

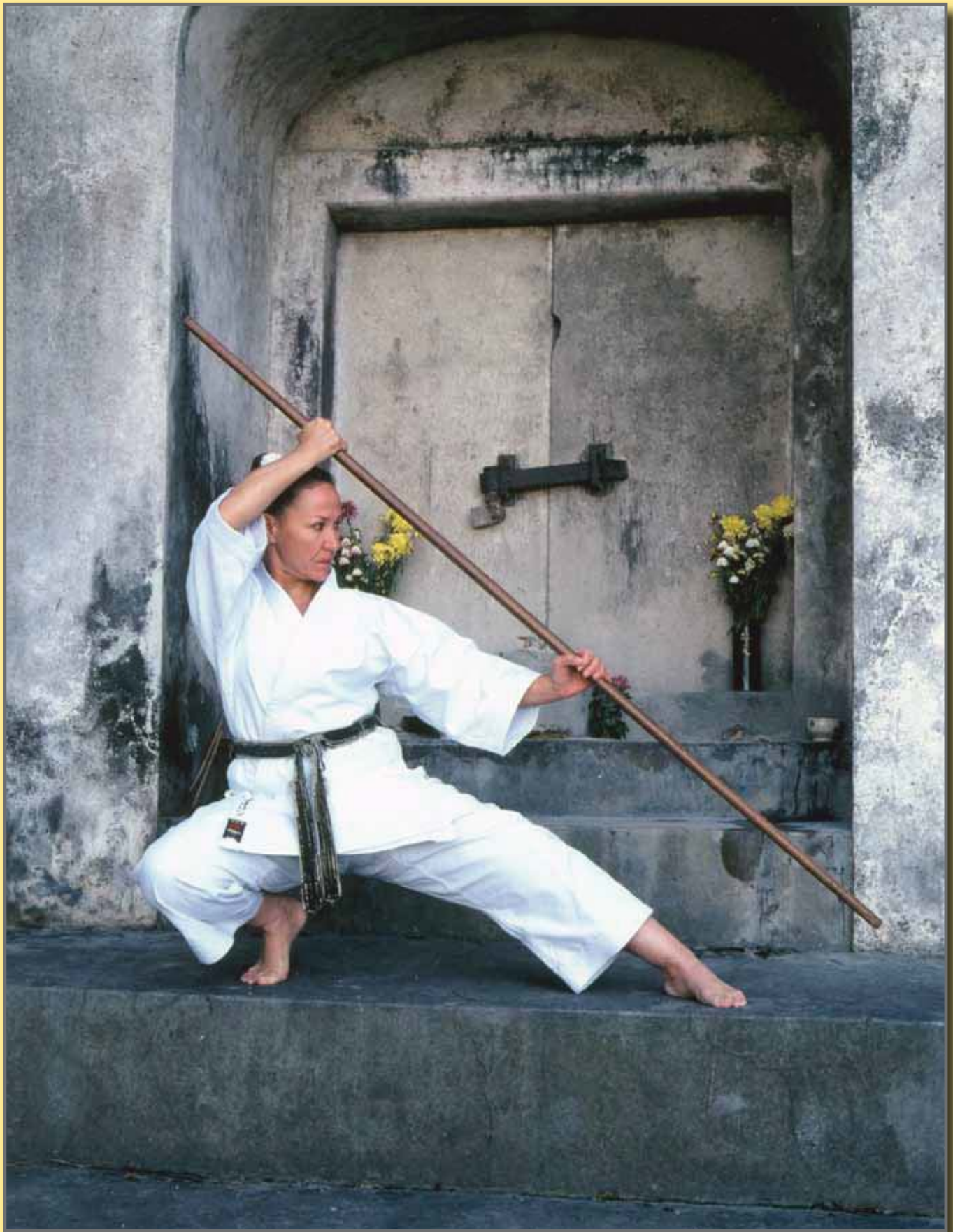
# KATHERINE LOUKOPOULOS

## *The Sky is the Limit*

By Jerry Figgiani

**I**n the martial arts as in life, there are certain people that are trailblazers. These are people who set the standard or raise the bar for others. One such person in the world of the martial arts is Sensei Katherine Loukopoulos. In a time when it was almost unheard of, Loukopoulos Sensei called Okinawa her home for fifteen years. She is not only a world champion martial artist, winning the gold medal at the World Karate / Kobudo 1997 championships in Japan, she is also an outstanding instructor who has taught all over the world. Her impressive resume tells of a professional experience, holding an M.A. in forensic psychology and criminal justice. She is also a communication specialist, lecturer and author and has instructed courses on law enforcement in police academies in countries such as Greece, India, Russia, Germany and Australia. Today she continues to teach and promote martial arts from her home in Athens, Greece. Still blazing trails, traveling and giving seminars throughout Europe, I am proud to do this interview with someone my Sensei Joseph Cabonara felt so highly about that he promoted her to Hachidan in Matsubayashi Shorin Ryu. Here is an inside look at this fascinating martial artist.





## The Sky is the Limit

### *Please tell us when you started training and why?*

When I was a little over 14 years of age I migrated to the United States and started my new life in New York City. Since I did not speak English and was considered a minor the only jobs available to me at that time would be considered as 'child labor' with severe unhealthy and unsafe conditions. My greatest danger came from my fellow co-workers when I was sent for supplies in warehouse type basements and back rooms.

As I acquired friends in school I voiced my concerns and a friend told me about "Karate". I did not know what that was, and I went with him to see a class. I liked it, but I was not very excited. He also taught me two new words: "Martial Arts". He told me that Karate was a Martial Art. If I learned it well I could fight back! I thought that I would love to punch out some of my nasty co-workers!

