

# Hirokazu Kanazawa Sensei - Karate master - Blitz Martial Arts Magazine

## Hirokazu Kanazawa Sensei

Written by Mike Clarke

There are few teachers of karate alive today who have spent as much time in the spotlight as Hirokazu Kanazawa. From his rise to the very top of the once-prestigious Japan Karate Association to the founding of his own organisation, Shotokan Karate International Federation, in 1978, Kanazawa Sensei has withstood the focus of attention from the karate world for well over 40 years.



Hirokazu Kanazawa Sensei

His relentless travelling has seen him crisscross the world many times during his annual visits to the several million SKIF members in more than 130 countries around the globe. Kanazawa Sensei's organisation is, and has been for some time, the largest karate group in the world training under one teacher, and this was evident during his visit to Shotokan Karate International Australia's recent 'Shotokan Week' held in Hobart, Tasmania. Mike Clarke was fortunate to chat with the revered karate master during his rare trip Down Under.

Until now, Hirokazu Kanazawa Sensei's unremitting travel routine has seen him clock up more air miles than your average airline pilot — but not anymore. This year is the last time Kanazawa Sensei will travel so extensively, and from 2012 he intends to spend far more of his time at home in Japan.

The next SKIF World Championships, scheduled for Sydney in November 2012, will be his last major overseas trip.

I met Kanazawa Sensei for the first time back in the late 1980s in Perth, Western Australia, and for several years afterwards I met and trained with him again at various locations in Australia, England and America. But all that was a long time ago, and these days we are both showing signs of, shall we say, maturity! With more than a few suspect joints, and carrying other injuries that stand testament to a life in the dojo, Kanazawa Sensei is lucky to be alive. In January 2009, a skiing accident saw him fall badly and be buried, face down, under a huge mound of snow. The force of the fall and the weight of the snow damaged his spine, crushing three vertebra; a condition resulting in constant pain for Kanazawa Sensei ever since. His freedom from the snow came about because he was able to move one leg, and with that he managed to attract his rescuers to where he was buried. Recovery has been slow and has been hampered by the enforced rest from daily training that has allowed minor problems to become more severe. Fifteen years have passed since our last meeting, so I was very happy to have a chance to meet and train with him again recently. This time it was right on my doorstep, in Hobart, Tasmania, where he led the annual week-long training event for SKIF in Australia known as 'National Shotokan Week'. This event is held in a different location around the country each year, and having it happen this time a mere 200 kilometres from my home was a wonderful opportunity to connect with Kanazawa Sensei once again.

The twice-daily training during the week-long course was held at two different locations in Hobart, with Kyu-grade students in one location and Yudansha (Black-belts) in another. The separation of students along these lines allowed for the various instructors to move from one group to another and to teach according to the level of each. It was a system that worked well and gave both groups the opportunity to get the maximum benefit from training with each instructor. Kanazawa Sensei's sessions were assisted by either his eldest son, Nobuaki Sensei, or by Manabu Murakami Sensei, both of whom teach at the SKIF hombu dojo in Tokyo.

During the training led by Kanazawa Sensei, it was clear from the beginning that the younger men may be doing all the demonstrating, but the lesson always came from Kanazawa Sensei himself. Even at his advanced age — he is now in his eighties — he has lost none of his 'spark' or passion for karate. For as long as I've known him, I've only ever seen him encourage his followers to do their best and to try that little bit harder.

On two consecutive nights, after the training was over for the day, I met Kanazawa Sensei, his son Nobuaki, and Manabu Murakami at their hotel. Away from the crowds, the requests for photographs, and the constant glair of attention, they relaxed with a glass of wine, discussed a little business and, like many Japanese visitors to Tasmania, looked forward to sampling the fresh seafood on offer around the many harbour-side restaurants in Hobart. My conversation with Kanazawa Sensei was a gentle one. He has been training in karate for longer than I have been alive, and I'm 56 years old! I didn't want to waste this opportunity asking him questions about the technicalities of Shotokan karate, I wanted to connect with a sensei who transcends the concept of 'style' within karate. So I began our conversation with the question: Where to from here?

“After this year I will not travel so much, and next year I will retire from travelling altogether after the World Championships in November,” he told me. “After that, I want to repair my body. My ankle, knees and hips are a problem now and my doctor believes I need to have surgery to fix these problems. Once I recover from these operations I will be in better (physical) condition, so at that time I want to try many things. I want to continue with tai chi, karate-do, and other things too.”

Kanazawa Sensei continued, “There are things that I am still not teaching from tai chi. I also want to teach more kobudo. Now people are training with the bo and also nunchaku, but I want to teach sai too, because these weapons are from the same family as karate. Usually, in mainland Japan, kobudo and karate are separate; karate remains independent from kobudo, but in Okinawa they are the same family.”

It is clear when you meet Kanazawa Sensei that he perceives SKIF as a family. But this is not a unique analogy in the world of martial arts — I’ve heard many others speak in similar terms about their organisations. Still, Kanazawa Sensei is sincere in his feelings toward those who follow him and, I have to say, more authentic in this belief than many I have met over the years. Even though SKIF was founded over 30 years ago and has (literally) millions of members worldwide, Kanazawa Sensei still feels he has not done enough to spread his message. “I don’t know why people are still requesting membership to SKIF, but they do, they are still coming,” he said.

