

Master and commander

AFTER 50 YEARS AT THE TOP OF HIS PROFESSION, THE CHARISMATIC INSTRUCTOR WHO KICK-STARTED BRITISH KARATE IS STILL HARD AT WORK

Words • Alan Harper Photos • Suzanne Grala



the story varies depending on who tells it. In some versions, there are two assailants, in others, three or more. Some say he was coming out of an afternoon training session, others that he was leaving a Tokyo restaurant late at night.

But they all agree on two things. When the thugs sprang upon the karate master, he was carrying a bag. And seconds later, when they were lying groaning in the street – routed by a few lightning-fast moves of foot and fist – he was still carrying the bag.

It is a classic tale that celebrates the essential idealism of eastern martial arts. There are countless examples: outnumbered, unarmed Chinese monks defeating infantry; a humble Okinawan peasant punching through samurai armour; the philosopher attacked by two wrestlers (in a restaurant, naturally), deflecting their blows without visible effort, and leaving them in a heap.

Underlying all of these legends is the universally appealing notion of the underdog triumphing over his oppressor. But many of them also express Taoist ideas, improbably paradoxical to Western thinking, of stillness and inaction: “The way never acts, yet nothing is left undone.” The karate master did not put down his bag, yet his opponents were defeated.

Stories attach themselves to all the great masters. Hirokazu Kanazawa is one. As a young man, he won the first Japan Karate Association kumite – free sparring – championships in 1957 with a broken hand, after a training accident. He was going to withdraw, but his mother reproached his lack of ‘warrior spirit’ – she had come a

long way to watch. So he fought his way through the early rounds, protecting his damaged hand by concentrating on kicking techniques. In the final he won with two double-kicks. Each time, his opponent blocked the first, but didn’t even see the second.

“I didn’t think I had any chance of winning in the state I was in,” he later wrote. “Which is probably why I was able to relax enough. I was so relaxed, I was able to read opponents’ minds, and I saw everything in slow motion.”

Similar, but different

In 1958 he won the JKA kumite title again. But although he had shown himself to be one of the most gifted exponents of his generation, he came to feel that such contests reduced karate to mere sport. Indeed, this would eventually cause him to split from his parent association and set up his own, the Shotokan Karate-Do International Federation, in 1977. “Sport and budo – warrior spirit – are similar, but different,” he explains.

As well as winning in kumite, in 1958 Kanazawa also won the kata event. Kata is a ritualised battle against invisible opponents – a repository of ideas and techniques that forms a direct link to karate’s historic origins in China and Okinawa. Traditional exponents – karateka – regard kata as the purest expression of karate.

There are many kata, from the simple sequences of parries and stepping punches practiced by beginners, to bewildering combinations of spinning leaps, sweeping blocks and flying kicks that could have ➤



Hirokazu Kanazawa, photographed in Blackpool on 1 November 2008. Opposite: training during the 1970s.



Kata, 'this legacy left by the masters', is central to Kanazawa's teaching.

been choreographed for a Jackie Chan film. An advanced kata can comprise over 100 individual moves. It requires the experienced practitioner to enter a state of trance-like concentration as he or she strives to do justice to a complex, solo ballet of mythical violence. Each kata has its own unique combinations of speed and stillness, hard and soft techniques. There is also the proper application of the voice – the *kiai* – which focuses power.

In one of his kata textbooks, Kanazawa writes of this “legacy left by the masters who created these techniques, through gruelling practice, personal encounters, and spiritual and emotional experiences”. The imaginary battle of a kata is as much a form of personal expression, he says, as the white paper and black ink of the calligrapher – it is only through the mental

discipline of kata that karate has any value. When Kanazawa demonstrated the kata known as unsu on an early visit to Europe, his performance was greeted with awed silence. Then the hall erupted into uproarious applause and cheering. He had to do two encores.

Sleeping rough

Hirokazu Kanazawa arrived in England in April 1965. Along with a small band of his contemporaries he had been tasked by the JKA to spread karate around the world.

European karate was in a primitive state. The British Karate Federation had just a few hundred members, among them Michael Randall, who had been training for just over a year. He was there when Kanazawa and three other JKA instructors first arrived at Lyndhurst Hall, in London's

Kentish Town. “They exuded superior ability. I was awestruck. Kanazawa looked the all-round athlete – perfect, like a Greek god,” he recalled in Clive Layton's book *The Kanazawa Years*. When their newly-arrived sensei, or teacher, demonstrated a kick, “I saw his leg whip out at the speed of light and lock at the end. The *kime* – focus – was shattering. I knew that I was witnessing real karate. I was completely shocked.”

Kanazawa was accommodated in lodgings so dismal that he would stand outside under a street light to read. Once when the BKF failed to pay his rent, he was reduced to sleeping rough in Trafalgar Square – where he was discovered in the morning by two of his students. England seemed strange and unwelcoming, but the Japanese champion lost no time in drilling the fundamentals into his charges. “The students were a lively bunch and very keen,” he wrote in his autobiography. “In the first lessons I put more emphasis on correct etiquette and the spiritual and mental aspects of karate than on the technical side.”

Mike Randall remembers months of kihon – basic techniques. “Kata would be practiced towards the end of a lesson. The lessons seemed lacking in structure but Kanazawa knew what he was doing, and knew exactly what he wanted from us.”

