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Interview with Hirokazu Kanazawa Sensei

An Interview With Hirokazu Kanazawa
by Graham Noble

Part I

I don't suppose that Hirokazu Kanazawa needs any introduction at all, but just to recap, he has been one of the leading figures in the Shotokan world for almost fifty years. He was the first JKA All Japan Champion, one of a new breed of athletically gifted karate instructors with a proven competitive pedigree, one of the very first professionally trained instructors, one of the first to bring karate out from Japan into the wide world. Today he is seventy-three years old, still in good physical condition, a 10th dan and head of one of the leading Shotokan groups, with a diary full of international teaching engagements.

I met Hirokazu Kanazawa in November 2004 at a course he was giving in Glasgow, Scotland, and would like to thank the course organizer, Jim Palmer, for making the meeting possible.

One thing I couldn't help noticing after the course, was that around fifty students lined up to have their books, magazines or uniforms signed, or have their photos taken with Kanazawa Sensei. He gave time to everyone, chatting and writing out his elaborate "Mount Fuji" signature. Although the process took more than an hour, he never showed any sign of irritation and was patient and gracious throughout. In its quiet, understated way it was all quite impressive.

During our talk he was friendly and open, and it was interesting to hear about his early days of training and kumite, the challengers he sometimes had to face, and his meetings with the old masters like Chosin Chibana. When we were looking through some material on the Okinawan masters he had met forty years ago, he observed that they were all dead now, and then added jokingly, "It will be me next!" Well I hope not. He is in terrific shape for seventy-three years old, a testament, if you like, to the benefits of long term karate training, and I hope he remains in good health, that his diary remains full, and that he continues to teach his classical karate to his thousands of students for many more years to come.

Take care of yourself, Sensei.

November 13, 2004, Glasgow and Stirling, Scotland.

Graham Noble: Sensei, the first time you saw karate was by Mr. Yamashiro, an Okinawan?

Hirokazu Kanazawa: Yes, it was when I was at senior high school. Okinawa, after the last war, was governed by the USA. Therefore, when Mr. Yamashiro came to university, for fishery college, in the holidays he didn't go back to Okinawa. He came to my countryside, Iwate, because he was a very good friend of my brother. He would work at my father's company, part-time. Sometimes he would show karate kata. One day he showed how to break bamboo. That was a big surprise for us.

From then I wanted to do karate, but unfortunately at that time northern Japan didn't have karate--not until you go to Tokyo. It was only when I went to university that I had the chance to do karate. I started at Nihon University, studying fishery. I started karate, Shotokan style, but there was only one black belt instructor there, all the others were white belts.

GN: It wasn't a strong club?

HK: No, I wasn't happy, because I liked karate very much. I wanted to go to the strongest karate university, so I took my entrance exams again, this time for Takushoku University. Then I started karate at Takushoku.

GN: Can we go back to Mr. Yamashiro for a moment. You said that he practiced his karate by himself, in secret?

HK: Yes, he trained by himself, but we would try and watch.

GN: Did he train in kata, makiwara?

HK: Kata, yes.

GN: What style was it? Shorin-ryu?

HK: I think Shorin-ryu, because he [deletion] sometimes would (Kanazawa demonstrates a quick slap to the inside of the thighs, then shows a sharp attacking move) hit like this then attack, "Aaagh!" Don't know what style, but maybe Shorin-ryu, yes.

GN: And he once knocked out the local policeman, Kodama?

HK: Yes. I think sometimes he would get lonely, homesick for Okinawa. One day he got drunk. Now my town was a fishing port. There were many fishermen, they were very rough and were often fighting. Now Yamashiro was a very small person, something was said, and fighting started. Someone called the police and they came in a truck. Then Mr. Kodama came, a very big man, a famous godan in Judo--godan at that time was very high. He came in. "What is this?" he said, "I am Kodama!" Even the Yakuza didn't want to take on Kodama. But (Kanazawa chuckles), Yamashiro said, "What is Kodama!" and jumped up and hit him --Bahh!-- on the nose, breaking it. Then all the other policemen jumped on him and took him away. He was in jail only for a day. My brother went to the police station to explain and to take responsibility for him and he was released.

