

Reminiscing with Three Karate Pioneers

**Joe Lewis, Bill Wallace and Jeff Smith
Share Their Views and Experiences**

Interview by Jerry Beasley

The scene was the Los Angeles Sports Arena on September 14, 1974. Some 10,000 spectators—among them movie stars, sports personalities, martial arts legends and press representatives—showed up to watch 14 fighters battle it out for undisputed world titles.

When the fights were over, three Americans—Joe Lewis

(heavyweight), Bill Wallace (middleweight) and Jeff Smith (light-heavyweight)—had earned the most prestigious titles in competition karate.

For Lewis, Wallace and Smith, the world titles in full-contact karate signified still another area of dominance in their illustrious careers. All three fighters had been No. 1 in the country in

PHOTO BY RIC ANDERTON



The Big Three (left-right) Jeff Smith, Bill Wallace and Joe Lewis.

point fighting, both with and without pads.

The PKA (Professional Karate Association) title may have seemed anticlimactic to Lewis, who had been a champion since the mid-1960s. Wallace, on the other hand, built a major reputation for his unblemished defense of his world championship. "Fast Billy" had been called a runner in point competition and, as such, "Superfoot" (his official full-contact name) found no end to the challengers who thought they knew the way to defeat his 60-mph left leg. None was successful.

Contrary to Wallace's predicament, Jeff "The DC Bomber" Smith, whose nickname came about from his habit of knocking down most of his opponents in non-contact competition, found few challengers to his throne.

Since the Lewis, Wallace and Smith era, no fighters have come on the scene with comparable distinction. There have been successful names built in individual activities: Benny Urquidez and Jean-Yves Theriault in kickboxing, and Keith Vitali and Steve "Nasty" Anderson in point karate, for example. Yet not since Lewis, Wallace and Smith has any one fighter ruled the roost in all three areas: non-contact, light contact and full contact. They were the best of their time—most would argue they were the best ever.

In 1984, the trio sat down and exchanged old war stories and views on the state of the martial arts in this exclusive interview.

BLACK BELT: What's your opinion of the way karate was practiced in the mid-1970s compared to the way it's practiced today?

BILL WALLACE: The problem with karate nowadays is that you've got pads on your hands and feet. So it went from good, viable techniques to basically what I call slop. The No. 1 hand technique in point tournaments in the late 1960s and early 1970s was the reverse punch or backfist because it had to be controlled. Now, it's a ridgehand. With the grand championships today, it's like, "I'm going to throw it and hope I get it in. If I don't, well, I'll just swing something else out there."

