

# KARATE

# Trailblazer

An interview with Shihan Merv Oakley

INTERVIEW BY BEN STONE | STUDIO IMAGES BY CLIVE GIRDHAM

Shihan Merv Oakley is a name synonymous with Australian karate and, in particular, the Goju-ryu style. The Sydney-based master introduced Goju karate to Australia in 1963, after training in Japan with Gogen 'The Cat' Yamaguchi, founder of the Goju Kai school. Since those days, much has changed in the Australian karate scene, and within the Goju fraternity itself. Following on from our cover story last issue, here one of our country's martial arts pioneers gives us his opinions on the karate of old, the karate of today and much more besides.

**D**o you use the standard protective equipment for sparring (*kumite*) in your club these days?

[We] use gloves. In tournaments, we use groin-guards and mouth-guards because they're compulsory, but in the dojo we won't allow groin-guards, because we reckon if you use a groin-guard all the time, then you ruin your stances.

**And it probably makes you a bit complacent as well?**

Yeah, a little tap in the groin now and then to get your stances right. I always say, if the stance is wrong, everything's wrong, because you'll have no balance.

**You say you're a bit softer in your old age; how do you maintain the discipline then?**

Instead of [doing] *kumite* with the kids, I send them in the back and stand them in the corner. You just can't hit kids. With the older ones, once they get past Green-belt, they do as they're told without you having to yell at them.

Put it this way: I've got a class down at Guilford that's 90 per cent kids; by the end of the class I've lost my voice from yelling at them. I've got another class at Roseville that's half kids, half grown-ups. They're entirely different people — most of them are Chinese and Japanese — and I never have to raise my voice. [It's a] different attitude from the people, I'd say about half the class there are Japanese kids and they're really good to teach — you show them something and they take notice. With some of the other kids, you're

repeating the same thing over and over and over again, and you're glad when the class finishes.

**Is that because a lot of the parents obviously see the value in discipline, but at times they're probably relying on you to do it?**

I think the trouble is that in school's these days, there's next to no discipline and they're sent to me to get disciplined, and a lot of them can't handle it. Of course, they don't last very long — you yell at them once and that's the end, you don't see them again. Those that really want to learn, they keep coming back. I've got a lot of the parents coming in saying, "Thanks, they've improved so much at home — they're actually starting to clean their room for a change." When they come in the dojo, I'll tell them to sweep the floor and they'll

kinda look at you like, 'How do you do that? Never done that.' In Japan, not only did we sweep it, but we used to get down and push along with a wet rag to clean it.

**That was all part of the process back then, wasn't it?**

Yeah, and in some dojos in Japan it still is. One place we go to [in Japan], there's a dojo there and I've seen the kids, after they've swept and washed the floor of the dojo, go out and pull the weeds out from around the outside of the dojo. I couldn't imagine my students doing that, I've got to get them just to sweep the floor. It's a cultural thing — the ones in Japan, their dojo is sort of 'their' dojo, it means more to them.

**I guess in part it's become a bit of a commoditised thing here, where people**





**pay their money and they feel they deserve whatever instruction is coming?**

Yeah... I used to be very hard on grades, but I find that if I keep knocking them back if they're not good enough, then their parents come and say, "Little Johnny who lives next door goes to a different school and has only been there six months and he's got six grades" and their kid with me hasn't got any.

**So what do you tell them?**

I tell them that when he's good enough, he'll get graded.

**Why do you think it is that a lot of your students are kids these days? Has there been a gap in time there where people stopped taking up karate?**

In Sydney, there are just so many different clubs. Sometimes in the hall — we have our dojo

