

It wasn't the way he would have wanted to die. It was a death that had no panache to it, none of the wild flamboyance of the life he claimed to have lived, a life others argued was only a creation of a brilliant but twisted mind.

His pale, delicately beautiful young wife found him stiff in his bed one morning, his insides full of clotting blood that came, not from a street fighter's knife or a mafioso's bullet or a kung fu master's poison hand, but from an ulcer that he had burned into his own stomach with too much high, hard living. That part of his life, all who knew him agreed, was real enough.

The "Deadliest Man Alive" was dead. Count Dante had passed into a legend.

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he had created for himself. He was 36 years old.

Dante, otherwise known as John Keehan, had been interviewed by BLACK BELT scarcely two months before his death. It was the second major interview he had ever granted a martial arts magazine, the first that traced his complete history.

The meeting had been arranged through Bill Aguiar at the latter's dojo in Fall River, Massachusetts. Aguiar was perhaps the most dedicated and enduring of all Dante's students. To him had fallen the mantle of president of the World Karate Federation and chairmanship of the Black Dragon Fighting Society.

Dante always made an electrifying first impression. Just under 6 feet 1, he managed to look taller. But the face was what held your attention. The curly black hair made a sharp widow's peak and the carefully tended beard came to sharp angles. The first thing you noticed was the bright red of his face. Though Dante was a handsome man, the floridity combined with the sculpted hair and beard to give an impression of a devil mask. He affected — or, perhaps, had naturally — an aristocratic mien, the walk always casual and unhurried, the carriage erect, the head always tilted back at the slightest angle, so he could look down at a man without seeming to do so deliberately.

People who knew him casually always wondered about the color of his face. Some thought it was the vestige of burns he suffered when the battery of a junker in one of his Chicago used cars exploded in his face. Others, who knew him only toward the end, assumed that it was a symptom of his high blood pressure. Most simply decided that he used cosmetics — a long time friend said, "Dante's face is a mask in more ways than one. Don't forget, he's a master of make-up." He was that and a master of his own sense of self-presence, as well.

Aguiar introduced us and we shook hands. "You've got a good grip," he said. "You want to go out on the floor?"

"Well, we'll get some pictures later."

"I don't mean that. Do you want to go out on the floor and fight?"

"Ah, well . . . no, to tell you the truth."

A nod of the head and a curl of the lip. "I didn't think so," said Dante, turning his back and walking away.

Did he always come on so strong at first? I would ask Aguiar later, after the



"I would like to do some good for my fellow man."

interview had been squared away. "No, it's just that he's so fed up with martial arts people putting him down. He's the greatest fighter who ever lived and if you'd gone out on the floor with him, he would have crippled you just to prove his point. If you were affiliated with a particular style, he wouldn't even have spoken with you. That's why he doesn't give interviews to martial arts magazines. He has no use for the established styles and the people who belong to them."

Dante had been particularly incensed by an item on the letters page of a martial arts magazine a few months before. A youth who had read a Count Dante ad in a comic book had inquired about his background and the editors had described Dante as a once-promising karateka who had turned into a charlatan.

Once into the dialogue, Dante proved to be an agreeable sort. We asked him the questions we thought the readers who knew him only as a comic book

figure would be most interested in. Excerpts from that interview are repeated here verbatim:

DANTE: I was born and raised on the South Side of Chicago. It was a good neighborhood, from an upper income bracket. My father was a physician and surgeon. (My parents) had come from Canada after fleeing Spain after the Spanish Revolution. In fact, I still own the property — Nestor Falls, Ontario, Canada.

In those days in Chicago, it was pretty hard to stay out of trouble. Everyone was always getting into fights. I was always very interested in body building, weight lifting, boxing, wrestling, judo and things like this. And because of the fact that my father did have money to help me study, I studied boxing in Johnny Coulan's gym. He was a world champion, located on Sixty-third Street. I think he's dead now.

BLACK BELT: How old were you at that time?

DANTE: About thirteen. I did all the boxing I could in high school. I went to Mount Carmel High, which was called "the little Notre Dame." I was the heavyweight boxing champion there in my second and third year. I was only there three years because I finished in a public school, where I was heavyweight wrestling champion for two years (sic).

There were a few instructors around who knew a little about judo and jiu jitsu. I went to the Judo Institute, which has been in Chicago about forty-three years under Mas Tumora. They had performers like Johnny Osaka, who was the national champion, and Vince Tumora. I also took jiu jitsu there and aikido under a Commander Cramer, who was also a karateist. Then I went into the Marine Corps at eighteen and spent a lot of time, almost all my time out of boot camp, in the Far East. After I got out of the Marines I went into the Army and I was in 'Nam and Korea. I studied hapkido, tang soo do, moo duk kwan, tae kwon do, Thai boxing, Chinese boxing. When I was over there, they didn't know what kung fu was. They called it Chinese boxing.