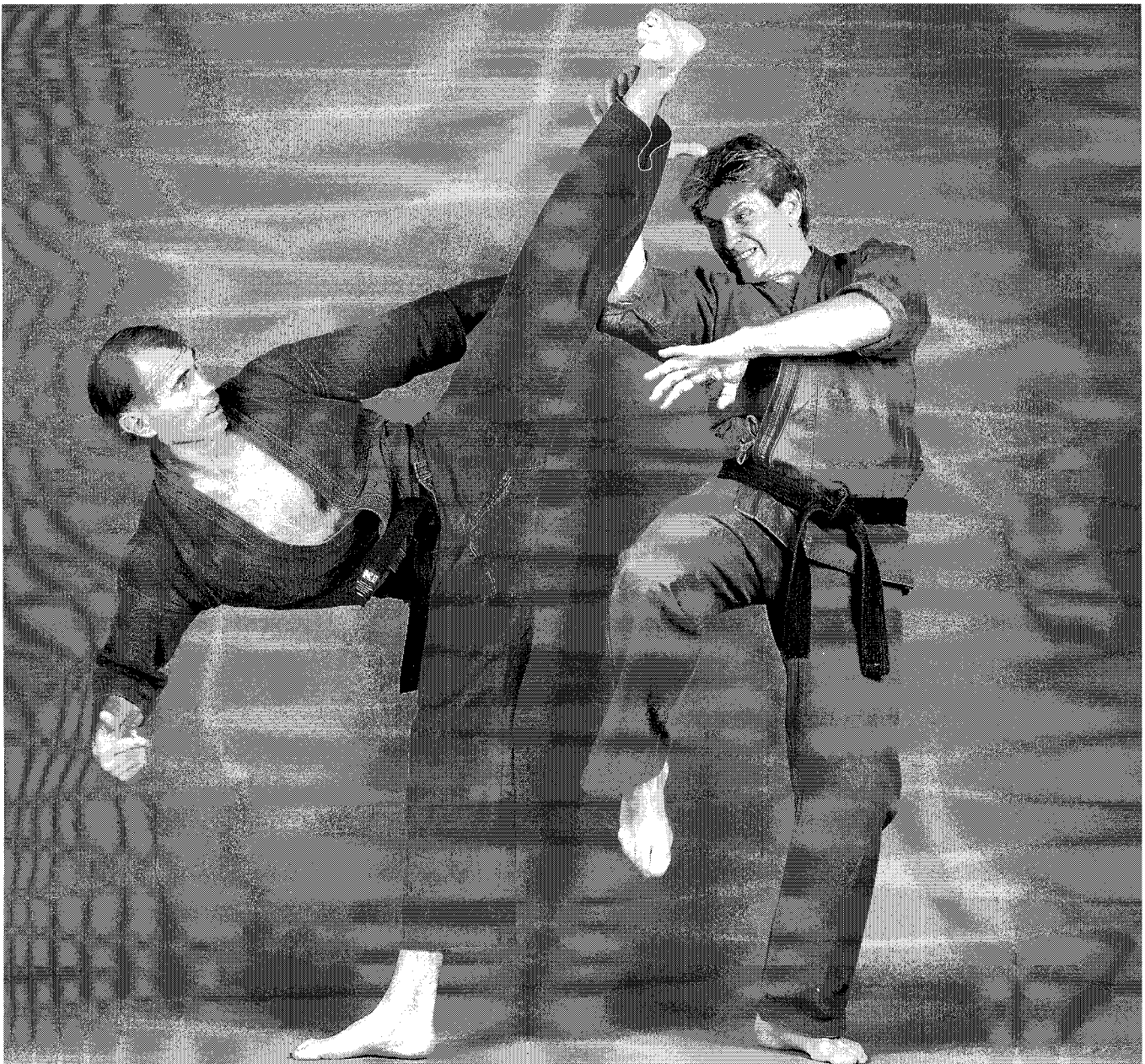
JEFF SMITH: When Bill went from no pads to pads, it didn't hurt his technique. His kicks still looked sharp; his hand techniques still looked clean. What it did was make the sloppy fighters even sloppier. With the pads, people now are trying to put a little bit more power behind the techniques because they have the pads and have to go harder to hurt somebody.

JOE LEWIS: To piggyback on what Jeff is saying, back in those days there were only a handful of us who put more than just speed and technique behind what we were doing. There was also an element of combative spirit, and this spirit brought a sense of reality to competition. Other competitors were either afraid they couldn't demonstrate that or were afraid of receiving the punishment from someone else. So it's basically separating

BLACK BELT PHOTO



Whether it was point-fighting or full-contact, Joe Lewis (above) dominated the heavyweight division during his competition days.



Bill Wallace (above left) used his quickness and "Superfoot" to dominate opponents, while Joe Lewis (above right) was known for his aggressiveness in overpowering rivals in the ring.

the men from the boys. Look at how many of the guys—other than Wallace, Smith and myself—made the great transition from point fighting to full contact. Not many guys did it successfully, especially top fighters.

SMITH: With Bill's techniques everybody was saying, "Awe, this flippy dippy backfist and those round kicks..." Of course, when he went to full-contact, he changed and put more power into it because Bill always went by the rules.

LEWIS: Until that time, Bill didn't have to put more power into the technique.

WALLACE: You have to bend the technique or go by the rules. What I did primarily was go by the rules. It was never stated that I had to hit you hard. All I had to do was hit close with a good, strong technique. So I would flip that little roundhouse kick that Jim Harrison calls a "flippy dippy roundhouse kick." All I had to do was flip it and touch you with it. I was a wrestler and I was in good shape, but I wanted to play by the rules because I didn't want to get hit hard back, whereas Jeff and Joe are much heavier than I am.

SMITH: Joe used more body speed. He utilized his whole body power, whereas Bill would rely on just his limb power. His leg would flip out and catch you before you had a chance to block it. But Joe's whole body would move at you with the limbs coming in combinations. So he had a lot more force because of the body momentum. He would just run over you. He would destroy you, whereas Bill would pick you apart. You would try to get in close and sneak in something, and all of a sudden—bam! You got hit in the head with a kick.

BB: We haven't seen anyone with your talent dominate the divisions in many years. Why don't today's champions have the same popularity?

