

The DEVELOPMENT of American Karate

ERAS

that defined an art

BY DR. JERRY BEASLEY

Following is an excerpt from Dr. Jerry Beasley's book "Mastering Karate." Human Kinetics is the publisher.



The 1974 Professional Karate Association world champions included Jeff Smith (left), Bill "Superfoot" Wallace (center), and Joe Lewis (right). © Jerry Beasley/Ric Anderton

The mixing of styles and philosophies and the addition of methods and practices introduced by Americans might be better understood if we look at the development of martial arts in the United States over several eras. We will start with the traditional era.

TRADITIONAL ERA (1956 – 1966)

The Chinese probably were the first practitioners of Asian fighting arts in the United States, but a century passed before non-Chinese were instructed in the art of kung-fu. The California Gold Rush of 1849 and the subsequent building of the transcontinental railroad created a tremendous demand for labor. American business interests filled this demand in part by bringing thousands of Chinese workers to the United States. After fulfilling their work contracts, many of the workers stayed, living together in enclaves that came to be

known as "Chinatowns."

The first karate instructors appeared in the United States as early as 1946, when Robert Trias, an American serviceman who studied karate in the Orient, gave private instruction to friends in his Arizona community. It was not until 1956 that Ed Parker, a Hawaii native, opened the first commercially successful karate school in California. In later

years, many Americans and Asians, who maintained strong affiliations with Asian countries, spread karate throughout the United States.

A number of economically successful karate experts who introduced martial arts in the United States saw profit in its widespread appeal. In the 1960s, Americans were attracted to the foreign garb, the pageantry, and the violent performances of brick and board breaking. While some karate masters intended to promote only the benefits of karate instruction, the methods of attracting an

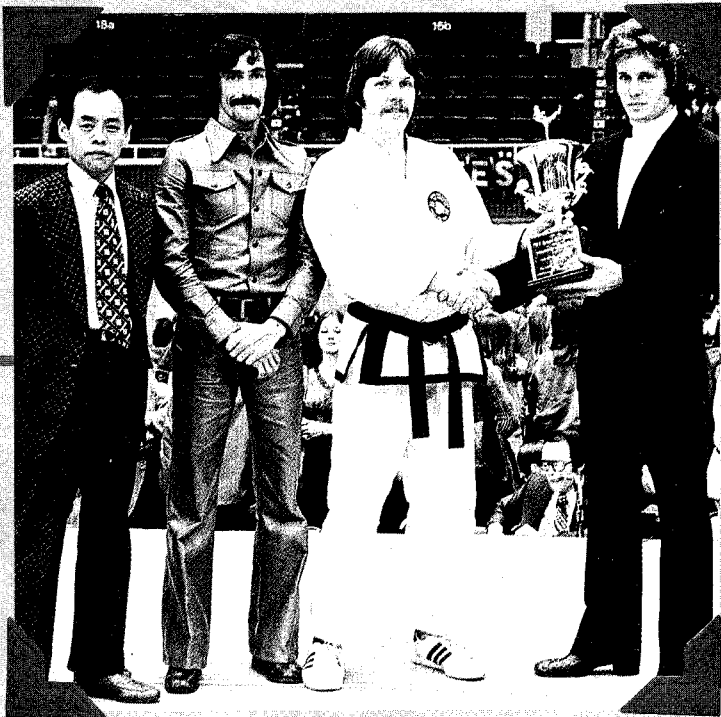
Through the Years

Following are the highlights of karate through the years.

- The Traditional Era (1956-1966)
- The Progressive Era (1967-1972)
- The Contact Era (1973-1980)
- The International Era (1981-1992)
- The Reality Era (1993-2000)
- The Contemporary Era (2001-present), partly triggered by the events of September 11, 2001, after which Americans renewed their interest in the original intent of karate: self-defense.



Skipper Mullins and Ron Marchini battle it out during a progressive era competition. © Jerry Beasley/Lara Gordon



Pictured here, left to right, are Jhoon Rhee, Mike Anderson, Jeff Smith, and Joe Lewis. Rhee, Anderson, and Lewis were important figures in the development of the contact era. © Jerry Beasley/Larry Ritchie

audience associated the art with an Asian superhero capable of defeating multiple opponents. People reasoned that what worked for the superhero could work for them. Americans joined karate schools by the thousands, many motivated by the opportunity to gain a new identity: superhero.

