

ARTICLE OKINAWAN TIMES 27 MARCH 2022

1. Where and when were you born?

I was born in a small country town, named Bethlehem, in the Free State province of South Africa in November 1948. I grew up in the country until the age of seven, when we moved to the southern part of the country where my father originally came from, Stellenbosch.

2. Where do you live presently?

For the past 42 years I live on a smallholding or small farmstead in the wine growing area in the historical Western Cape near the town of Stellenbosch -the oldest town in South Africa and also basically a University Town - I can see the iconic Table Mountain from my house! My Honbu Dojo is situated on this small farm, so an escape to the country for my students for classes!

3. What is/was your profession?

I have a Bachelor's degree in Physical Education, now called Human Movement Study as well as a Higher Teaching Diploma.

I was a school teacher for a few years since 1974 after returning from training in Tokyo with Higaonna Sensei until 1980, where I taught all Physical programmes for boys as well as History and Geography. I was also a parttime member of the citizen force military in Field Artillery was compulsory for South African male citizens at that stage.

Since 1981 I was offered a position in the South African Defence Force as a regular or permanent force member as a Senior Staff Officer for Sport and Physical training.

It involved managing 45 sports clubs spread across the four arms of service of the South African Military as well as being responsible for Physical training - implementing, applying, upgrading testing and training physical training programmes to prepare soldiers for the battlefield.

As a senior staff officer, I was also a member of the Regional Command Council, so did a lot of managerial, strategical and combat courses to be able to be involved in planning and execution of various plans, ranging from combat to budgets, etc

Having these fulltime professions was good for my Karate, as I could teach Karate uncompromised the way I was taught without having to worry about not having enough students to take care of my family financially!

I retired in 1998 when offered a voluntary severance package when there were a lot of changes in our country with the new dawn after apartheid.

Finally, I could live my dream by only doing Karate!

4. When did you start karate and with who?

I started in 1963 as a 14 year old boy suffering from being bullied all my life because of the fact that I was sent to school two years prematurely because I was a very naughty young boy and secondly because of my two enormous ears - 'Bakkies' is actually my nickname and means like 'soup bowls'! 'Bakkies' also means 'funny face'! But even my mother calls me Bakkies now!

My mother ran a boarding house in Stellenbosch and the boarders were military students that studied engineering at Stellenbosch University. Every evening at 21h00, my mother

would put out some tea and snacks for them, as they studied hard. This is when they brought our boxing gloves and sparred - of course I got dragged into the sparring and got the life beaten out of me by guys at least six years older than me! But eventually I could hold my own against the smaller build ones and just when I was starting to survive, I heard that they were talking about this new fighting system starting soon at the university - Karate!

I thought, here we go again - I am going to get beaten up again if I don't do this also, but my parents were poor and could not afford the fees for the Karate and it was only for university students! To cut a long story short (this history it is on my Podcast series) I cheated my age to join and I cleaned 15 pairs of shoes for the military guys every night for 50c a month per pair of shoes - it gave me enough money to pay for my Karate!

The Teacher was Hugh Thomson and the style was a very rough Kyokushinkai style! But I enjoyed every moment of it. As Karate was very unknown and new in South Africa, one could not buy a Karate Gi anywhere, so eventually we got some kind of navy blue Gi's from somewhere and that was our Gi's! My Grandmother actually made me my first white Karate Gi by hand by copying this Gi!

Training was basically basics for a short while and Kumite, mostly Ippon Kumite and Sanbon Ippon Kumite (Randori was full out full contact, so the Teacher did not do it often, as there would be bleeding noses, etc. - it was more brutal than the boxing I did before!). For the rest of the class, we did a little Kata at the end, mostly the Pinans, as we left Kyokushinkai in 1964 and joined the Shotokan group, JKA.

This was the largest organisation at that stage and featured the famous names of Kase Taiji, Kanazawa Hirokazu, Enoeda Keinozuki, Shirai Hiroshi Senseis. In 1965, a group of them came to South Africa to promote Shotokan or JKA and I had the privilege of training under the late Sensei Kase Taiji and Shirai, Hiroshi and met Kanazawa Senei for the first time. They stayed for a long period, I guess six months or longer.