I’m not a big fan of ‘celebrity’, in fact, I think the existence of it within the martial arts is proof that so many have misunderstood the purpose of training. Still, Kanazawa Sensei is very inspirational, and as such, it is easy to see why so many involved in Shotokan karate would choose to follow him. He believes his greatest achievement over the years has been to establish a sense of harmony within himself, and within the members of SKIF. “Even when you are in competition, at a tournament, harmony is very important. Harmony with your opponent, having respect for him, means that you are never frightened, never angry; this level of respect between people makes good harmony.” It’s a philosophy Kanazawa Sensei has been developing for many years. In January 1961, he left Japan for the first time to take up residence in Hawaii as the representative of the Japan Karate Association. Expectation was running high among the local karateka, but if they were expecting ‘The Terminator’, they were in for a surprise. For as well as the physical demands he was about to make on them, he brought with him his own philosophy of understanding and harmony.

“When I arrived in Hawaii, I told everyone who came to training, ‘because you train in karate, don’t become big-headed. Don’t pretend to be strong. Try to find harmony in your life, that way you will never be angry or frightened; so never forget this’. I’m not sure if everyone understood what I was saying, but I tried to teach this lesson when I arrived in Hawaii. I wanted people who had strong karate to also be humble in their dealings with others.

“When I travel around the world now and see people I have known for many years, it makes me very happy to see a lot of them are successful in their society. When I see they are happy, then I too get a happy feeling. For me, this is the best feeling in life.”

As so often happens when people become involved in karate, they get lost in the acquisition of technique. There is often a hunger for more that sees people move around from club to club, or

association to association, if they believe they're not getting enough 'new stuff', or the next kata is a little too long in coming. It's a childish approach to karate, of course; an approach born of immaturity and a lack of understanding of what karate is. Nevertheless, commercial instructors frequently concede to the demands of their members rather than see them go elsewhere. In the self-indulgent rush to grab as much information as possible, the reason why something is done in karate is often lost in the rush to learn how to do it. The result of this approach is that many people become expert at training in karate, rather than in karate itself.

When I spoke with Kanazawa Sensei about this, he told me, "The learning of correct technique is often very difficult, but the patience and perseverance needed is good for building your character. Even moving correctly from one technique to another is very important and takes time to learn how to do well.

"If all you do every day is punch and kick without thinking, this is not so good. You have to ask yourself, 'Why are you doing this?' Okay...so if you don't ask yourself 'why?' maybe just doing the movements is better than not doing anything but, if you never think and ask yourself why you are doing techniques this way or that way, this is not good; training this way is not budo. Karate training is not just physical, it must be good for your body and spirit [character] together."

As well as his extraordinary physical abilities as a younger man, Kanazawa Sensei has always been known as a deep thinker. Many of the ideas he has expressed in various interviews over the years have led some to believe he sees the world differently to most. I would agree that, while pointing out that the differences reflect his ability to harmonise his thoughts, deeds and actions into one complete package: that of a sensei. That others who claim the same title are often unable to achieve a similar balance in their lives sets Kanazawa Sensei apart in my mind, for all the right reasons. I have never walked away from spending time with him without learning more than I thought I already knew, and this occasion was no different.

During the course of the evening our conversation turned to subjects other than kicking and punching, although still very much related to the understanding of karate. The concept of ten-chi-jin (heaven-earth-man) and the harmony of these three elements were, Kanazawa Sensei said, important in order to make a connection between who we are and what we are doing. "The idea of 'ten-chi-jin' is about harmony. Ten is heaven or, in this case, the sky; chi is the ground, or earth; and jin is a person, or a person's nature. To bring these three into harmony is important. If you have a good character but you are not strong enough to deal with the problems in your life, this is no good. On the other hand, if you have strong technique but a poor character, what good is that? Karate is not just about thinking, or just about doing, it is the balance of both to bring harmony into your life."

Retuning to the subject of tournaments for a moment, I was keen to get Kanazawa Sensei's thoughts on seitei-gata — those strangely punctuated displays of overly exaggerated choreography that many in karate today believe are kata that have been handed down to us from karate masters of the past. To anyone who understands the role kata plays in the learning of karate, the gymnastic displays of karate-like movements seen in tournaments bear only a passing resemblance to the forms studied and practised in the dojo. "Today it is very difficult to judge kata, mostly because people have

changed the timing and sometimes the distance of techniques too. Also, the breathing in some kata has been changed and now you can see even small children trying to breathe too hard. Stances too have been changed, but this also affects your distance and timing, two very important parts of a kata. Therefore, I say you have to make a difference between sport karate and budo karate. These changes may be okay for sport karate, but not for the whole of karate. Unfortunately, some people see sport karate and think this is all karate is.”

