

An Interview with Arthur Meek Sensei

8th Dan Renshi

Acting Chief Instructor

Wado-Ryu Karate-do Academy

By Domenico Capilongo

Conducted by Ali Mirkarimi



Sensei, can you give us a brief overview of what it was like when you started karate? Why did you start and what was the training like at that time?

I started when I was thirteen but my parents wouldn't let me join the club because it was considered too dangerous. I was attracted to karate because of the Bruce Lee era. So because they didn't allow me to join the local club, which had a reputation of being quite tough, I practised alone in my room, in the park, in the garden. When I was approaching my fifteen birthday, my father finally said, "It's okay." The training there was very, very good but very strict with a good instructor and some good fighters there.

Where was the club?

It was in Bridgwater, my hometown, and that was the only karate club in town at the time. It was a fighting club and the standard of basics and kata was good too with good instruction.

In fact, because my father wouldn't let me join, I used to sneak down there and watch and had a few free lessons until they said, "Look you can't come in again until you have permission." I could see straight away that it was for me. The training was quite strict, quite tough. That club trained four days a week, two hours at a time. So, finally I joined and from the age of fifteen I practised there religiously for four and half years until I got my Shodan.



How tough was the training in those days?

Well, it was tough. You wouldn't wear mitts or a gum shield (mouthguard). My mother was a bit concerned when I came home with a black eye or a split lip. I wouldn't say that was every week but it was pretty strict and pretty rough and some of the seniors could be quite. . .they were handy, to put it that way. They were good fighters. I always felt looked after quite well to be honest. It was a good grounding for me and we belonged to the Japanese organisation so my first grading was with Kobayashi Sensei and we had other sensei down like Wakamei, Nishimura, and Yamanashi. The young instructors who would travel to the South west.

It is quite well-known that you spent nine months training at the famous Nichi-Dai University Wado-Ryu Karate club. Looking back now, what would you say was the most important principle or lesson that you still use or teach today?

Well, it's quite an easy answer, it's the spirit because if you lacked spirit you wouldn't stay there, you couldn't stay there. Sometimes you think maybe I learned some secret technique or something mystical but no, it was just, you must hang in there. It was the spirit. The training was pretty extreme at times and the fighting was competitive. You either stuck it out or you got out of there. That was the warning I had from Shiomistu Sensei before I went. He asked me, "are you sure this is what you want to do?" That is why he didn't allow me to go immediately. He waited a few months and kind of engineered the training towards preparing me. He shouted at me and we sparred and he hit me around a little bit just to see if I had the mental capacity to do it. Sure enough, when I arrived and did the first week I did really wonder if I had made the right decision. After a few weeks, you started to settle into it. Without a doubt, it was the spirit.



What was a typical Nichi Dai training day like?

You got up at 5:30 and lined up on the road outside and waited for the seniors to come down and then you'd run to the park and then we'd do an hour's training. A little bit of running and then some light kumite practice with partners. We'd go back for breakfast and then split up into four groups. One group would clean. One would clean the toilets and showers. One the dormitories. One would do the cooking. The students would then go off to school for the day. Training would start again from four to seven p.m. but often that seven p.m. went on to eight p.m. depending on Tanabe Sensei's mood. So four hours a day Monday to Saturday and then Sunday was a day off.



Have you had a chance to go back to Nichi Dai recently? Has the training stayed the same?

It's not the same now. I've been back at several stages since I returned at that early age. It did maintain that kind of strict and harsh attitude for sometime after but now these days it's different. I think that comes down to authoritative measures. These days you can't risk injuries. This is going on throughout the world now. Standards have to improve for safety. I speak to my colleagues who I used to train with and they say the same. It's not as strict or as tough or as hard. Don't forget Nichi Dai really is a competition based club. Even though the jiyu kumite was hard and harsh, it's all about winning trophies. It's about being the best university competitive club in the country in the end. They're still chasing that but I don't think it is anywhere near as hard.

How is the spirit there?

It's hard to tell because I don't train there. I went there a few years ago and took my nephew Connor and he loved it. He had a day's training with them and they were sparring. They got a bit of music playing and there was a little bit of joviality. So I don't know if that was a typical daily routine or whether it was just because it was prior to a competition and they were taking it easy. I can't really comment on their daily routine.



You also spent many years heading a nightclub security company. Did you learn anything about the effectiveness of Wado during this time?

It was a period of time when I guess you were at an age where things happen. You're competing a lot and I guess in your prime. You put yourself into situations where possibly you have to rely on your karate training. Yes, that happened and I think you have to prepare in advance to do that kind of work and think of the techniques that you can rely upon. Which are probably few and far between but I always trained things like the heavy bag, and sparring, which I guess you can say a boxer would do the same or kickboxer or whatever martial art you're into. You have to make the techniques that you practise functional. So there were times of course where you had to make good a situation and I think you have to justify your actions at a certain point in time when faced with adversity. It's a bit like the Nichi Dai spirit. You have to have the spirit to do the work. So I think the combination of technique and spirit is unquestionable.

