

"Chicago Memories" and the Death of Jim Concevic

BY MASSAD F. AYOOB

SYNOPSIS—Count Juan Raphael Dante, aka John Keehan, died in his sleep on May 25, 1975. He was on the verge of a comeback in the martial arts. His fortunes had collapsed in 1970 with the death of his friend Jim Concevic in what Chicago called a "dojo war."

Last month's installment traced his own story of his beginnings in the martial arts, and his recollections of the "death matches" he claimed to have fought, matches that the majority of American martial artists deny could possibly have happened.

BLACK BELT's story was compiled while Dante was still alive. Those whose opinions you will read in this article were not speaking ill of the dead; they were speaking bitterly of a man they felt ruined karate in the Midwest at a time when they were trying to build it up. Most of these interviews had been completed a month before Count Dante passed from infamy into legend.

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Robert A. Trias, one of America's pioneers in karate, was Dante's (or rather, Keehan's) mentor. Together, they had established the United States Karate Association. USKA still endures as a respected establishment, though Dante left the organization in 1964. But before then, young John Keehan had been respected as a prolific instructor, and one of the driving forces in promoting legitimate karate in the Midwest.

We spoke with Trias. Told that we were doing a story on Dante, his first response was, "Are you serious?"

Assured that we were, Sensei Trias gave us his account of his relationship with John Keehan. "I used to like John quite a bit. When he was with us, he was very conscientious—a good student. He applied himself well. He used to motor to Phoenix every year to study at my school, spending three or four months at a time. In the beginning stages of

USKA, I needed someone in Chicago, and he was young and energetic, (so I gave him that area).

"What happened was that he was given too much power too young and too fast. He was about twenty-two, twenty-three. He had a lot of good ideas about promoting tournaments and other karate activities, but some of his ideas were so fantastically out of reason . . . ideas that would include doing or saying anything whether it was true or false, and this is one of the reasons that John was dismissed from USKA. He'd print stuff about having been here, having been there, having been with Castro, just fantastic stories that were really hurting the organization." Dante once claimed that he had served as a guerilla under Raul Castro during the Sierra Maestre campaign in Cuba.

Continues Trias, "(Dante) got all his rank from us, from yellow and green belt on up. He came to us at the age of 22, in 1961. He told us he had studied jiu jitsu at the Chicago Institute on Wabash, earlier that year. He came to us in August of '61, studied through October, and was promoted to fifth kyu in September of '61. He was dismissed from the organization in December of 1964.

"He was pretty good. He had good technique, and he was strong, and he was very interested in karate. And as a result he was very proficient. John wasn't a bad fellow. Apparently, he just listened to the wrong people, got a little power hungry . . . He did a lot of good for the organization when he was with it. He was well liked."

On December 7, 1964, the following letter was sent by the USKA to member groups: "Please be advised that Mr. John Keehan has been expelled from the organization for various violations against the constitution of the USKA under article XI-V, and for conduct unbecoming the true spirit of karate-do . . . let us not at any time support those who seek to weaken and undermine the true karate way."

Dante told this writer that he was ex-

Photos by Ed Ikuta

"Chicago Memories"

pelled for promoting black students to shodan, something that was, he said, tacitly forbidden by USKA. Trias, confronted with this, told BLACK BELT, "That's ridiculous. Even today, the organization consists of about forty percent blacks." Dante answered, "Trias is right about one thing: he didn't lose black support. That was one thing that really hurt. I pulled out of USKA in defense of my black students, thinking they would come with me, but almost to a man, they stayed with Trias."

One big midwestern karate name that Dante always claimed as a student was Agene Caraulia. Caraulia said, "I used to be pretty tight with John, a long time ago, but he never trained me. He did happen to be on the promotional board that gave me my black belt. The reason he claimed me as his student was, I had originally worked for Gene Wyka of the Chicago Judo and Karate Centers. I taught summers while attending Northern Michigan University. When John went to Phoenix to take his black belt tests, I took over his classes at Wyka's."

"We were friends, and we worked in the same dojo, and rather than deny that he was my teacher when he made that claim, I just went along with him. Actually," said Caraulia, "we differed quite a bit on karate techniques and teaching methods. We liked each other personally, but we didn't get along karate-wise. We separated because I was winning, and I wouldn't join him in his 'World Karate Federation.' I wouldn't go with that bull because I never believed he was my superior anyway."