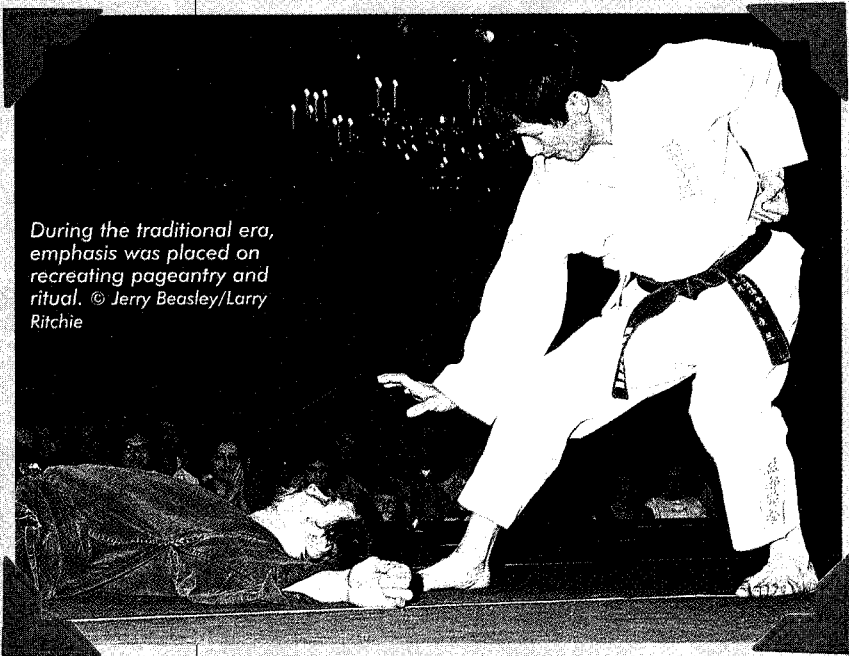
According to tradition, the black belt was the highest level of achievement. Thus, some practitioners sought the identity of the black-belted superhero. As a black belt gained a following of dedicated disciples (a practice that could be likened to the traditional masters), he or she could challenge lesser groups for control of the steadily increasing numbers of practitioners. So much emphasis was placed on becoming a leader that the actual virtues of leadership were often misplaced. In the process of attracting groups to the study of martial arts, the once honorable arts had in some cases been distorted by those who projected a false and inflated image of superior fighting ability that simply could not be achieved.

PROGRESSIVE ERA (1967 – 1972)

While karate practitioners had formerly taken much pride in promoting only the techniques or skills their styles had developed, tournament competitors of the mid-1960s and early 1970s began to incorporate skills from other styles into their own fighting styles. As a result, the fighters felt better equipped to fight a variety of competitors. Some of the top tournament fighters of this era were Chuck Norris, Mike Stone, Joe Lewis, Louis Delgado, Joe Hayes and Thomas LaPuppet. These fighters and others were characterized by innovative ways in which they arranged and adapted their fighting skills to enhance their abilities.

One of the top fighters of the progressive era was Chuck Norris, who entered tournament competition to attract attention to his Southern California-based karate schools. A favorite of magazines and tournament fans, Norris eventually won the World Professional title in Madison Square Garden in New York. In the 1970s, Norris retired from competition and, with assistance from movie star Steve McQueen (a student of Norris), entered a lucrative career as a movie star, action hero, and television actor.

Norris enjoyed success in his early tournaments, largely because he cross-trained in Korean kicking skills and Japanese punching skills. In so doing, Norris initiated a movement to progressively mix the karate-style arts to develop a more competitive fighting style. Before Norris, most dojo in Amer-



During the traditional era, emphasis was placed on recreating pageantry and ritual. © Jerry Beasley/Larry Ritchie

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Fighters and masters of the traditional and progressive eras. Left to right standing: Ralph Castro, Ron Marchini, Alan Stein, Chuck Norris, Ed Parker, Skipper Mullins, Tonny Tulliners and Greg Baines. Left to right kneeling: Arnold Urquidez and Mike Stone. © Jerry Beasley/Larry Ritchie

ica closely guarded their systems and disregarded skills associated with other arts. After Norris demonstrated how to blend the arts to get a better product, the practice became commonplace.

While maintaining close association with traditional training methods, practitioners during the progressive era laid the foundation of integrating styles, which led to the development of what's commonly called American karate. This development of a new system of karate practice, even in its infant stages, was strongly rejected by traditionalists.

