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**World Oyama Karate**

**Honbu Newsletter**

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# Breaking Through The Wall

By Founder Saiko Shihan Y. Oyama



Yes, I'm talking to You! You! And You!...

## ■ Training in Solitude

I imagine that the majority of Karate masters like to train by themselves in peace and quiet with no interruptions. Unfortunately, this is hard to do. If they have their own dojo, they are constantly busy; if they have their own organization, they are even busier. I am the founder and the director of the World Oyama Karate Organization, so I have a lot to think about: Black Belt promotion tests, regular promotion tests, instructors' training camps, domestic and foreign training camps, clinics, Black Belt class training, normal class training. I also have a wife, kids, grandkids, I have two rescued dogs that I have to walk, feed and clean up after, I have to cook, wash the dishes, and on and on. (By the way, I'm a good cook. I don't mean to brag, but it's true. All my former *uchi deshi* are good cooks. Those that are married and have families usually do all the cooking in the house.)

So, it's sometimes hard to manage my time, but it must be done. Here at the

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Honbu Dojo, we are closed Saturday afternoon and Sunday. Sometimes we have clinics or promotion tests on those days, but for the most part there's nothing going on then. I love to train by myself during those times. It's quiet and peaceful, with the smell of sweat hanging in the air. To me, that smell is more beautiful than *Chanel 5* or any other perfume. The quiet dojo still radiates with the chi of all the students who have trained there. Such a luxurious feeling to train at those times!

I can well remember all the time that has passed since I started training until now. But in some ways, it seems to have just flown by. As I get older, the tempo of my training begins to change, to become smoother. Until a little while ago, I loved to train hard and push myself until I had no oxygen. I'd go to sleep and feel fine the next day. If I train that way now, it takes me at least a couple days to recover. When I push myself too much, old injuries start knocking on my door, saying, "What are you doing!? Are you crazy?" The reality of my age suddenly hits me. I don't want to accept it, but I must. Before, my chi was always driving forward, pushing. Now, it's more receiving. That's Mother Nature. We have Driving Kumite when we are young and Counter Kumite as we get older.

I'm always trying to find the balance between my body and mind. Everyone changes day to day. Even professional athletes who strive to maintain a consistent high level of performance are different season to season and even game to game. Sometimes my mind thinks I can do more, but my body says no. Other times, my mind says no, but my body says yes. It's always up and down; that's why dedication to training is so important.

When I train by myself in the dojo, I can better see a

lot of points concerning the organization and students, including the instructors. I need to tell some of the instructors not to scream so much, or that they need to talk less and sweat more. I used to just keep all of these revelations in my head, but now I have to write them down. My mental computer is not as reliable as it used to be. So I train a set, rest, train a set, rest and I figure out solutions that have eluded me during the week. It makes me feel so good and reaffirms my belief that I am a born Karate instructor, that the Karate world is wonderful. But, on my journey until now, I've hit many walls. Some were easy to break through, others were a long struggle. All of those experiences helped to enrich my inner "soil" to produce great insight and knowledge.

## ■ Reality Check

All types of people train at my dojo. Young, old, men, women—they all sweat together on the same mat. If there are 100 people, there are 100 different motivations for training. Some want to be champion, others want a Black Belt, or to get exercise and lose weight, or learn self-defense, or any other number of reasons.

When a new student puts on their dogi for the first time in the locker room and ties the white belt (too bad it's not already black) around their waist, they look at their reflection in the mirror and already feel like a great samurai warrior. This is a common misconception. Class has not even started, but just wearing the dogi makes them feel as though they've already reached their goal. I was the same way when I was young, always wanting to jump ahead to the finish line, not thinking about the steps that were required to get there. Many people are like that, especially now with the level of technology in the world. You can control every aspect of your life with the

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touch of a button. You don't have to move your body; you just think it in your head and in the next moment it becomes reality.

So, when some new students tie their belt for the first time, they already imagine themselves being able to do roundhouse kicks, back spin kicks, swing *nunchaku* at lightning fast speeds and never hit their head, better than Bruce Lee or Jackie Chan.