"It's kind of hard for me to talk about John," says Caraulia wistfully. "He really destroyed my basic faith in a lot of the precepts I felt karate was supposed to teach. We were really tight friends—we had a ball personally. We did some really wild Fitzgerald-type things."

"I've seen him fight. He was as good as any shodan I've seen. He was legitimately a good enough technician to wear the black belt."

Like many of the midwestern karate greats we spoke with, Caraulia regretted that we were doing a piece on Dante, who was alive and going for a comeback at the time of the interviews. "Nobody pays attention to him anymore in the Midwest. I wish you wouldn't do the story. He's getting enough publicity in his comic book ads, and that's where he belongs, as far as I'm concerned . . . if you do a story on him, your magazine can put a black feather in its cap."

Caraulia knew Dante well, and had felt the power of his personality deeper

than most. "He's got a lotta balls, though, you gotta give him that. He used to tell us about beating up three guys in a streetfight, and you'd almost believe him . . . you want to know something about charisma? Listen to John. It's really fun . . . Isn't he nice to talk to? You know he's an ass, but you wonder how a guy can think you're that dumb, to believe what he's telling you. But in the old days, karate was still a mystery, and until we took it out of its mysterious realm, and put it in the tournament ring, karate was something terrifying in those days. Those 18, 19-year-old kids would listen to John telling how he could stick his fingers into their ribcages, tear their mouths out, rip away their throat . . . God, that scares anybody."

Dante claimed to have fostered many of the leading black belts in the Midwest, including Bill Wallace. Pressed on the latter point, he would tell you that it was an indirect relationship, that Wallace had been trained by Glenn Keeney, who had been trained by Jim Concevic, who had been personally trained by Keehan. We spoke with Glenn Keeney.

"I never studied under Dante, not a lesson," maintains Keeney. "I went to Jimmy Concevic's club with Bill Wallace when Jimmy was head of the Chicago Judo and Karate Centers owned by Gene Wyka. This was back in '69. We worked out in his dojo for two days, and with Jimmy himself for about four hours. Jimmy was really good. He was the man who *invented* the counter kick, where one guy would kick and another guy would counter kick under his leg. They didn't even call points for that technique then, but Jimmy could hit you seven or eight times with it during a match, and like he said, 'Maybe nobody calls points for it, but it slows down my opponent a lot.'"

"I've seen Dante spar around lightly. I never did think he was really that good. He was what you might consider an average black belt. He never won anything. What John Keehan was to me, was a salesman. At that, he was excellent. He pulled thousands of people to karate tournaments at a time when, in Chicago, you had as much chance of pulling them in to see a basket weaving contest. He was a promoter. He made the USKA in the Midwest, but he just started going overboard. He could have controlled the whole karate program in bigger and bigger areas, but he just flipped himself out a little too much. He just got too big and thought he didn't need anyone but himself, and

he started taking advantage of too many of his friends.

"Concevic was definitely Dante's student. There were a lot of people in the Midwest who studied with John. At one time, the man *was* karate in the Midwest. When they had the (first) World's Championships, there were three men they called—Jhoon Rhee, John Keehan and Robert Trias."

For a lot of karateka in the Chicago area, Dante is still a bitter memory. When first contacted, Kenny Knudsen exploded, "The man is demented! He is all show and no fight, he is mentally ill, and he is surrounded by degenerate students! The kind of person who buys his mail order books will only be enticed by anything you write about him, and you can tell BLACK BELT and KI that if anything about him appears in your magazines, I'll cancel all my dojo subscriptions!"

