

Okinawan Karate Seminars

Training in Okinawa: What is it Really Like?

“Knowledge is of two kinds.
We know a subject ourselves,
or we know where we can
find information on it.”

—Dr. Samuel Johnson, 1709–1784

We used to regularly receive inquiries asking us who was the best teacher to train with in a particular style, or who was best at kata, bunkai, free fighting, and so forth. Of course, these questions are almost impossible to answer successfully given the many variables that exist. We would also be asked for introductions to famous karate teachers, which is always difficult because one never knows what the eventual outcome of an introduction might be. The student might be unhappy with the teacher, and vice versa. In both instances we would be blamed for their dissatisfaction.

There is also a very distinct communication problem inherent in these exchanges. For example, when the student asks for, “the best kata teacher” does he mean an instructor who can teach him how to rapidly overcome a violent opponent in a “life or death” situation using karate, or someone who will coach him for a sport karate kata championship, in order to acquire a plastic trophy. Similarly, we are asked for “bunkai” instructors as if kata and bunkai teachers were the karate equivalent of such medical specialists as urologists and pediatricians.

We tired of explaining to people that any legitimate karate teacher should be capable of teaching a complete system, regardless of the style. I’m sure that many felt that we were withholding information, but we were not. It was simply too difficult to explain concepts that were obvious to us, but seemingly incomprehensible to others.

Eventually we realized that the best solution would be to expose those seeking a deeper understanding of karate to the source—the most senior Okinawan karate instructors of all styles—and allow them to draw their own conclusions. This we did for the first time three years ago by organizing a series of seminars in Okinawa with the most respected senior instructors on the island. The results were extraordinary. Experienced Western karateka, when confronted with genuinely traditional karate were shocked, amazed, and then seized with a desire to learn as much of it as they could, as quickly as possible!

When we placed our invitation to attend an Okinawan karate immersion course in the pages of this magazine, the first group to respond was a diverse one. It included professional karate instructors, lawyers, a physician, business people, engineers, a journalist, a security consultant, a writer, a translator, college students, and a fac-



Classical Fighting Arts

*The Authentic Martial Disciplines
of China, Japan, and Okinawa*

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Summer 2012

Classical Fighting Arts (ISSN 1547-416X)

Published quarterly by
Dragon Associates Inc.

PO Box 6039.

Thousand Oaks, California, 91359

USA subscriptions are available for

1 year \$29 (4 issues);

2 years \$49 (8 issues);

3 years \$69 (12 issues)

Canadian subscriptions (airmail):

1 year \$35 (4 issues);

2 years \$65 (8 issues)

Overseas (airmail):

1 year \$49 (4 issues);

2 years \$95 (8 issues)

Please call (800) 717-6288

to subscribe or visit our web site:

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Change of Address:

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Important Notice: *CFA* magazine is not
responsible for replacing undelivered copies.

Periodicals postage paid at Thousand Oaks, CA,
and additional mailing offices.

POSTMASTER: Send address changes to

Classical Fighting Arts magazine

PO Box 6039 Thousand Oaks CA 91359.

Advertising: To advertise in
Classical Fighting Arts magazine
please call toll-free (800) 717-6288.

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The Class of 2010: Front row, left to right: Jason Quero, Michael Galose, Yoshio Kuba Sensei, Taylor Prakken, Mickey Brock, Warren Graham.
Second row: Paulo Bartolo, Ray Walter, Rick Wilson, Chris Denwood, Leland Pierce, Jeff Bickle.
Third row: Rick Arter, Denis Boillard, Alexander Puchalski, David Isenberg, Jonathon Roll, Sarah Morse, Edward Comeau, Jon Berry.
Fourth Row: Michael Kwasigroch.

tory worker. They traveled from the UK, US, Canada, Portugal, and Brazil, to Naha International Airport to be met by a welcoming committee of senior members of the *Okinawa Prefectural Karate Do Rengokai*, and *CFA* magazine staff.

