sunlight. I imagined all my Black Belts sitting in seiza along the shore chanting, “Osu... Osu.. Osu...” in a deep soft voice. The swordsman (Sonny Chiba) would be dressed in traditional samurai clothes and I would be wearing a dogi, holding the tonfa. The camera would show the two of us from the waist-down circling each other at the water’s edge. Suddenly the sword

would glisten in the rising sun’s light and the death match would begin. At the climax, as the two of us were locked in a final struggle, a cell phone would ring, which was really Masa’s alarm clock going off beside the bed. However, the producer said that going to the beach and shooting that scene was not in our budget, so we moved everything to the dojo. But I’d still like to film the beach scene someday.)

The back parking lot was completely overtaken. About 30 people in “*Take a Chance—CREW*” shirts moved around the set and back and forth to the equipment trucks. I recalled what someone had told me awhile back that the industry norm for movie production is that it takes 1 day to produce 1



Saiko Shihan and Sonny Chiba rehearsing for the camera crew

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Saiko Shihan and the Uchi Deshi. Left to Right:

Masashi Odate “Rikio”, Saiko Shihan, Sensei Masa, Mackenyu Maeda “Masa”, Sensei Karl, Sensei Saito

minute of film. We had about 90 minutes of film to make and only 14 days to do it in! There was a lot of pressure.

My Black Belts and I naturally became more tense initially under all the lights and cameras. There was something intimidating about having all that equipment around. I showed Sonny Chiba the sword and tonfa we would be using for filming. He looked at me with shocked eyes: “We’re using a *REAL* sword!?” he asked. Sonny Chiba has lots of experience using swords on and off the screen, but he said in movies a dull, not sharp, sword was used to prevent injuries. Our sword was razor-sharp.

Initially, we rehearsed with a *Bokuto*, and had no

problem. But when it came time to use the real sword, Sonny Chiba’s timing changed. I had to convince him that I was OK and not to worry. At last we were ready. I had no movie experience, but I was the director, so I was in charge. I looked at the crew and shouted that I was ready and to start filming. They just looked at me with blank stares. Derek explained that it wasn’t that simple. There was a whole procedure to go through to make sure the lights, camera, audio, actors are all in sync before each shot. The basic commands were:

- Quiet on the set, lock it down!
- Roll Audio
- Roll Camera
- Mark it! (Slate it!)

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Camera A set!
 Camera B set!
 Action!
 Cut!

I jumped from number 1 to number 7 so many times. My hyoshi is obviously not congruent with movie-making.

But I learned little by little. I learned that in between each take, cameras have to be adjusted, lenses changed, lighting altered, cues given, positioning modified. So Sonny Chiba and I did our first take and I was ready to move on to the next scene. But Derek told me we needed to do it again because there was a problem with the lens focus. So we did it again. But they wanted to get another take. As far as I was concerned, the shot was good. But the camera crew was very professional and wanted it perfect so it would look spectacular on the big screen. It made me frustrated, but I agreed with their approach and attention to detail, so we did another take.

Little did I know that each shot usually requires four or five takes. And beyond that, you have to shoot the same scene from a variety of angles, i.e. Wide Shot, Close up on Actor A, Close up on Actor B, etc. At one point, Sonny Chiba sliced his left thumb during a take and started dripping blood on the mat.

My first thought was, "Oh man! He's going to sue me for everything I've got. There goes my house, my dojo." I had joked with Shihan Goda years before about being in my movie. "I don't act. Who can I be?" he asked. "You can just be some homeless guy," I told him. "You can be Homeless A and I will be Homeless B. Don't need to say anything, just stand there and look homeless." That joke came back to haunt me when I first saw Sonny Chiba's cut hand.

But Sonny Chiba was very professional about it. He

bandaged up his thumb and we finished the scene. That was only the beginning. Next we shot Uchi Deshi training scenes. I figured that since Sensei Saito, Sensei Masa, Sensei Karl, Masashi Odate and Mackenyu had lots of training experience, their scenes would be easy to shoot. I was wrong. It's one thing to have good conditioning and training experience, but quite another to transmit that onto the screen. By the end of the day I was exhausted and wondering how I'd ever make it to the end.