GN: What was different about Takushoku University karate club? What was it that impressed you about it?

HK: At that time Takushoku was the strongest university in karate in Japan. They were famous. They had karateka like Nishiyama, Arai, Yanase, then Minoda, Kurosawa, Okazaki, Irie, Onoue (?). All very strong students.

GN: Was that strong in kihon, kumite?

HK: Everything. I went to all the university dojo in Tokyo. Then one day I went to Takushoku university. It was kamae and "Ba-ba-ba-ba-ba!" (Rapid fire techniques). "Awwhhh!" I thought, "This is the karate I want to do."

GN: What was the training like? Lots of kihon, repetition, not much explanation?

HK: Kihon, and especially makiwara: Makiwara, makiwara everyday, before training and after training. The skin would get torn off your knuckles at first.

GN: So they thought the makiwara was very important?

HK: Yes, but sometimes I didn't like it so much. At night I would have to take the straw out of my knuckles.

GN: You said that at the time most of the seniors didn't explain very much, but Nakayama sensei was different, he would explain about each technique.

HK: Nakayama Sensei would give a very scientific explanation. He would come once a week, but other seniors and old boys (of the university) would come every day, and enjoyed pushing us in training. They never gave any explanations. They would push us down on stretching, and for our jumps they would sometimes swing at our legs with a bo.

GN: That could hurt.

HK: Yes, very dangerous! (Laughing). Once a month all six Shotokan Universities came together to train. This I enjoyed very much.

GN: What kind of training was that--shiai (contest)?

HK: First we did basic training, all together. Then after that, kumite training. I enjoyed that so much.

GN: Was that sambon kumite, ippon kumite, and jiyu-kumite?

HK: Funakoshi sensei didn't want so much jiyu-kumite, but the seniors, they liked it very much.

GN: Was there much contact? Did people get black eyes and broken noses, for example?

HK: Yes, yes. Also sometimes there were grading examinations. When I took nidan or shodan, I can't remember. Waseda University Club was there. I stood waiting for the attack, but the Waseda karate timing was different--he came in, but the timing of his punch was different and I didn't move back, and he collided with me and tumbled me down. This wasn't very good. Then it was my time to attack jodan, but my timing was different too and smack! I punched him in the face. I thought I had failed the grading. But Funakoshi Sensei said OK, the timing between the two clubs was different, but even so the Waseda man should have blocked my punch. So, OK,

Kanazawa is successful in the grading. I passed.

GN: In the kokan geiko you would have trained with other styles, Goju-ryu, Wado-ryu, Shito-ryu. Tatsuo Suzuki (Wado-ryu) told me that in those days he could tell immediately what style someone was from just by looking at their stance, their kamae.

HK: Yes, we could see that, the kamae were different: Goju-ryu mainly in nekoashi-dachi; Wado-ryu a high stance, no kamae; Shotokan, more a long stance and kamae.

GN: When you were talking before you said that the Goju-ryu had some tough fighters kokan-geiko.

HK: Yes, Goju-ryu used to do a lot of free sparring training, so they were very good.

GN: What kind of techniques did they use?

HK: They fought at short distance. Before that we had already reached them, but after we came close they would throw us down--bang!--because their close-in technique was very good.

GN: So you might score the point first, but then they would throw you?

HK: Yes. Therefore what we did was to really hit with our technique, so they couldn't catch us with their throws. The seniors, the old boys, would say "Stop Kanazawa! Stop!" But I knew that if I stopped the Goju fighters would throw me down. Therefore it was very difficult. After, I said to the senior, "I am sorry." He said, "Don't worry. When I said stop I meant you could carry on hitting him."

GN: He really meant the opposite of what he said?

HK: The opposite. Yes.