I set out to visit karate schools and pick the one I would like the best. I ripped out the "K" and "M" pages of the Yellow Pages and visited each and every school in Manhattan... at that time I did not know that New York City had other boroughs; I used to think that Manhattan WAS New York City...

### *Who was your first Sensei?*

Heshiki Zenko Sensei was my first karate teacher. The dojo was located on 72nd Street, on the West Side of Manhattan, on the 2nd floor. I clearly remember the first day I met Heshiki Sensei. He asked me why I wanted to learn Karate, and I told him that I needed to protect myself against my co-workers. He asked about my parents, and told him that they were back in Greece. Heshiki Sensei took pity and said that if I could survive one class I could study there free of charge. Now THAT was a good deal! He gave me a Gi, and I took the first class. It was 1970.

What did you feel in those earlier classes?

I loved the classes! Heshiki Sensei and his senior instructors were ruthless with their words and with the training. It did not matter to me because most of the time I did not understand what they were saying. I made better progress with my training than with the English language. I worked, trained, and went to night school. That was my life, and it was just fine.

### *Tell us about training in those earlier years?*

The training was Spartan but giving up was not an option.

I don't know how other students felt because I did not have time to socialize. I was there with a mission: To become strong and to effectively deal with my pestering co-workers.

As the months turned into years I fell in love with everything the training offered. I loved Kata, Bunkai and Kumite. Zazen training was not easy because I never sat still in my entire life... yet, even that I learned to do... I observed the advanced students' kata performances and secretly drew sketches step by step until I had drawn the entire kata. I would correct my sketches as the senior students received corrections from Heshiki Sensei. We were not taught kata which were considered above our rank level. Women could only progress to Ikkyu which meant that I would never learn the beautiful advanced kata. Therefore, I taught myself Chinto, Gojushiho, Tomari no Passai and Chatan Yara no Kusanku by drawing, practicing secretly, and in the process, I forgot all about taking revenge on my co-workers.