May 7—DAY 2—RUNNING TRAIL

I've known Shihan Goda over 50 years. He is one of my closest friends. We met at the Kyokushin Dojo when he started training after I'd been there a couple years. He is very likeable. He talks straight but also has a warm heart. I wanted him in my movie, but where? He doesn't speak English or have any acting experience. So I decided to put him with my wife in a running scene. We set up our shoot on the Greenway trail across Lakeshore from Samford University. There's a part of the trail that rises just enough that we could position cameras at the bottom of the incline and film Shihan Goda as he appeared over the crest of the hill.

Back when I was at the Kyokushin Dojo, students would sometimes run around the neighborhood in groups of 40 or 50. A leader would be in charge of the cadence and the students would repeat in unison as they jogged. Just like an army platoon running in formation. In those days, we used to chant, "Fight-o, fight-o". I wanted to do something similar with Shihan Goda. In his scene, he jogged at the head of a pack of 6 beautiful southern ladies. They chanted "Washoi, washoi!" as they ran, which is a very traditional running chant. At this point in the story, Masa has just arrived from Tokyo and is out running in a new world as an uchi deshi. I wanted to portray his struggling and exasperation at seeing this strange pack of chanting runners exhibiting more power and energy than him.

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Before the first take, Shihan Goda was excited; he was going to be in a movie! His wife, family and friends would love it. However, the first time through, we missed the timing where Masa turns to look at the runners. So we had to re-set and do it again. Shihan Goda and the runners were still smiling. After the next take, we needed to re-set once more. We had to wait while dog walkers, and a couple other joggers cleared the camera's path.

The temperature was already in the mid 80's. We'd been there since 9:00 a.m. and it was already 11:00. We did another take... Cut! Masa missed his cue. We had to do again. Shihan Goda's smile began to fade away as did that of the other ladies. How many times are we doing this?, they wondered. A couple of them had other meetings and commitments they had to get to. Just one more take, please. I told them it wasn't their fault, but a tech-

nical problem. They were beautiful, elegant, powerful...(I tried to flatter them with any word that came to mind in hopes they would do as many takes as necessary for us to get our shot.)

Just one more, I pleaded. Shihan Goda replied, OK, but this is the last one! Luckily that take was successful and we were able to move on. The entire day, we filmed running scenes. As the director, I wasn't in any of the scenes, but I ran a lot too trying to coordinate everyone and give cues. The next shot we did was all the Uchi Deshi running with their shirts off (except for Mackenyu, who was too skinny, so he kept his t-shirt on).

As before, we did multiple takes. Each take, the uchi deshi had to run hard. In one of the scenes, the character Masa was supposed to catch up to and pass by Takeshi (Sensei Saito) and Karl (Sensei Karl). After that, they were supposed to sprint to



The first ever Champaign fountain in the dojo. No Champaign, but we have Champaign glasses???

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Legendary Cast. Left to Right: Sonny Chiba, Saiko Shihan Y. Oyama, Shihan Goda

catch up—it was the final scene in the script. Derek wanted to use a golf cart to film them as they ran. They ran so many times; at least 10 for that scene. I kept shouting at them to run, just like Jenny shouts “Run, Forest! Run!” in *Forest Gump*.

Sensei Motoi stayed in town until Monday evening, so I had him run along with Sensei Karl’s brother, Kyle, in one of the scenes. At first, Sensei Motoi was excited, but after 3 or 4 takes, he started to tense up. In one of the scenes, Senpai Rolanda was supposed to try and catch up and pass Masa. She wore a green running top, green shorts, green shoes and held a water bottle in each hand. She was drenched in sweat after 4 takes. But she was very enthusiastic. She did her scene the fourth time and Derek said we needed to re-shoot because she

got too close to the camera. “Sorry,” she said, “I was just so excited.”

We did another take, and this time Mackenyu laughed so we had to cut and shoot again. Senpai Rolanda was breathing hard by this time. I told her she should drink some of the water from her bottles. “Osu, but Saiko Shihan, this is an important prop, I don’t want to mess it up. I’ll be OK.” So she did a couple more takes, and after the last one, was finally tired enough to drink the water.

