

# History of American Karate

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No individual can truly claim to be the founder of "American Karate" because it is an eclectic mix of systems and styles. Many instructors have taken what they considered to be the best of different systems to devise a curriculum that worked for them and their students. Some individuals who have claimed to be founders of their own systems of "American Karate" are listed here, some of whom have claimed 10th degree or higher black belt ranks for themselves. In the Asian culture, most 10th degree black belts (typically represented by a Red Belt) were awarded only upon the death of the Grandmaster to his successor.

**Jhoon Goo Rhee** (January 7, 1932 – April 30, 2018), commonly known as **Jhoon Rhee**, was a South Korean [master](#) of [taekwondo](#) who was widely recognized as the 'Father of American Taekwondo' for introducing this martial art to the United States of America since arriving in the 1950s. He was ranked 10th [dan](#).

**Allen R. Steen** is a 10th-degree black belt who earned his 1st degree black belt in 1961 in [Tae Kwon Do](#) from [Jhoon Rhee](#). Steen opened the first karate school in Texas in 1962 and became known as the "Father of Texas Blood and Guts Karate." He also gained fame for defeating Chuck Norris and Joe Lewis in a single evening to win Ed Parker's Long Beach International Karate Championships in 1966.

**Joe Lewis** was often called the "Muhammad Ali" of American sport karate. He amassed many firsts including the first World Professional Karate Champion and the first U.S. Heavyweight Champion. He began his martial studies while an 18-year-old U.S. Marine stationed in Okinawa in 1963. He earned a black belt in a record 18 months and due to his outstanding tournament career was named the "greatest karate fighter of all time" by his peers in a Black Belt Magazine survey. Lewis died in 2012.

**J. Pat Burlleson** is a 10th-degree black belt. He received his 1st degree black belt in 1963 in [Tae Kwon Do](#) by [Allen Steen](#). Burlleson was [Allen Steen](#)'s first black belt student. Steen, in turn, was [Jhoon Rhee](#)'s first black belt student in America in 1962. Burlleson based his system on [Tae Kwon Do](#), [Tang Soo Do](#), and [Wado-Ryu](#). His website says he is one of the founders of American Karate and his claims have been based on his legitimacy of winning the first National Karate Championships in 1964 in Washington D.C.

**Jim R. Harrison** is a 9th-degree black belt. He received his 1st degree black belt in Judo and Jujitsu in 1962, Tang Soo Do in 1963, Shorin-Ryu Karate in 1964, having trained under Bob Kurth, Kim Soo Wong and Jim Wax. In 1964 he opened his Bushidokan dojo in Kansas City from which he competed, trained several regional and national champions, and hosted major tournaments.<sup>[8][9]</sup>

**Ernest H. Lieb** was a 10th-degree black belt. He received his 1st-degree black belt in 1958. Mr. Lieb based his system on [Chi Do Kwan](#), [Karate](#), [Judo](#), [Jiu Jitsu](#), and [Aikido](#). In 1964 Lieb was one of the first teachers to put the word "American" in front of karate.

**Edmund K. Parker, Sr.** was the founder of [American Kenpo Karate](#). He received his black belt in 1953 from William Chow. Parker based his system on Chow's Chinese [Kenpo Karate](#). Parker was one of the first to commercialize karate in America and became known by many as the "Father of American Kenpo Karate" because he originated the first "Americanized" version of Karate.

**Keith D. Yates** is a 10th-degree black belt. He received his 1st degree black belt in 1968 in [Tae Kwon Do](#) by [Allen Steen](#). Yates was [Allen Steen](#)'s youngest black belt student at the time. After a successful tournament career Yates went on to become a respected teacher and author. He has served on the editorial boards of most of the major martial arts publications and has authored or co-authored 13 books. He also sits on the governing boards of several international martial arts organizations.

**John Worley** is a 10th-degree black belt. He received his 1st degree black belt in 1967 in [Karate](#) under the tutelage of Charles Loven and Texas karate legend, Master Instructor J. Pat Burlleson. Worley also studied with Jhoon Rhee and was one of the top instructors in the Jhoon Rhee Institute in Washington, D.C., before leaving to found the National Karate system of schools in Minnesota in 1973. Along with co-founder and fellow 10th-degree black belt Larry Carnahan, Worley has grown the National Karate schools into one of the most successful sport and

Americanized karate systems in North America. In 1977, Worley and Carnahan also founded the Diamond Nationals Karate Championships.