### *In your span of over forty years, what has been a particular experience that sticks out?*



On February 1st I was 65 years old so this question fits right in. I cannot imagine a single day when I felt 'bored'. I have spent a life of learning, teaching and working in between. I am thankful for every day that I am alive, and try to live it to the fullest. I work hard at the tasks at hand, and I do not worry about tomorrow. I believe that if I do a good job today, that will take care of tomorrow... I daydream every day; I feel grateful for every little gift that comes my way and for every kind gesture. Life is GOOD!

#### **What made you decide to go to Okinawa?**

From 1979 to 1985 I was a member of the Amateur Athletic Union (AAU) US National Karate Team and competed in Kata, Light Weight and Open Weight Kumite Categories. I achieved ten times All American and three times All around All American. At that time, there were no international Kobudo Kata competitions; however, I had the privilege to demonstrate Kobudo Kata at Opening Ceremonies at international events including WUKO.

In international competitions I was very successful with the exception of three WUKO Karate Championships. On these three occasions, the Japanese coaches protested and effected my disqualification under the guise that my kata was Okinawan and therefore not approved. One only needs to ask why I was not disqualified from the start of the competitions; that is, from Round # 1 since my kata was also Okinawan on Round # 1. Instead, I received high enough scores that advanced me into Round # 2 and later into the final Round # 3. So the question in my mind was "why be disqualified in Round # 3?" If our American Delegation and Kata Coaches knew enough about Okinawan kata, they could have protested; but they didn't. Perhaps there were two reasons as to why they did not protest: First reason was that their Diplomas and Referee Licenses came from Japanese instructors; and the second reason, I was not one of their own students.

**Back home in the US I faced severe criticism that the Japanese did not approve my kata because I did 'Village Karate'.**

The first time I went to Okinawa was for a full month in December of 1982. There I realized that I had struck 'GOLD' and my confidence became unshakable! Deep in my heart I knew that I would return to Okinawa and would uncover the truth as to why this 'Village Karate' which the Japanese copied and later changed it to fit their own combative imagination was so scorned by mainlander teachers...

**Who were some of the standout practitioners at that time in Okinawa?**

Those who were alive during my stay on Okinawa (1985-



2000) and made a difference in my life and in my understanding of the Okinawan Karate "Kokoro" are as follows: Tankichi Nagamine Sensei, Kadekaru Morinobu Sensei, Master Nagamine Shoshin, Namakura Seigi Sensei, Miyazato Eiichi Sensei and Maki Hisao Sensei.

Those who are still with us today are as follows: Uehara Ko Sensei, Shiroma Katsuo Sensei, Ogimi Chokaku Sensei, Masanobu Kikukawa Sensei (relocated to Canada), Yasuda Tetsunosuke Sensei, Yogi Jyosei Sensei, Hokama Tetsuhiro Sensei, Nakamoto Kiichi Sensei, and Shurei Do's owner Mr. Nakasone who gave me many karate Gi.

There were many more teachers, friends, school colleagues on and off the US Military Installations and a huge number of students who helped me develop into the person I became.

**What was the difference between training in the USA and in Okinawa?**

In 1970, I started Matsubayashi Shorin Ryu karate training in New York City under Heshiki Zenko Sensei. For nine years each class was an identical replica of the other. Students who for various reasons did not want to practice zazen

## The Sky is the Limit



were asked to leave; thrown out is a more accurate description. 12 years later when I went to Nagamine Shoshin Sensei's Honbu dojo I was amazed to experience the exact same class routine. Of course there were deviations, but never in the presence of Nagamine Shoshin Sensei! The other fact is that Nagamine Sensei rarely was absent.

Both Heshiki Sensei and Master Nagamine focused on repetition even of the most minute of techniques. In 1982, Kihon, Bunkai, Kata, Yakusoku Kumite and Zazen were the daily menu! And so, just as we shift flower, likewise they shifted and selected students.

