



KENSEI TABA

An Okinawan Legend

By Jerry Figgiani

I felt extremely fortunate when I had the opportunity to travel to Japan and Okinawa with six of my students to study the culture, history, and traditions of the Martial Arts. The privilege of studying karate under one of Okinawa's most senior karate masters, Kensei Taba, was the highlight of my trip. People who may not be familiar with this Okinawan master should know he was once a student under Chosin Chibana and Hohān Soken, as well as a long-time student under Shoshin Nagamine.



(Left): Sensei Taba with Sensei Nagamine in Nagasaki City. • (Right): Author Jerry Figgiani at Sensei Taba's dojo.

Taba Sensei, who heads his own organization, Okinawa Shogen Ryu Karate-Do Association, was at one time the president of the World Matsubayashi Ryu Karate-do Association and the ranking student of Shoshin Nagamine. The name Shogen Ryu was chosen to pay respect to Grandmaster Shoshin Nagamine and represent the return to TRUE Okinawa Karate-Do. The 'Sho' represents Shoshin Nagamine and shows the Matsu link to Matsubayashi Ryu while 'Gen' means original or the root of Okinawa Karate. In the same way Shoshin Nagamine spread Matsubayashi Ryu to the world, Taba Sensei hopes to spread his style of karate. In the United States, Shogen Ryu Karate-Do is headed by Sensei Tony Partlow of Dayton, Ohio which is where Matsubayashi Ryu got its start in the United States. Tony's father, Chuck Partlow, was an early student of James Wax, the first American Black Belt in Matsubayashi Ryu. Through Sensei Tony Partlow, I first met Taba Sensei in 2007.

Spending a week with Taba Sensei in Okinawa gave me the opportunity to not only study the martial art Shogen Ryu Karate-Do but also to interview this fascinating sensei. Training with Taba Sensei, I not only was impressed with his karate but I was more impressed with the way he conducted himself. I first took note of this at the 2009 World Championships as other senior masters of Okinawa made it a point to show their respect to him. From opening up his home to me, and the consideration he and his fellow associates showed my students, I was truly honored. Kensei Taba is a master and one that truly demonstrates the true meaning of Martial Arts showing respect, kindness, generosity, and most of all, humility. Here is a quick peek into this fascinating man.

When and why did you first start your study of the Martial Arts?

On August 22, 1944, I was on a ship that was torpedoed by a U.S. Submarine. I watched many of my friends drown and since I was just a young boy, I could not save them. After being rescued by a Japanese warship and spending about a year on mainland Japan, I was returned home to Okinawa. In 1948 at age 13, I decided I wanted to become stronger so I would not be helpless again and I began studying Karate-Do.

Why did you start to study Matsubayashi Shorin Ryu?

When I decided to study Karate-Do, I went to many different schools and watched what was taught. I liked what I saw at the Nagamine dojo. I thought it was better than anything else I had seen. It was nice that the Nagamine dojo was very close to my home.



(Top) Hohan Soken.
(Bottom) Chosin Chibana.



Sensei Taba during Kata and Kobudo training sessions in Okinawa.

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(Top): Group of assistants and student at the "Bushi Matsumura Memorial."

(Center): Makino Sensei, Taba Sensei and author Jerry Figgiani.

(Bottom): Group of student posing at Sensei Taba's dojo.

You studied under Hohán Soken and Chosen Chibana. Could you describe your memories and impressions?

Nagamine Sensei was a police officer and was moved to Nago and Motobu as part of police force. He was gone for a few years and that was when I began training with others. Hohán Soken Sensei had good technique. He helped me a lot with my technique. We had a strong relationship. On his 90th birthday, he had 5 or 10 special dogi (training uniform) and obi (belt) made up and given to his top students. The obi was a shade of gold with a stripe of a different shade of gold running the length of it. I was one of the few to receive these gifts. I believe I showed you the obi. I still have it but have never worn it. Chibana Sensei taught good original Okinawa Karate-Do. That says it all. Another person that influenced my training during that time was one of the senior students of Nagamine Shoshin, Toguchi Seitoku. He was my "senpai" in Matsubayashi Ryu. He and I would train together outside of the dojo. It was very hard training. He was very good with the makiwara. After a few years of being away from Naha, Nagamine Shoshin returned and I resumed training under him directly. I did so until his death.