This 2010 event created a blueprint upon which all subsequent events have been based. It was simple, practical, enjoyable—for both teachers and instructors—and rewarding for those of us who organized it. It also did much to encourage openness among the more conservative Okinawan instructors who had initially balked at teaching publicly. One must remember that for many veteran karate instructors, teaching still means working with one or two students, in a private dojo, behind closed doors.¹

We also discovered from this first event that working with the board members of the Okinawan Prefectural Karate Do Rengokai—our karate hosts, and the largest karate organization in Okinawa—was an amazing experience. President Isamu Arakaki and Vice Presidents Minoru Higa and Zenpo Shimabukuro were efficient, organized, and fun-loving. If something went wrong, it was fixed immediately; if I

needed more resources, they were instantly made available; if a student had a problem, people were set to work on solving it! So different from what one experiences with other karate organizations!

The Rengokai provided the Okinawa Prefectural Budokan for the seminar venue, an impressive building of unique design that stands on the edge of Onoyama Park close to the East China Sea, bounded on one side by National Highway 58, and on the other by the Kokubagawa River. The second floor Rinsei Dojo in which we train is very large, light, and airy, with private changing rooms for students and teachers. Like the building of which it is a part, its design is unique, and ideally suited to its intended purpose which, according to the legend above the entrance door, is:

“...A special place for training the mind and body. In the dojo, budo practitioners must maintain discipline and show proper courtesy and respect. The dojo should provide a quiet, clean, safe, and solemn environment.”

On that first Monday morning our train-

ees had, what would be for many of them, their first sight of Uechi Ryu. Seiyu Itokazu Sensei² took them through the basics of the style and then on to Sanchin, the fundamental kata of Uechi Ryu. He emphasized the need for body conditioning during his seminar, a requirement which was not obvious to many of our members until they tried to block Itokazu Sensei’s (“polite”) punches. The well conditioned arms of an Uechi Ryu practitioner are weapons. As seminar attendee and journalist Rick Wilson noted: “Equally impressive—or scary—were their forearms, which sometimes appear to have been tattooed purple. Hours of *kote kitai* or arm pounding exercises have turned them into the equivalent of baseball bats.”³

Tsuyoshi Uechi Sensei taught the afternoon seminar on Isshin Ryu, a style only recently recognized by the Okinawan authorities as traditional, (*dento* 伝統) largely as a result of his efforts and those of the Rengokai. Quiet and unassuming, Uechi Sensei is a strong proponent of traditional training methods as can be seen from his fists, made hard and huge by years of dedicated makiwara training. Apart from his obvious strength, his most impressive

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features are the quality and strength of his kata, which is truly superb. His front kick is remarkable for its speed and power, yet he performs it without apparent effort.⁴

On Tuesday morning, as the Prefectural Budokan in Naha was closed for maintenance, we piled into our bus and headed for Okinawa City, 15 miles north of the capital city of Naha. The Okinawa City Budokan was recently extensively refurbished to provide a venue for the All Japan Gymnastic Championships, and now boasts superb karate and judo dojos. We have the exclusive use of this huge facility when we train there, and to save them the inconvenience of traveling south to Naha, we ask senior instructors who live locally to instruct us.

Zenpo Shimabukuro Sensei (10th Dan Hanshi, Shorin Ryu Seibukan) was a natural choice to teach the morning seminar as his dojo and business offices are close by in Chatan. Assisted by his son Zenshun and his senior student, Tatsumasa Isagawa, Zenpo Sensei taught with the energy and sincerity that have earned him his reputation for excellence. It was nonstop Seibukan Shorin Ryu, or as one senior Shotokan attendee put it, "Shotokan on steroids!" It

might well be. Zenpo Sensei's father was a senior student of Chotoku Kyan, (Chan Mi) a contemporary of Gichin Funakoshi. Seibukan karate is distinguished by its power, speed, and punishing impact that is generated by dynamic stance shifting as the body is being "whipped" in the characteristic Shorin Ryu fashion, a vital "power" ingredient that is now absent in Shotokan karate.