BLACK BELT: What degrees did you earn in those arts?

DANTE: In the Chinese fighting arts, I never went for degrees. Some of the schools, like Ti Wai Wong's kwoon in San Francisco, had a sash system, but I never stayed with one school, see, because I felt it hindered me. Even after I was out of the service, I used to just

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tour around the world. In this country, even in Trias' school in Phoenix, I would come out there two or three times a year. I wasn't his student, and he wouldn't quite accept this. He wanted me to just work his style, goju shorei, but I told him I wanted to get a complete, in-depth study of all the fighting arts. I wanted to know as much about the grappling and the fistic arts as I possibly could. He wasn't too appreciative of that — most teachers weren't, so you'd go from school to school.

BLACK BELT: How many instructors have you studied under?

DANTE: None. Because I don't think any of them were any good.

BLACK BELT: Well, how many instructors of repute?

DANTE: Maybe twenty. But I have never seen anybody who knew more about the arts than I did, 'cause I went there with a very inquisitive mind, a very open mind.

You know, there's a big difference when you talk about instructors and teachers. No one can teach you anything — you have instructors. It's like someone trying to teach you to ride a bike. They can show you how, but they can't teach you. You learn yourself by getting up there and falling down and everything else. I have seen so many instructors sit there and walk around with blinders on. I figured they don't have the smoothness of boxing or professional wrestling. Now, professional wrestling may look like a joke, but I would like to see karateists stand up to one. Martial artists are no purer than pro wrestlers, because, you see, they're pulling their blows — the same thing with sport karate.

The toughest people I have ever been up against have been pro football players and pro wrestlers, boxers not so much, judoka — some are. Sumo wrestlers are very hard to fight. They're very tough.

BLACK BELT: Let's go back and pick up your martial arts background.

DANTE: I was connected with the US Karate Association under Robert A. Trias, a good fighter. This was in '58, '57, somewhere around there . . . I was about a . . . Jesus, I don't know . . . it was a pretty high rank then, because when I left the USKA I was a sixth dan and I was about twenty-three years old and that was the largest rank ever given to a person that age.

I got my black belt in aikido from Morihei Uyeshiba, around 1965. In

judo, I received a black belt from the Chicago Yudanshikai under Gene Wyker, who I think is about a fifth dan now, and I worked at his schools in '62, '63. I've studied jiu jitsu. I've got a seventh degree black belt in ju-te, which is a combination of aikido, jiu jitsu, ki-bo and bo-ki-bo, that was in 1963 under Woodrow Edgell, who had trained under Uyeshiba. Most of these ranks I received at approximately the same time, because I was in the arts full time and studying as much as possible.

Since I was about sixteen or seventeen, I was completely for the fighting arts. I'm not talking about judo or karate. I'm talking about the fighting arts. And when I was in the military, high school, college, Marines, Army, I went around and picked up anything I could. I didn't care if they were Bruce Tegner books. I found some of the things Tegner did weren't bad. I know Bruce Tegner could kick the shit out of Aaron



“The greatest instructor I ever had was actual application in the street....”

Banks — which isn't saying much.

And I read every possible book. In fact, when I was on Sunset Strip and I was doing this motion picture business with a film company, I'd go into a bookstore and ask to buy everything they had on any martial art — the same thing Bruce Lee did. And this book dealer, Bruce Lee had come to him and bought every book he had on the fighting arts and Bruce Lee had just died and now he was trying to buy Lee's library back.

But, you know, my greatest instructor was myself. You learn more, because if you have an instructor, he is doing your thinking and you've got to think for yourself. The greatest instructor I ever had was actual application in the street and looking in a mirror.

BLACK BELT: You mentioned Bruce Lee. Did you ever meet him?

DANTE: Yes, I worked out with him. That was in 1962, '63. I had met Ti Wai Wong of San Francisco through Jimmy Lee and when Bruce Lee was first over here, he had contacted Jimmy and I got to know him there.

He was very good. He got a lot of reputation, but for what? Did he ever win a championship? Did he ever challenge anybody? Did he ever accept challenges?

BLACK BELT: Did you challenge him?

DANTE: No, because I don't challenge people that are no competition. I weigh two hundred now and I just dropped twenty pounds. That's like Muhammad Ali challenging you. Joe Lewis could have broken Bruce Lee in two. I believe it was Joe Lewis and Mike Stone who *did* romp over him.