But then the real training starts. They feel the lack of coordination in their body; nothing moves smoothly. They think to themselves, "Wait a minute...what's going on? Where is my right foot? I'm right handed, but which is my left hand, and which is the right hand? Is this really my body? Where is my body?" As training continues, they start getting out of breath and start thinking, "Where did all the oxygen go? I need water. Why are we not taking a water break? What is the instructor talking about? Is he speaking English? Why is he screaming so much?"

The new student struggles to make it through class. Going back to the locker room, his legs are heavy, but he can feel something is different. As he's in the shower, he can feel the effects of training on his body. If he's not in shape, he can *really* feel it, but even if he's in good shape, he can feel that he's used muscles in different ways than normal. During training, while the body is warm, new students can feel a little burn, but overall not so many aches or pains. But the next morning is a different story.

A new student wakes up the next morning, stiff and achy, and all they can think is, "Oooh, my back, my shoulder, my legs, my head..." For many, this is the first wall they hit in training. Some quit here. Really, it's not much of a wall, more like a speed bump, but

unfortunately, some students can't make it over. Some even go to the doctor. "Doctor, I had a bad experience. I went to the World Oyama Karate dojo and the instructor said, 'Don't talk about it, don't think about it, just sweat!' So I did, and now something's wrong. Help me please!"

"Well," the doctor replies, "You're in bad shape. You don't need to talk about it, think about it or take medicine. You need more exercise!" (That doctor is my Black Belt.)

Many students are excited by the soreness the next day. They can feel tangibly that they've really done something. They've always seen images of flashy techniques in the movies, and now they are on their way to being able to actually do it themselves. All this is in their head, but it pumps them up. They start thinking about Karate all the time. At work or at school, they can't wait for class to start. They imagine what kind of training they will do that day. So, for a couple months, they are really excited and fascinated about Karate. They are completely focused on their training. They begin mastering the techniques in **Kyoten Book I**, and are soon ready for their first promotion test. The day before, they feel nervous. They practice and go over in their head everything they've learned—*Zenkutsu Dachi*, *Sanchin Dachi*, *Kihon Sono Ichi*, etc.

At this level, basic techniques, Kata, and Kumite still don't fit the student yet. They understand how to execute basic techniques, but they aren't really in their body yet. They aren't natural. The form of their techniques look correct overall, but they aren't yet part of them physically; it's still all mental. Yet, students at this stage think to themselves, "I got it, I got it!"

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In the days leading up to promotion, they rehearse in their mind and picture themselves doing everything correctly. They plan out what they will do during the

Kumite portion, how they will use their strong right hand punch or left foot roundhouse kick. Of course, they always imagine themselves beating their opponent, never the other way around.



When the promotion actually starts, they line up with a pounding heart, thundering so loud in their ears that they're sure the person next to them can hear it. But once the Sensei starts the test and shouts commands as they go through the basic techniques, they begin to calm down...if they remember to *kiai*. If students don't *kiai*, or if they hold it in, they become more tense and nervous. There remains a gap between the mental and physical that makes them feel unbalanced. On the other hand, if they shout with a loud *kiai*, they become more relaxed as their mind and body unite naturally behind what they are doing. I could spend an entire issue talking about *kiai*, but I'll save it for another time. I hope everyone enjoyed Senpai Lora's story in the last newsletter about her experience with *kiai*.

So, the promotion test continues, and students go through all the required Kihon and Kata. At last they come to the Kumite portion. Sometimes at testing, there are students from other dojos who have never seen each other before. They look around and think, "Man, he's big

**Put Your Spirit in Your Technique!**

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with a mean face. I hope I don't have to fight him," or, "Oh, good, I'm a lot bigger than that guy. I hope he's my partner," or any number of other thoughts.

Once it's time to fight, students get nervous again. Especially if someone else fights before them. They can hear the "Pow-pop!" of blows being exchanged and can feel it on their own body. Finally, student's name is called. They stand across from their opponent. They bow to the Sensei, then to each other. "Hajime!" the fight begins.

The student's mind tells him to punch and kick, but his body doesn't listen. The Black Belts looking on also tell him to punch and kick. He tries to attack, but nothing lands. His opponent moves around, punching and kicking *him!* This is not what he imagined. Again and again he's hit. He begins to think, "What's happening? I can't breathe! We must have been fighting for 10 minutes already!" This is after 30 seconds.

