

The central *dojo* of the All America Karate Federation is just another of those empty storefronts on profitless streets that say KARATE in big block letters over blank windows and are similar in appearance to the cheap massage parlors located in such places across the land. The building's blank wall on the side street is covered with spray-can graffiti, unintelligible but not Oriental. Next door on the other side is a storefront office of the United Farm Workers, its windows as colorful with exhortations against Ernest and Julio Gallo as the *dojo*'s are plain. This is 1440 West Olympic Boulevard in downtown L.A., where most so-called natives claim they *never* come, are you crazy? But for Hidetaka Nishiyama, the United States' ranking karate man and chairman of the AAKF, it is the boulevard to the Olympics, or else. From this unlikely base, Nishiyama is attempting, simultaneously, to clean up karate's brutal commercial show-biz image and win its acceptance as an Olympic sport.

To students in the hundreds of American schools that teach the authentic Shotokan, or Japanese Karate Association style, this reserved, polite, incredibly powerful little man is anything but a promoter. He is the most inspiring *sensei* (teacher) of karate in the country. He is hard, distant and cool, but gut-wrenching workouts with him become a kind of addiction. He exemplifies the *way* as much as the technique; he is incorruptible in a time rife with schismatics and opportunists. When Nishiyama's paperwork for the 40-nation World Karate-do Championship Tournament, which will be held in Los Angeles next week, cuts into his students' workout time with him, they are hurt, angry, jealous.

Nishiyama's technique is fearsomely advanced, well into the realm of art. "He has never been defeated in a match in his life by anybody at any level," says one black belt. When second- and third-degree black belts are asked to demonstrate an attack against him, says another, "You don't want to go in. You know you're not going to get hurt, but you don't want to go in. He'll totally break

you down. Crumble your mind. Something comes out of his eyes. Say he demonstrates a kick to your stomach. It just touches you and stops. It doesn't hurt. But your skin burns for hours afterward. He fully extends his arm, knuckles against your breastbone. He just exhales hard and you are knocked back three feet."

Nishiyama's *dojo* is no more imposing on the inside than it is from the street. If

Apparently they have room to improve. The master's voice sinks to a vibrant bass with a shaming, disappointed oo-o-o-o. Grinning, he mimics someone's boxer-like tendency to put his shoulder into an imaginary punch to the head, which is supposed to be started with a flick of the hips and done with the back straight and shoulders low. Speed and focus, not blundering mass. Karate is difficult for Americans to understand.

SMOKE FROM AN URBANE VOLCANO

Meet Hidetaka Nishiyama, a tough gentleman of Japan who is fighting to have karate accepted as an Olympic sport by MASON SMITH

you want a place that looks like a Zen monastery, try a restaurant. The left half of the long room has an oak floor and bare walls painted brown below and cream above. Just inside the front windows, which have blinds to diminish glare and distraction, there are a few hard benches where children coming in off the street sit and wonder at the goings-on. In the middle of a side wall an American and a Japanese flag are crossed beneath a portrait of a round-faced, silver-haired, unsmiling gentleman, the founder of modern karate, Gichin Funakoshi.

The varnish is worn off the floor except in the corners and close to the walls. At the far end are two large mirrors, originally about six feet square. Both are missing big chunks, and raw plywood stares out from where the glass has been broken away. There is a round clock. A ventilation shaft drops creamy light into the room. Across a half-partition on the other side of the building, a young Oriental woman works in the office. In a small lobby with no seating, plants, carpet, anything, just a little counter and an opening in the office wall where you pay for lessons, there is a dusty glass case containing gimcrack trophies.

It is impossible to understand a word the *sensei* is saying. The little man is out there walking barefoot back and forth in front of two rows of black belts. This is a special class for instructors, big frogs in some pond like Grand Forks, N. Dak.