We weren’t able to finish all of the running shots before the rain poured down during our 4:30 lunch break, but we got most of them. The rain would’ve ruined the movie cameras, so we sent back to the dojo to film some other scenes. The filming never

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stopped. I didn't know how I would make it through, honestly. I'd go home and get in bed at night and my mind would still be reeling with thoughts of camera angle, lighting, actor positions, etc. But this was my one chance to achieve my dream, so I just had to hang in there and get through it one day at a time.

MAY 8—DAY 3—DOJO

After the first two days, I realized that filming was going to be a big challenge. We used two cameras, so before each shot they consulted with each other and with the lighting and sound departments. They discussed. And discussed. And discussed. It was a real test of my patience. Shihan Goda suggested that I invite my wife, Audrey, to the set to watch me work all day. Then maybe she would be nicer to me and appreciate me more.

Whenever I talk to Shihan Goda on the phone, I always tell him that I'm working hard, but he just laughs and says, "Yeah, sure, sure, sure!" But when he saw me acting, directing, coordinating, shouting, singing on the movie set, he really believed how hard I was working. That's why he suggested that I bring Audrey so that she too could see how hard I worked. But I told him, "Nah, she's not going to change. She'll still be my boss."

Anyway, I needed a lot of patience to make it through each day of filming. On the 3rd day, we did all dojo night scenes. I wanted to give all my students and opportunity to participate in the action onscreen, but we only had a limited space because of all the equipment. One of the scenes we filmed was when Cynthia (Cassie Scerbo) knocks Masa (Mackenyu Maeda) out with a roundhouse kick.

I had spent two days training Cassie in LA before filming. She is very limber and coordinated, so she caught on quickly. However, she had never actually kicked someone in the jaw. I didn't want her to really knock Mackenyu out, but I didn't want the

kick to look fake. But after the fourth or fifth take, we got the shot we wanted.

My students who were acting as extras in the class scenes kept jumping the gun when we filmed. I had to remind them not to start until I yelled "Action!" "You need to wait until the cameras and sound are set," I admonished them. "There's a procedure to follow," I imparted my new-found wisdom. "I'm the director, so wait for *my* signal."

According to SAG and other film crew union stipulations, lunch needs to be provided for the film staff 6 hours after the start of the work day. This meant that the time we ate lunch varied from day to day depending on what time we started. Sometimes it was as late as 4:30, other times 2:00. I ate breakfast with Sensei Masa and Sensei Saito every morning. I didn't need that much food, maybe just a bagel and one egg and some coffee. But the other two would each eat five eggs, 3 bagels and 2 bananas. It wouldn't be long after we started filming that they would look at me and ask, "Saiko Shihan are you hungry yet?" I was a little hungry, but there was no way they should be hungry after all that breakfast! But if I didn't feed them, they would drag down the whole tempo of our filming. So I would send Senpai Robin out to Chick-Fil-A to bring back something to tide them over.

Cassie Scerbo's character, Cynthia, is a brown belt in the script. As many of you might know, there is something different in the way beginning and advanced students wear their belt and dogi. Beginners tend to tie their belt high at the waist and pull the top down at the bottom so that it fits tightly around the torso; the dogi seems to wear them, rather than them wearing the dogi. Advanced students, i.e. Brown and Black Belts, tend to wear their belts lower on the hip and the top of their dogi is more open and loose. They look confident and comfortable in their dogi as if it is part of them.

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I tried to explain this point to Cassie and show her how a Brown Belt would wear their dogi. But during the course of filming, she would unconsciously pull at her belt and top to fix them as if she were wearing any other top and belt. I started to relate to her as one of my students, my tone became sterner each time I fixed her dogi. Scott and Derek had to remind me to take it easy. She wasn't my student. She was an actress working for Disney and from Hollywood. They have a different temperament. Rather than saying, "No, that's wrong! Do it again! Hurry up!" I should try saying, "That was great, awesome. But, just one thing... could you maybe do it once more like this?"

So, I tried changing my tone. I told Cassie she was beautiful, marvelous, really looked like a Karateka, maybe even a 2nd or 3rd Degree Black Belt. "Really?" she asked. "Yes, definitely," I smiled back. Cassie really did do a great job, though. On this third day of filming, I realized that what I had in my head and what was possible in reality given the fixed amount of time, budget, equipment, etc. did not always match. It was necessary for me to compromise in order to do what would be best for the film and staff overall.

