

# CEZAR BORKOWSKI

## Forward Thinking

By Jerry Figgiani

**W**hen someone mentions Canadian martial arts, one name which always comes up is Cezar Borkowski. His family migrated from Poland to Canada in the mid-1960s. Borkowski Sensei, with over fifty years experience in the martial arts, is not only a gifted teacher who runs an operation called Northern Karate Schools (founded in 1972) which also boasts twelve locations with over 10,000 members, but he still is very much a student of the martial arts. A walking encyclopedia, Borkowski Sensei is second-to-none as an educator and motivator. Sensei Tony LaSelva, a director and senior instructor at the Richmond Hill N.K.S Dojo, states

*"I am extremely fortunate and grateful to be a student of Hanshi Cezar Borkowski. He is the kindest and most generous individual I have ever known. His knowledge of the martial arts and its history is parallel only by his willingness to share it with all who desire to learn. Not only do the directors of N.K.S and all the senior teachers appreciate his contributions to our personal growth, but thousands of students who train at our schools and throughout the world benefit from his undying commitment on a daily basis."*

While most people take vacations from work, Sensei Borkowski takes vacations for work. His travels have taken him to Okinawa, Bangkok, Singapore and Bali to study with the "who's who" list of the world's top masters in the martial arts. Some of these have included Nagamine Shoshin, Matayoshi Shinpo, Kishaba Chogi, Hokama Tetsuhiro, and Nakazato Jyoen. He has also used his martial arts to give back to communities raising hundreds of thousands for many charities. He is the Director of the Ryu Kyu No Kaze Society and a certified master instructor by the All Okinawan Karatedo Federation, Japan. Sensei is a six-time national champion rated number one by NASKA and the PKL as well as a 2011 inductee into the Candian Blackbelt Hall of Fame. With these types of credentials, his dojos are filled with students who experience a unique method of teaching which introduces students not only to the physical movements of the martial arts but exposes them to the knowledge and history of all facets in the martial arts. He is the author of the "Complete Idiot's Guide to the Martial Arts" and "The History and Traditions of Okinawan Martial Arts." Here is a look into this fascinating martial artist, teacher and student.

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***Was there a turning-point that propelled you from student to martial arts educator?***

I was hooked rather quickly and a year after beginning my martial arts training, was already leading other children. At the age of 10 or 11, I'd found my calling. I was first to arrive and last to leave and knew I would be a sensei for the rest of my life.

***You were a very successful tournament competitor. Can you give us some insights into those early days?***

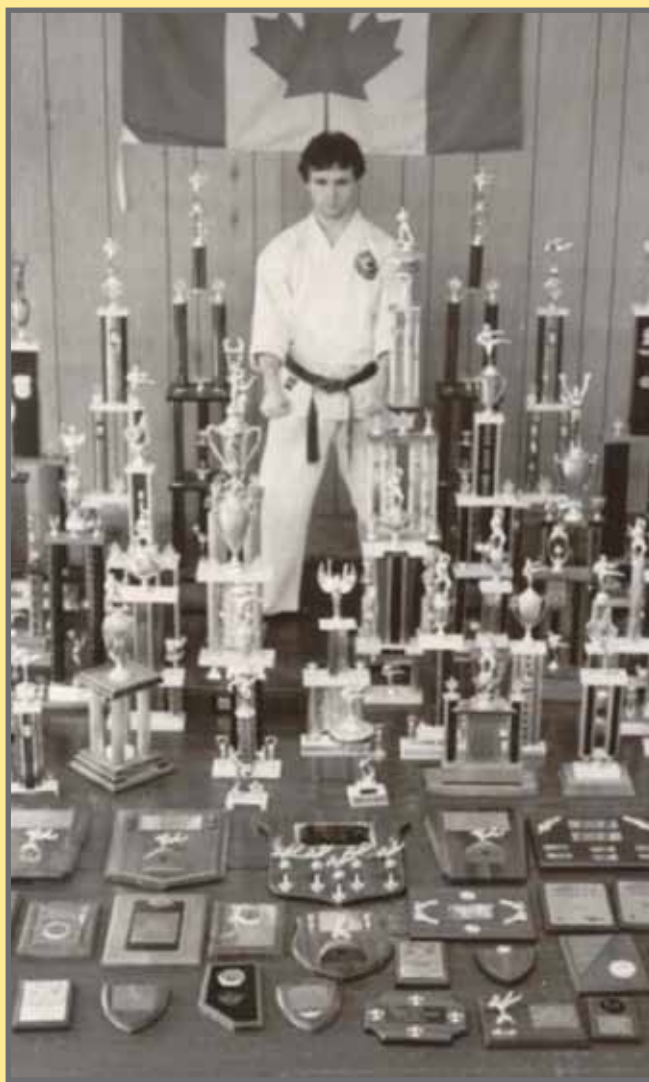
In the 1960s, tournaments in Canada were few and far between. Although men typically gravitated toward sparring/kumite and women and children only focused on kata, my first win was in the forms division. I finished in second place at the Canadian National Exhibition performing Chito-ryu Shihohai. I embraced this new aspect of martial practice, competed internationally, and was ranked # 1 by Karate Illustrated, NASKA and MBL before retiring in 1987.

