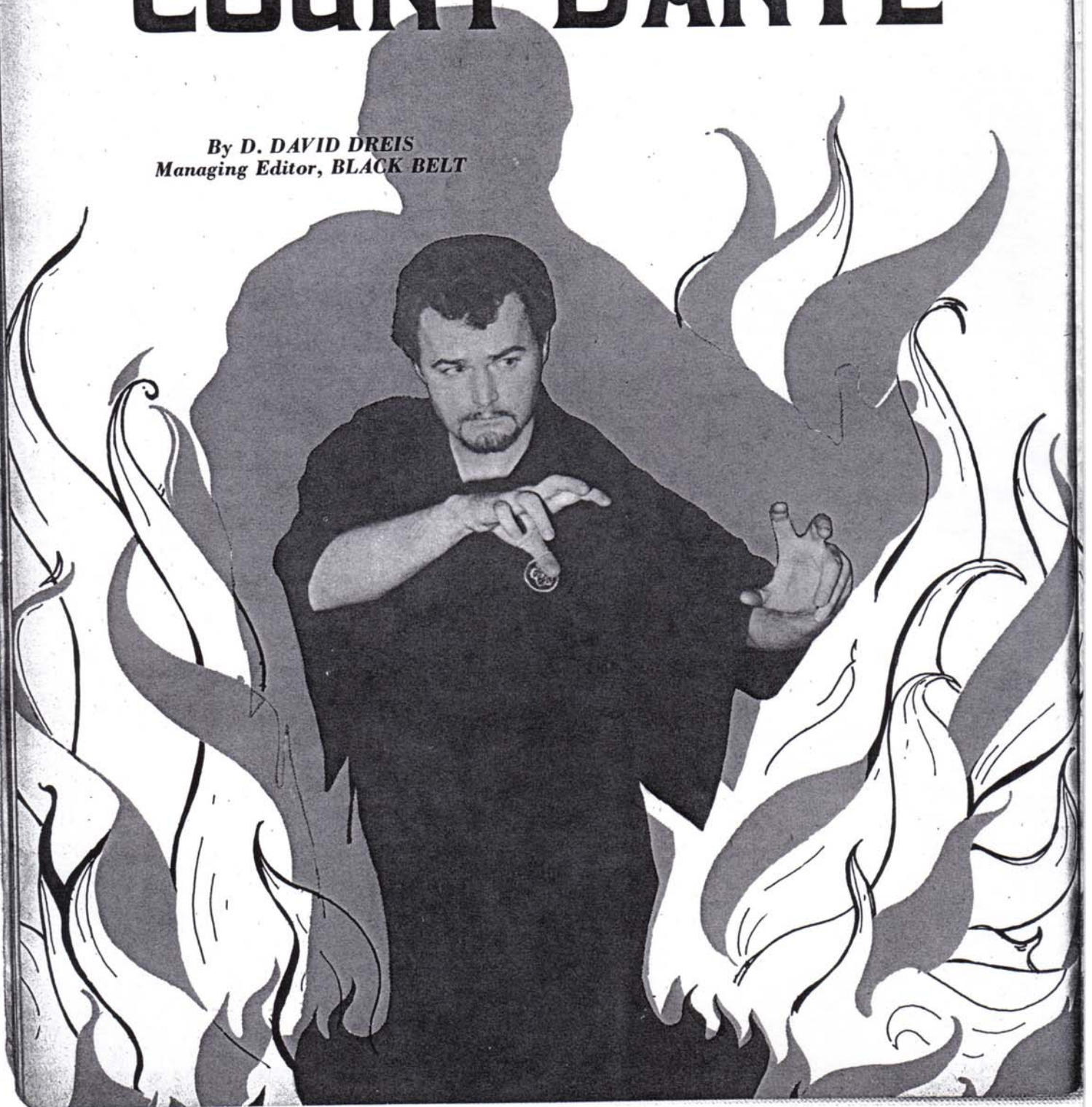


# THE TRIAL OF COUNT DANTE

By D. DAVID DREIS  
Managing Editor, *BLACK BELT*



## PROLOGUE

Lake Michigan was huffing and puffing with only half its force across the city of Chicago, at a site selected by BLACK BELT as the focal point for a conference of Chicago senseis, students and enthusiasts. Chicago can get cold, oftentimes breaking the winter records of any city in the nation. Now, in October, the last tinges of autumn were fighting hard to stave off the incoming winter storms.