What did Bruce Lee ever do for the arts? Did he ever hold a tournament? Was he a pioneer? Because he was in movies, he was lucky. If I had that kind of backing, like Jhoon Rhee does in D.C. with the politicians or like Parker has with the movie stars . . . But, fine, they're stuck in their thing, where they've got to play their little game. I don't. I don't need it. I was startin' to get ulcers with all the politics, because you get wrapped up in style and there's really no such thing. The Dante system is a universal fighting system where you become one with the universal mind — which is your subconscious in accord with the Almighty.

BLACK BELT: John, are you a religious man?

DANTE: Yes, I am. I am a Catholic, and as soon as I get back to Chicago, I plan

to go into studies to become a minister. I hope to be studying at the Moody Bible Institute. (Author's note: Count Dante's application to enter the Moody Bible School, he told me later, had been rejected.)

BLACK BELT: You profess to be religious, yet your life as you describe it is devoted to violence. Isn't that a contradiction?

DANTE: No, when you figure that when Jesus chose the twelve Apostles, some of them were the dregs of the earth. I've seen one end of life, and I believe that when you go past thirty-five, you're nearing forty, you're going toward the wrong side of seventy. I would like to do some *good* for my fellow man.

I will still teach advanced martial arts, but there will be some type of

change to it. I think there will be more of a spiritual aspect and more of a metaphysical aspect to it.

BLACK BELT: You claim to have been the victor in a number of "Death Matches." How many people have you killed?

DANTE: I would say over fifty. That includes the military, on the street and in competition. I would say it would be about half and half, twenty to twenty-five in the military, about the same in either streetfights or closed session sparring matches and street challenges. Things like this are supposed to be illegal, a lot of the magazines say, but then so is the Mafia illegal and they're still in business. I've never killed anyone with a weapon other than in the military, where I used mostly guns or knives and garrottes . . .

I do not dig killing, but I can psych

THE INFAMOUS COUNT DANTE, alias John Keehan, poses with victorious team members after winning the 1964 World Karate Tournament in Chicago.

myself up through what can be considered an oversecretion of the pituitary glands, really pumping the adrenalin in there, what the Orientals call chi or ki. I just call it plain guts.

As for the thrill in killing, there is always a thrill in winning, but I believe in using due force. In the military if someone is trying to kill ya', you've got to kill *him*. If you've ever been in the military, they don't play games and we don't take prisoners very often. We're no different than the Japanese and the Germans. I've blown away a lot of people that were supposed to be prisoners

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— just wasted them. That's part of war. There is always a surge that you feel in not being killed yourself, in being a survivor. But I do not get any type of sexual, spiritual, physical or psychological thrill out of killing somebody. I believe in the human spirit and the individual soul. (Author's note — a personal student of Dante's explains, "He did everything he could to train a student to kill, if he had to. What he was teaching, he was teaching with the attitude of killing if you want to.")

I have also maimed about twenty-five people — either blinded them, took one eye out, two eyes or maybe either completely taken the testicles off or maybe one with a groin slap and twist and tear, but these were under very adverse conditions. I do not believe in using this against someone unless there is a very dire threat.

BLACK BELT: You claim to be undefeated. Have you, in fact, never lost a fight?

DANTE: I've lost two fights in my life. One was to a crime syndicate hoodlum.

I was very young, a good boxer and a good wrestler, still in high school. This guy's father was one of the heads of one of the "families" in Chicago. It happened in my father's basement, where he had all the outboard motors for his boats. This guy and his friends, a couple of Sicilians from the old country, had come in to steal them. I heard them down there and I stripped to the waist and went down to take care of them.

The guy kicked me in the balls. I had never experienced that before. I went down. He asked me did I give and I said, "Sure." I ended up kicking his ass about two years later.

Another time when I was a kid, I lost a fight and I couldn't believe it, because it was a kid I knew. He romped me and I couldn't believe that he could have beaten me. I chased him for four blocks and every time I caught up with him, he dropped me again. I ended up catching him a couple of years later, too.

You've got to have that feeling of having been hurt if you're going to be an effective fighter. I say, get your ass kicked so you know how it feels.

BLACK BELT: Tell us about those controversial death matches.

DANTE: Well, I used to travel all over the place, in the military and on my own. I had money and I used to *live* in kwoon and dojo, but I never formed affiliations with the teachers or the other students.

The first Canton match was not even held in Canton. It was held in an outlying district. There was also competition in Bangkok, Thailand, at about the same time, where they had the Thai boxers, Koreans, Japanese, Okinawans, Chinese gung-fu men, all this.

I was travelling to the Orient. I didn't go to the Orient for the express reason of fighting in the death matches. I was in Thailand when I happened to hear of the Canton match and I went from there to China to compete when I heard about it. They had a similar match in Thailand. A lot of people don't believe that events like this ever occurred.

BLACK BELT: Describe the scene at the "death matches."