Somehow, he survives the 1-minute round. "Yame!" the Sensei calls out, and the fight stops. Eventually the promotion finishes. He goes to shower and change clothes. Some instructors tell him he did a good job, but their eyes reveal that they're not impressed. Others give him different words of encouragement, but they all have a tone of consolation. He is deflated.

He goes home and sits on the couch and watches TV. He's so exhausted. He starts thinking, "Well, maybe Karate isn't for me. I thought I had it, but I was wrong." The dream is over. Especially if he has an injury like a cracked rib. He feels the pain with every move he makes. Until this point, he had been really excited about Karate. On the job, or at school, or talking with friends, he was always thinking about train-

ing. But after promotion, the shine that Karate used to have for him slowly fades and becomes dark.

Before, he used to always try and think of how to make time in his schedule to come to the dojo. But now, he tries to find excuses why he can't train that day: it's too cold, or it's warm, or it's raining, or it's such a beautiful day... He starts skipping training. But when he lies down to sleep, his instructor's face comes to his mind. Maybe Sensei Karl's face, or Sensei Dale's face, maybe even my face. He blocks out the images and falls asleep, but they even follow him into his dreams and give him nightmares.

A long time ago, a kid about 7 years old was training at the dojo. He was really excited about Karate. His mother would bring him and she would always tell the instructors how much he loved coming there and how much she appreciated all they did for him. At his promotion test, he had a hard time. After that, he tried to skip class. He told his mother he wasn't feeling well in order to get out of coming to the dojo. That night, his instructor appeared in his dream and made him do 100 push-ups as punishment for playing hooky. The next morning, he told his mother about the nightmare and said he never wanted to go back to the dojo.

Even some Black Belts make excuses as to why they can't train. I think the older students get, the cleverer their excuses become. But most times, I can see straight through them. I always say, "Oh, OK, go ahead and take care of what you need to do." But I know they can see in my eyes that I'm on to them. That night, I get into their dreams and torment them.

Other students, however, don't hit any wall after their first promotion. For them, everything goes smoothly. They start getting even more excited about training.

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Their excuses are the opposite; they make excuses at work or school or with their friends so that they can spend *more* time at the dojo. But guess what...their wall is waiting for them right around the corner.

## ■ Wall of Repetition

Students who don't hit any wall like the ones I've described feel excited about training for about 3 – 6 months. During that time, everything they do is still fresh, like nothing they've ever done before. New stretches or exercises like knuckle push-ups make them sore, but they gladly endure it because they feel it is helping them improve.

Their techniques start to look correct. Their bodies begin to adjust to the training routine. So they begin to feel that they now understand Karate, but in reality they've only just scratched the surface. After about 3 – 6 months, the newness starts to wear off and they begin hitting their first wall.

People hit walls for a variety of reasons at this point, but there are 2 main ones. The first is that they start to get bored. They feel like they're just doing the same thing over and over again in training. The freshness is gone. The other reason is that they feel that maybe they are better suited to do something else, that Karate doesn't fit them. The techniques that they do in training are difficult. But rather than being patient and continuing to work on it, they give up.

The reason people start to get bored and feel like they're just doing the same thing over and over is because they have a big head. They think they already know it all and want to move on to something different. But in order for techniques to fit a student's body, repetitious practice is essential. Understanding a technique in the mind and having it fit you naturally

are two completely different points. Students at this level only see basic techniques, like *seiken* and *mawashi geri*, from one side. They only punch directly with their strong hand, or just target the face area with their roundhouse kick. They don't think about using their lead hand punch to set up their reverse punch, or to block to set up for a punch, or to punch to set up for a kick, or to kick to set up for a punch. When techniques truly fit a student's body, they can see natural combinations and a variety of ways to use the same technique. These students are not at that level yet. But they still feel like they know it all.

The second main reason students hit a wall after 3 – 6 months is that they feel that Karate doesn't fit them. Before they started, they imagined themselves doing all sorts of flashy techniques, but the reality of training is quite different from what they had imagined. Perhaps before starting, they pictured themselves learning to do a roundhouse kick to the head, but they discovered that because they are so stiff, the highest they could kick was about belt-high. Rather than spend the time necessary to stretch in order to reach their original goal of kicking high, they just resign themselves to the notion that they aren't cut out for Karate.