A storm had been rising in Chicago for some time, created by serious students and practitioners of karate against the armada of warriors who hold the World Karate Federation and its leader, John Keehan, known as Count Dante, in high esteem. To the average Chicagoan, Count Dante is the most well-known karateka in the city, having promoted himself to an image of the all-powerful, dynamic master of the Oriental art who fears no man and holds an annual tournament to prove it. To the many who practice karate in their dojos without the fanfare of television and newspaper coverage, the image is all wrong, and needs to be corrected. To them karate is a sacred and revered art, greater than any one individual, more tempting than the plateful of charisma the sensei exerts before the paying public.

James Jones, a sensei, attended the International Convention of the Martial Arts, carrying the banner for Karate-Art and pleading for a more intensive look into the Chicago and mid-western karate societies. Jones had set up a national tournament, scheduled for November 2nd in Chicago. He had invited teams from the East and the West to participate in the event, and although he was a member of the United States Karate Association, he assured one and all that this was not a USKA meeting and that members from any dojo organization would be welcomed. With John T. McGee, the BLACK BELT correspondent dispatched to the tourney, I scheduled a trip to Chicago prior to the event to personally talk to the senseis and practitioners in the city. It was a spur-of-the-moment decision and Jones contacted a number of people to attend the meeting at the Essex Inn, on Chicago's Michigan Avenue, unfortunately known as the battleground for the Chicago Police Depart-

ment's War against the Yippies during the Democratic Party Convention. With the site selected, known hereabouts as Ft. (Richard) Daley, BLACK BELT held a dinner for those who would partake of its forum with a general meeting set up following the discussion.

Jones, affably, introduced the members of the party he had invited. One of those who came along, with his pert and attractive wife, was Gene Parker, a moustachioed karateka whose wife described all wives of karatekas as forlorn widows whose husbands place the martial art before them in hours spent. Parker is exuberant and garrulous, and he listens to every word spoken as if checking for its authenticity. This was the first time that he had met anyone affiliated with BLACK BELT although he has been a regular reader of the magazine and was able to speak with some authority on past articles that he liked and disliked. He was pleased that BLACK BELT was making an appearance in Chicago, but was wary of what we might find in our discussion with some of the karatekas set up for this evening.

Wally Borkowski is a tall, dark-haired fellow who came nattily dressed in a cream-colored Nehru jacket and an over-size jade-centered amulet chained around his neck. He looks like singer Ed Ames and has a ready smile. His gait is a bit fey, but firm, and he consistently wears a happy expression. He seemed ready for any discussion and was a bit surprised, so it seemed, that dinner had been arranged prior to the meeting.

Another participant to this "antipasta" gathering was Joe Thomas who brought his petite and enthusiastic wife along for the outing. Thomas is a burly, shirt-sleeve type of person who seemed uncomfortable in his shirt, suit and tie. He was sharply dressed, however, and eager to make a good impression. He was not exceptionally in favor of BLACK BELT for he had felt that he personally suffered over the editorial commentary on the city. However, besides taking token pot shots at the magazine for its hearty criticism of the Chicago karate picture, he was more than eager for the confrontation of the evening. Thomas is a salesman, the public relations director for the World Karate

*He calls himself Count Dante, but he is known, really, as John Keehan. Dante or Keehan, the karateka has done more harm and more good for karate than any man in Chicago. This look into the windy city's karate picture tells how the city's karatekas are fighting back and scoring ippons along the way.*

# THE EVIDENCE



## 6th Annual WORLD KARATE CHAMPIONSHIP



**Count Dante**  
WORLD'S DEADLIEST FIGHTING MASTER  
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## Black Dragon



Fighting Society

Federation although he is the owner of a couple of outlets known as the House of Karate and is quick to mention that he is not the major sensei in his dojos, leaving that honor to a more idealistic, dedicated instructor, not saying that he, himself was not one, to some extent.