In 1979, for the first time, I competed in the Metropolitan AAU Karate Tournament. This I did with the encourage-

ment of Ansei Ueshiro Sensei and with his student Terry Maccarrone Sensei. That was the very first time I stepped foot outside of the Matsubayashi Shorin Ryu dojo. I felt like Alice in Wonderland! I saw kicks that I could not imagine humanly possible! Later on I learned that they were yoko geri, mawashi geri, ushiro geri, and for the first time, I saw other styles' kata. I was fascinated and immediately I was sucked into the world of competition. I loved it. I made new friends, and learned techniques that could be used in fighting. Thomas Carroll LaPuppet Sensei who was the Director of the Metropolitan AAU made sure that I learned the Kumite Rules, and Toyotaro Miyazaki Sensei assisted me with my tournament kata preparation and presentation.

In that same year I made the US National Kata Team and the following year I also made the Kumite Team. For the next seven years I became Matsubayashi Shorin Ryu's 'Public Enemy # 1' because I 'exposed' Rohai, Tomari no Passai, Chinto, Gojushiho, and Chatan Yara no Kusanku without Master Nagamine's permission. In the world of Matsubayashi Shorin Ryu the majority of teachers were offended that I showed off the 'forbidden' kata and much more, I WAS winning. Their big question was "how did I learn them?"

Against all odds, Joseph Carbonara Sensei, Terry Maccarrone Sensei, Mario Medious Sensei, and later on, Joyce Santamaria Sensei offered full support and encouragement.

As the medals were piling up, support came from a myriad of other style karate teachers and students. The greatest support of all came from my own students, especially James Thompson.

In those years there were no sponsors available. Each one of us had to pay for our own flights, hotels, food, uniforms and medical. It was unthinkable to ask my family for financial support because they were back in Greece; but the donations and the support steadily came in from the four corners of the earth. Eventually, Toyotaro Miyazaki Sensei besides helping me financially, he also became my karate and kobudo demonstration partner.

When I traveled to Okinawa to study at the Honbu Dojo it was the best thing I ever did up to that time! I met Nakamura Seigi Sensei who was next in command after Master Nagamine. I was fortunate because Nakamura Sensei took a personal interest in my training. He taught me every day, and introduced me to many other style teachers where I was asked to demonstrate my kata. It was Nakamura Sensei who personally introduced me to Jundokan's Goju Ryu Master Miyazato Eiichi Sensei and to Uehara Ko Sensei who prac-

ticed Goju Ryu and Ryu Kyu Kobudo.

Nakamura Sensei insisted that I develop stronger open palm techniques and improve my circular movements. Nakamura Sensei said that "Goju Ryu training would improve my Shorin Ryu shuto techniques". As far as my kobudo development he entrusted me with his good friend Uehara Ko Sensei who was also a student of Akamine Eisuke Sensei. That was 1982.

The die was cast! When I would finish with International Competition, I would return to Okinawa to study for a very long time! In 1985 I returned with the intent to stay for one year, but I stayed for 15 years. The very first thing that Nakamura Sensei did was to send me to 'Kitsuke' School where my teacher Ms. Horikawa Tamako worked hard in order to transform me into a 'soft and elegant Gaijin'.

***What was your relationship like with Shoshin Nagamine?***

My relationship with Master Nagamine was that of a karate father and grandfather at the same time. Nagamine sensei sat on his chair and watched all classes with the exception of the morning class which he enjoyed teaching it by himself. He scolded us for every little thing, especially if we arrived late to class, or we did not do a very good zazen. He was especially strict if we did not stay after class in front of a mirror practicing over and over some technique.

During a drinking bout I took a bet with my classmates to prove that vegetarians had more endurance than meat eaters. Senior teachers told us that we could prove this by running the Naha City Marathon. Next day when I was sober I run to Nagamine Sensei and told him that I had never entered a long distance run. He coached me in a single sentence: "Concentrate on your breath just like in zazen and make sure you count to ten, and then, start again." Since I was not an experienced runner I took his suggestion to heart and was able to finish the race within six hours. He also warned me not to go up and down the sidewalks as that would change the pace of my breathing. Last, he warned me not to change my pace on the downhill from that on the uphill as that too would change the pace of my breathing.