Shy and angular and barely out of his teens, Randall spent three months plucking up the courage to speak up in class. When he sat down again, mortified with embarrassment at having forgotten to ➤

His lodgings were so dismal that he had to read outside under a street lamp



bow to his sensei, Kanazawa complimented him on a very good question and explained it to the students.

Focus of power

Kanazawa’s arrival in Britain was marked by public demonstrations and media appearances. On one occasion, live in a television studio, he found himself expected to break thick hardwood boards which were soaked with water, having been left out in the rain. The first broke at the second kick. The next one was tougher: on his third attempt with an elbow strike there was a loud cracking noise – his elbow. “There was no way I could back out. I took a deep breath and emptied my body and soul of tension. I retreated into my own world, created an image in my mind and brought down my elbow on the board once more in a deliberate, concentrated movement. This time it worked.” The final board succumbed to his first strike.

“Movement and power in harmony is very important,” says Kanazawa today. “I always say we must think with the *hara* – your centre of gravity, a hand’s breadth below the navel. If you concentrate on this, then you have the best balance of body and mind.” He likens this concentration to self-hypnotism.

In one of Kanazawa’s more spectacular – if least explicable – techniques, he would punch a stack of boards but break just one of them, having first announced which one. “I have seen him do this selective break,” confirms Roger Carpenter, a contemporary of Randall’s. “The hardest board is the first one, and the easiest is the back board. He says it is about focus of power. I have seen others demo this, but not in the way Kanazawa does it.” The sensei could also drive his fingers through pine boards.

When Kanazawa’s one-year contract with the BKF expired, his students formed a new organisation, and issued the official invitation required to secure a new visa for



This picture, and below: teaching in Blackpool, 2008.

their sensei. Based in London but travelling to teach at new clubs all over the country, Kanazawa stayed in the UK until 1968.

Many of his earliest students are now, like Randall and Carpenter, among the most senior instructors in British karate. Today, Randall is in no doubt of Kanazawa’s importance: “In the world of Shotokan karate, he is probably the most influential of all instructors. He was a gentleman. He was always inspiring – a delight to train with. Karate is supposed to represent

The next board was tougher: on his third attempt with an elbow there was a loud cracking noise – his elbow

character, personality, morals, good nature – Kanazawa had all these attributes.

“For me, he’s the top man. I don’t know anybody quite like him.”

It’s all in the bag

Shotokan simply means ‘the Shoto building’. It was a dojo, or training hall, built in 1936 by students of Gichin Funakoshi in Tokyo. A schoolteacher and scholar of the Chinese classics – Shoto was his pen-name – Funakoshi arrived from Okinawa in 1922, the first karate instructor to set up in Japan. He was already 55.

Kanazawa began karate at university in 1951, aged 19. Funakoshi would visit the club, and the young student became one of the last to train under the 84-year-old master. “He was a small man, always smiling,” he remembers. Once, after picking him up in a taxi, Kanazawa was silently wondering to himself how this diminutive, apparently frail person next to him could possibly be effective at karate. Could he even block a punch? The old man suddenly spoke: “You can try if you like,” he said.

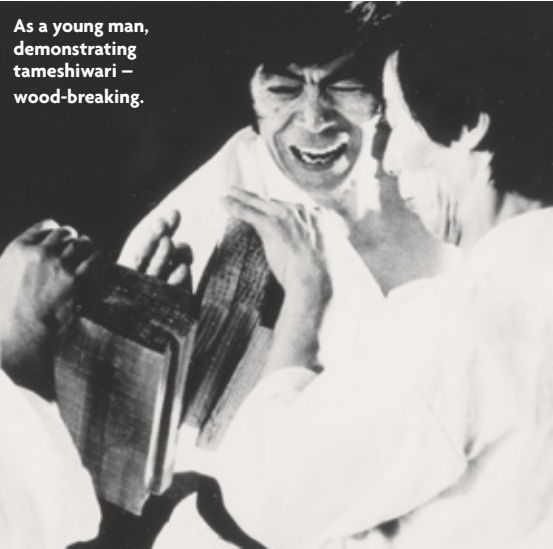
Now 77 and a revered master himself, Kanazawa still spends half the year travelling the world, supervising training sessions and officiating at grading examinations. He is feeling his age. The hips stiffen after sitting in aeroplanes, and aches and pains are constant reminders of old injuries. “As you get older, the power of the spirit becomes more important,” he says. “Without mental strength, it is impossible to do karate aged 77.” Every day starts with breathing exercises before he gets out of bed, followed by his stretching regime. He likes to ski, and in the dojo his technical demonstrations still look sharp.

And students still tell stories about him – including one about an episode more than 50 years ago, when he was set upon outside a Tokyo restaurant while carrying his sports bag. Within seconds the confrontation was over – and he was still holding the bag. “Yes, it is true,” he admits, smiling. “It is one of my favourites.” But why hold on to the bag?

“I had to,” he laughs, “or people would think I wanted to fight!”

The Author

Alan Harper struggled with karate through the 1980s, in England, the US and the Far East, under several instructors. None ever quite measured up to Kanazawa.



As a young man, demonstrating tameshiwari – wood-breaking.