I was graded to Senior Shodan in July 1965 at the age of 16. But at this age, I was the Cape Province's Grand Champion (best in Kata and Kumite) for two years against adults! Interesting to mention at this point that there were no weight or age divisions then in tournaments. My tournament participation led to me eventually being chosen for the South African National Team to take part in the WUKO World Championships in 1972 in Paris France, where I made it to the quarterfinals, or last eight. Again, no weight divisions - just three persons on the podium after two days of fighting! I mention this tournament, because it relates to the next question.

To get back to my Karate, in 1966 we changed to the Goju Ryu Karate of Higaonna Sensei. My Teacher and Sensei James Rousseau, were not happy with the politics in the South African JKA organisation and therefore Sensei James Rousseau left for Japan in the summer of 1966 looking for an alternative. On advise from the famous icon Don Draeger, he ended up at this small Dojo near Yoyogi Station in Tokyo and immediately realised this is what he was looking for. He mailed my teacher (no emails then, just rough phone calls and a letter that took two weeks from Japan!) to come to Tokyo to have a look, and he went and was sold on Higaonna Sensei's Karate and the style.

I was doing my compulsory military service year in 1966 and only came home just before Xmas, went to my Teacher immediately to find out about this new system and learned my first Goju Ryu Kata end of 1966 - Seiyunchin!

In 1969 a group of South Africans went to Tokyo to train with Higaonna Sensei, but I was at university at the time and also did not have money to go.

5. What first led you to train with Higaonna sensei in Yoyogi Tokyo?

In 1972, Higaonna was invited by my Teacher to come to South Africa, stay for almost six months and teach us. En route, Higaonna Sensei flew via Paris France to see the WUKO World Tournament and would then come home to South Africa with us. I will never forget when my Teacher knocked on my hotel door and there stood Higaonna Sensei! He gave me a pair of Okinawa Sai, which I still have to this day.

Also taking part in the tournament for England was well known Terry O'Neill, whom I had met in 1969 when he came to South Africa with an English team and we took part against each other. Terry and my Teacher had become good friends - to the extent that Terry had invited us to England directly after the tournament to his home in Liverpool. So we went from Paris to Liverpool, Higaonna Sensei caught up with a Goju Kai student named Gary Spiers, who would also train at Yoyogi Dojo previously and taught a class or two in Liverpool for Gary and for Terry's JKA Dojo.

This was a major moment in Higaonna Sensei's career, as Terry launched a magazine soon afterwards called 'Fighting Arts' and subsequently covered a lot of Goju Ryu and specifically Higaonna Sensei, which put Okinawan Goju Ryu really in the limelight, as before it was just crazy American styles, Mas Oyama's Kyokushinkai and Shotokan being the prominent styles promoted by Black Belt magazine. In 1973, Terry and one Denis Martin visited Okinawa and wrote a series of articles on Okinawan Karate - I still have copies of the magazines.

Back in South Africa, the training with Higaonna Sensei was just an incredible experience - he was so fast and strong and moved so differently than what I was used to during my Shotokan days! On a personal note - I looked at Higaonna Sensei one evening in training and said to myself -'I also want to move like that!' And I have been trying ever since, but off course, not possible!

During Sensei's stay in South Africa, my mother invited him for dinner on a Sunday when there was no Karate and she mentioned to Sensei how Karate had changed me and became such a passion to me (my university results reflected this!) and Higaonna Sensei asked her to send me to Tokyo to train - he would take care of me.

So that's how it happened that the following year, in 1973, the father of one of my students arranged for me to travel to Tokyo by ship - a large cargo ship - and twenty five days and one typhoon later, we sailed into Tokyo Bay just after midnight - the next day, Sensei came accompanied by an American, Pat Telsrov (for the language) to pick me up! I stayed almost six months and Sensei had arranged for me to stay with a very kind old lady, Mrs Fukazawa, whose family was from Kanzai area and descendants from Shingen Takeda,

famous general in the south. From her and her family, I learned much about the Japanese culture and Budo -she practised Naginata in her younger days.