***What do you feel are the differences between Shorin Ryu and Goju Ryu?***

There is no difference between Shorin Ryu and Goju Ryu when it comes to the stances. A good zenkutsu dachi, shiko dachi and neko ashi dachi are good in both styles. In Shorin Ryu there is approximately one fist distance between the two heels and that is understood because of the hip rotations. In Goju Ryu there is no space between the two heels. However, if we study old photos of Shorin Ryu teachers, there was no space between their heels for the Neko Ashi Stance.

Generally, Goju Ryu karateka train with heavier implements and their open palm techniques are more solid with strong emphasis. Shorin Ryu practitioners on the other hand, train for speed and 'running' out of harm's way as in 'Tenshin Motion'. Wrists need to be flexible for there are lots of Uraken. There are exceptions, however, and this critique does not apply to all as there are quick Goju Ryu practitioners and pretty strong Shorin Ryu karateka.

If I am allowed to make a suggestion based on my years of experience, then I must say that Shorin Ryu practitioners need to pay more attention to Kata Bunkai. Of course we practice the Yakusoku Kumite, but we need to do more in terms of Kata Bunkai. In order to accomplish this we also need to be able to perform basic rollouts and falls in every direction. We need to understand a little bit of grappling for the benefit of our survival on the ground. Shorin Ryu 'hidden' Kata Bunkai included wrist locks and takedowns which were removed for safety of children once Karate was introduced to Okinawan Schools by Anko Itosu in 1904. Of course we will continue to train for the 'single drop punch'.

***You have a very extensive educational and career background. Can you give the reader some insights to your background?***

I graduated from John Jay College of Criminal Justice with a Master of Arts in Forensic Psychology. I have taught Law Enforcement, Criminology, Criminal Justice and Victimology Courses for Central Texas College (Pacific) and University of Maryland (Asian Division). I taught Social Psychology for the State University of Ryu Kyu. I also taught English at Gushikami, Yonabaru and Shuri Public Junior High Schools.

In Germany, I served as Director of Faculty and Instructional Technology for City Colleges of Chicago-Europe, Military Programs across 67 military installations. Also in Germany, I served as a Career Counselor for the Army. For one year in Afghanistan I served as a Recruiter for Kellogg Brown & Root Services, Inc. For almost four years I worked at CSA, Ltd., Kuwait City, Kuwait, and served as Communications Specialist, Researcher and eventually as Athletic Director for three US Army Camps.

I created the Martial Arts Programs for the US Marine Corps on Okinawa, and obtained permanent funding for the events. In Greece, I introduced and taught the Hand to hand Combat Course at the Army's military school. Over the decades my martial arts training overlapped with my professional education creating positions that were challenging and exciting.

***You have had a great competitive career. What are some of your standout moments?***

## The Sky is the Limit



My disqualification in Round # 3 at the WUKO Kata Category in Spain, 1980; and, my Gold Medal for Bo Kata at the 1997 Karate Kobudo World Tournament, Japan.

### **What is your view on traditional Karate today?**

The Okinawan Prefectural Government is making a big push in order to create reasons for people to travel to Okinawa and to learn from the current masters. This is excellent because the people who would like to visit Okinawa would train harder and longer in order to prepare for the trip. Going to Okinawa for two or three weeks is not enough. It is 'karate tourism'.

To be able to penetrate the heart of a teacher one needs to stay there and to study for a very long time. To go to Okinawa and to learn one more kata does not translate into having been 'taught' by a master. Now days, we can learn the steps of any kata using the Internet and slow down the movements frame by frame. In reality, however, we need 1000 days just to begin to comprehend what the teacher is teaching us. To understand the 'soul' of karate, we need more than a modest stay there.