GN: You told me earlier that one time when you were on the JKA instructor's course, Ujita Sensei and his Goju group from Wakayama Prefecture came to the JKA dojo, and they were very strong fighters.

HK: Yes, I was surprised. Mr. Okazaki, and Mr. Minoda (?) from the JKA were as strong or maybe stronger than them, but the other JKA people...no chance.

GN: So the Goju Kai fighters were stronger than the JKA fighters?

HK: Yes, yes. (Note. Kanazawa sensei did not fight on this occasion).

GN: You mentioned one occasion when a Goju Kai senior told you to demonstrate your kicks on him.

HK: That was during kokan-geiko. The old boys of the Kansai University were there. After the training finished they asked me, "Please show us your kicking." So I showed my kicking technique against one of the seniors, maybe nine of ten times. Then the last time, as I kicked he blocked and hit me at the same time in the face with fura-uchi bang! I was not happy. I was just showing him my kicking, not fighting. But, they were seniors, and even if they were

from a different style you always showed seniors respect. But inside I was "Grrrr!", really angry!

GN: In those early days did the Goju people use mawashi-geri?

HK: They only did chudan kicking. We did jodan kicking.

GN: You were on the first JKA instructor's course with Takayuki Mikami. Who were your first teachers there?

HK: Mostly Nakayama sensei, and sometimes Nishiyama sensei.

GN: Did you often have to do jiyu-kumite with the seniors in the dojo?

HK: The seniors did the teaching. Sometimes we did jiyu-kumite with the seniors, but sometimes with the seniors it is difficult. (Kanazawa Sensei explained earlier that it was difficult to go against seniors strongly because of the in built Japanese respect for them). But one day, one of the seniors, Mr. Yanase, a class mate of Nishiyama Sensei I think, and a judo 4th dan very strong did kumite with me. When he did kumite he would catch his opponent and throw him down.

He did that to everybody, so everybody was frightened of him in kumite. I did jiyu-kumite with him and as he came in I hit him. "Oh, I am sorry," I said. Then he came in again to throw me, catch me, and again, bang! "I am sorry, I am sorry!" After three times of him coming in and me hitting him, Mr. Yanase said, "Ok, Kanazawa. We finish for today!" He could not catch me with his throws.

GN: Which other seniors were there? Did you do kumite with Nishiyama Sensei?

HK: Yes, yes.

GN: Kase Sensei?

HK: Yes, I think so. Not so many memories, but yes, Mr. Kase, he liked jiyu-kumite.

GN: Did he use a lot of tai-sabaki body movement?

HK: Yes, he used mainly fudo-dachi because he was in the line of Yoshitaka Funakoshi Sensei. Therefore he used fudo-dachi.

GN: Did you ever hear stories about Yoshitaka Sensei?

HK: No, I never heard many stories about Yoshitaka Sensei.

GN: Did you ever see Egami Sensei?

HK: Yes, yes.

GN: Was he good?

HK: Yes, be he was more in a different world. He was close to God. When he talked about karate or did karate he was different to us. We thought, "Is this Shotokan?" It looked different.

GN: Did you know Minoru Miyata sensei?

HK: Oh yes, Miyata sensei took me all over Kyushu. One day we went to the Kushinkai. I forgot the name of the instructor, but he

was very strong. He sometimes came to Takushoku University and did fighting with the seniors, very good fighting. So Miyata sensei took me to the Kushinkai in Kumamoto to do kumite. I did kumite with all the black belts, then came to the last one. We took up kamae, but he didn't move. So I thought what should I do? Miyata sensei had introduced me as the All Japan Champion, so I myself shouldn't initiate the attack. So I waited and he waited. So (inaudible).

It was dangerous, but already too late, and next moment "bang!" That opened up a cut.

GN: He cut you?

HK: He hit me. Then they put a bandage on and we started kumite again. But now we have equal feeling. So I attacked--"Ba, ba, ba, ba," pushing him back to the wall twice. Then he stood back up and said, "Ok, today I don't want any more fighting, as I know Mr. Miyata very well."

