

KARATE

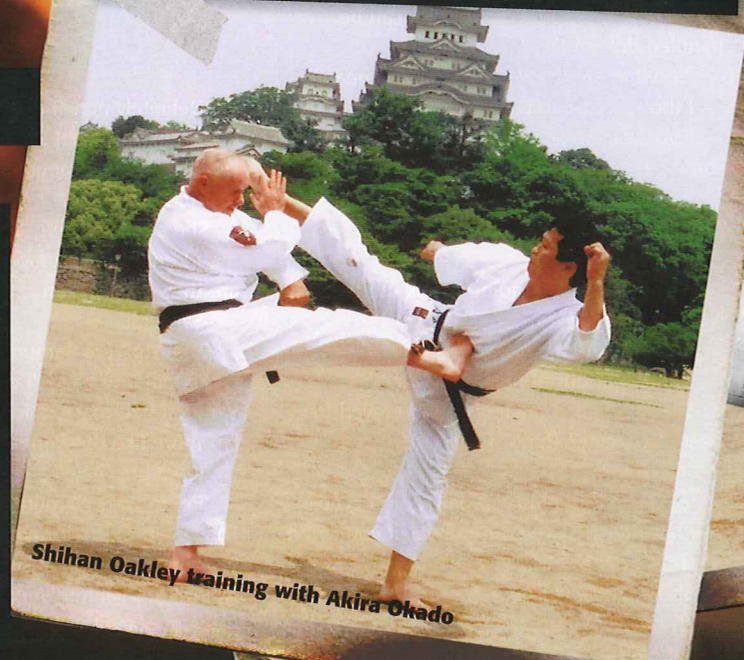
Trailblazer

PART 2

An interview with Shihan Merv Oakley

INTERVIEW BY BEN STONE | STUDIO IMAGES BY CLIVE GIRDHAM

Shihan Merv Oakley is well known as one of the early pioneers of karate in Australia – in particular, of the Goju-ryu style. The Sydney-based master introduced Goju karate to Australia in 1963, after moving to Japan to train full-time under Goju Kai founder Gogen 'The Cat' Yamaguchi. In the 45 years since, Oakley has seen much change in the Australian karate scene, and has fought to keep some things just as they were. In the second and final instalment of this interview, Oakley tackles some controversial topics at the heart of karate.



Shihan Oakley training with Akira Okado

Shihan, you mentioned [last issue] that you occasionally trained at other karate schools while you were a student at Goju Kai headquarters in Japan during the 1960s. If you've found something to work in quite well with the style and it's practical and it works, such that you're teaching it your students, how does that sort of thing go down with the organisations you're affiliated with?

It depends on who's the head [master] at the time. Whoever's the head only wants things done their way, no other way.

Do you find that pretty common?

Yeah, with every change of head – not only the head of each association, but of each school. I take a group over to Japan every second year, we go to Oita, to a teacher called Kiohara – he's a very good teacher, very easy to get along with. We train there, then we go across to my weapons teacher, Murikami Sensei – I started with him in 1972. I see [Kiohara] when I take a group down there, but I usually see Murikami Sensei every year... I only take a group every second year – too

much mucking around trying to look after so many people.

Then we go up to Saitama and we do a tournament. I like the tournament up there, simply because the judges and referees are honest. They know what they're doing and they're honest. You can't ask for any more than that. We don't win everything – we win some, lose some – but the ones you lose, well, fair enough. You lost it because you weren't good enough; the ones we win is because we were good enough.

So there's none of that cultural favouritism that tends to happen?

There's no bias. Most tournaments you go to, you just can't win because it's biased. In the old days of full-contact they had to give it [a point or victory] to you, but now if you hit [your opponent] you get disqualified.

How important do you think it is to have a connection to the art's roots in Okinawa and to have instructors above you to go to for training, advice and such like?

I think it's quite important to have people who you look up to. I don't care how many years you've been in the art, you can always learn. I've been in

to be a
Stephen



Shihan Oakley teaches his class

it a long time now but I always learn different ways to do the same thing – there must be a million ways of doing the same thing. Murikami Sensei's a real gentleman, he's 81 now but if he meets anyone he's always the first to bow. He is most polite when he speaks, very easy to get along with, but put a weapon in his hand and he looks 21. He's not in your face; very polite, very humble, very honest – my idea of what a karate man should be... but quite a few aren't.

Can you tell me about your family and their involvement in karate?

My son, Ken, got up to Shodan, he got that in 1990 when we had the international tournament here... he doesn't train much now, unfortunately. [My] wife, Teruko, is up to Green-belt – having babies sort of slowed that down. Yamaguchi Gogen [note: Japanese give the surname first – *Ed*] gave Ken his name when he was still in his mother's tummy; we asked if he'd name our son and he thought about it for a couple of days and he named him Ken, for *saeken*, the *kanji* letter he uses.

Has kobudo had any affect on your karate in terms

of your understanding of movement or tactics?