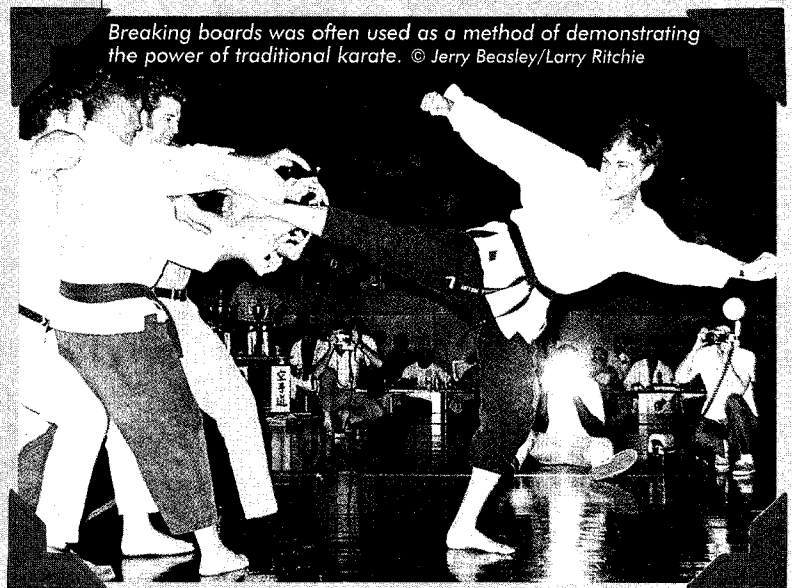
Throughout the 1960s and into the early 1970s, karate practice in the United States prospered. By 1974, a marked decline in karate school enrollment was attributed in part to the economic recession, the death of kung fu superstar Bruce Lee, the cancellation of the Kung Fu television series and general apathy on the part of Americans toward the practicality of traditional karate instruction as a viable means of self-defense.

CONTACT ERA (1973 – 1980)

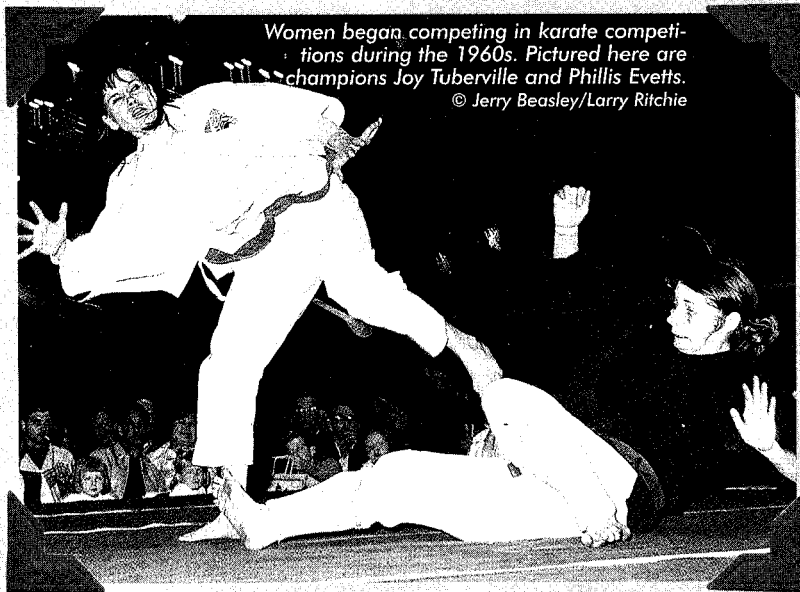
In 1973, Jhoon Rhee, a Washington, D.C., martial arts instructor, developed and marketed the original Safe-T equipment, which permitted moderate contact without injury. Mike Stone, who proposed the development of hand and foot protection for karate competitors, influenced Rhee. Thus, the stage was being set for a dramatic change in American karate

that would eventually influence the development of karate worldwide.

While loss of credibility and diminished student enrollment took their toll among traditionalists, the introduction of a new sport, contact karate, attracted interest. This new method of karate practice, developed in the United States during the early 1970s, allowed participants trained in the symbolically lethal techniques of traditional karate to make



Breaking boards was often used as a method of demonstrating the power of traditional karate. © Jerry Beasley/Larry Ritchie



Women began competing in karate competitions during the 1960s. Pictured here are champions Joy Tuberville and Phillis Eveitts.
© Jerry Beasley/Larry Ritchie

contact during karate bouts. Encased in specially designed contact gear, participants often abandoned traditional skills to hit their opponents with cushioned fists and feet as often as possible. The traditional practice of bringing one hand back in a set position as the other hand punched, while suitable for non-contact bouts, was grossly ineffective. Likewise, the traditional kiai, or loud yell, was found unsuitable for contact karate competition, as a blow to an open mouth could result in a broken jaw.

When traditionally trained practitioners were matched in full-contact competition, most chose to abandon traditional techniques in an effort to defeat their opponents. While we might assume that early contact fighters realistically attempted to knock out opponents by using classical techniques, some audiences witnessed what has been termed a "martial farce," because traditional school participants could not effectively control their opponents, which resulted in unappealing brawls. Consequently, karate as a self-defense art was severely criticized.