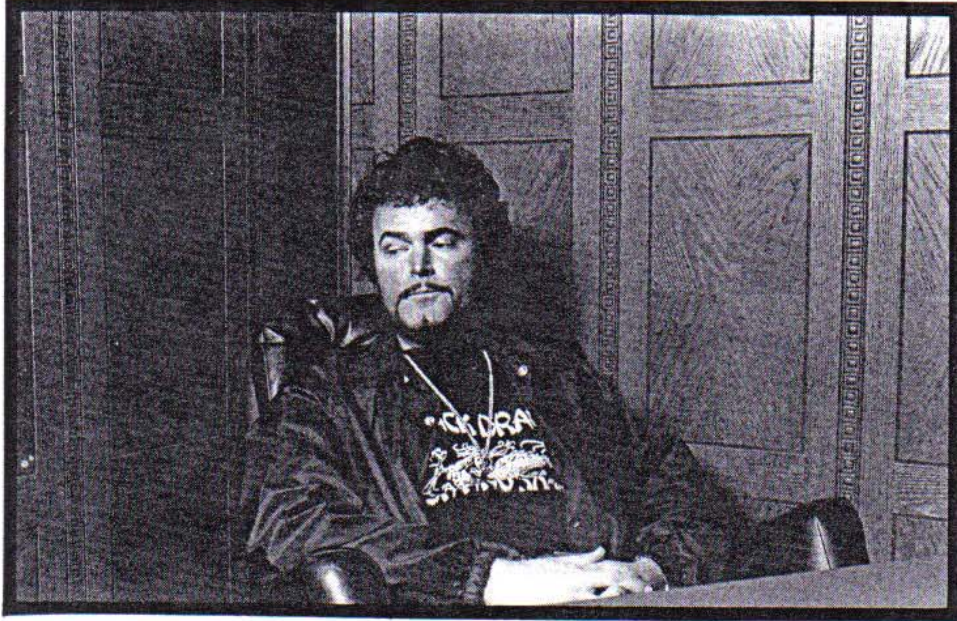
Later, Knudsen explained his initial outburst. Jim Concevic had been a close friend, and he blamed Concevic's death squarely on Dante. He likewise felt, along with many established midwestern karateka, that Dante's publicity had been destructive to efforts to build a legitimate karate community.

Dante's influence on martial arts in the Chicago and midwestern zones during those formative years is fairly clear. Those in the arts despised him, but the public found him fascinating. At one point, he announced publicly that he would duplicate the classic feat of killing a bull with a single shuto. John said later that someone had finked to the SPCA and gotten an injunction to prevent the spectacle; others claimed that Dante had milked the idea for all the publicity it was worth, and then tipped off the SPCA himself.

It is apparent that Dante did much for karate during the time he taught in Chicago. He did fill tournament halls with average citizens he made hungry for karate. He did teach many black belts who went on to establish their own dojo and turn out nationally respected students.

But those accomplishments aren't the obituary he would have written for himself, though he would have wanted them mentioned in passing. He would have wanted to be remembered for the death matches, for a name that, to the layman, relates as much to the martial arts almost as readily as Bruce Lee.

But what karateka most remember him for are his crimes. The dojo bombing episode is one of his classics. Actually, it was neither a bombing nor, as a New York-based martial arts magazine



... he "made himself up" every morning, and he looked it. John could have made the cover of Gentlemen's Quarterly....

reported after his death, an arson attempt. Until Dante's death, martial arts people taunted his students, with "Hey, is your grandmaster still dynamiting dojo?" It stemmed from a very real incident in the 60's. This is Dante's version:

"I was employed by the Chicago Judo and Karate Centers, and I had a falling out with the owner (Gene Wyka), who was a judoka. And, it was nothing to go in there and pound lumps on HIM, because there was nothing really there. He was a tough boy, he was trained by Johnny Osaka, who is now with the Detroit Judo Club, one of the top champions the United States has ever produced. And we didn't go in there and challenge the instructor, because he was a student of mine, Jim Concevic. And so, Doug Dwyer, one of the black belts, and myself, we were both three sheets to the wind, stone drunk, we went there and tried to blast away the window."

With dynamite? we asked. "Well," Dante answered, "there was dynamite, but the police never found it. There were cases of it. All they found were the caps. We were so drunk that we would tape the dynamite caps to the window, light the fuse, take off, and we'd go around the block and it hadn't gone off. The fuse was just sittin' there. It was falling off the window. After three or four times—this was basically a shopping

area in Chicago, and there was no business at night, this was like two in the morning—the police finally spotted us.

"The reason it got the big publicity was that Sam Giancana, one of the top crime syndicate bosses in Chicago, was in jail because he took the Fifth Amendment . . . he wouldn't take the immunity they offered him to give evidence, so he had to serve the remainder of the time the grand jury (decreed)—a year in the county jail. So, it was the assertion of the Chicago police and the general public that the crime syndicate was bombing places all over the city, trying to get the message across, let Sam out. So it got completely out of proportion . . . they were looking for the Mad Bomber, and (Doug and I) just happened to fit the description. And since I had the school on Rush Street, which is the Crime Syndicate's mainstay in Chicago outside Cicero, they figured that we were connected. But we were just a bunch of kids having a good time, you know?" Dante smiled a calculated smile.