GN: Was Miyata Sensei a good karateka?

HK: Yes. His style was closer to that of Kase Sensei, more Yoshitaka Sensei's style.

GN: When you were preparing for the first All Japan Championships did you do any special training?

HK: Yes. For two months before I didn't train with my friends because of course they would be my opponents in the tournament. So I did secret training by myself and visited other dojos sometimes other style dojos. There were many dojos in Tokyo. Sometimes I went to university dojos, to a Shito-ryu dojo, but mainly I went to Takushoku University dojo to do kumite with the students.

Then four days before the championships I was training in the dojo. Of course, I did the general training, maybe an hour and a half, two hours, and then after the end of training I did fighting, kumite, with seven of the students. They were very good for my tournament training. I finished and said thank you, but then my senior said "Kanazawa! Are you finished?" I said, "Yes." He said, "No, you are not, you must do more!" so I did another six fights. But on the last one I broke my hand.

GN: Your right hand.

HK: Yes. Therefore, the JKA said I couldn't compete. Two days later my mother came to Tokyo to see me fight in the championship. I said, "I cannot fight because I have broken my right hand."

She said, "Ohhh, in karate you only use your right hand?"

I said, "No, no, karate is also the left hand and both of your legs."

"Then why can't you participate if you have only broken your right hand?"

"Because the JKA says so"

But my mother said, "I still don't understand. Please ask the JKA why you cannot participate. You still have your left arm and both legs. Only one hand is broken."

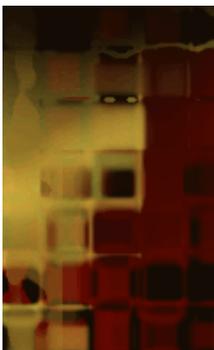
I went to see Nakayama Sensei and Tagaki Sensei (Masatomo Tagaki, the general secretary of the JKA) to explain, and then I went to see one of my seniors from high school. He was my senior in Judo and he ran a clinic. He said he would write a letter to the JKA, and he would accompany me to the tournament and take responsibility for me if something happened. So Nakayama Sensei and Tagaki Sensei said, "Ok, you can participate." Now, I never pray to God for things. I respect God, but I do not pray for help with things. Only this one time, I said, "Please God, let me win just one fight," so I could show a winning fight to my mother.

Then I won my first fight, and I thought that was enough. But then I won the second fight, and the third--funny. My niece came up to me and said, "Ok, uncle, grandmother says that's enough." But I said, "No, I still have to go on now because I'm winning. If you're winning you can't stop." So I continued to fight, but from this moment all the opponent's movements seemed to happen slowly. I could see all the detail. I used left hand blocks and counterattacked with kicks--only kicks: combination kicking, or sometime just one kick to take the point. I used one hundred percent kicking techniques.

GN: So you won all the fights with kicks?

HK: Yes, one hundred per cent. I used my hand to block or feint. In the final match I met Mr. Tsuyama. He was a famous person in university karate, also a champion. His favorite technique was jodan mawashi geri. He would take kamae then kick, no initial movement, with the front foot kick--bang! He got everybody. But I couldn't block because I couldn't use my right hand; my left hand wasn't enough. Therefore as soon as he moved, at the same time, I slipped into his attack and then pushed with my shoulder and used kekomi against his supporting leg and fell down. He was very shocked because no one had done this to him before. Then I thought, "He is not so confident now. I have a good chance." I did mae geri, then mawashi geri chudan and scored. I thought, maybe I can use that technique one more time, it's a possibility. A third time would be impossible, but a second time, maybe. But of course not exactly in the same place. So this time I did mae geri and then jodan mawashi geri to score and win by nihon, two ippons, the first one mawashi geri chudan, and the second one mawashi geri jodan.

Sincere thanks to Mr Graham Noble for so kindly allowing TheShotokanWay to use this interview



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