The absence of popular cultural heroes such as Bruce Lee and David Carradine (who played Caine, a kung fu monk, in the television series *Kung Fu*), ill-advised marketing procedures, and criticism about the effectiveness of traditional training methods resulted in sharp declines in karate enrollment.

INTERNATIONAL ERA (1981 – 1992)

In 1980, actor Richard Chamberlain starred in the leading role of the television miniseries *Shogun*. The hugely successful series introduced viewers to Japanese history, traditions and the martial art of ninjutsu, sparking a new era in the development of karate in the United States.

During the international era, Americans found interest in many martial arts representing different cultures. Stephen K. Hayes, perhaps America's most prolific ninja, introduced forms of the art through seminars conducted throughout the United States. Like karate, ninjutsu shared the Japanese traditions; therefore, it was readily adaptable to many Japanese karate styles. So popular was the art of ninjutsu that several magazines gave a majority of space to ninjutsu instruction.

Additionally, television programs and full-length feature films, such as *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles*, were devoted to the karate-like art. During this era, many karate instructors sought to supplement their classes by offering ninjutsu instruction. A second martial arts craze during the 1980s was established by a protégé of Bruce Lee named Dan Inosanto. Inosanto (a kenpo karate black belt who had taught Lee's art of jeet kune do), along with Remy Presas, was directly responsible for the popularity of the Filipino martial arts of kali and escrima.

In the late 1990s, Billy Blanks introduced the hugely successful *Tae Bo* video series. Among the top women competitors were Linda Denley and Arlene Limas in fighting, Kathy Long in full contact, and Cynthia Rothrock in forms. Rothrock went on to enjoy a lucrative career as an actress in martial arts movies.

REALITY ERA (1993 – 2000)

The year 1993 marked the introduction of no-holds-barred (NHB) and mixed martial arts competitions in the United States. Rorion Gracie, head of the Gracie Jiu-jitsu Academy in Torrance, California, helped organize the first Ultimate Fighting Championship in Denver, Colorado, in 1993. In this event and those that followed, fighters representing karate, taekwondo, ninjutsu, jeet kune do, boxing, wrestling, judo, jiu-jitsu, kung fu, muay Thai, savate and various other systems were tested in NHB competitions.

After viewing literally hundreds of mixed martial arts competitions, the result seemed self-evident. Several thousands of years ago the Greeks found that in NHB competi-

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Some of the top fighters of the progressive era. Left to right: Demitrius Havanis, Ed Daniels, Ronny Cox, Skipper Mullins.
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tions, grapplers had an advantage over strikers. If the grappler could successfully drop his head and shoot for an opponent's legs, the striker would find no satisfactory targets other than the top of the grappler's head. Strikers who attempted to hit the heads of grapplers suffered bruised or broken hands. Grapplers were successful in compromising the strikers' advantage (their punches), then capitalizing on their weakness (a lack of preparation for ground fighting). In modern NHB competitions, results were much the same. Grappling arts have much to offer modern karate practitioners.

As a result of reality fighting events, grappling arts became popular for several years. Most karate systems have now added at least some weapons training (stemming from Japanese or Filipino influences) and grappling skills (based on Brazilian and Japanese jiu-jitsu). Other unique advances in karate instruction during the 1990s included the emergence of martial arts business associations that assisted instructors with learning or creating new, more efficient ways to develop their practice.

CONTEMPORARY ERA (2001 – Present)

While competitions and new training methods for mixed martial arts sports dominated the last few years of the 20th century, an act of international terrorism served to refocus American karate on the original intent of the art: self-defense. On September 11, 2001, Muslim terrorists from the Middle East hijacked several jet airliners and flew them into selected targets, including the twin towers of New York City's World Trade Center, which were destroyed, and the Pentagon in Washington, D.C., which was severely damaged. Thousands of people were killed in the attacks.

Many reporters and writers have referred to September 11, 2001, as the day America changed. Surely, leaders in the karate industry recognize the importance of their practice in helping people learn to protect themselves. Karate instruction has much to offer. Learning from past mistakes and adapting to future needs will increase the success of the art of karate in the 21st century.

The period following the attacks was filled with patriotism and reflection. It was a time in which karate instructors put aside differences and sought to improve the arts by learning from the past. Perhaps even more important than self-defense skills, karate instruction offers the devotee an opportunity to find inner peace, protection and a sense of belonging within a socially acceptable organization. Our own history of karate in America has shown us that karate, when properly understood, is much more than training for self-defense. Learning karate is a step toward perfection of character, a release of negative emotion and a desire to become at peace with one's environment. The karate dojo offers

safety, security, and a sense of belonging in a time when, for many, fear is running rampant. ☯

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