### Enter: Count Dante

Enter: Count Dante, or John Keehan as he is really known. Keehan is a smartly-dressed, bearded karateka with a pomposity in his manner which seems to mark him as a man set apart from the usual trappings of the Oriental karateka. With him was a voluptuous young girl with a tight fitting white dress and the long contemporary hair style one might find in the Playboy Club where she occasionally works as a Bunny. Dante, upon meeting me, displayed an open contempt, a hostility, which seemed less against me than for an image he liked to project. He wore an Italian double-breasted sport coat, light blue, which set him further apart from the conventional (Borkowski's Nehru jacket withstanding) garb of the others. Sitting down for dinner, all but Dante were exuberant in their conversations. Thomas and his wife seemed somewhat aloof to the proceedings, using the dinner as a tool for further conversation with Dante who is his personal friend.

It is Dante, and Dante alone, who has been the focal point for much of the criticism of Chicago karate and he knows this all too well. BLACK BELT intentionally avoided coverage of his tournaments and of his students since it did not consider him an asset to the art. However, to give just due, when a karate master is sought by the newspapers for some publicity fodder, there is no one who will give the press what it wants more than this person, and often at the cost of karate as an art.

Admittedly, I was wary of Dante more than anyone else at this conference and I insisted that he attend to give his side of the picture of the Carnival Freak which I and others had received. He is an occasional visitor to television, using his contemptuous manner as a means to project the image he finds very commercial. Indeed, his students who have come to the World Karate Federation have come as a means to find out

from The Man himself how to defend themselves against "the attackers." I told Keehan that the Forum had been set up as a means for him to explain himself; to tell all of us who he really is. He spent a few minutes berating BLACK BELT and its so-called appreciation and respect for the Orientals and lambasted the public for its acceptance of this magazine. He further attacked the concept of the magazine in talking about sportsmanship and covering tournament play without contact, since his tournaments adhere to contact much as a prize fight does. He has great reason for contempt of the magazine for because of BLACK BELT many top senseis have boycotted his tournaments, even to acting as spectators, and he doesn't draw great support from fellow senseis in the Chicago area, but rather depends on those who feel karate is a diabolical sport and its leader a menacing fighter. In short, his spectators, as a rule, come to see plenty of blood spilled. Ofttimes they are disappointed; all too often they get their money's worth.

His attractive partner is part of the trappings which Dante likes to use, and he has gotten her a few spots on local television as promotion for his tournament, although she is not a practitioner. She told me later that wherever he goes, people stop him on the street, recall his name and treat him with respect. Although she is kind and rather unaffected, she seems to shine in his lustré and wants him to be more well-liked than he is now.

During the chit-chat of dinner, Dante lessened in his contempt of me and of BLACK BELT and realized that we had not come to kill him professionally, a pose which he undertook at the beginning, and relaxed, sufficiently enough for conversation to open on a wider spectrum than he had supposed. He began to smile a bit more, forgetting the image which went over well with the populous, but not with fellow senseis, and got down to the business of discussion. Jones seemed to like this "new" personality of Keehan (Dante) and remarked to me about it. He hadn't liked him too often of late, but recalled when, as a beginning student of the sensei, Dante was then seriously interested in the martial art, was an easy-to-talk-to



target, they were for another chance of respect and tribute. And there was a great deal of interest in revising the rules so that they could get their results.

Thomas, who had been pouting over the magazine's treatment of Dante and Chicago, was full of praise for the magazine getting these people together to discuss the issues. He promised full cooperation, and more, he felt that for the first time Count Dante seemed different, that the meeting had opened his eyes to what had been the problem with Chicago. He optimistically foresaw a change in Chicago in the future, and he pledged that he would do all in his power to have this come about.

Later, as the crowd emptied out of the room and I had per-

sonally met each and every one in the room, I was told by many of the people that they were regular readers of the magazine but felt that Chicago deserved to be covered, that Count Dante had done his best to attract people to the martial art, and that he was not a villain as many people supposed.

I admitted that. John Keehan is not a villain any more than any other promoter is a villain. But he does villainous things, and having been put in an image of his own making he has played that image for all it is worth. Now, unmasked, with Keehan, or Dante, which he prefers, there is every hope that a rehabilitation might come about and with it, Chicago would be getting a second chance, the Windy City getting a Second Wind, so to speak.