They love it, though. They gleam with humility and effort. The hour will be too short. After 1,000, even 10,000 iterations, the hope of making one simple reverse counterpunch correctly is an eager dream on their perspiring faces. And not because the punch will have a force of about one ton per square inch, compared to a good boxer's 400 pounds or so, but because—well, it is preferable not to verbalize exactly why. Karate has a way of avoiding the brain in these messy matters. It is a thing of the spirit. But these black belts seem to understand what Nishiyama means. They respond with unintelligible noises of their own. The hard surfaces inside the old store bang the words around until they become as obscure as the graffiti outside, but you have the unmistakable sense of harmony, of good communications.

The command voice is driven from Nishiyama's diaphragm; it has a deep whirl of power, a gearbox hum. He demonstrates a basic block and counterpunch, then puts the black belts through it by the numbers, stressing the placement of feet, the motion of hips. He holds them frozen in midexecution, turns to the wall and illustrates correct body action. Then he adds another block, a kick, a strike, a punch, creating an *ad hoc* sequence. The students are so zonked on selfless struggle that now and then they shout "Osu!" seeming not to know they are doing it. "Osu!" means "yes!" or

continued

PHOTOGRAPH BY BILL EPPRIDGE

Standing beneath a portrait of the founder of karate, Nishiyama teaches in his L.A. *dojo*.

"right on!" Going slowly at first, Nishiyama puts them through the new sequence over and over. "Un! Tsoo! Tree! Hoa! Hi-i-i! Sssseece! Heaven!" On reaching 10, the pupils all shout "Osu!" or "Ai!" or "Argh!"

It looks easy, punching and kicking thin air, but at the end of one of these brief exercises students have streams of sweat running off their chins. Nishiyama does not give them five seconds' rest. He tells them very little. He whacks a belly—sharply—then a back, the student visibly grateful. The typewriter clicks in the office. The cries sound more and more like people being sick. In the final sparring practice, the lone female black belt blinks and flinches. Her cheeks look terribly hot.

In a motel café farther out Olympic Boulevard, the instructor-students drink beer very moderately and approach the subject of their *sensei* very carefully, tugged opposite ways by the desire to protect Nishiyama and to glorify him. He is, technically, one of the best teachers of karate in the world, they say. He has everything broken down to a science, can isolate the most important things to work on. He evokes more spirit than any other *sensei* ever. He can drive you to your breaking point. In Japan he is feared because his classes are physically so difficult, so brutal.

He is more lenient here. There is a racial thing. The Japanese, basically, don't expect Americans to be able to do karate. He's the embodiment of a samurai, really. There is something different about him from any other Japanese instructor. Something colder, almost ghostly. In Japan they have a phrase for him: a snow-capped volcano. A lot of coldness, a lot of fire.

Clearly, you don't make a dash to Tijuana with the man, but this talk of ghostliness and coldness contradicts a hint of effervescence behind that wonderful language barrier of 14 years' standing. And Nishiyama must have as much hustle and bustle in his way as Mr. Honda, if there is anyone by that name. Nishiyama is chairman of the AAKF, which is a member of the U.S. Olympic Committee. He is executive director of the International Amateur Karate Federation, executive director of the Pan-American Karate Union, representative of the Japan Karate Association International of America and a director of the JKA itself. There are those who think he is trying to con-

trol karate in the U.S., if not in the world. There are those of whom he thinks the same. But even when talking of AAU officials in the U.S., Jacques Delcourt of France or Ryoichi Sasakawa of Japan—none of them true karate men, he says, just power-seeking impresarios—Nishiyama cannot keep from erupting with laughter. You'd have to be a sweat-drenched worshiper in a *gi* not to see the *joie de vivre*.

As soon as he can safely let go of all these fancy handles, he says, he will do so. But at this historic moment it is necessary to establish controlling bodies to define and protect karate. It is being abused, especially in the U.S. It has become a code word for ferocity, for sensational, near-miraculous stomping; and the *do* aspect—the polite, truthful, gentle, fearless way of life karate teaches—is hardly guessed by most of us. Unqualified and unscrupulous phonies pretend to teach it rapidly, for plenty of dollars.