Like Zenpo Sensei, Kiyoshi Takamiyagi Sensei⁵ 10th Dan Uechi Ryu is a fluent English speaker, and so I was delighted to encounter him in the lobby of the Budokan after lunch. I assumed that he would be teaching the afternoon class. I was partly right, he was, but not alone. Within five minutes, eight additional senior instructors arrived including: Tsutomu Nakahodo (10th Dan Hanshi – Living Intangible Cultural Treasure), Hiroshi Inada (10th Dan), Toshio Higa (9th Dan), Hirokuni Yamashiro (9th Dan), Soko Machida (6th Dan) and others. The class was absolutely amazing, given entirely in English, and every student was handed a set of lecture notes



The Okinawa Prefectural Budokan is located on Hwy. 58 within easy walking distance of Asahibashi, Tsubogawa, and Onoyama Koen monorail stations. The CFA/Rengokai seminars will be held there until construction of the World Headquarters of Karate (*Karate Do Kaikan*) in Okinawa is completed.

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entitled: "On The Basic Karate Mentality"⁶ by Takamiyagi Sensei who is a Professor Emeritus of Kokusai University.

Every morning our members would ask me, "Who is teaching today?" Every day they would be surprised by the quality of the teachers, their kindness, and the care with which they taught. Higa Sensei⁷ (10th Dan Hanshi Kobayashi Ryu) although fearsome in appearance and a hard task master in the dojo, (2,600 full power techniques for a warm-up and he did every one with the class) is the kindest and most considerate man you could wish to meet. Arakaki Sensei (10th Dan Hanshi Kobayashi Ryu) is extremely strict when it comes to training, but would have the whole class giggling with his anecdotes and reminiscences. A broad smile would spread across Kuba Sensei's otherwise stoic countenance as he demonstrated his diabolical kata applications involving locks, throws, and the most incredible nerve holds, (he is a practicing acupuncture doctor and pharmacist and knows just where to catch hold of you for maximum effect).

Despite some initial concerns on our part, the debut event went very well and was viewed as a success by all involved. If proof were needed, I would point to the number of attendees at that first event who have since returned: Jason Quero, Michael Galose, Michael Kwasigroch, Warren Graham, Sarah Morse, Denis Boilard, Nathalie Carrier, Juan Antonio Balderas and Rosalinda Balderas. Ed Comeau (Canada) returned in 2011 with 31 students, Chris

Denwood (England) with eleven members of his dojo, and Paulo Bartolo (Brazil) with ten.

On 11 March at 2:46 PM the northern part of Japan was struck by the Tohoku Earthquake and resulting tsunami. Measuring 9 on the Richter Scale, it was one of the worst seismic events ever recorded killing 15,848, seriously injuring 6,011, and leaving 3,305 people missing, with a further 460,000 homeless. The tsunami generated by this cataclysmic occurrence was as high as 133 feet and traveled at great speed inland as far as 10 km. (6.25 miles). Despite the often wildly exaggerated and distorted reports that appeared in American and European newspapers, in Japan there was no panic, looting, civil disobedience, or unrest. The Japanese people simply cleaned

up and went on with their lives in an orderly fashion, as they always do.

However, the reports of food shortages, that did not exist, coupled with the radiation scares,⁸ did succeed in reducing the group of twenty-eight members enrolled for the spring 2011 seminars to 14. The resolute souls who did come left their homes in the Americas, Europe, and Australia for Tokyo's Narita Airport just 22 days after the disaster. Several members later remarked that Narita seemed less busy than usual, and they did experience several aftershocks in the airport. At 7:25 PM local time, as the sun set over the Land of the Rising Sun, Japan Transocean Flight JL 3095 took off on schedule with our second seminar group bound for a tropical island set in the emerald waters of the East China Sea, almost one thousand miles to the south.

When I left my home in Southern California for Okinawa a week earlier to prepare the seminars, I was told by Japan Airlines executives that ours was the ONLY group that did not cancel their trip to Japan that week! They were amazed; I was not!