## MARTIAL ARTS FORUM THE PROSECUTION and THE DEFENSE



**DANTE:** "The streets are where you learn whether you can fight, not tournaments where they pull their punches. I know plenty of guys who have black belts who couldn't defend themselves when they got into a street fight. BLACK BELT respects them."

*This forum was held in Chicago. Participating were Ed Miller, World Karate Federation; James Jones, United States Karate Association; Wally Borkowski, Illinois-Indiana YMCA Karate; Gene Parker, Gen-Ki Karate Association; Joe Thomas, House of Karate; and Count Dante (John Keehan), World Karate Federation. The forum was moderated by BLACK BELT Managing Editor D. David Dreis.*

**BLACK BELT:** All right, let's talk about karate in Chicago . . .

**THOMAS:** Well, I'd like to start it off by complaining of the way you've been treating John . . . Ever since you wrote about John's tournament — the Knockout Tourney — in that article "Storm Clouds Over Chicago," and also about his run-in with the police, he's been unjustly pictured by BLACK BELT and others in Chicago . . .

**BLACK BELT:** How is it "unjust?"

**THOMAS:** Well, I've known John for several years. He's one of my closest friends. He's taught everyone in Chicago karate; well, most. And I think that BLACK BELT which reported that John was arrested for attempting to blow up a dojo was wrong. You reported his arrest, but you didn't report him to be found 'Not Guilty.' Now, I think — and everybody I talk to thinks it — that when a man is found 'Not Guilty' you shouldn't keep reporting that he was arrested for bombing another dojo, or

attempting to bomb a dojo. Being arrested for something is very different than being found 'Not Guilty.' And you guys at BLACK BELT didn't report that he was found 'Not Guilty.'

**BLACK BELT:** John, were you found 'Not Guilty?'

**DANTE:** No, I think I should set the record straight on that. I was found guilty — of attempted malicious mischief.

**THOMAS:** Well, Gee, I told everyone . . .

**DANTE:** No, BLACK BELT knows the story . . . I was found guilty of it, but I don't think BLACK BELT did anyone any good by printing it in the magazine.

**BLACK BELT:** John, that incident probably did more harm to karate's image in Chicago than anything else. Too many people think men in karate are hoodlums.

**THOMAS:** You know, this is the first time I actually mentioned this to John although we've been close. I didn't want to approach the subject. But anyway, BLACK BELT by printing this hurt us all in Chicago. A lot of people, after that report, "Storm Clouds Over Chicago," boycotted John's last tournament. You ought to report about John's ability, how many students he's taught, how much respect his students have for him.

**BLACK BELT:** Well, if I'm not mistaken, John, in teaching his students, has been advocating contact in tournaments, has been handing out his black belts freely . . .

**DANTE:** As far as I'm concerned, I couldn't care less about belt rankings. If a student wants to have a black belt, I give him one, but as far as I'm concerned, it could have polka dots, it could be green, yellow, purple. Karate is a fighting art and that's what's most important to me, the fighting art. I am interested in whether my student can defend himself when attacked, and I don't mean by pulling his punches. The streets are where you learn whether or not you can fight, not in tournaments where they pull their punches. I know

plenty of guys who have black belts who couldn't defend themselves when they got into a street fight. BLACK BELT respects those karate people and not the ones who really could fight if attacked.

**THOMAS:** But this attack by BLACK BELT is unfair to all of us in karate. You ought to look at all he's done.

**JONES:** I think BLACK BELT has looked at all he's done.

**DANTE:** I was the first person in the nation to hold a major karate tournament. I held the first Open Karate Tournament. That was 1963, and at that first event Ed Parker who runs the Long Beach International and Jhoon Rhee who has the National Karate Tournament in Washington, D.C. came to my tournament. There was only one Open Tournament being held at that time; it was in Canada and it was run by Tsuruoka, but it was very small. I have been a teacher of karate all of those years in Chicago. There are about 60 percent of the teachers in Chicago now who have been taught by me . . .

