

## **Premier Karate Course, Leigh Sports Village, 18<sup>th</sup> October 2009**

Mention of the town of Leigh –if it is known at all– suggests images of old Lancashire. Situated to the west of Manchester, coal, Rugby League, cloth caps and cotton are the dominant images. All these motifs remain in the modern Leigh, but in a form that would be far from familiar to the town's inhabitants from its industrial past. As one approaches the town on the A579, its undulating rollercoaster surface is testament to the subsidence of earlier mining activity. Rugby league continues to wield an important influence, but with a very contemporary feel. The old rugby club has undergone a dramatic facelift in the form of the brown-signed "Sports Village" with modern facilities, not only for the 13-man game, but also for racquet sports, swimming, aerobics and, of course martial arts. My first sight of a flat hat then was not on a middle aged man with a whippet, head bowed against the Lancashire rain. In fact as I pulled into the car park of the Sports Village the dapper figure of 9-time World Karate Champion Wayne Otto, replete with stylish corduroy flat cap, was disembarking from his car. As for cotton, the sight of 150-odd white canvas karategi greeted me as I entered the main sports hall.

English National Coach Otto was one of four instructors teaching on the inaugural Premier Karate Seminar. A student of Terry Daly from the Okinawan style of Uechi Ryu, Wayne was joined by three other luminaries, each from a very different style and background.

Teaching Goju Ryu would be Tony Christian 8<sup>th</sup> dan. A native of Liverpool but a long-time resident of nearby Wigan, Christian was one of the first professional karate teachers in the UK.

From the Shitoryu / Shukokai tradition was Terry Pottage. One of the most highly respected referees in the World Karate Federation, Terry was recently promoted to 8<sup>th</sup> dan by his organisation, Ken Yu Kai.

Completing the foursome and representing Wado Ryu was Iain Abernethy. 5<sup>th</sup> dan Abernethy has established himself as an authority on the application of kata, or "bunkai". Now a widely published author, Iain's body of work includes books, magazine articles, videos and a blog.

As well as coming from different ryu-ha, each of these instructors has his own unique approach to the practice and tuition of their skills. Seminar attendees would spend an hour with each of these teachers and get a chance to sample a little of what they each had to offer. There was anticipation of a real treat in store.

Delegates were divided into four groups by age and grade, so the tuition could be tailored to the required standard of each group. Each set was allocated an hour with each instructor. After the time had elapsed a whistle indicated that we were to move on to the next area and the next teacher.

The third dan and over group began with Uechi Ryu 5<sup>th</sup> dan Wayne Otto. As part of the warm up routine the group engaged in light kumite, with frequent partner changes, giving us the opportunity to spar with a wide variety of stylists of all shapes and sizes. Amiable Wayne discussed principles of movement and range, with early drills encouraging participants to move into their opponent's "island" of safety, deliver a scoring blow, and retreat. Interestingly, he explained that scoring range should be the *same*, irrespective of technique delivered, so a snap punch, reverse punch or kick should all be deliverable from the same distance.

Inevitably, Wayne spent some time drilling principles of sweeping and takedowns. Otto noted that his tournament success at sweeping was in part attributed to necessity borne out of his inability at kicking, and having to find another way to pick up the big points. To a somewhat incredulous audience he described how his early poor kicking technique was rectified by a simple piece of advice from Greg Francis, after Ticky Donovan had virtually given up on trying to correct a less than perfect mawashigeri posture!

Sweeps and takedowns, explained the former champion, could be mastered with adherence to three simple precepts: position, direction and force. With these thoughts in mind a wide variety of takedown techniques were drilled, with an insistence that observation of these three principles ensured effective takedowns without inflicting undue injury or discomfort on one's opponent. In the Question and Answer session closing the hour, BKA Chairman Brian Seabright asked for Wayne's views on the recent changes to the WKF rules. Specifically, he wondered whether Wayne felt he would have been as successful under different rules. Without false modesty Otto asserted that attitude plays a much greater part than particular technical skill, and therefore, even under the new rules "I would still have been champion". Wayne was also interrogated on his views on the apparent conflict between "traditional" Uechi Ryu and the tournament karate in which he has forged his reputation. Wayne was very clear. There is no conflict. He continues to study the kata and techniques of Uechi and sees the two traditions as parallel but distinct paths, each with their own intrinsic rewards.

Next on the instructor rotation was Tony Christian. With a new instructor came a change of mood and a change of surface, from mats to bare wooden floor. Tony described how he had been a scrapper as a young man in the 60's but had been impressed by the early Japanese visitors to English dojo, such as Kanazawa and Enoeda from the JKA, and from the Goju tradition Higaonna and Chinen. He started the session with a strong message that to him karate had been a fundamental force in changing his character for the better. He expressed a disdain for the use of Japanese terminology in an English-speaking environment.

Having explained that he recognised the experience and maturity of the high graded group, he went crash bang wallop into defence against (thankfully rubber) knives. He described how such thrusts should be confronted with forearm "blocks" inflicting maximum damage, rapidly followed by controlling grabs and then finishing blows. Cuts and thrusts were delivered from a variety of angles, and we were encouraged to respond with our favourite counter/ restraint / disarm.