The easiest way to explain this is what Murikami Sensei says: 'Your kobudo and your karate are like a cart: if you're only doing karate, it's like the cart's only got one wheel; it'll fall over. If you use karate and kobudo, it's like the cart's got two wheels; it will stabilise itself. I find the kobudo really helps, especially now that I'm getting older [because] you're not actually hitting your body against somebody all the time – you're using the weapons, the weapons are hitting. If you have any tensions, like you get a

bit tight, you spend a couple of hours with the weapons and all the tensions leave. I feel younger again afterwards.

What is it about the movement and using the weapons?

I think you have to keep moving – like a machine, if it doesn't keep moving it will seize up... if you don't keep moving, your body will [seize].

What sort of training do you do with the weapons?

Mainly kata and do yosuku kumite with the weapons and do *ju kumite* with the *bo*. Only we use control with the *bo*



Water training in Japan

when we do jyu kumite. You don't want to hit someone with a bo — you'll kill them.

So you don't do like the Filipinos do with their weapons sparring, don the helmets and gloves?

In Japan they do, they have like kendo armour... We just use control, like in the tournaments — we don't actually hit. I always say, if you just do kata and not kumite then you're not getting the affect you should. A good example of that [is], there was a girl in NSW, she used to win all the kata tournaments... One time she got grabbed in the street and she just froze because she'd only done kata, she'd never done kumite. Even with the little kids, I still get them doing kumite. It's controlled, of course, but if a strike comes they know they have to block it. In the higher karate katas, a lot of the movements are like jujitsu movements. I did jujitsu for four years before I started karate so I use a lot of them, especially with the kids and with girls: the grabs, wrist-locks and throws, simply because girls get grabbed more often and then they get hit. It's good for them to know what to do if they do get grabbed.

What's your own training and teaching regime like these days?

I do six classes a week and private lessons daytime and weekends. I prefer the private lessons — I like to see the students getting better all the time. I get about two hours a week for myself. I go to the dojo at Roseville before the

class starts. One day I do the karate katas and the other day I weapon katas. If you don't keep doing them to keep the mind fresh, it's easy to forget movements.

And the rest of your training is just going through the classes?

Basically just teaching the lower parts, until you get

the students up high. There are a couple of students who are working in the higher parts. The grades in the kobudo are much harder to get than the grades in karate.

How many weapons are you teaching?

I'm teaching three: nunchuku, bo and sai, together up to Shodan [1st Dan] and then each Dan-grade after that you add another weapon — tonfa and karma... It's a lot to remember all the time, there's so many katas. If you count them up, you're up to like 80 different katas with the karate and the kobudo.

Do you encourage people to do all the weapons or to find one that suits them and to specialise in that?

More or less to do the three weapons up until they get to 1st Dan. They exercise different muscles in the body and by using the three of them, the whole body starts to work better together.

When you're running classes, is that when you do a lot of your training?

Most of the time I usually demonstrate before they actually do something and then just yell at them and make them do it properly. At my age I couldn't do a hard workout. In the old days I used to do kumite for an hour non-stop. If I did that now, I'd be sore the next day — I wouldn't be able to move.

Do you still do any kumite?

Oh yeah, I still do kumite, but not as much.

In your 45 years in karate, you've achieved 6th Dan in JKF

Goju. On what basis are higher Dan-grades awarded — does it become, as with a lot of martial arts, an issue of time and service to the art itself, rather than it being specific, skill-based grading processes?

I went up as far as 5th Dan under Yamaguchi Gogen and that was a kata and kumite test. When I went for the 6th Dan that was the JKFG [Japan Karate Federation Gojukai] and it was only kata.

And what about in your organisation?

We do everything, right through from the very basics, through to the kata and kumite. That's for all grades, except for first grade — they don't do kumite, it's just basics and kata. And we start from the beginning of the kihon [basics] with every grade and go right through.

We've discussed the fracturing of karate organisations [last issue]. Can you tell me what happened in Goju within Australia? It was one of the bigger early styles, with a lot of well-known instructors coming out of it. Do you still have any involvement with any of those guys from the early days?

JKFG, they're the Goju instructors all around the country; some of them I taught, some I didn't. It's getting just as politicised as everything else now. I try and keep right out of the politics side of things. I turn up to the tournament once a year and that's about it.

You mentioned before how you share with the Japanese instructors and you said you're quite open to sharing with other styles. Here in Australia, do you do much of that?

I used to, when I first started teaching. I stopped simply because people from other schools would come in — I used to welcome everybody to train — then the next thing they go back to their own school and they were saying how great they were and how terrible we were, [yet] if you look at them, what they were doing was what they learnt from me. So I more or less cut it right out. Now I don't let anyone train in my school unless they're a member of my school. If anyone's coming from another school, I ask them why did they leave their teacher — there must be something wrong — and if I know the teacher, I say, 'Well, there's nothing wrong with him, stay with him'. I had some fellas come from Kyokushinkai — one of the best teachers in Sydney of Kyokushinkai is [Australian Kyokushin Karate Association president] John Taylor. This fella said he'd been training with John Taylor and I said, 'Well, why'd you leave?' 'Oh, he makes too much contact, blah, blah, blah, blah'. I said, 'Well, I'll make more so you go back and see him'. Sometimes you don't know the teacher they're talking about, so you can't comment. **BLITZ**