Shihan Goda was scheduled to return to Japan the following morning, so I wanted to make sure and shoot the after-tournament party scene that night to get his face in there. I had imagined that students would wear a variety of clothes, some in regular t-shirts, some in Oyama shirts, some in judging shirt and red tie, some in suits. However, there was a miscommunication and the vast majority of them just wore pants and t-shirts. I wore a suit, as did Shihan Goda and Judge Pete. However, Shihan Ron just had on a t-shirt, so we scrambled to find him a tie and shirt he could wear for the scene.

There was also a communication gap between me and the Art Department, who is in charge of staging the set. I thought I had explained to them that for

parties in the dojo after a tournament we usually set out a couple folding tables with pizza, chips, dip, beer, coke, water, and that's it. But the table they had set up was like something you would find at a buffet in the Ritz Carlton. There was a champaign fountain in the center and decorative cakes and champaign glasses. We had decided that we wouldn't have any scenes with alcohol in this movie, yet there was a champaign fountain and glasses??? I couldn't believe it. We had to film anyway, so I tried to position students in front the table to hide some of the elegance.

During this scene, I was scripted to give an after-tournament speech. However, I wanted to add something special for Sensei Masa and Sensei Saito. They both came to Birmingham for 2 ½ weeks, leaving their dojos behind. Sensei Saito has a new baby girl and also the June 3rd Fighter's Cup to organize, so I really appreciate his supporting the movie. So I changed the script during filming and called up Takeshi (Sensei Saito) and said how I was sending him to San Francisco to build up World Oyama Karate on the West Coast. Then I called up Yuzo (Sensei Masa) and announced I was sending him to the Nerima section of Tokyo to build up our organization. I think they appreciated the free publicity.

When we finished this shot around 10:30 p.m. , I announced I was going home. There were a couple close up shots that needed to be done, but I felt the crew could handle it. I was the director, but I also needed rest.

MAY 9—DAY 4—COSTUME DEPARTMENT

The next morning, Sensei Karl looked at me with hard eyes. "How'd it go last night after I left?" I asked him.

Sensei Karl kept quiet. "Did you finish quickly? Ten, twenty minutes?"

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Sensei Karl just shook his head. "Half an hour?"