**BLACK BELT:** Which is one reason why BLACK BELT didn't cover Chicago.

**DANTE:** I can't understand why BLACK BELT does not advocate contact in matches in the United States, but you cover those 'blood baths' in Japan. Just recently you had that report on kick boxing. I'm sure if you had kick boxing here, with those Japanese boxers, or Thai boxers, you'd give them plenty of publicity. And I'm sure that 99 percent of those titles that some of these Orientals have are figments of their own imaginations. I'm sure that 99 percent of those people who have titles who are in the United States have titles that are figments of their own imaginations. Every guy from Korea is a Korean Champion. I've met them and they have some glamorous titles that they've won. The man who wins a trophy at a tournament may not be the man who wins the fight on the streets.

**BORKOWSKI:** I disagree with that. As far as I'm concerned, you really do undergo somewhat of a test in a tournament. You learn how fast you move, how accurate your punches are. It's not contact, as John advises, but a tournament does tell you how much you've learned.

**JONES:** Now, we're planning a tournament here in Chicago and I plan to have paid referees, and no contact at all in the matches or else I'll disqualify the fighter.

**DANTE:** The tournament doesn't tell you how much punishment you can take or how much punishment you can give out. Can the man give out four times the punishment he can take, or can he take six times the punishment he can give out?

**MILLER:** Tournament competition is one thing, but aren't we all interested in self-defense, putting our opponents away as effectively as possible?

**JONES:** Tournament competition is a positive application of what we've learned in a dojo. This is where John and I differ; one of the many ways. I used to be with



Jim Jones, left, and Walt Borkowski are karate instructors who serve with the YMCA's karate program, but both of them find the going rough against the shenanigans and power-play of Count Dante and his World Karate Federation.

John when he was with the USKA, but John is interested only in money, in the commercial way of life. I'm interested in karate as an art. I've got a job for money. Ever since John began promoting the way he promotes, all of us in Chicago suffered by it; we all were hurt. BLACK BELT didn't pay any attention to us. The newspapers treated us like freaks. I don't think karate tournaments should need the gimmicks he employs.

**DANTE:** The newspaper people wouldn't give my tournament any coverage. I gave them what they wanted to give me publicity. I went to Cassius Clay's house, here in Chicago, and challenged him to a fight at my tournament. That made news for my tournament. That also meant that it could mean more people at the box office. Look, you talk about my gimmicks. All right, that gets publicity for my tournament. But as for contact, I'm talking about men, not boys, fighting, and no one under 21 years of age is admitted. I love karate as well as the next man, but I want the contact of big men with big men.

**BORKOWSKI:** I judged the last tournament John had. It's the last time I'll be a judge at his event. The fights were like an amateur boxing match.

**DANTE:** But it wasn't a blood bath. You saw that guy knocked out.

**BORKOWSKI:** Please don't remind me.

**JONES:** What happened at that tournament wasn't karate. Those fighters may have known karate, but they weren't using it.

**MILLER:** You can't really have karate with gloves on. Karate with gloves on isn't karate. You train your students to fight with no padding on their fists. When you're focusing, you teach them to fight so that their blows can be an inch in for

contact. Put that inch of padding on their hands and they don't inch in far enough.

**BORKOWSKI:** If you don't have padding on, and if you are going for contact, you'll have one winner and 35 dead contestants!

**DANTE:** Here in Chicago, things are rough. That karate man better learn how to protect himself. The Japanese and the Koreans walk around like they know their art, but get them in a fight and I wonder how they'd do. When a student comes to me I tell him I'm going to teach him how to defend himself. I'm not interested in teaching people who want to go in for the sport. My people know their karate and they know how to kill, if necessary.

**BORKOWSKI:** And everybody goes for a head shot.

**THOMAS:** It's not that way in the tournaments. It's a friend against friend.

**DANTE:** You talk about the proficiency of some fighters. Some people can learn karate from a book and be fairly proficient. I don't know of a book that's out that somebody can't learn something about defending himself.

**BLACK BELT:** You wrote a book.

**DANTE:** Which BLACK BELT refused to sell. You wouldn't even let me buy an advertisement to promote it in your magazine. You don't respect me or my students because you don't respect my promotions. Who promoted Mas Oyama? He put out a book. He started his own organization. I started the World Karate Organization when I left USKA and Bob Trias.