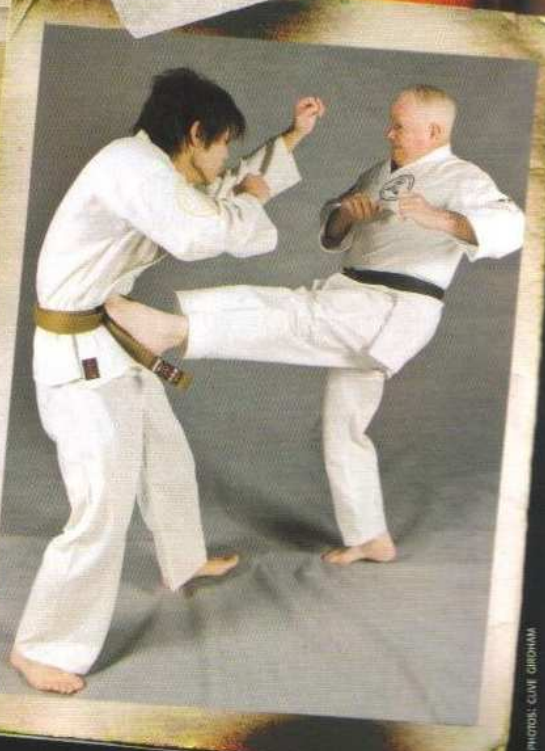
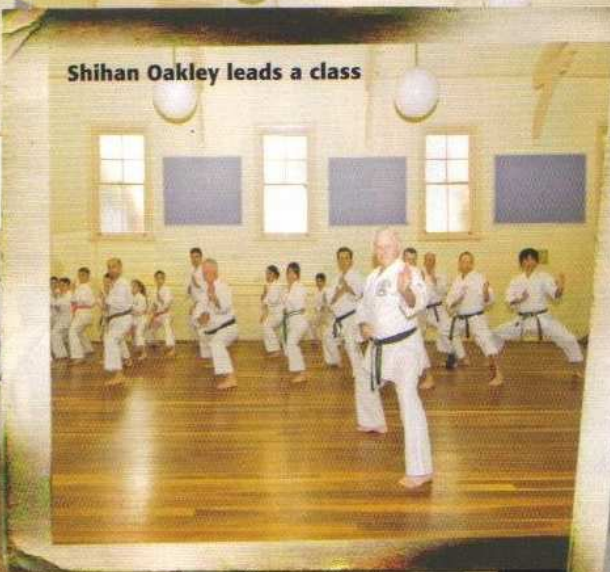
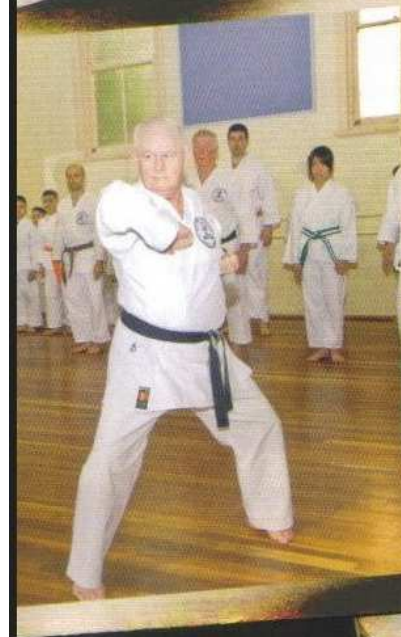
there once a week — there's a different club there twice a week, in the same hall. And in one little suburb, take Guilford for instance, there's four different martial arts clubs just in Guilford. Everywhere there's a hall, there's some sort of martial arts club.

**How has that affected the running of your club over the years?**

It varies. We don't have as big a club as we used to have — if we have 20 in it, then we think it's a big club. The one at Roseville is a small one — there's never more than between 10 and 15 there, but it's the best one because being so small, they get a lot more attention; that's why they come up much quicker through the grades. If you've got a class of 20, you can't personally talk



Shihan Oakley leads a class



ALL PHOTOS: CUV DIGNITY

to each one of them, but with a small class you can.

**I guess with that small class, you can discipline the kids — so it all works in their favour.**

With the higher grades, I try to give them private lessons. My weapons teacher always said the only way to learn anything is in a private lesson, one on one — you correct every little thing as you go through. Another thing he'd do was he'd teach you a kata, but one time I was there, there were about three different katas and he said, "Go home, do each kata 1000 times then come back and see me and I'll teach you how to do those katas." At the time I was thinking, "What's this?" but he was right — until you really know the kata, you're sort of 'not there', to get it perfect. Doing it is easy; doing it right is an entirely different thing.

**So he wanted you get the movements down by rote first and then tweak them?**

So you'd get the pattern and you wouldn't have to think what your next movement was, you'd just automatically do it. I always say, there's three sides to a kata: there's doing it, then explaining what the movements mean, then doing the kata with somebody on the other side, doing the reverse

towards you. I've always said, if you don't have your opponent in your mind's eye when you're doing a kata, then you are not doing a kata, you are doing a dance.

**And that's something you pass onto your students?**

Yes, very much so, especially doing the reverses.

**On that topic, you've said you think sport karate has taken a bit of a wrong turn in some ways — how is that? And how do you think that can be rectified?**

I don't know how you can rectify it unless you go right back to the old days, where it was two half-points for a win in a tournament, or one full point. One full point was always in the body and the person went down at least on one knee or right down with the strike — I mean in the muscle area of the body, not breaking ribs or anything — and if they just touched, then it was a half-point. These days, you just touch somebody and, what I don't like is, some teachers even teach their students to act [and] get really upset. Someone gets a little tap and they hit the ground and roll around a bit and the other guy gets disqualified for doing a good technique [that] touched. The acting seems to be getting more [points] than the real karate.

**I suppose the other thing is that people start to teach the technique to tailor to the sport. As long as the strike barely touches, it doesn't have to have any real penetration...**

Yeah, no power in them even; just a little flick. It [works well] for very tall, thin fellas, because it gets them in a lightweight division and there's a long reach and they just sort of wriggle their hands and they've got a point. In the old days, there had to be power in it and it had to be properly focused.

**Do you have students competing these days?**

We don't do [many] tournaments these days; we used to do a lot in the old days. We do the Goju National — it's only once a year — and we have two of our own, [to which] we invite other clubs as well, twice a year.