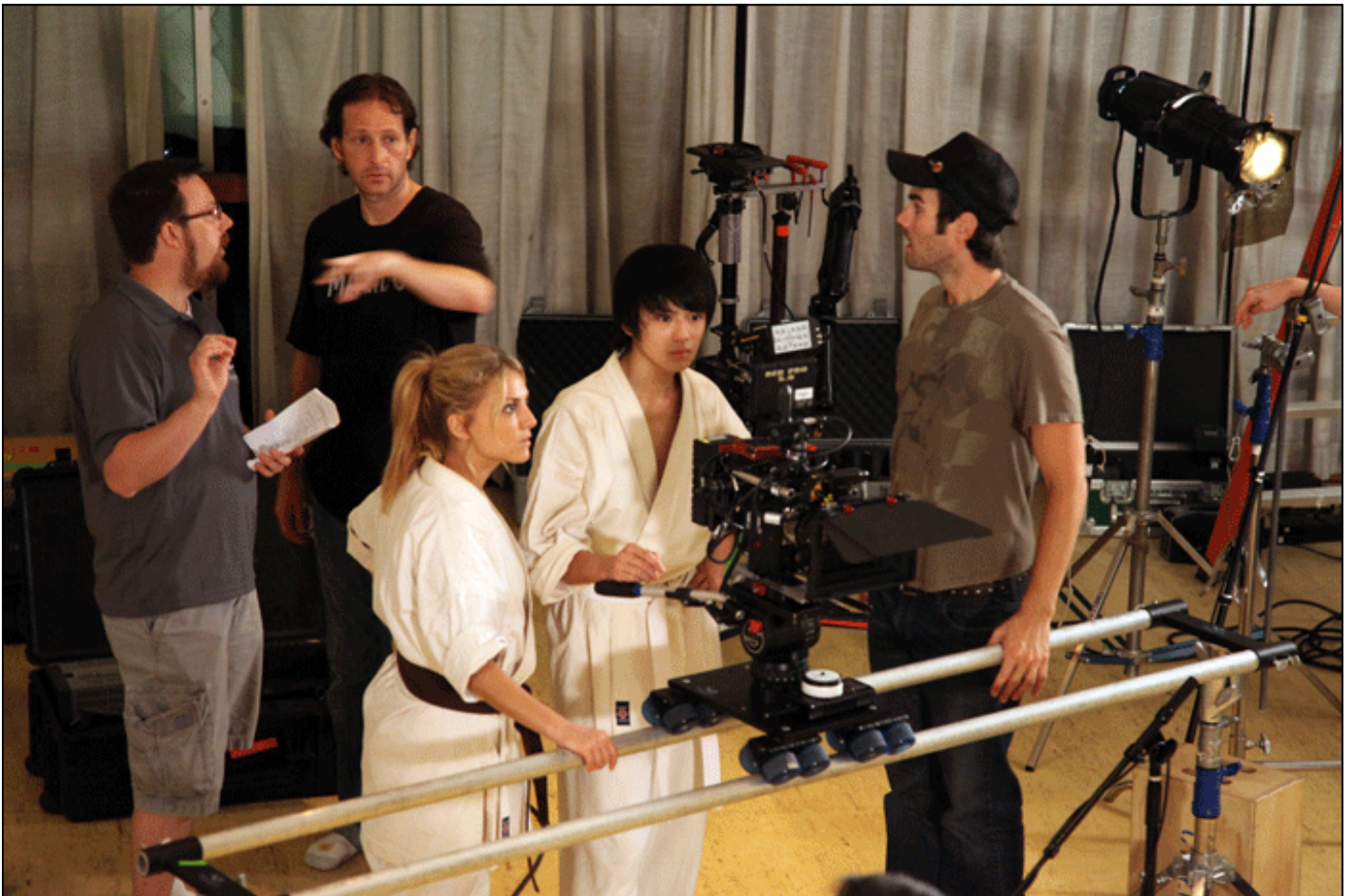
"No," he replied in a deep voice. I tried to change my tone and seem more sympathetic. "How long were here? An hour after I left?" Sensei Karl just kept shaking his head as I asked how long he stayed. "An hour and a half? Two hours? Two and a half hours? Three hours?"

Sensei Karl nodded his head and answered, "I left at 1:00 a.m."

"Oh, that's fine," I replied, "you're young, don't worry about it." As we were talking, Masashi Odate, who played Rikio, told me, "Saiko Shihan, the director should stay until the end of shooting. Otherwise everyone gives their opinions and we

don't get anything done." I could see his point.

On this day, I had a problem with the wardrobe department. No matter how many times I tried to convey my vision for Cynthia, they didn't get it. In the script, Cynthia is a college freshman in the deep south. She's still a college kid, not a grown business woman. I imagined her wearing shorts, t-shirts, jeans, tennis shoes. But when it came time to shoot her scenes, the wardrobe department laid out a bunch of high-end designer fashions and asked which ones I wanted her to wear. Which ones!? None of the above. In the end, I realized that I was a novice director, so needed to concede to people with more experience. I didn't agree with all the wardrobe choices, but I left it up to them to pick what would be best.



Cassie Scerbo and Mackenyu Maeda on the dojo set



SUMMER CAMP 2012

Orange Beach/Gulf Shore, Alabama

July 19th - July 22th, 2012



Sweat! Sweat! Sweat!



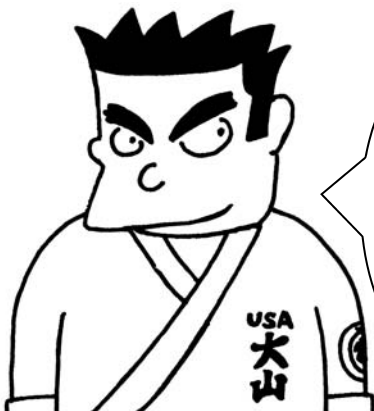
Sunrise Training

- *Special Take Down Technique*
- *Basic, Kata, Fight*

Afternoon Gym Training

- *Tonfa, Nunchaku, Bo, Sai, Shinai*
- *Weapons Fighting Technique*

Snow White Sand & Turquoise Blue Water is Awaiting You!



First, Tournament. Then shooting the movie.
What's Next? SUMMER CAMP !!!

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