**BLACK BELT:** How did that come about?

**JONES:** First, I'd like to say that I remember when John was affiliated with the USKA and he was a fine teacher. This was long before he started his WKF and



**DANTE:** "I've seen some matches where the referees haven't called them well enough. If ever any of my men are hit intentionally I tell my students to open up and finish them off." Jones admitted he does the same thing!

went on his commercial way. I recall one time when he got thrown out of his house because we were practicing there and the neighbors complained about the noise, and about people of my race. They thought it was a race riot going on there.

**DANTE:** It's no secret that I have a great many Negroes in my school. I've been teaching Negroes for a long time. That was the reason behind my rift with Robert Trias and the USKA. At the time, the USKA didn't have any Negroes in the organization, except for mine, and Trias didn't like that one bit. He even told me that I had promoted the second Negro in his organization. And, according to him, the first was by mistake. He told me that

had he known this fellow he had named a black belt in the Philippines was a Negro he wouldn't have done it.

**BLACK BELT:** That sounds hard to believe.

**JONES:** We all change.

**BLACK BELT:** You mean the USKA did not have Negroes in their organization until the Filipino and your black belts?

**DANTE:** That's the absolute truth. He didn't like it. He told me that he 'slipped' but at the time the USKA did not award black belts to Negroes.

**BLACK BELT:** You realize that your comments are being written up for publication.

**DANTE:** It's the truth. Of course, now he



Gene Parker, left, tells Joe Thomas that there was too much prejudice against Dante's World Karate Federation and he was forced to break away. He also claims Dante is interested in Dante and not the art of karate as he is.

has no qualms about it, but at the time, that's the way it was.

**JONES:** I think that was true at the time, but, of course, it's not today.

**DANTE:** No matter what the public believes or wants to believe, I have been against any form of discrimination; certainly against the Negroes, certainly pro-Oriental. My battle with Trias was also because I wanted to set up my World Karate Tournament and he didn't think it would work and didn't want any part of it.

**MILLER:** You can check the records on that. Trias wouldn't honor the champion of this World Karate Championship.

**BLACK BELT:** Overall, how do the Chicagoans fare in tournaments in other cities? Do any Chicagoans make it to the top in karate tournaments elsewhere?

**JONES:** That's part of the problem, Dave. Look, I've won 30 championships, national championships at other tournaments. I've won in kata, in free fighting, but my students don't believe me because my picture and the story has never been in **BLACK BELT**.

**BLACK BELT:** Not elsewhere?

**JONES:** I don't think you've reported USKA tournaments.

**PARKER:** I've stayed quiet through all this, but now I'll say something. Look, I broke away from the World Karate Federation because I didn't like what my students had to undergo when they were known to be a part of the WKF. I set up my own dojo and became independent. My students are good, very good, but there's too much prejudice against John's organization. Now, at the National Karate Championships in Washington, D.C. one of my students won the white belt championship. That's the white belts! Sometimes my students don't do as well as other fighters in tournaments, but I don't want them entering tournaments and having a prejudice against them because of the organization they represent. I am seriously interested in karate.

**DANTE:** I'm not interested in karate?

**PARKER:** You're interested in Count Dante and John Keehan and the World Karate Federation. I'm interested not in the Gen-Ki Karate Association more than the art of karate.

**JONES:** That's the problem. We have to gain a good reputation for karate in Chicago. There are a lot of people entering karate tournaments in Chicago who are very good, really, and they are not being reported upon because the only person who is known in the city is John Keehan, Count Dante. We are oriented to the Oriental ways of good sportsmanship and no contact. We have some very good instructors here and they deserve to be recognized and appreciated.

**BORKOWSKI:** We are interested in karate at the YMCA. We have had very great success in Illinois and Indiana with karate, and we intend to have karate as part of

the YMCA curriculum throughout the country.

**JONES:** At the Grand National Championships in Kansas City, seven of the 15 trophies at the event were won by my students.

**BORKOWSKI:** Of course, belt rankings aren't important, really, to a man's ability. If he knows karate and knows how to use it, that's what counts. Belt rankings only officially tell a man how far he's gone.