DANTE: The one outside Canton was indoors, the one in Bangkok was outside. I would say that at Canton there were approximately 700 spectators. I would say pretty close to forty competitors from all the different fighting arts In Canton, there were about twelve competitors (sic). There were Chinese kenpo men — my first fighter was a kenpo stylist. He was very strong for his age. He was old but it was hard to tell how old. They say the same thing about us. I killed him with a closed hand technique, a strike to the head.

After the Canton match, we fought outdoors in Bangkok before approximately 3000 spectators. There were over seventy competitors. I ended up fighting for the title with the heavy-weight champion of Bangkok. Whatever the style was, it was no holds barred. That's when I used the throat technique.

BLACK BELT: Would you elaborate on that?

DANTE: You move in very close. Thai boxers are very good with their knees, very good with their elbows. It's very similar to hapkido, except it's much stronger. They don't pull, they don't kime or focus as in karate. They will kick trees full power with their instep, balls of their feet, to develop their power and they will penetrate through an opponent's defense the same as a boxer does. So I tried to close in very tight, very fast. I used my left hand to



"I do not dig killing, but I can psych myself up through...what the Orientals call chi or ki. I just call it plain guts."

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go around his head so he could not bob, weave or roll with it. My left elbow was also covering his right fist. Now he could not move his head either way, because my hand was all the way around. Then I came in with the throat strike and he couldn't hit me with his left hand, because I was blocking with my right hand. I had my elbows where I could block anything coming up and my knee was in the center in case he tried to knee me. It's similar to a praying mantis stance. You grip the throat, just twist and peel. You don't aim for the larynx — there's too much room for error. You burrow your hand all the way in on either side. It's like an alligator getting a chunk of meat and using his tail for leverage. One hand goes one way, one hand goes the other way.

Much of the Dante legend rests upon the death matches. Official sources in the government of Thailand and the People's Republic of China will tell you that no such events exist today, if they ever did. But then, the Georgia Tourist Commission will probably tell you that there aren't any moonshiners in the Appalachian Mountains and the New Orleans Chamber of Commerce will tell you they don't have cockfights anymore.

There are a handful of credible martial arts people who know the Orient and who will tell you that death matches have, in fact, been held in this century, usually secretly conducted as a matter of honor between certain sensei. To be chosen by one's master is supposedly the highest honor that can be bestowed upon an advanced student in some of the remote regions.

Let us assume, for the sake of argument, that death matches do exist in the Far East. What are the chances that John Keehan, alias Count Dante, might actually have entered them?

Chinese-American kung fu people maintain that even if there had been death matches, an American would never have been permitted into the secret elite circles of those who sponsored and attended them. Dante replied that he won admission on the basis of his demonstrations of kata and fighting skill. Some say an American could never have entered Communist China. Dante said he bought his way in via forged passports and greedy Chinese sympathizers.

On the surface, allowing some arguments, he could have done it. Picture a young man of wealthy family, indulged in his every whim by his father's expansive pocketbook, who had devoted himself to the martial arts. Picture a man

who told this writer, "The martial arts were my one big shot in life. I gave it everything I had." Picture this man with the money and the connections that could actually get him into a closed country, albeit illegally, to take the ultimate test of combative proficiency. Picture a man whose acquaintances described him most often as "a psychopath," a man whose martial arts teaching ultimately attracted more barfighters than budomen.

Put all that together, and you have a picture of a man who just *could* have gone to the Far East to fight two or three men to the death. But the question isn't whether he could have. The question is whether he did.

Established, legitimate martial artists in the Chicago area, who almost universally despised him, claimed that Dante couldn't possibly have been in the Orient when he said he was, that he was working for and with karate people who kept attendance records. Our extensive inquiries have turned up no concrete proof of this.

But the most damaging evidence of those who knew him in Chicago is their consensus that he was basically a coward who let other people fight his battles and ultimately let his best friend die fighting one. They call him a charlatan, a mediocre shodan whose only outstanding skill was his ability to impress strangers with his dramatic lies and his charismatic personality. They remember a once-promising karateka who went the P.T. Barnum route and got caught up in his own fantasies and who all but ruined the midwestern karate world in an insane attempt to profit from those delusions.

The real basis of Dante's story is not the death matches that may or may not have occurred in the Orient, but the very real things that *did* happen in the sixties when Dante/Keehan was the top karate personality in the American Midwest — his rise in USKA and his ultimate break from it, his establishment of what may have been the first contact karate tournament 10 years before the concept became popular, Dante's alleged involvements with the Chicago Family of the Mafia, the building of a lucrative mail-order karate empire, the metamorphosis from John Keehan to Count Dante, the notorious dojo bombing episode and the "dojo war" that led to the death of karate star Jim Concevic.

These and other matters will be examined next month as **BLACK BELT** traces the strange odyssey of Count Dante.

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