But the pivotal thing in Dante's life—the act that would make his name anathema to established karateka, and which would prevent him from becoming an accepted master of the arts in his lifetime—was the "dojo war" that cost Jim Concevic his life.

The night of blood and terror that

ended with Concevic on a plastic-sheeted slab was the ugliest moment in the history of American karate. The full story of what occurred has never, until now, been published anywhere. When the trial was over, *Official Karate* ran Dante's version, but others who were there say that it was far from the truth.

Dante wrote in that magazine that members of the Green Dragon gung fu group had threatened him with death several times. He finally decided to face down his challengers at the Green Dragons' Black Cobra training hall in Chicago. With him were Dante disciples Mike Felcoff and Jim Concevic, and three of Concevic's students. Dante said that after they entered the hall, a group of some 12 to 17 Green Dragons, all armed with various Chinese edged weapons, locked the door behind them and converged. The three Concevic students ran for the door, he said; Concevic was stabbed during the melee while Dante gouged the eyes out of one Green Dragon and disposed of the others handily. "The remaining Cobra instructors attacked me and I dropped them," Dante wrote.

BLACK BELT, for the first time and perhaps a few years too late, hunted down several of those who were in the Black Cobra hall that bloody night. None of them wanted to be quoted directly, but their statements are on tape. Piecing them together, it happened something like this:

The reason for the fracas is not certain. One source believes that Dante had been extorting the Green Dragon people for money on the threat of bringing in his own people to smash their dojo, and that they finally challenged him to do so. Another version maintains that a Green Dragon instructor had been dating one of John's girl friends. In any case, on the night of April 23, 1970, Dante telephoned various friends and students and asked them to join him in a confrontation at the Green Dragon hall.

Ken Knudsen remembers that Jim Concevic called him that night and told him, "Crazy John wants me to go with him to the Green Dragon Hall." Knudsen refused to join him, he says, and begged Concevic not to go; Concevic said that he wasn't expecting trouble, but would go "to back up John in case someone tried to stab him or something."

From the others we talked to, those who were actually there, the story is as follows: Concevic calls several of his students to join him. He tells them that they will be going out for a beer and a

(Continued on page 77)

COUNT DANTE

(Continued from page 41)

sandwich, but first they'll be stopping by the Green Dragon Hall while Keehan pays a routine visit there.

Those who go in with him this night will maintain later that Concevic was not expecting trouble. He was too calm, too nonchalant. But Jane Orr, the judo black belt who shared his life then, believes differently. "Jim was prepared to go in and fight, because when I went to pick up his car later, his glasses and his daily reminder notebook were in the front seat, and so were his shirt and sportcoat. He must have taken his glasses and good clothes off in preparation for a fight . . . Jim liked a little street brawl once in a while. I don't know if it made him feel masculine or what . . ."

The door to the Green Dragon Hall opens, and slams shut and is locked once Dante and his contingent have entered. The room is full of street-clothed men bearing Chinese weapons—maces, spears, swords and knives. One man brandishes a mace at Dante and Concevic. Dante will write later, "I told him I would kill him if he hit me with it . . . As Jim followed me in I heard him say the thing I had said to the man with the mace."

A tense, uneasy silence hangs over the Green Dragon hall. At this point the accounts diverge. According to one story, Dante and Felcoff are led into a back office to talk with the manager of the school; Concevic and his men agree to stay behind as a vigilant bodyguard. Others say that Dante was there when the explosion occurred.

It blows up quick. No one will ever be certain who threw the first blow. All they know is that the hall suddenly goes up for grabs.

Concevic throws one Green Dragon to the floor with an osoto-gari, then turns from the prostrate form and throws himself into the fight. The group is fighting its way toward the locked front door. Knives flash. Concevic has become the center of the attack. He tries to fend off the blades, and the flailing mace, and his hands and arms are slashed to ribbons. One edged weapon, apparently a sword, thrusts deep into his left side. It is a severe wound. Another blade misses his throat and rips up under his chin.