In a lot of commercial *dojos* the traditional routines or forms called *kata* are not even taught. Students just learn a few techniques and start fighting. If you don't know enough to choose the right school, or if you fall for the twirling jumps and spinning heel kicks, you get robbed. You learn some fatuous dance, not karate. And maybe you never know any better.

Nishiyama's students get much more heated and righteous about those things than he does. It insults them that in many of these ersatz schools someone can get a black belt in nine months or a year. "If there are 50 *dojos* in the L.A. area, 45 are total phonies," says one of Nishiyama's students. "Not mentioning any names, there are certain people right around here selling franchises who will take just \$1,500, and in two weeks give you a black belt and show you how to teach. There are a lot of people who have gotten rich that way."

Actually, there can't be too many karate fortunes around. According to manufacturers' reports based on the total number of *gis* sold, about 200,000 people are practicing karate in the U.S. A majority are training with instructors who are serious, even if they are commercial. The AAKF itself is nonprofit. You pay \$25 a month and work out as much as you want. You might achieve a practical familiarity with the basic techniques (which is all that the term black

belt means) in three or four years. You will probably be serene in threatening situations thereafter, but the bully who kicks sand in your face will never know what you could do to him. The big change will be inside and always ongoing. You run the risk of karate supplanting your main interests and goals, including the girls (or boys) on the beach.

Tonight in the *dojo* the first class is for beginners of all ages. There are blacks and Chicanos and Japanese and whites, and there is one woman. It does not look so easy now. Compared to Nishiyama, the black belt instructor babbles, waves his hands, struts. Compared to the afternoon class, these students wobble, fan, peck. When the woman is supposed to kneel her sparring partner in the chest, she mimes it with an indulgent smile, then laughs and pats him on the shoulder.

Then Nishiyama appears to teach a group of brown belts and black belts. Right off he conducts a very hard kicking workout that takes the whole class beyond pain. It can be seen: a period, occurring at different times for different individuals, when each student is so tired that the legs will not perform the kicks, all done with one leg while standing on the other. They skip a count or two in the faster and faster groups of kicks.

Next he teaches a way of catching a punch on the wrist, whipping it away and using the reaction force to stage a counterpunch to the face. He is so polite, so perfect in gesture. He is talking about character development and self-perfection and good manners, while the medium is an art that involves hitting people in the throat or temple with an impact that the bones and joints of the human body cannot withstand. It is a breathtaking paradox, kept totally implicit. "Now very easy punch face. Unnastan? Very easy kick estomach. Unnastan?"

"Osu!" they all shout. Because it's neat. So beautiful.

It is a shock to realize how new karate is in the United States. The karate boom started in the early '50s, when ex-servicemen who had learned it in Japan came home looking for converts to the sport. And although we tend to think of karate as traditionally Japanese, it is relatively new in Japan itself. When Nishiyama was a child in Tokyo, karate was unknown to most Japanese. Funakoshi had brought the old techniques from Okinawa in 1922.

In Japan other martial arts, especially

kendo and judo, were very popular, and one or the other was required in middle school. By the time he was 14, Nishiyama was already a black belt in judo. But he never heard of karate until he was 17. When he asked where Funakoshi's *dojo* was, no one knew. He had to find it himself. So Nishiyama's career has coincided not only with the American boom but with the Japanese boom that preceded it.

He went through Takushoku University, training in karate while studying business. He had no intention of making karate his life's work, but instructors were so rare—and so bad—that he soon found himself coaching every evening. While the burgeoning college clubs and teams began to coalesce into regional and national organizations, he was traveling, organizing, administering. Then the war swept away the whole middle generation of Japanese men who might have been the leaders and teachers. In the emptiness of national defeat, the Japanese took up karate passionately as a form of individual spiritual reconstruction. Nishiyama had gone to work for Shell Oil, but now he became so busy coaching and traveling for the newly forming JKA that he took a leave of absence from his job and never went back.