Christian pointed out the importance of watching for body language cues in order to be well prepared *before* any knife attack. Reference was made to the "modern" application of "The Fence", popularised by Geoff Thompson *et al.* "We had the fence in the sixties", he declared. "It was called 'kamae'" (the "en garde" position of traditional karate).

Tony went on to describe bunkai from Goju Ryu kata such as Sesan (Seisan) and Tensho. He warned us, though, to think first of the attack, not the bunkai, and to respond accordingly. Typically many techniques found in kata were interpreted as grasps, and open-handed blows, to vulnerable points on the head and neck (themes to which we would return in our fourth session). We were reminded that such techniques achieve maximum efficacy if delivered with strong hands and arms. To this end Tony passed on Chinen sensei's advice that all good karateka should own –and regularly use– Chi'ishi, the traditional concrete "lollypop" exercise device of Okinawa.

Tony's session finished with a summary of his philosophy, reminding us that karate practice can last well into old age bringing prolonged benefits of health, well being and personal development. He closed with an invitation to join him at his dojo near Wigan.

Terry Pottage made his name in the 1970s and 80s, racking up successes in both kata and kumite. Later he established a reputation as a referee, first in England and the British Isles, then in Europe and in the World Federation. Until recently he was Chief Referee in England. As founder and head of the Kenyukai organisation, Terry has also established something of a champions' stable, responsible for the development of many national champions, and indeed competitors of international repute. Assisting him on the seminar was one such protégé. Ashleigh Kenny is current E(nglish)KF kata champion and was bronze medallist at the same championships in the U60kg Kumite division. After an impressive demonstration by Ashleigh of Shitoryu kata Nipaipo, the group agreed to dedicate time to learning a different form, Annan kata, from the Ryuei Ryu. Ashleigh performed Annan, and Terry explained that the Japanese champion Sakamoto had brought the form to the attention of the wider world.

The form is characterised by palm-heel strikes (teisho uchi) delivered from the reverse (gyaku) posture; rapid turns with stamping kicks to the knee (kansetsu geri) and stabbing front kicks (maegeri / kizami geri) from neko ashi stance.

Most of the senior dan grades had not hitherto learnt this kata and many were keen to take it away with them for further practice. Consequently only cursory attention was given to bunkai, with as much of the available time as possible given over to practice of the sequence of moves with guidance from both Pottage and Kenny.

All of us, including Terry himself, were disappointed to hear the "time" whistle, and this writer for one has since been examining "You Tube" footage of Sakamoto and others to help commit this kata to memory.

The final instructor was Iain Abernethy. After three hours of effort from both teacher and students one could be forgiven for expecting a lacklustre session for this closing hour. Thankfully this was not to be the case. Abernethy was full of enthusiasm and his larger than life persona was given full vent.

By way of introduction Abernethy drew on his extensive research carefully citing august references, such as works by Mabuni, Motobu, Itosu, and Funakoshi to support his assertions. As well as an enlightening discussion of Itosu's ten principles (translated into English, and now available for free at [www.iainabernethy.com](http://www.iainabernethy.com)) Iain referred to writings by Kyan and Motobu, both of whom apparently endorsed hard drinking (and, in one case the frequenting of brothels!) as essential in the development of the true karateka. His own philosophy included the maxim that the best way to achieve victory is to hit hard and often to your opponent's head and neck. Few could argue with that!

Today's seminar however concentrated on the prosaic and practical elements of kata. Again drawing on historical documentation, Iain explained that Mabuni had noted that the angle at which a technique in kata is performed represents the angle at which you shift relative to your adversary. So for example the point in Pinan / Heian Shodan, at which one turns to the rear, in fact signifies shifting to the rear of the opponent.

Other drills drew on ideas inferred from Abernethy's readings. Itosu he told us was "like me, a short fat bloke with above average strength". Added to this, was Itosu's reputation for destroying limbs, "so I began to look for these techniques in the kata", he explained. The bizarre two-handed, double "block" from Pinan Sandan was thus interpreted as an attempt to smash the opponent's elbow joint with the forearm, and the second such movement as a repeated blow, should the first one fail.

Funakoshi, apparently described yohon nukite (spear thrust, as e.g. in Heian / Pinan Sandan) as capable of felling an opponent. As a four-fingered jab to the chest this seems implausible even for the strongest karateka. Abernethy then, applied his lateral thinking and asserts that this could be interpreted as a blow with the inner forearm across the chest, the leading leg *behind* the victim, allowing one to drive him over the leg and thus to the ground, cross-buttock style.

This final bunkai hour saw much enthusiastic application of both new and familiar techniques. Yudansha felled yudansha with vigour as one would expect from practitioners of such experience. This writer was struck with the lack of egocentric posturing, with some very senior karateka on the floor as equals with higher and lower graded alike.

At the final whistle all four instructors were saluted with both the Japanese rei and the western round of applause. A group shot by official photographers DE Photo rounded off the afternoon.

Course organiser Brian Bentham of Ryu Do Academy is to be congratulated for an excellent afternoon, and he announced his hope that this will become an annual event with, probably, a different set of instructors next time. Such events certainly serve to reinforce another image of Lancashire – that of one of the richest regions of England for karate talent.