On Sunday morning, after a night's sleep, our members looked energetic and enthusiastic, so we set off on our Naha City orientation trip. After initiating them into the secrets of the monorail system, we visited the Budokan so they would know where to go on Monday morning, followed by the Jusco Shopping centre, then back to central Naha for lunch at "Main Place" in Shinto Shin, the City's downtown shopping mall.

Continues on page 66...



Tsuyoshi Uechi Sensei, (Isshin Ryu) is a very popular instructor as a result of his superb technique, and genuine humility. Seen here with a student at the shrine in Onoyama Koen, (just behind the Budokan), a favorite lunch time picnic spot for our members.

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This is conveniently located next to the Okinawan Prefectural Museum, a jewel of a place that is certainly worth a visit. After lunch we visited the magnificent Shuri Castle, the former home of the Okinawan Kings.

Training went very well that week. Higaonna Sensei taught two classes⁹ and Shinzato Katsuhiko¹⁰ Sensei joined us for the first time. Each day brought new teachers, new training methods, and new applications. The emphasis was, as always, on acquiring knowledge and skills, and not on the repetition of basic techniques. To this end, our instructors insist that the classes be small so they can explain in detail and answer questions from students. In our dojo the atmosphere is serious, respectful, and hard work is expected. There is also a refreshing absence of militarism, no barked orders, no snappy responses. This is not high school boot camp, but a martial arts university where the participants' intelli-

gence, strength, and skill, find each other!

For the Spring 2011 event we extended our social program to include a farewell dinner and tour of the Southern part of Okinawa using a small private bus provided by the Cultural Centre. On a warm sunny day we visited Shikina En, the former Summer Palace of the Okinawan Kings and wartime underground headquarters of the Japanese Imperial Navy in Tomishiro City, and then the beautiful if haunting Itoman Memorial Peace Park. A superb lunch in the dining room of the four star Southern Beach Hotel overlooking the East China Sea, was followed by a tour of the Gyokusendo caves, among the most extensive in the world, and nearby Okinawan Village. An enjoyable, culturally significant outing that provided a welcome change of pace after a very busy week.

Perhaps less culturally uplifting was our Sayonara dinner. As our number had been

depleted by the disaster at Sendai, Arakaki Sensei picked a small *izakaya*¹¹ as our venue. He also negotiated a price for dinner that included a two hour period during which beer would be served free. The hapless proprietor of the *izakaya* was clearly unaware of the fact that half of the male guests seated in his private tatami room were Australians, Englishmen, and Irishmen, individuals not unfamiliar with the restorative properties of the national beverage of their respective homelands. We were joined for this event by Arakaki Sensei and Higa Sensei, and the evening can only be described as a riot. It was a red letter day for us, and a red ledger day for the unfortunate owner of this amazing little establishment.

Our social events were so well received that for the Autumn 2011 seminar series we added more. The thirty-two members attending this event came from the *Team Canada Black Belt Institute* dojo in Oshawa,



Bus tour of Southern Okinawa, April 2011. Itoman Memorial Peace Park.

Front row, left to right: Kunio Uehara Sensei, Miyuki Uehara, John O'Conner, Mickey Brock. Second Row: Rosalinda Balderas, Juan Antonio Balderas, Kathleen Garrity, Steve Herskovits, John Turnbull, Denis Boilard, Francis Seery, Nathalie Carrier, Glenn Irvine, Agnieszka Jasinska, Steve Soars, Michael Galose. Back row: Takayama San.

Canada. Their senior instructor, Edward Comeau, had trained with us in 2010, and brought his students back to share the experience of studying traditional karate with senior Okinawan masters. After a week of intense training we toured Southern Okinawa, adding the Chojun Miyagi memorial and the Fukushu-En Chinese Garden to our regular list of landmarks to visit. The following day we headed north to Motobu and the Ocean Expo Park to experience the amazing Churaumi Aquarium, Okinawan Native Village, Dream Tower, etc.