Kanazawa Sensei pointed out that as well as kata, the sporting approach to karate has also changed the way people engage in kumite (fighting). I asked him how the idea of sparring challenged the maxim *karate ni sente nashi* (no first attack in karate), made famous by the founder of Shotokan karate, Gichin Funakoshi. “Well, if no one attacks, we can’t train, so I don’t think this idea applies in this situation. I think ‘*karate ni sente nashi*’ is about using karate in the street. Here, you should not attack first, but always try to achieve harmony with people, so you don’t have to fight.”

The idea of training yourself seems to be in decline these days, with many students only going to their training class, doing whatever their instructor tells them to do, and then returning home until their next class. This is in stark contrast to the traditional way karate has been understood and practised for centuries. *Kigu-undo*, the training and testing of your technique and spirit with the use of various tools, has also disappeared from most karate systems today. With the notable exception of the *makiwara* (striking post), few tools are used these days in Shotokan training. Kanazawa Sensei was introduced to the *makiwara* as a young man training at the infamous Takushoku University karate club and, if asked politely, will tell you tales of incredibly difficult training days when he was ‘encouraged’ to stand before the *makiwara* and face the excruciating pain of hitting it with open wounds where his knuckles had been the day before; and the scant relief from the agony he and his fellow students felt as they spent hours each evening plucking splinters of straw from their bloody hands.

“*Makiwara* training is important for karate, not just for punching, but also for the hips and to build a strong *hara* [centre – the part of the body where internal power is generated]. It can be difficult at first. One day I was teaching at a university in Japan; I wanted the students to have a strong punch so we were training on the *makiwara*. One student said, ‘Sensei, in competition I have to stop my punch, so why do I have to make a strong punch? Maybe weak is better. If I make contact by mistake with a weak punch then it’s okay, but if I make contact with a strong punch I will knock my opponent down and get disqualified!’ I could see the students thinking, and laughed, then told him to continue! “For me, the most important thing about *makiwara* training is developing the *hara* — spirit. This is important for developing a fighting spirit. If you don’t have a fighting spirit, then how do you get through life? How do you get through hard times at work or difficult times when you study? If you don’t have this fighting spirit, it is hard to achieve anything and life will become too difficult. People without this fighting spirit find many things too hard and they give up. So, besides developing correct technique, a strong stance, punch, and strong hips, if you practise many punches on the *makiwara*, you will develop a strong body and mind together.”

While the *makiwara* remains an essential part of karate training in many Japanese schools, it is unclear why most of the other training tools failed to gain a similar foothold in the karate of Japan

generally. Kanazawa Sensei's thoughts gave a possible reason: "I'm not sure how this situation has happened. But remember, Funakoshi Sensei was a school teacher, and therefore I think his idea for karate was to help with the physical and mental education of the students. In Okinawa, karate has kept the traditional training methods and I think this is very good. In Japan there are also dojo that have this kind of training, with many tools. For karate-do this kind of training is important, but it's not necessary if you are only training for competition. In that case, you only have to move quickly and punch or kick, then 'Ippon!', and you win. There is no need to be strong in competition; it's not like karate-do."

I wondered, as I sat listening to him, if Kanazawa Sensei speaks so clearly about the difference between sport karate and budo karate, why so many others in karate fail to see the distinction?

Besides training with the tools used to condition the body and mind, I asked what the importance of training by yourself was; as again, this method of pursuing karate has all but vanished from the minds of the majority of karateka these days. I was pleased to learn that Kanazawa Sensei agreed with me, and considered that finding the time to train yourself, on your own, is essential. He believes this idea (solo practice) has become increasingly rare today, and although he can't say for sure, he thinks it may have something to do with people wanting a certain level of excitement from their training. "Now, not so many people train by themselves, only a few. This kind of training is difficult to do and is not exciting like in a class with others. When you are training alone it can be very hard; but this kind of training is very good for the development of your spirit, because you have to rely on ki — your spirit!"

After eight decades, Kanazawa Sensei has had to deal with many adversities — the loss of his beloved wife, raising his three young sons, and his politically inspired departure from the JKA — all, or any, of which might have been enough to stop a lesser man from moving forward in life. But while Kanazawa Sensei believes the very act of living is difficult, he says, "I never think one thing in life is any more difficult than anything else, just different. You have to fix problems that come your way, try to do your best — that is all you can do."

It's a simple enough approach to life, I thought as I sat there listening, but I wondered how many karateka today understand this. Perhaps this is one of the drawbacks when karate training is conducted en masse: the personal relationship between sensei and deshi (student) is often lost. But, for many of the people training in Hobart, the week was about gaining experience and exposure to the ideas and words of an authentic master of karate, and in that regard, I think it's fair to say it was successful.

## Richard Norton: Master of Freestyle Fighting

Written by Ben Stone & Mark Boon Souphanh

Soke Richard Norton, 8th Dan, is as well known for his lightning speed and mastery of multiple martial arts as for his many action movie roles, both as an actor and fight choreographer. When Norton graced the very first cover of *Blitz* — his first of many over 25 years — he already had many years of fighting experience, having been a founding member of the notoriously tough Zen Do Kai and working for many years alongside its creator, Soke Bob Jones, as a bodyguard to the stars.