By the way, I believe that Karate is for *everyone*. Each person has different points they need to work on in order for Karate techniques to fit their body, but if they are patient and dedicated, they will eventually see the results of their training.

People who hit the wall and quit after 3 – 6 months often do so because they grow tired and don't see the point of practicing the same techniques over and over again. But at that level, they've only scratched the surface of what training really is. If you look at any

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professional athlete, they practice the same things day in and day out, month after month, year after year. How many hours do you think that Phil Mickelson has practiced putting and driving? Or how long do you think that Ichiro and Alex Rodriguez have spent in the batting cage over the course of their careers? Not just a couple months. Years and years they have practiced and still are trying to make improvements. I don't mean to compare Karate students to professional athletes, but the point is that if you really want to learn something in your body, it takes much longer than just a couple months.

Karate is culture, culture is society. Society has waves and is constantly changing. While the core of a society remains relatively constant, the outward aspects are ever-evolving. Especially with the recent technological revolution. When I was about 5 or 6 years old, TVs first

started appearing in homes and stores. Cell phones were unheard of; that concept was beyond even the reach of science fiction. Time seemed to pass so slowly when I was growing up, as if there were 36



**Training Without Contact is not Complete! You Need to Feel It!**

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hours in a day. Now there seems to be only 12 hours in a day. Before I realize it, a week has passed, and then suddenly a new year has already started. Because of all the advances in technology, we have so much variety in our lives now. People have forgotten how to be patient and dedicated to one thing; they are always moving on to what's next. Many people believe in the concept of improving their physical condition, but when it comes time for action they are lazy. People who hit the wall and quit after 3 – 6 months often do so because they don't have patience. They want to constantly move on to the next thing.

## ■ Back to the Beginning

I first really started getting into Karate training when I came to the United States. My eyes were suddenly opened and I could better appreciate Japanese and Karate culture. In my former style, all students did the same things during class. For beginning white belts to advanced Black Belts, the training was the same. Students would stand in Sanchin Dachi and go through all the punches, blocks and *shuto* techniques. Then they'd stand in Heiko Dachi and do all the kick techniques. On and on they would go, just punching and kicking the air and shouting, “*Eisha, Eisha, Oya, Oya, Eisha, Eisha, Oya, Oya...*” To an outsider it might've sounded like they were rehearsing Beethoven's *Ode to Joy* or some other choral piece.

After awhile, I started wondering, “Is this *really* how people used to train in ancient times?” The answer was no. This style of training, punching and kicking the air and having all students go through all the basic techniques in every class (without contact) was a more recent development, post-WWII. For me, this one-size-fits-all approach to training didn't seem to make sense. After all, would you teach the same sub-

ject matter to a kindergartener and a college student?

In ancient times, a prospective student would seek out a *Budo* (Martial Arts) master. He would knock on the master's door and ask if he could learn from him. Rather than saying yes or no, the master would tell him to clean the yard. So, every day, the student would clean the yard. This would go on for a couple weeks or months. During this time, the master would evaluate the student's character.

Finally, one day, the master would teach the student one thing. He might show him how to stand with one foot in front of the other, knees bent and hands out in front of him—basic *kamae* and stance. The student would practice only this for a period of time, maybe weeks or months, then finally the master would teach the next lesson—how to make a proper fist. So the student would just practice how to make a correct fist over and over again until the next lesson finally came. The point is that everything was not taught all at once, but rather gradually, one technique at a time. This helped to ensure a strong foundation of basics.

After coming to the United States, I began questioning the modern approach of teaching all students all basic techniques at the same time. I felt it was time to go back to more ancient methods, so Soshu and I started the World Oyama Karate Organization and produced the instructional books, *Perfect Karate* and *Kyoten Books Vols. 1 – 4*. These books laid out how to teach students from beginner to advanced, gradually, step by step. Spending time on just a limited amount of techniques allows students' knowledge to grow deep rather than being spread out thin.