***How has your personal training changed over the years?***

While learning the Okinawan-based Chito-ryu of Masami Tsuruoka sensei, I also started practicing southern-style Kung-fu and Goju-ryu with Robert Dagleish. I was promoted to Shodan in Chito-ryu in the fall of 1971, and achieved this same rank in Goju-ryu a year later. Over twenty years on the tournament circuit fellow competitors became friends and respected colleagues, including Toyotaro Miyazaki, Hidy Ochiai, Wally Slocki, Chuck Merriman, John Chung and many others. They influenced my practice and help shape my approach to teaching. I also trained some incredible students, many of whom became champions in their own right, but the single greatest bonus of tournament travel was meeting my wife, Marion Manzo, at a Boston competition in 1983. She was already a very sharp black belt in the Queens NY dojo of Sensei Miyazaki, and thirty-three years later, I enjoy teaching, training and running our schools with her. Rather than resting on our laurels or relying on the 'currency' of past glories, we've redirected the time, energy and passion we'd previously invested in tournaments into developing a state-of-the-(martial) art organization, Northern Karate Schools.

***What is your main style of karate and is this what you teach your students?***

Our empty-hand curriculum, Seishinkan, is hybrid of traditional Okinawan systems infused with boxing, grappling and Silat. We focus less on branding or compartmentalizing it as one or a few styles and instead, view it as broad-based, organic and evolving – a system that is both classical and cutting edge. We take the fluid approach in our kobudo



program which includes Ryukyu, Matayoshi, Yamanne and Mura traditions that I've discovered while training with some of the best teachers in the world.

***You have strong relationships with Okinawan masters. How did you make these connections?***

I am fortunate to have a wonderful network of teachers and friends in Okinawa, many of whom are senior practitioners of various styles and groups. Giri (reciprocity) is at the foundation of these relationships. During the course of several decades travelling and training in Okinawa and throughout Asia, I've discovered that giving more than you receive is the key to establishing and maintaining these associations. Rather than seeking rank advancement or affiliation as foreigner practitioners often do, I prefer to further the cause of Okinawan Karate-do and Kobudo. It's an amazingly generous culture that deserves respect and support.

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**How many times have you travelled to Asia and Southeast Asia? What martial arts have you practiced during these trips?**

I visited Asia nearly 50 times for martial training and cultural research, and to reinforce the bonds established with individuals in Japan, Okinawa, India, China, Thailand, Malaysia, Indonesia, Singapore, Cambodia, Laos and Vietnam. The martial systems of Southeast Asia have enriched my personal practice and teaching methods, and ultimately, my aim is to experience all Asian combative arts in their country of origin.

**Are there other areas of martial arts that interest you – for example, history, philosophy and culture?**

I have a deep and abiding appreciation for every aspect of martial arts. Beyond enjoying the physicality of each style and discipline, I've developed a passion for research and study and have written and edited several books, articles and blogs. I am grateful each time I'm afforded the opportunity to meet budo luminaries, discuss their experiences, exchange ideas and share concepts. Books and online research can be very valuable, but 'drinking from the original source' is life-changing and fuels the concept of shuhari: learn, detach and transcend.

**You have one of the most successful dojo operations in North America. Can you tell us something about its genesis?**

Today, the Northern Karate Family is one of the largest and most respected martial groups in the world – with twelve schools and 10,000 active students in Toronto alone – but we come from humble roots. As previously mentioned, I began teaching part-time at a local YMCA. I also assumed the helm of an after-school karate club at Northern High School and in 1972, rented a storefront. These were 'character-building' times, with choices like – do we pay rent or go to an out-of-town tournament - we usually opted for the latter – and discovering dozens of ways to make bologna or onion sandwiches more appetizing. These lean years also helped us build a team that remains the nucleus of Northern Karate, along with hundreds of professional martial arts educators.