Ray Dalke, one of the first of Nishiyama's brilliant American protégés, says that when the *sensei* came to the U.S. in 1961, "karate was like chow mein. Something you ate." There were about half a dozen clubs in Southern California and very few anywhere else. In the short time since then, North America has been colonized so well that now, if you are one of Nishiyama's best students, you are liable to be sent off to Lima or Montevideo to instruct. Karate is booming in South America, too.

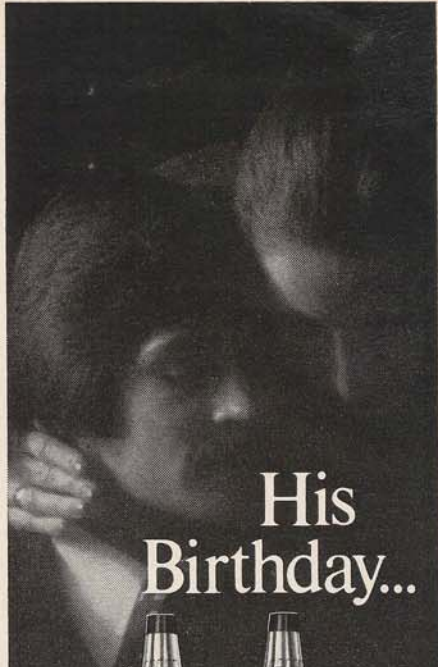
A stable world organization will apparently have to be born of conflict. On the one hand is the year-old International Amateur Karate Federation, which, it is Nishiyama's feeling, democratically reflects the wishes of the majority of karate people around the world. On the other is the World Union of Karate-do Organizations, dominated by Sasakawa with his French ally Delcourt. The AAU, after a brief honeymoon with the AAKF, has tried to take direct control of amateur karate in the U.S. and represent it internationally and has thrown in with WUKO. Ignoring the AAU and WUKO, the IAKF is staging a "world confer-

ence" along with the Los Angeles championships. In turn, the AAU is ignoring the IAKF and running its own "world tournament" in Long Beach in October. Classic Japanese bickering aside, it seems likely that the IAKF will emerge as the stronger body.

While describing all this, Nishiyama is drinking beer with one of his students, Steve Ubl, who is so close to the *sensei* that he doesn't speak English with articles anymore. Only four years ago Ubl was a lonely jewel cutter, but his life has been transformed by karate. In record time he has reached third-degree black belt, lived and studied with the chief instructor in Japan and become the U.S. champion in *kata*. Nishiyama gives him a "big chance" to win the world championship in individual *kata*.

Japan's team, its strongest ever, is heavily favored. But with two-time Pan-American champion James Field and with the All-America champions of the past two years, Edwin Moise and Gerald Evans, the U.S. team has the seasoning to take second place over less experienced teams from Italy and West Germany. Still, the results will be less important than the progress the IAKF's world tournament is sure to make in legitimizing itself and the sport. Next, karate may be included in the Pan-American Games. That would seem to assure its eventual acceptance in the Olympics.

They say that karate has an hourglass shape, or is like a pyramid balanced point to point on a pyramid. You strive toward a narrow, uniform ideal, the mastery of basic techniques. When you achieve it after years of effort, you look up and find an expanding universe of potential development. You've just begun. On another level, that is what it will be like for Nishiyama. He has been keeping up a terrible pace: doing administrative work all morning, teaching all afternoon and evening, giving exams and flying to conferences all over the world on weekends, seeing his wife and 3-year-old daughter only at weekday breakfasts. Next weekend when several of his *ad hoc* responsibilities suddenly expire, his limited goals will be won. In that salutary quiet and emptiness he will be just beginning once more. His secretary, the only person around the *dojo* who feels free to tease him, insists that he is not a master yet. He has it in him, though, she says. If he doesn't make it, it will be because he's lazy. Nishiyama grins, agreeing. **END**



His Birthday...



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