LEWIS: Well, there are many reasons. No one can say, "Yes, I've got the answer." Obviously, just like in baseball, it's hard to overthrow the legendary endeavors of Babe Ruth. It's hard to overshadow what's already been done.

WALLACE: We are known for making the transition from point tournaments to full contact, and we were very successful at it.

SMITH: The reason our names got as famous as they did is



Bill Wallace claims that Jeff Smith (above right) was one of his toughest opponents in point-fighting during their careers.

because all three of us made it in semi-contact, point fighting without pads and then full contact. So we went through three phases of the sport. Nobody in martial arts today has been around long enough to go through all three phases.

WALLACE: Nobody cares about point tournaments today because you've got the fighters out there who are full-contact brawlers, then you've got your gamesters who don't want to fight full contact because all they've got to do is touch you to win. Now, my argument is that point tournaments will never make it. The public doesn't understand what scores a point. And if the public doesn't understand point tournaments, how are you going to have athletes who have that mystique like we had in the old days?

LEWIS: The three of us had the ability to play with the best of them in the middle of the ring and, at the same time, get down in the trenches and mix it up with those who wanted to get rough. And there are very few people who have that versatility. I'd like to ask Bill and Jeff why there is such a difference between our motives to compete and the motives of today's competitors.

What makes people today go into karate competition? Back in the old days, we didn't fight for trophies. We weren't necessarily after titles. We sure didn't get glory or money out of it. So do you fight harder for pride than you do for money, glory or fame?

SMITH: That's a good question. I've talked to a lot of fighters nowadays who say they don't care whether they look good in their fights as long as they win. I had the opposite attitude. I felt it was more important to get out there and really perform and do a good job. I had pride. If I had to fall down or run out of the ring to win, I'd rather lose. I preferred standing up and going along with the rules rather than stretching the rules. That style of fighting makes for a more exciting fight. I mean, defense is one thing, but when you're running or evading or falling down, it's not as exciting for the audience.

BB: Do you prefer point or contact karate?

WALLACE: We can still go hard, but after the age of 30 your bones don't heal like they used to. Your bruises take longer to heal, too. As far as preference goes—full contact is it. But we can't do that anymore because we don't heal like we used to.

With the point tournaments, I can still stick it in there.

LEWIS: It's not so much the bruises not healing anymore, because if you've got a good defense, you're not going to get hit that much anyway. Your capillaries shrink with age, so you can't get the optimal fuel supply to your muscle tissue—especially in your legs. I don't care how hard you train, you just can't get out there and run nine or 10 miles every day. You can't get out there and go hard for 25- or 35-minute sparing sessions every day anymore, either.

SMITH: Even now that you're over 40, both of you have more power than you did back then.

LEWIS: It's not so much the power as it is the savvy and finesse.

WALLACE: Yeah, we don't have the speed we had, and speed makes up for a lot of bad mistakes.

BB: Do you see anybody else coming out and dominating the weight categories as you've done?

SMITH: There's only one other guy that I would mention who could have done it and should have done it—and he just had an injury setback—and that's Howard Jackson.

LEWIS: If you look at Howard's fight at the first world championships, it's obvious he won. But Howard broke the rules, and that's the only reason he lost the title.

SMITH: And then he had a knee injury after that, which set him back.

LEWIS: He was fighting that night with a knee injury.

BB: Who was your toughest opponent?

WALLACE: The only one who hurt me was Blinky Rodriguez. He hit me with a left hook, and it hurt. But as far as point competition goes, Jeff Smith was one of my harder matches.

SMITH: All the guys in the top 10 were kind of rough on me.

BB: What's your advice for today's competitors?

SMITH: Nowadays fighters either fight full contact or they fight point. And I think the monetary aspect has not evolved as it should have for full contact. Really, you can probably make as much in point fighting. And having done both, point fighting is much easier as far as training is concerned. It takes a lot more training—especially for endurance—for full contact. When you're taking those full-contact blows, your body wears down more quickly than when you're point-fighting.

BB: So you're advising people to get into point karate?

SMITH: I'm advising people to do one or the other and to really make a definitive choice. If you're doing full contact for the money, then you shouldn't be in it at all. If you're doing point and you enjoy the competitive aspect of it, you can do the training without having your body take so much abuse. So,

because of the full-contact training and the abuse your body takes, the risk of injury is much greater. And the dedication for training is a lot more intense.