**How do you reconcile traditional martial arts and successful commercial schools?**

I am a firm believer in the Buddhist concept of the middle path, or chudo. You have to find a middle ground in most aspects of running a modern dojo with a traditional core. Modern students have shorter attention spans and busier agendas, and we live in a society where instant gratification is the order of the day. Members have access to more information via the internet. They're savvy consumers who need to maximize their time and financial investment. Shorter classes that are economical on time but information-rich, stripes and regular testing, a curriculum that features new





and classic material in a student-centric manner and an unswerving commitment to over-deliver on program benefits are vital to the longevity of any modern martial arts organization. The concept of giri (noted above) is also a key motivator for NKS teams who believe that like all good samurai, we are here to serve our students and honour our mission: provide the best martial arts and life skills education. Good service builds a good business, and great service builds a great business.

***You have an excellent kobudo program. Can you talk about that and some of the additional martial arts that you've explored abroad?***

NKS' kobudo system is unique and the result of my practice with some extraordinary teachers beginning with Tsuruoka Masami, an expert in Chinen Sanda and Kyan Chotoku. Following my 'primary' weapons education, I trained with many masters, including seven who have left an indelible impression: Matayoshi Shinpo, Akamine Eisuke, Hokama Testsuhiro, Kinjo Masakazu, Kishaba Chogi and Tomimoto Yuko. The end result is an amalgam of their combative practices, kata and strategies. Their teachings inspired me to create an innovative maximum-impact method that relies on angular, rather than direct, defense and incorporates fluid footwork, effective space management performed as prear-

ranged and spontaneous two-person exchange drills. Like our empty-hand training, this approach to kobudo practice is more 'martial' rather than 'art'.

***Where do you see your schools five years or ten years from now? What are some of your goals?***

The future of Northern Karate Schools is secure because we produce leaders rather than followers. I trust our teams - talented, hard-working, bright individuals who share our mission and vision. These remarkable dojo directors and senior teachers are motivated by the desire for excellence and to preserve the past while paving the way for NKS' future. In the same way we train and nurture our students, we grow our operational teams, providing them with the opportunity to earn a good living doing what they love. Over the next five and ten years, we will continue to expand our organization and share our services with new communities - locally and further afield.

***How do you balance personal and professional commitments?***

I am extremely lucky to be married to a martial artist and successful dojo director, and "my" plans are more often than not, "our" plans. Marion and I share the same personal and professional values and interests. We live a rich life and seek the middle path in all things. Both of us hope to kick and punch until we die and to leave this world a little better than we found it.

***Who are some of the stand out instructors that you have encountered in your travels?***

While I've met so many incredible people and choosing a



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handful is difficult, there are a few that hold a special place in my heart and mind: in Okinawa, Hokama Tetsuhiro, Kinjo Masakazu and Nakamoto Masahiro, a trio of martial masters that are passionate about teaching and learning; Guru Mohammed Kamin of Singapore and Malaysia, an exceptionally-gifted Silat instructor; and Hanshi Patrick McCarthy, a friend and colleague for more than 45 years, and a budoka who inspires me every day.

### *Is there one person that made the biggest impact in your martial arts life?*

Again, narrowing it down to one person is challenging, but I'd say Jhoon Rhee left a lasting impression on my martial arts soul. Whether you're a student of Japanese, Chinese, North American or Korean combative systems, Master Rhee is fascinating. He's a true Renaissance man: teaching the who's who of Korean karate including the Chung family and numerous world champions, as well as high-profile US politicians, athletes and movie stars; running successful schools; developing martial arts business operating systems; creating foam-dipped sparring gear and in the process, revolutionizing light-contact sparring. However his single greatest achievement is promoting Might for Right. More than a

slogan, it was a moral mandate that required martial artists to be good and productive members of the community and I often think about him when conducting NKS' charitable programs.

### *What are your views on politics in the martial arts?*

We all have a 'political' agenda, but from my perspective, true gains result from finding the win-win rather than jockeying for position. There are instances where the ego takes control in the quest for rank advancement or group affiliation with a particular ryuha. In contrast to self-serving activity, we work with a variety of teachers and groups and prefer those that are multi-disciplinary like the World Kobudo Federation (WKF), where cooperation is valued above competition or greed. Change is inevitable. Lean into it as you work for benefit of all.

### *What is your personal training regimen?*

Age and wear-and-tear teach us humility. While my passion burns brighter than ever, knee and shoulder injuries and a hip replacement have imposed certain limitations. In addition to regular martial practice, I cross-train at the gym 2-3 times a week to build strength and functional mobility. I also



like to 'exercise' my mind and read voraciously. It's bunbu (scholar/warrior) in action, or in the wisdom of Mao Zedong "Civilize the mind but make savage the body."

### **What are your views on MMA?**

I appreciate MMA as combative expression, but the professional wrestling bravado often detracts from its image and value. Like all martial arts, MMA is synthesis of systems and techniques that predate the octagon. It's important that MMA and TMA (traditional martial arts) practitioners respect each other. We may choose different paths, but we're moving in a common direction.