On 9 October our Canadian members took part in the Naha City Giant Tug-of-War, a contest that according to the *Guinness Book of World Records*, uses the largest straw rope on the planet. In the morning they joined the *Ufunnasunei* parade, and at 2:00 PM precisely, all thirty-two of them took hold of an ancillary rope and pulled the East Team to a draw. This was a wonderful group and we were very sorry to see them leave.¹²

Our seminars, the only ones officially sanctioned by the Okinawa Prefectural Karate Do Rengokai, continue to evolve and grow. All the members attending our

next seminar series will be from the ESKK dojo in England, students of alumni Chris Denwood (Spring 2010). They will be the first group to train exclusively in the private dojo of senior masters such as Isamu Arakaki, Minoru Higa, Morio Higaonna, Yoshio Kuba, Zenpo Shimabukuro, etc. for the true Okinawan Karate Experience. A few days after they leave, the members of our main spring group will arrive from the United States, Canada, Mexico, Australia, Denmark, and Poland. All will be welcomed with the warmth that Okinawans always show their guests and which is summed up by one very important word in the Okinawan language, *Mensore*: welcome! You will always be welcome to train with us in Okinawa!

I wrote this report at the urging of seminar members because it gave me the opportunity to thank the people who make these unique events possible; the often unseen faces upon whom the success of everything depends. Of course, without our amazing faculty nothing would happen, and so we list their names at the end of this report with pride.

Isamu Arakaki Sensei, the President of the Okinawa Prefectural Karate-Do Rengokai is the person who made these events possible by using his considerable influence to promote and support them. Zenpo Shimabukuro Sensei is the Rengokai senior in charge of this project, and does a outstanding job as our advisor, liaison officer, and interpreter. Miyuki Uehara, the local CFA representative in Okinawa, is the “go to” person if you need something done. She is organized, efficient, and prompt; things just “happen” when Miyuki San is around. Kunio Uehara Sensei (no relation) is our official interpreter, and works tirelessly helping non-English speaking instructors teach their classes, organizes meetings, and accompanies tour groups. I would also like to thank our transport manager, Takayama San, who after a full day taking care of our members, drove all the way from Itoman to Naha to return a camera that one of them left in his bus. The staff of our (karate friendly) hotel also deserve credit for their patience and kindness. I am proud to work with these fine people, and eternally grateful to them all!



A karate demonstration at the centre point of the rope, where the two halves, male and female, are joined with a huge wooden pin. The karate community is heavily involved in the Otsuna Hiki event at every level. In 2011 the President of the Tug-of-War Preservation Society was Isamu Arakaki Sensei, who is also President of the Okinawa Prefectural Karate Do Rengokai, our host organization.



October 2011, Onoyama Park lake, immediately behind the Prefectural Budokan, Naha City, Okinawa, Japan.
Members of the Team Canada Black Belt Institute, Oshawa, Ontario, Canada, pose for a memorial photo after their last seminar.

For more information:

Web site: www.karatedata.org

Interviews of seminar attendees (Okinawan TV): http://www.okinawabbtv.com/culture/karate/okinawakarete_c/html/2010_sankasha_semina_en.html

Footnotes

1. Isenberg, David, Alumni April 2010. "Kicking it With The Okinawan Masters," *Asia Times* 15 June 2010: "In fact, while training in Okinawa is generally physically and mentally taxing, it is also non-repetitive, and personal. Okinawan teachers do not generally like military type 'drilling' and prefer a low teacher-student ratio." <http://atimes.com/atimes/Japan/LF15Dh0I.html>
2. Please see the interview of Itokazu Sensei that starts on page 15 of this edition.