Over the din of the battle, Concevic yells, "Get the fuck outa' here!" The three students he brought, who are nearest the door, manage to kick it off its hinges. They race into the street. One of them, realizing that Concevic is no longer behind him, turns and darts back into the Green Dragon Hall to rescue his sensei.

He enters the door in time to watch his instructor take his death blow. Con-

(Continued on page 78)

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COUNT DANTE

(Continued from page 77)

cevic, blood soaking his T-shirt and slacks, is badly hurt. He appears to be trying to run, but he is dazed, charging aimlessly like a wounded bull in an arena. He slams into a wall. As he caroms off the wall and tries to make for the door, the man he floored at the beginning of the fight raises a heavy spear and lets fly.

The spear catches Concevic in the side of the neck. Growling like a wounded animal, Concevic paws at the nightmarish staff that protrudes from his body. He jerks it out, and as the spear clatters to the floor of the hall, it is followed by a thick, pulsing stream of blood: the karate champion's carotid artery has been severed. He dashes brokenly into the street, then falls to the sidewalk. Blood no longer spurts from his wounds. His heart has stopped pumping.

The fighters can hear sirens. One of the Concevic students has made his way to a nearby firehouse and called the police. Many of those present will escape; many more, including Dante, will be rounded up and taken to police headquarters, and charged with the murder of Jim Concevic, whose body bears 36 slash and stab wounds and a hole in the throat.

Where was Dante during all this? He told us he was fighting for his life, and pulling eyeballs out of the heads of the opposing instructors. We asked for details. Dante replied, "I really don't like to remember it. Sorry, Mas, but I've got selective amnesia."

Some accounts have Dante caught by police, hiding under a desk in the Green Dragon office. Says a staunch Dante disciple, "I believe it. He didn't have time to get out. Where would you go if the cops were coming in both doors and you had just blinded a guy for life?"

The *Official Karate* account had Dante saying that he was "charged with taking both eyes out of" an opponent. He told us that in fact he had done so. But others on the scene say no, that the only other casualty was indeed a Green Dragon who suffered an eye injury, but it was, they maintain, inflicted by the nunchaku of one of Concevic's students.

The trial, ultimately, came to nothing. Though the man who had gone in to rescue Concevic identified one of the Green Dragons as the one who hurled the fatal spear, the case was ultimately thrown out of court. Some said it was because the suspected killer's father bought some people off. Dante maintained that it was *he* who bought everyone's way out, exhausting his own funds so totally that, with his karate business in ruins after Concevic's death, he was reduced to peddling peanuts in a Chicago baseball stadium.

The effect of the incident upon Dante was profound. Jim Concevic was his best friend. Some said that, except for his later protege Bill Aguiar, Concevic was his only friend. His death crushed Dante, and talking with John years later, even when you had more or less learned to sort the half lies from the truth, you could see that it had broken a part of him that never quite healed.

* * * * *

The "deadliest man in the world" selling peanuts. You could believe it only if you knew him, only if you realized that his own pride was too great to admit to something like that unless it was inescapably true. He considered himself too big already to have to depict himself rising from the ashes to enhance his stature.

The peanut concession, he would confide later, had been an opening into the last outlaw phase of his life. The man who got him the job, who controlled concessions like that, was a part of the Chicago Family. It was, Dante would say later, his entry into the world of organized crime, a misty world that would swirl around him, thicker and thicker, until the day he died.

By now, he had gone through several careers. He would never again teach full time in the martial arts. His attempts to set up a string of hairstyle salons had failed, though he had managed a spectacular front page on the *National Informer* tabloid that stated, "The World's Deadliest Fighter Is . . . a Hairdresser!" Later, he would distribute to friends the gold-embroidered packs of specially blended Count Dante Cigarettes that he'd had made as a publicity gimmick for the hairdressing chain. Never, though, did he lose the makeup skills he had acquired while studying for that profession. One intimate friend hinted that he "made himself up" every morning, and he looked it. John could have made the cover of *Gentlemen's Quarterly*, but the only cover he wanted, he would tell you, was that of *Rolling Stone*.

* * * * *

By the time he died at 36, the once "pure martial artist" had evolved into a figure of infamy with a taste for headlines and with connections in the world of organized crime.

Next month, we'll close the Count Dante saga with the story of his controversial American tournaments, his own accounts of his activities in organized crime, and the background of his mail-order karate empire.

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