Many Karate styles don't spend enough time really examining each basic technique. They look at them



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from only one side. I believe this is wrong. If you really get into training, you look at each technique from the front, back, side, top and bottom. Looking at each technique from different angles allows students to have a fresh feeling in training, even though the techniques are still the same. In order for this to happen, however, the instructors need to get into training even more deeply than the students. If not, the students will just feel like they are doing the same things over and over. Their Karate fever will cool down and a wall will appear. They go to the dojo and nothing ever seems to change. They lose their motivation and become discouraged. Especially if someone gives them a hard time during Kumite training. They start thinking, "Well, I guess I've gotten everything I need out of Karate. Maybe I'll try yoga or Jazzercise instead." This wall is most often faced by intermediate students, around Yellow/Orange belt.

## ■ Halfway There

Students who break through this second wall generally face their next obstacle at about the Green/Brown Belt level. Once they reach this level, they can better feel themselves improving and getting stronger. They have confidence that they are headed in the right direction. When beginning students hit their first wall, they find it hard to believe they could ever reach Brown Belt; reaching Black Belt seems like an impossible dream. But once they overcome the second wall and get to Green Belt, moving up to Brown Belt becomes a possibility. If they get to Brown Belt, they start to feel that Black Belt is within their reach. During Kumite training, they are able to effectively use their strong techniques against an opponent. For the first time, they believe that they could actually fight in a Knockdown Tournament. Their confidence builds,

and their enthusiasm for training returns. They eagerly assist with dojo events. Their "Osu!" is louder and stronger. Students at this level ride a large wave of motivation. It is a peak time for making improvements.

But another wall is waiting for them down the line. When teaching students at the Green/Brown Belt level, instructors become more critical. The student is not learning new techniques per se, but rather polishing and refining those that they already know. So every little detail is important. Green and Brown Belt students are also held to a higher standard in how they conduct themselves in the dojo and their level of understanding of basic techniques and Kata. They are expected to understand how each Kata is related to Kumite. Because every little detail is scrutinized in their training, they start to hear whispers once again, and a new wall slowly rises before them.

By the way, a high percentage of students who reach the Green/Brown Belt level, then quit for some reason, eventually find their way back at some point. The hours of training and sweating at World Oyama Karate linger in their memory. Some who quit start training in another style and even reach Black Belt there. I imagine that they put on the other style's Black Belt and look in the mirror and feel that something is missing. They feel empty in some way, and begin to wonder if they should return. Then one day, they make up their mind to come back. The door is always open for them, but of course they have to restart at the White Belt level. So, they put their White Belt back on and train, and eventually re-test for their former rank or one rank below that.

## ■ Fast Food Black Belts

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Nowadays, many Karate dojos are like fast food restaurants. There is one on every corner. I always say that during training, you don't need to talk or think about anything—just sweat! We make you sweat first and talk after. That's World Oyama Karate. But many other styles will talk before they sweat. They tell students things like, "Our training will strengthen you spiritually. We teach our students discipline, patience, respect, and give them self-confidence." All those are good qualities, and it's true that Karate training can benefit students in those ways. But they are the by-product of hard training and sweat, rather than the starting point. The air in these types of dojos has no traces of sweat. The instructor's dogi is crisp, clean and pressed. He/she doesn't smell like they've been training, but rather like they are wearing cologne or perfume.

In other types of dojos, they only teach fighting. Students learn basic punch and kick combinations (especially low kick) and that's it. All other historical and traditional aspects of *Budo* (Martial Arts) such as stance and other techniques have been cut out. Students who quit World Oyama Karate at the Green/Brown Belt level find it easy to get a Black Belt in these other styles. But, that Black Belt has something missing, which I imagine leads them to come back. Some of this is my speculation, but some of it is from my experience with students over the years.

## ■ Conditioning for Life

So, back to the original point. The wall most Green/Brown Belts hit comes up from how much attention is paid to every little detail in their training. For example, their punch has nothing wrong, but it lacks sharpness. Or their kicks are OK, but need to be done with a better angle. In order to improve the finer details,

they need to improve their level of conditioning, endurance and flexibility.

Conditioning training cannot be done overnight. To improve their level of conditioning, a student must coordinate all aspects of daily life to reach this goal: how and what they eat, what they drink, how much they sleep, and so on. It requires a lifestyle change, which creates a wall for many students. For others, exercises to improve conditioning, such as push-ups, sit-ups and stretching become monotonous, which also creates a wall.