In my young days, we secretly drew sketches of the moves and practiced those moves at home because in the dojo we could only practice what was given to us in accordance with our rank levels. Exceptional students could not progress;

they had to wait and to learn patience. We did not have the patience in order to practice patience so we sketched move after move until we had drawn the entire kata. That thirst for knowledge coupled with the patience of sketching and secretly practicing is what produced me and a few others.

### **You are still active teaching. What do you mostly teach at your seminars?**

Seminars are different from dojo classes. In a seminar there is a gathering of similar minded karateka frequently from different styles who want to learn a particular aspect of the martial arts. Usually, it is a highly packed training of many hours, but to my opinion, it is not enough! Via seminars teachers can reach many people and address them as 'students'. I call them 'participants' because in order to be a student one needs to live and breathe the same air as the teacher for many years, and then again, only a very small percentage will reach the status of 'student'. Traveling around I often hear teachers citing huge numbers as students at various countries, and I can't help thinking if the teacher knows their names...

In the last five years I have lived in Greece and have taught around Europe. Sometimes I teach karate, sometimes kobudo and sometimes both.

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

MMA is an important aspect of the Martial Arts. Just like in the 60s and 70s when some karateka tested their skills and endurance with bare knuckles, likewise today, martial artists can test their ability and endurance. Of course technical expertise has evolved and developed since the 60's but people have not changed. There will always be some martial artists who would like to test their limits.

### **What is your favorite part or training? Kata, Kobudo or Kumite?**

My favorite part of training is 'THE Training'.

With the passing of Shoshin Nagamine and his son Takayoshi Nagamine, as well as the closing of the Honbu Dojo, what are your thoughts on the state of Matsubayashi Shorin Ryu?

Master Nagamine built a tremendous karate style practiced today across the globe. During his life he was considered as one of Japan's living treasures, but even so, there were many Matsubayashi Shorin Ryu practitioners who disagreed with his concept of Ken Zen Ichi Nyo (Karate and Zen as One) and refused to sit zazen. In fact, I know that there were 'secret trainings' with likeminded practitioners at 'secret locations'.

Soke Nagamine Takayoshi had exceptional ability and succeeded his father, but he too passed away. The Headquarters ( Honbu ) closed since the government required a 'Nagamine' to be teaching in that building.

Technically elite practitioner Taira Yoshitaka Sensei is the President of the 'official' World Matsubayashi Shorin Ryu Karate – Do, while other senior teachers head their own organizations. For reasons the western mind cannot comprehend organizational leadership does not permit or strongly discourages its members from joint activities outside their own borders.

In order for Matsubayashi Shorin Ryu to remain alive with an abundance of high quality technical expertise, the various organizations need to become a joint umbrella with a board of directors under a single leader. If this does not happen, the greatness of Matsubayashi Shorin Ryu will be a thing of the past. And, while karate is booming all over the world with a single mind focused on the Olympics Matsubayashi Ryu leaders need to prepare their students for an exciting karate future. Isolation and alienation cannot produce positive results.

Nakamura Seigi Sensei did not have a dojo. He dedicated his life going from Branch Dojo to Branch Dojo in order to ensure that technical details were adhered. He even went to the 'secret' training places. I know this because on a few occasions I went with him. However, Nakamura Sensei is



no more, and I am not aware that someone else is walking in Nakamura Sensei's shoes.

There are a handful of senior western practitioners who are trying to keep Matsubayashi Shorin Ryu alive and spring it into the future. One of the difficulties they face is to be able to train and to learn from Matsubayashi Ryu teachers outside their own organizations. Isolated instructors may be very good technicians, superb fighters, and generous teachers, but without contact to the 'heart' of Matsubayashi Shorin Ryu community, the polish slowly wears off.

### **What advise can you give someone starting out in the Martial Arts?**

Do your BEST in EVERY class... and who knows? The sky is the limit!. 🐉