6. When was your first visit to Okinawa, and what was the occasion?

It was in 1973 while I was training in Yoyogi Dojo. It was the 20th Commemoration of Miyagi Chojun Sensei's death and as part of the Yoyogi Dojo team, we went to do demonstrations at this event - Pat Telsrov and myself did some self defence against a knife, which was apparently quite strange to the locals, as most Dojo's just did the Sanchin, some Kihon, much Kata and some basic Bunkai. Now and then Ojo Bunkai. It was a big problem to find an actual knife for the demonstration in Naha - we eventually got something from a hardware store that was almost a dagger!

We stayed in the high school dormitory opposite Makishi station, I recall, and then for a day or two in a Ryokan, but I cannot remember which one!

7. What is one of your best memories of your visits to Okinawa?

I guess the demonstrations at the Commemoration were absolutely the high point - seeing all the well know names like Senseis Uehara Ko, Miyazato Eiichi, Meitoku Yagi and many more doing physical demonstrations of their Kata and the years of training that it was representing, were moments that has stayed with me all these years and continues to inspire ,me top keep going! Gogen Yamaguchi was also there and gave a speech in his samurai outfit.

But the Okinawan people were the biggest eye-opener! So completely opposite to Tokyo people - relaxed, informal, friendly and 'live-loving'. I fell in love with this culture within hours after arriving by boat from Tokyo with the Yoyogi group. Everywhere you went, one could just ask for help and the locals would really go out of their way to help you. Taxi drivers that were not ripping you off - unbelievable! Okinawa will forever have a very special place in my heart and I was happy to take my wife along for a visit and she enjoyed it thoroughly as well.

8. When did you start teaching karate and Goju-ryu?

I have been teaching Karate and specifically Goju Ryu while at University at the University Dojo since 1967 - my first year at university after my yearlong military service, and started my own Dojo in 1972, just before I went to Japan the next year.

It was situated in an old church hall in a very rough area in Stellenbosch, and I actually lived inside the Dojo in a small room with only a cold shower, so in winter, I had to make sure that, after training, I was sweating to endure the cold water!

I also had some encounters with local criminal elements - in one incident one pulled a knife on me when I caught him breaking into my motorcar and I reciprocated in kind - it's a story for another time!

After this, the community started to accept and respect me and I actually started teaching Karate to them. It was totally against the apartheid laws of the country at that stage, and I was visited by security police because of this, but when I explained to them that I was trying to help the good ones to stand up against and defend themselves against the bad ones, they were prepared to look the other way and actually encouraged my to continue and two of them also joined my Dojo!

9. Where is your present dojo?

My present dojo is on my small farm, just outside Stellenbosch town, in the beautiful winelands of the Cape. I am completely surrounded by vineyards and enjoy the country life, while still very close to neighbouring suburbs where most of my students come from. With the help of my students, we build the Dojo ourselves in the early 1980's - it was first just a regular Dojo adjacent to a sheep shed, but in 1983, I sold all the sheep and converted the sheep shed to another Dojo as well, so now it is big enough to host small Gasshukus, etc. Inside I have all the traditional Hojo undo equipment - Chi'ishi, Kongoken, Makiwara, etc.

10. What is its name?

Stellenbosch Honbu Dojo - just plain and simple! With a picture of Higaonna Sensei taken in 1973 at the back watching over us!

11. When did you open it?

1982

12. How many students train at your main dojo?

I only teach adult Black Belts myself and I have 23. Some of my seniors take the other classes and altogether we have about 70+ students, from Juniors to seniors

13. How many dojo do you oversee in SA?

ILOGKF South Africa has been going since 1966, as I previously mentioned and we have 37 very active Dojo's all over the country.