### **What do you think the old masters would think of modern martial arts and competitions?**

I wouldn't presume to guess what the 'old' masters think of the current state of martial arts, but this is a popular question and there's no shortage of fantasy match-ups and theories. It should be noted that sword saints like Musashi, Bokuden or Sasaki often faced challengers. Karate's Motobu Choki also welcomed the opportunity to test his – and others' – skills, however his enthusiasm for combat was tempered by an Okinawan upbringing and value system that emphasized nuchi du takara (life is a treasure). Mas Oyama was eager to prove why Kyokushin was the 'strongest karate' and demonstrated its superiority against man and beast. At the other end of the spectrum, Jigoro Kano, Funakoshi Gichin and Morihei Ueshiba promoted styles that were more recreational and rank-driven and delivered a character-building component. Bottomline – you'd have to ask them what they'd think of the fighting or sport value of modern martial arts, but many were more progressive than you might imagine, and some were keen to field-test their abilities.



### **You met and trained with Master Shoshin Nagamine. As a non-Matsubayashi stylist, what insights did you gain through this exchange?**

I had the distinct privilege of visiting the Matsubayashiryu hombu dojo on five occasions and found Nagamine Shoshin to be a kind, inviting sensei and one of the brightest lights of Okinawan Karate. I was invited to training and early morning zen mediation sessions. Additionally, I was a guest at private social functions, like Nagamine's 85th and 88th birthday celebrations and the opening of the Shurijo Castle Park. He was ahead of his time, used written lesson plans that were curriculum-based, and incorporated lightweights, skipping ropes and timing drills. Master Nagamine's technical skills were impressive and his knowledge of martial arts was encyclopaedic. He generously shared both. He spoke simply and from the heart, and walked the talk – living what he preached.

### **How has karate changed your life?**

Karate didn't change my life. It gave me life. Everything I am and everything I do is because of karate.

### **What can be done to preserve and propagate karate and traditional martial arts?**

Like the NKS system, we need to blend classic and cutting-edge resources. Social media, 'product placement' in movies and television (why are Krav Maga or BJJ part of the narrative, but not traditional karate), and more print and digital articles in mainstream media can play a vital role. Everything 'old' is 'new' again – if you know how to keep it top-of-mind. MMA and BJJ are trending due to the efforts of tech-savvy millennials. Karate media is more often than not fuelled by 40, 50 or 60 year olds – with the much-appreciated exception of Karate by Jesse. To quote Funakoshi "karate is like boiling water, if you do not heat it constantly, it will cool." The Father of Modern Karate-do would likely also think it's ok to heat it on an electric stove.



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## *What would you tell someone who has started their journey in the martial arts?*

Congratulations. Enjoy your training and practice regularly. The smallest elements and tiniest details hold vital importance as you progress, so take your time and embrace the process as you develop solid basics. Most importantly, know that the art you are practicing will benefit you on many levels. Shin gi tai, balancing skill, strength and mind, will prepare you for challenges that lie ahead inside and outside the dojo.

## *Where do you see traditional martial arts in the future?*

Modern life affords us many conveniences. It also can bring stress, disconnection and uncertainty. In the face of these challenges, traditional martial arts are well-positioned to enjoy newfound popularity, i.e. martial arts and character development courses taught in schools and community centers. In addition to the benefit of physical exercise to encourage healthy weight-management and body image, children need to develop confidence, street awareness, and bully-proofing skills borne of self and mutual respect. Teens and tweens require self-discipline and stress management. Adults enjoy the body-mind-spirit connection. Families have never been busier, so parents and kids want to combine fitness and quality time and appreciate a flexible class schedule. Individuals with learning or physical challenges must tap-into a welcoming community. There are many experts who recommend martial arts practice as a replacement or adjunct for ADD, ADHD, ODD protocols. Can Shorin, Goju or Uechi ryu replace or reduce reliance on Ritalin or Adderall? Any student-centric martial arts school that is motivated to serve the needs and wants of today's students is well-positioned to flourish tomorrow.

## *Finally, how do you feel about karate's inclusion as a demonstration sport in the 2020 Olympics (Tokyo) and potential impact for sport karate?*

Although many practitioners are happy about international recognition for karate, they haven't seriously considered pros and cons. Prior to 1964, Judo was shrouded in mystery and seen as one of James Bond's secret weapons but after the Tokyo Olympics when spectators witnessed competitors losing their belts and their balance, this martial art lost its cool edge and enrollment declined. Similarly, after Tae Kwon Do made its debut at the Seoul Games in 1988, IOC rules and the quest for hardware superseded recreational practice. Dojang focused on training elite athletes who represented perhaps .01% of their student body, rather than the average man, woman and child. So I don't fear the inclusion of karate as an Olympic Sport, but I am concerned about what it will become. 