**And do they run under the standard rules?**

Yeah, AKF (Australian Karate Federation) and JKF (Japan Karate-do Federation) are more or less the same — they used to be different but they've more or less blended in together. One good thing used to be that round-kicks had to be with the ball of the foot to the body — it was the Goju way. Now they're giving points for instep [kicks] to the

body. I prefer the old way of the ball of the foot, because the ball of the foot does a lot more damage, but with the instep, you can more or less take it.

**You identify trends in martial arts and their popularity, with kung fu coming through in the '70s as well, after karate, and then taekwondo boomed — that sort of started the whole thing with kids taking up martial arts since the Olympics 10 years ago. Now there's a lot of focus on reality-based systems. Have any of these had any affect on your club and the way it runs and what you teach, or on karate in general, in your opinion?**

I can only comment on my own club. I more or less teach very close to the same way I was taught 40-odd years ago. If I'm with the Goju system, with the JKFG (Japan Karate-do Federation Goju Kai), every time you go to Japan, the katas are just a little bit different. More or less, every year there's some slight change in them... I haven't changed mine for 40-odd years and the way I do them is entirely different to the way they're doing them right now. I always say: to see if [a technique] is right or wrong, you do it against somebody — if it works it must be right; if



A young Oakley performs a flying kick



Murakami Sensei demonstrates the tonfa with Oakley



Shihan Oakley and his students in Japan



it doesn't work, then it must be wrong. A lot of things they're doing these days just don't work.

I might be a bit cynical, but often I find they'll change the katas about three months before the national tournament comes up, and they say, "Ah, you're doing that wrong". So, of course, you're losing points but their people have had three months to practise it. They always seem to put a kata seminar on the day before a tournament – how can you change things in one day?

**I've heard that from a few people actually, regarding taekwondo as well.**

Not my club, but one of the other Goju clubs, they sent half a dozen of their people over to Japan for a three-day kata seminar. There were all these changes in the katas and they were learning them all. The last hour of the third day, someone came along and said, "Oh, that's the old way, we don't do it that way anymore, it's been changed." So after learning three days of changes, things have changed again.

**And is there ever any reason, from a combat applications point-of-view, given for these changes?**

No, not that I can see. And they're making them worse, not better. In 1990, they told me that

there were changes in the katas and that was it, they weren't going to change again. In 1990, I ran the international tournament here in Sydney, when the acting president was Kenzo Uchiage Hanshi, and they said, "This is it and they're not going to change," so I changed *Saifa* and *Seiunchin* to fit in with the association. Then, a couple of years later, when the international tournament was held in New Zealand, they were all different again. So I put them all back the way they were and I haven't changed any since – and I'm not going to.

**Fair enough. I guess the only disadvantage of doing that would be in competition?**

In competition now we don't worry about kata, we only do the kumite. In [our] tournaments we do kata, [but] with the mixed ones we only do the kumite... [it's] not worthwhile [to do kata].

**It sounds like a strange and often politically driven process...**

Politics have ruined karate. **With so many youngsters in your classes and various trends in martial arts coming through, what do you see as the future of karate in Australia, and Goju?**

I think it's just getting bigger and bigger really, but not all under

one person. Every teacher has his own way of doing things – a lot of different ways, which is okay. No two people are the same; you get a big person there and they're entirely different to a small person in the way they move. When I teach, I almost teach everybody like a lightweight, with a few little differences for the big people – some things work better for a big person, which they can't do like a small person. I've got one of my Japanese students, he'll go up in the air, sort of stop, throw two kicks and then come down, but a big person has no chance of doing that, they've got too much weight.

**Over the years, in the Goju Kai fraternity in Australia and even within the Yamaguchi family itself, it has fractured a fair bit and many members are doing their own thing. Each individual case is obviously a lot different, but we see a lot of this in martial arts in general. Why is this sort of story so common in martial arts organisations?**

I think everybody wants to be the boss. Some people are very arrogant and they think that what they do is right and what everybody else does is wrong. I remember when I first started training, I was told that Goju was THE best –

everything else was rubbish – and like a good student, I just believed them. I did everything that I was told. When I got to about 4th Dan stage, I started travelling around in Japan through all the different schools and I found the other schools had very good techniques too. That technique works well and I like it; I don't care what school it comes from, I'll use it.

**In that sense, have you added and used things – not just in your own karate but into your syllabus – over the years that you've picked up from other styles' instructors?**

Yeah, like the dojo in Ueno was full-contact, really hard, you used to get all bruised up. I used to go down to a place in Nagoya, Nippon Kempo school, they were controlling and it was more like arranged fighting. I'd spend a week down there waiting for all the bruises to heal up! But I learnt good things from there – some of the movements they did there were different and it worked out good. I was still learning and I wasn't getting bruised up so much.

*To read the rest of our interview with Merv Oakley Shihan, check out the next issue of Blitz magazine, on sale 29 October. **BLITZ***