14. Do you see a big difference between mainland Japanese karate and Okinawan karate?

Yes absolutely. I see mainland Japan more concentrating on the sports aspects in order to promote the different schools or styles, so there is a much more 'competitive' environment, which leads to a considerable turn-over of students, stopping after they have achieved their tournament goals in many cases, whilst in Okinawa it is more relaxed, you do it for yourself and you do not stop after obtaining, for example, your Shodan Black Belt, etc. I guess in Okinawa the approach is much more 'amateurish' - not doing it for a living - compared to mainland Japan where the instructor need to make a living from teaching Karate, so commercialising is much bigger there.

15. According to you, who were the pioneers of karate in SA?

The pioneers were undoubtedly the late Sensei Stan Schmidt from Shotokan JKA, Len Barnes from Kyokushinkai and then we have Sensei James Rousseau and Hugh Thomson for Goju Ryu. Back in 1966, there were only four styles of Karate in South Africa - now, I believe there are more than 30 organisations just for Goju Ryu! Sensei James Rousseau must get credit for expanding the ILOGKF to Europe in the late 1970's. He went to study in England and started to get Goju Ryu going in many European countries.

16. Regarding the karate population in SA, is it mainly composed of children or adults?

It is undoubtedly at least 80% children and 20% adults in all organisations. Students usually start of as children in junior school from the ages of about five and then start dropping out

when they start with puberty, so from junior and senior high school, even more during university and when they start working full time, it becomes really hard to fit in Karate as well.

I am lucky to have so many adult Black Belts in my Dojo, all being working adults - they love the Karate as it is constructive, professionally organised and they know how to arrange their time and daily lives accordingly.

17. What has brought karate to you?

Karate has taken a very rough edged kid - who could easily have become a delinquent, as my mother and father had to work full time their whole lives long and was not able to direct me - and turned it into someone with a purpose in life!

My mother is a true die-hard - she has never given up on anything in life and has been my biggest inspiration never to accept mediocrity as a norm! (She's still alive at 96)

I was also always lucky in the sense that I had some of the very best Karate Teachers from the beginning, from the Shotokan Teachers up to Higaonna Sensei, with whom I had a personal relationship stretching back to 1972 when we physically met. If I started off with some other Teacher or style, it could have worked out very different for me!

Karate brings one in direct confrontation with your own vulnerability, your own weaknesses and if you use it and approach it correctly with correct guidance from a real Teacher, it helps you to overcome these weaknesses and vulnerabilities. Because it is an Art, one can never ever reach perfection, but the striving for that perfection is the essence! In my military career, I was admired by many of my fellow junior and senior officers for my ability to keep calm and sort out difficult situations.

18. What are according to you the major charms of karate?

The biggest selling point for me is the fact that the road ahead of yourself in Karate is always going higher - there is no end!

So one keeps going and when one gets to a more mature stage of your life, one appreciates every aspect of Karate so much more

I have a saying that I often use at Gasshukus or seminars when I teach 'You are as Good as your Last Training Session!' Not as good as you used to be 20 years ago or last year - your most recent training! That's why Karate inspires one to put everything into it every day, from adjusting your eating and drinking habits and relaxing time lifestyle, to adjusting your approach to life!

19. When you do not teach karate, what do you like to do?

I love to explore nature - in Southern Africa, we are blessed with some of the greatest natural nature reserves, starting right close to my home and up to the game reserves in the northern areas of South Africa. To sit and watch a school of whales with their babies in the ocean close to the shore about an hour from my home at a certain time of the year, and then again to the north of the country a herd of elephants, buffalo, giraffe, impala moving naturally through their unspoiled habitat and to see a lion or leopard stalking his prey, is an incredible feeling of being a part of the universe! I have travelled extensively through neighbouring Namibia and Botswana and it is just amazing once one understands how the ecology works, to watch this daily miracles taking place!

20. Do you have a favourite proverb, karate or not related?

I have more than one, but the most prominent and most used ones are'

'Mediocrity has never been an option to me!'

My mantra in life is based on the famous poem IF by Rudyard Kipling: 'If you can Keep your Head when all about you are losing theirs and blaming it on you,!'

Karate wise and life wise, I also like the well-known "It's not the size of the Dog in the Fight, that counts - It's the size of the Fight in the Dog that counts!'