What was your relationship like with Shoshin Nagamine?

Nagamine was like a father and I was like a son. He taught me everything without holding back which is what I do with my students now. I only have a few direct students and we are family.

In 1991, he made his son, Takayoshi Nagamine, Soke. Were you surprised by this appointment?

No, I was not surprised. No one was. Takayoshi is the son of Nagamine Shoshin and it was only right that he become Soke. Soke is the inheritor of a system, not the person who is highest rank or the one in charge. In 1991, Nagamine Shoshin announced that his son was Soke but Nagamine Shoshin was still President and I was one of his Vice-Presidents. I had been promoted to "hachidan" (8th degree black belt) in 1975 and there were only three people senior to me in Matsubayashi Ryu. These people were Nagamine Shoshin, "judan" (10th degree black belt), Nakamura Seigi, "kudan" (9th degree black belt) and Takamura Seiko, "kudan" (9th degree black belt). A few years later, when Nagamine Shoshin was sick, he asked me to be the President of Matsubayashi Ryu. Nakamura Sensei was my good friend and senior and I urged that Nakamura Sensei be President. I was younger than Nakamura Sensei and he was also not in the best of health, so he and Nagamine Sensei both wanted me to be President. Takayoshi was still Soke.

You and the other senior students of Shoshin Nagamine continued to support Matsubayashi Ryu after the passing of Shoshin Nagamine. When did you decide to form your own style and organization?

When I was in Canada for a Matsubayashi Ryu seminar, a little while after the passing of Nagamine Shoshin, I saw people performing poor kata. They wanted it to be easy (soft). I did not feel that Matsubayashi Ryu was being performed well by people of all ranks. I never wanted to be President of Matsubayashi Ryu and did not think that I could change it, so I decided to leave.

What was the feedback from your peers?

Most of my peers approved. In fact, some of the seniors of Matsubayashi Ryu followed me. Two of the most senior Matsubayashi Ryu karate-ka, Tamaki Takeshi and Shiroma Seiei, helped form Shogen-Ryu. Several other seniors joined me.



Tajime Sensei, Taba Sensei, Shinzato Sensei and author, Jerry Figgiani.

Why did you decide on the name Shogen Ryu?

Nagamine Shoshin was my most influential teacher. I wanted to honor him so I kept the symbol for "Matsu" which is also read as "Sho." That is for his name, Shoshin. "Gen" means "root" and symbolizes my desire to get back to the realistic and effective root of Okinawa Karate-Do.

Shogen Ryu has spread to Canada, the United States, and Australia.

While your organization is small, you have had good turnouts at your seminars. What does the future hold for Shogen Ryu?

I expect that Shogen Ryu will remain small. I have few direct students. Shogen Ryu will be passed in entirety to these few students and on through their students to keep Okinawa Karate-Do alive. My students know that I do not believe in limiting the knowledge I share with them and that I expect them to do the same. I tell them that they are to teach anyone who has an open mind and is willing to have a change of mind.

What is your goal with your organization?

I want to keep Okinawa Karate-Do alive. I do not want a large organization that is like a business. It is not about money. I want to find people that want to learn good, real Okinawa Karate-Do and teach them all I know. That will keep Okinawa Karate-Do alive. Shogen Ryu is also not about rank. People come to me wanting to join Shogen Ryu but when they find out that I am not handing out rank, they leave. People have to earn rank but not care about it. That is not easy to find in these times. That is why people have to train with me for a while before I will make them a full member. Even then, they are not guaranteed to have the same rank they came to me with, even if they are Matsubayashi Ryu.

With the popularization of mixed martial arts, what are your views on mixed martial arts or sport karate in general?

Sport karate and MMA are sport with rules. Shogen Ryu is Budo. There are no rules. The two are completely different.

What do you think the future holds for traditional karate?

Unfortunately, many of the "traditional" styles are becoming more like sport karate. They are no longer real. I started Shogen Ryu because of this and have faith that it will be passed on through my students and their students. We have people from all over the world interested in learning true Okinawa Karate-Do. Shogen Ryu will grow slowly and strong like a tree. If a tree grows slowly, it grows a strong root. 