3. Wilson, Rick, "A Pilgrim Studies in the Birthplace of Karate," *Charleston Sunday Gazette-Mail*. <http://wvgazette.com/Life/Travel/201005280851>
4. Footage of his and other seminars, and interviews of our members by Okinawan TV can be found at: http://www.okinawabbtv.com/culture/karate/okinawakarete_c/html/2010_uechi_semina_en.html
5. Co-author, with Katsuhiko Shinzato Sensei, of the *Karate Do Jitten* encyclopedia.
6. *Classical Fighting Arts* magazine Vol 2 No.19 Issue 42 pg. 9
7. President of the Okinawa Karate Do Renmei.
8. The *Fukushima Dai Ichi* accident has been compared, unfairly, with the Chernobyl disaster in the Ukraine (USSR) of 26 April 1986. The result of gross incompetence by Communist authorities, the radioactive material expelled from Chernobyl spread across the whole of Europe and estimates of the eventual death toll go as high as 200,000.

- It was mainly our European members from regions affected by Chernobyl radiation in 1986 who cancelled their trips to Okinawa in 2011 on the grounds of radiation risk. This is ironic as they had already received a much greater dose of radiation from Chernobyl (even though it was 1,000 miles away) than the people living in the immediate vicinity of Fukushima Daiichi!
9. For Okinawan TV footage of his classes see: http://www.okinawabbtv.com/culture/karate/okinawakarete_c/html/2010_higashi_semina_en.html
 10. http://www.okinawabbtv.com/culture/karate/okinawakarete_c/html/2010_shinzato_semina_en.html
 11. A local bar/restaurant, the Okinawan equivalent of an English pub.
 12. Please see footage of Naha City Giant Tug-of-War (Otsuna Hiki) here: http://www.karatedata.org/Video/tug_of_war.wmv

CERTIFICATED GRADUATES

Jennell Armstrong, Richard Arter, Juan Antonio, Balderas, Paulo Roberto Bartolo, Jonathan Bennett, Jonathan Berry, Jeffrey Bickle, Denis Boilard, Mickey Brock, Nathalie Carrier, Lynn Collins, Edward Comeau, Christopher Denwood, Thomas Flagg, Samantha Forster, Mike Galose, Kathleen Garrity, Warren Graham, Stephen Herskovits, Mark Hukezalie, Glenn Irvine, David Isenberg, Agnieszka Jasinska, Michael Johnson, Connor Johnston, Erik Johnston, Rachel Johnston, Joseph Kowaliw, Michael Kwasigroch, Pierre Lepage, Holly Martindale, Karen Martindale, Robert Martindale, Wesley Martindale, Dana Miettinen, Matthew Mitchell, Pamela Moore, Sarah Morse, William Morse, Christopher Mueller, Michael Mueller, Henry Nicholson, James O'Connor, John O'Connor, Leland Pierce, Taylor Prakken, Dante Presta, Alexander Puchalski, Jason Quero, Brian Riley, Jonathon Roll, Francis Seery, Steven Soars, Susanne Trauzzi, Jon Turnbull, Elisha Van Tienen, Kurt Van Tienen, Peter Van Tienen, Rosalinda Villegas De Balderas, Raymond Walter, Richard Wilson, Daniel Wilson.

FACULTY

Isamu Arakaki, 10th Dan Hanshi Shorin Ryu; Minoru Higa, 10th Dan Hanshi Shorin Ryu; Morio Higaonna, 10th Dan Hanshi Goju Ryu; Seisho Itokazu, 9th Dan Konan (Uechi) Ryu, 8th Dan Matayoshi kobudo; Yoshio Kuba, 9th Dan Hanshi Goju Ryu; Katsuhiko Shinzato, 9th Dan Kishaba Juku; Zempo Shimabukuro, 10th Dan Hanshi Shorin Ryu; Katsuhiko Shinzato, 9th Dan Shorin Ryu Tsuyoshi Uechi, 9th Dan Isshin Ryu; Kiyoshi Takamiyagi, 10th Dan Uechi Ryu; Ryuko Tomoyose, 10th Dan Hanshi Uechi Ryu; Tsutomu Nakahodo, 10th Dan Hanshi Uechi Ryu; Sokuichi Gibu, 10th Dan Hanshi Shorin Ryu.