Sensei, your dojo is also well known as a boxing, kickboxing, and MMA training Gym and you have trained and coached some top professional fighters. Is there a separation for you or is it all part of Wado?

It's a martial art and I think I'm lucky to start in Wado because Wado is adaptable. Talking to previous Japanese instructors who came to Europe they had a brush with other martial arts and they felt that Wado was adaptable to most situations. For example, I boxed as an eighteen and nineteen year old and I found it quite a comfortable transition from doing Wado-ryu Karate to boxing. Some people could do it but some people couldn't. So therefore, I felt that it's not just Wado technique, it's martial arts' technique. However, movements such as Wado-Ryu relaxed movement and Nagashi movements certainly are a huge part of martial arts in the kickboxing ring and in MMA. It wasn't until I actually started to learn the grappling martial arts that I think I also began to learn about the relaxation in martial arts more, which Shiomitsu Sensei was always talking about but I didn't always understand it. Before I had an MMA class I spent years grappling with a Judo instructor and I learned to relax and breathe in a different way other than Wado-Ryu Karate or boxing for example.





In recent years you have been emphasising the principle of Datsuryoku. Why do you think it is so important to the practice of Wado Ryu Karate?

Well Shiomitsu Sensei brought it to our attention and explained his thinking and his belief of datsuryoku coming from juryoku which is gravity. In a seminar one time he did link the two together how you should use gravity and your body weight in a relaxed way, therefore, you then start to understand and utilise datsuryoku. I think sometimes when you learn something you have to go away and study it. I can't say that I learned it solely from Shiomitsu Sensei. Since he's been ill, I've been studying it more from other sources, Youtube and reading up on Google and elsewhere and then I bring it back to what I was talking about earlier doing grappling or boxing where you think, "Oh, I relaxed here in this position or that position" and then I feel perhaps I'm getting the idea of having that relaxed power. I'm still studying it but I think certainly the instigation for me to learn it was coming from Shiomitsu Sensei. He could do datsuryoku without a shadow of doubt; you could see it in his movement and his technique.



You have a big responsibility as the Acting Chief Instructor of the Wado Academy. How has the Academy developed in the last few years?

That's quite an easy answer because I look around now at all the Chief instructors around the world and they've all pulled together. You say I'm the Acting Chief Instructor, which has now been bestowed upon me, but I think without everybody who has pressed on, I think each Chief instructor in each country and their assistant instructors and their students have all pulled together incredibly well for Shiomitsu Sensei. I think in the early years we all hoped that sensei was going to come back so we trained hard and we strived to keep things going for that time to come but unfortunately, that is no longer the case. Well, I think that set a path for us to continue. We always talk about sensei. We always try to emulate his movement and his theory of karate-do and life itself but I think what we have now is a legacy from sensei and we often use idioms from his teaching like, "be happy everyday", "smile", "get sweat." All those little things, every instructor still has those memories which we try to adhere to and I think the Wado Academy has pulled together extremely well in the last ten years and we continue to work well together.

Your latest Dan Grading syllabus is very complex and you added the Nihon Gumite. What advice do you have for students preparing for Dan Grading?

Actually the Dan grading today is no more complex than it has ever been. I only use Shiomitsu Sensei's renzoku waza, kumite gata, kihon gumite, and now we have a new nihon gumite but there has been no additional complexity to the grading; it's just taken from previous formats of sensei. So nothing's been added by me. I just switched around sensei's ideas from before. The second part of the question, how do you prepare? Well, you have to train regularly. Because of the complexity, as you say, of the dan grading, you've got to practise. You've got to give it time. It's got to become part of you. It can't just be the last few months before the grading and, "I'll give it a go." You've really got to spend from first kyu, even before first kyu, already you should be preparing for that dan grading in the years and months before you take the grade. Work hard and train regularly.



This is your first visit to Toronto. How was it? Do you have any advice for us to improve our training?

I'm pleased to say that the students I taught this weekend and I saw practice do have the same level as what I see in Europe. Although I've not been here before, and the Canadians have not been in the U.K. and Europe for some time, I believe the standard is the same as the Wado Academy has always been. We're proud that even Japanese high level instructors have commented on the standard of the Wado Academy. That of course comes from Shiomitsu Sensei. When I go to these other countries I don't just see students I see Shiomitsu Sensei's students diligently practising his method and trying to continue in the same way. I am very pleased with the standard I see in Canada and I'm sure that's going to continue.

Thank you so much for your time. We look forward to your next visit.