Students at the Green/Brown Belt level are also tempted to slack off during class. They understand the rhythm of training and when they can pull back from giving 100% effort during partner training, Kihon training and Kata training, even sometimes during Kumite training. If one looks at their stance and *kamae*, they can easily tell if a student can do more and is just being lazy. Students at this stage hear two sets of whispers, one on each shoulder. The first tells them they need to continue pushing and not relax in class, the other tells them to go ahead and take a break. The more they listen to the second voice, the larger their wall becomes.

## ■ I Have Arrived!

Some students never advance beyond this point. But others persevere and remain dedicated and somehow make it to Black Belt. When a student puts on their Black Belt for the first time, the world seems totally different. They see their name embroidered on the official belt and remember all the sweat, struggle and sacrifice it took to make it that far. They feel like they really are a samurai. The world has changed, and they have broken through all the walls that they will ever

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face...or so they think.

I felt the same way when I reached Black Belt. I had to test and re-test and test again before I finally made it. I put on the belt and could feel people in the dojo looking at me differently. I conducted myself with an attitude of, "Yes, here I am!" Even when I walked down the street (not wearing my dogi, of course) I looked at the world with completely new eyes. But you think that once you get to Black Belt you'll never see anymore walls? You think that if any actually do come that you can simply bust through them with one shot? Well, you're wrong! Many stronger, thicker and higher walls than you ever imagined are still waiting for you.

When I started Karate, my Senpais and Senseis often remarked that once you become a Black Belt, your training really starts. Until then, you are still in the womb. I've heard many masters from other styles say the same thing. In order to reach the level of Black Belt, you have to fight yourself and overcome many obstacles. You begin to recognize both your strengths and weaknesses and better understand yourself what you need to do in order to improve. When a student first gets to Black Belt, all of these points are still fresh and vivid in their mind. They've focused their time and energy on training at the exclusion of many other aspects of their life. By pushing themselves in this way, they've gained a deep understanding of the Karate world, which is why their training is really about to start.

## ■ Fighting Against the Fade

But this feeling of a new and richer beginning doesn't last forever. If a student slows down their training after reaching Black Belt, their level of clarity and in-

sight wanes and becomes foggy. The depth of knowledge they had attained becomes increasingly shallow. The excitement they initially felt after finally reaching their goal of Black Belt cools down after a couple weeks or couple months. They start to hear new whispers like, "Hey, you're a Black Belt now. Why are you still pushing yourself so hard? You already understand Karate, you don't need to keep training at this pace." At first, they try to block out these whispers, but soon they become louder and louder and the student starts making excuses again as to why they can't train: it's too cold, rainy, sunny, cloudy...