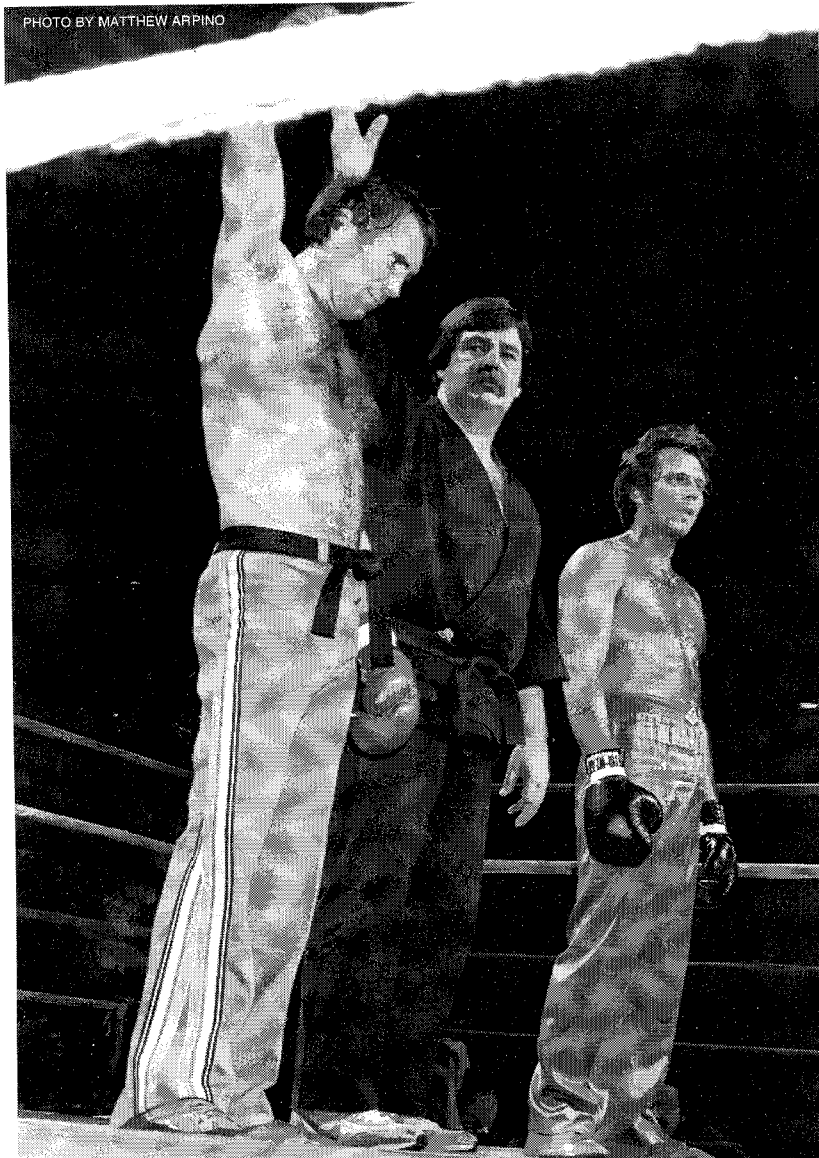
BB: Mr. Lewis, any advice?

LEWIS: The two weaknesses I see in today's fight game are, first, a lack of defense. People get hit too often. In the old days, you won a tournament by not getting hit. Today, you win a tournament by getting the most points. We've lost the whole concept of self-defense. The idea in a street fight—and the idea in full contact—is if a man can't hit you, a man can't beat you. The second big weakness is that people are thinking too much about combinations. They're coming off the firing line slowly. They're not blitzing. They don't have good lead-off techniques. They fire one technique and hope they can follow through.

SMITH: The players who are succeeding in point fighting today are using a lot of the techniques we used back in our point days. It's funny how these tech-

niques almost skipped a generation, and now they've come back. These athletes are using limb speed. You see kickers using Bill's leg techniques. You see them using that initial movement—that explosion—that Joe talked about. And these are the guys who are winning in point fighting today. They're the ones who are using the techniques we were doing back in the early 1970s.

LEWIS: And there's also an attitude difference. Today's fighters are more performance-oriented. Fighters in the old days went out there to do a job. They had a purpose in mind. And, to me, the only purpose in a kick or punch is to do damage. Now, I'm not saying you go out there today and are supposed to do damage, but if you're up against someone who is purpose-oriented and not performance-oriented, it's real hard to deal with him. ✕



In a familiar stance, Bill Wallace (above left) is raising a triumphant hand after yet another victory in kickboxing. Wallace ended his career with an undefeated record in full-contact karate.