**DANTE:** What's a black belt anyway? A Shodan, the first degree, is only a testimony that the participant is beginning to learn.

**MILLER:** The belt is a stepping stone to becoming a master of the art of karate, nothing more. The black belt, however, in many people's minds is the highest title a guy could get. But what degree of black belt?

**BORKOWSKI:** Here in Chicago, and I've seen it, there's no respect for the referee.

**MILLER:** Do you blame us?

**BORKOWSKI:** Okay, a lot of referees aren't good and you can't respect their calls, but that's no reason to have them get hit when they try to break two fighters apart.

**BLACK BELT:** The referees get hit?

**BORKOWSKI:** I've seen them hit the referee, not intentionally, but so out of control that they do. Sure, the referee can stand aside and not get hit, but really, the way some referees here have taken it . . .

**DANTE:** Sometimes it happens.

**JONES:** I've seen it happen, too.

**BORKOWSKI:** Now at the YMCA we have been with karate for 13 months and everyone is happy with the program. There are less accidents and the referees don't horse around. If someone is out of control, they're disqualified.

**DANTE:** I've seen some matches where the referees haven't called them well enough. If ever any of my men are hit, and I mean intentionally, I tell my students to open up and finish them off.

**JONES:** I tell my students to do the same thing. If they're ever hit intentionally, I tell them to make short work of them. Forget the tournament rules and go at them. What else can you do?

**BLACK BELT:** Walk away from it.

**MILLER:** Walk away? Look, have you ever seen a guy open up with his punches and miss, and land on the floor because he missed? That guy wasn't kidding around and you know it. I've seen Joe Lewis in a match and you guys at BLACK BELT publicize him and all too often he's not kidding around.

**BORKOWSKI:** The answer here and any place is for the referee to have control of the tournaments.

**DANTE:** But they don't and I tell my students to pulverize these guys, deck them as fast as possible.

**JONES:** A man must protect himself.

**BLACK BELT:** Now, you talk about BLACK BELT not publicizing the Chicago area. From what you tell me it's probably good for Chicago that we don't.

**MILLER:** You've covered other tournaments which weren't any good. You've blasted them, but you've covered them. All we ask you to do is tell it like it is.

**BLACK BELT:** And encourage 'blood baths'!

**JONES:** No, not that, really, but we can change the picture if we know that the readers' eyes are on us.

**BLACK BELT:** How many dojos are there in Chicago?

**JONES:** I don't know, really; about 50, I'd say.

**DANTE:** About 50 more or less.

**THOMAS:** But we've been apart, not working together, fighting among ourselves. At this meeting, I see more unity than I've seen in years. If we could all work together.

**JONES:** We did that at the convention, the ICMA in Los Angeles which I attended. That was really good, and I got a lot out of that.

**BLACK BELT:** I'm in Chicago because I was told that things in Chicago were changing, that it wasn't as bad as the picture we had. But I'll admit one big thing. Chicago and every city which does not, or has not, conducted themselves in the true interest of the martial arts is on trial. We will not give space in our publication to cities which do not improve the image of the martial arts. We are not interested in blasting tournament after tournament.

**JONES:** At my tournament, good or bad, we will have paid, professional referees. This tournament will make or break the midwest and we intend to have it make it. I think it's much more enjoyable to see a good tournament, with good fighters, than to see bloodshed.

**PARKER:** And a tournament which isn't filled with politics. When I was with the WKF, they were north side of Chicago, and we were on the south side. There was a great deal of rivalry and we were outside the politics of the group.

**JONES:** We are interested in uniting people who have an interest in karate and the martial arts. To me, there is no joy in having someone get smacked in the mouth, or worse. Both Wally and I are on the YMCA Board of Directors . . .

**BORKOWSKI:** We are both going before the national YMCA conference to try to get karate in all of the YMCAs. We think our success will help this along.

**BLACK BELT:** Well, this has been illuminating. We at BLACK BELT wish all of you luck. Maybe there is some hope for Chicago as a karate center. As the third largest city, it seems to me that you should have good karate and honorable karate. That to me is the way to get your place in the sun.

# WHAT'S YOUR VERDICT?