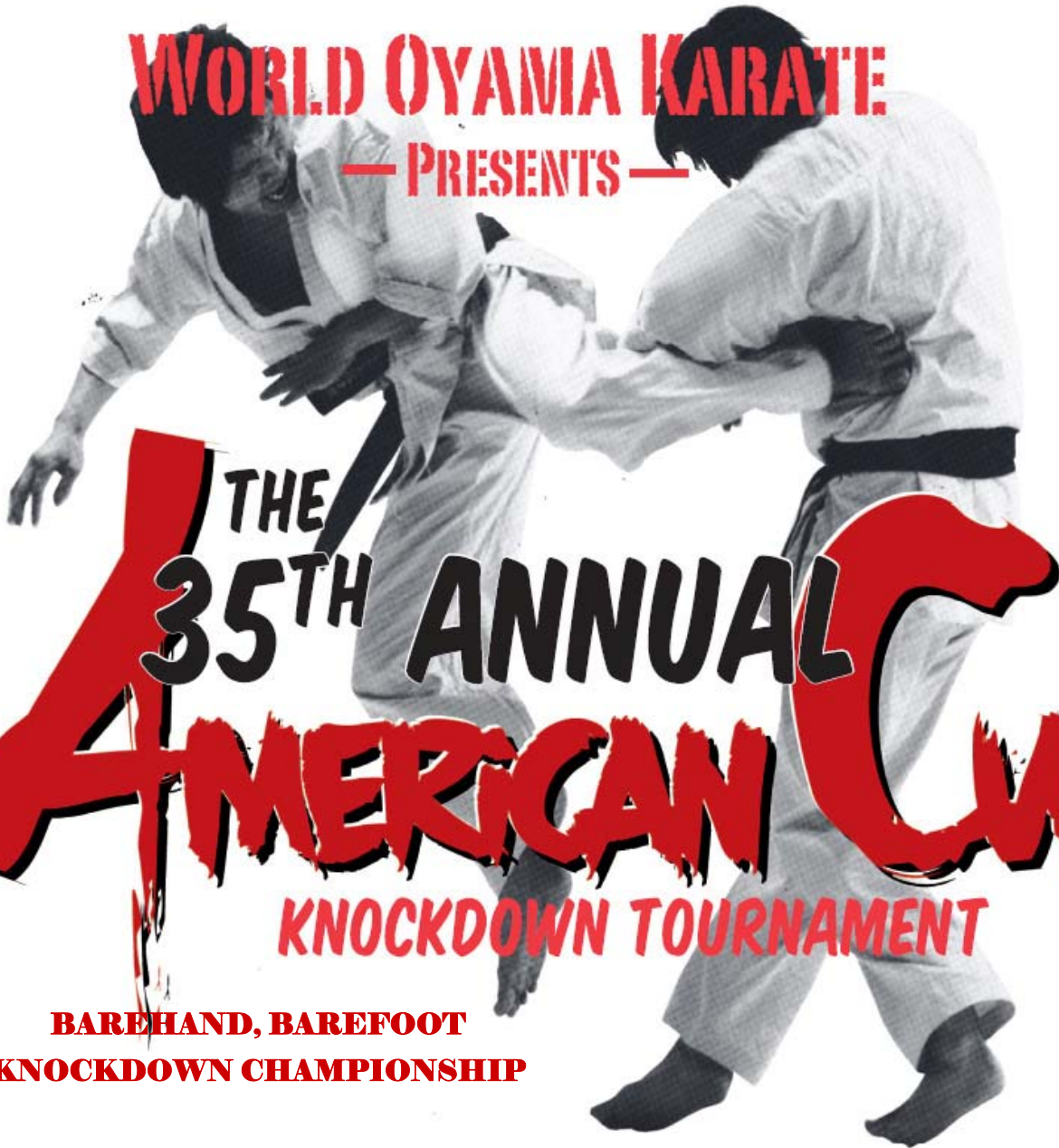
When a student starts hearing these whispers and making excuses, they lose all of the progress they had made during the Green/Brown Belt level. During that time, they had developed their favorite technique and made their own individual fighting style. But after getting their Black Belt and listening to these whispers, they begin to backslide. I see this happen to many Black Belts. I want for each Black Belt to have their own individual fighting strategy that truly fits their strengths and unique character. If a Black Belt just comes into the dojo and trains like every other student, they won't be able to do this. They need to continue to challenge themselves; otherwise their chi will slowly fade away and become weaker.

The beauty of Karate training is when it becomes second nature. When a student has dedicated enough attention to correct form when executing techniques, including the set-up and finishing position, they don't need to consciously think about it; the techniques flow naturally from one to the next. That's the real beauty. You need to make your Karate fit you. To do that, you must fight yourself. You make your own walls, so you must continue training throughout your life to be able to overcome them. Just sweat! OSU!



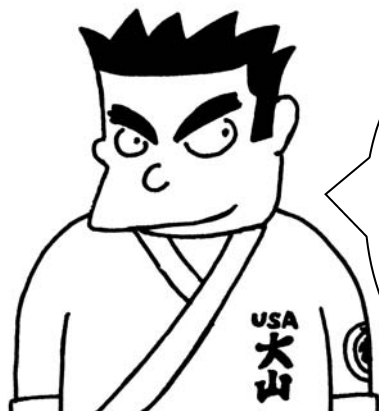
**SATURDAY, APRIL 30TH SAMFORD UNIVERSITY GYM TOURNAMENT STARTS @ 10:30 A.M.**

**WORLD OYAMA KARATE**  
**— PRESENTS —**



**THE 35<sup>TH</sup> ANNUAL**  
**AMERICAN CUP**  
**KNOCKDOWN TOURNAMENT**

**BAREHAND, BAREFOOT**  
**KNOCKDOWN CHAMPIONSHIP**



Don't forget  
35th Anni-  
versary  
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