TOM SCOTT
A HEART OF FIRE

JESUS DEL MORAL
On Elite Kata Coaching

KEVIN KUCBOR
PARA-KARATE USA Team

XXXI PAN AMERICAN CHAMPIONSHIP Curacao 2017 FULL COVERAGE!

BRANDI ROBINSON
Sharp Punches

ANTONIO ESPINOS
WKF President One-on-One
2018 USA KARATE
March 30 & April 1, 2018
Paris Las Vegas Hotel & Casino - Las Vegas, NV
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If one simply goes through the physical motions of Karate, but omits the intrinsic elements of traditional training, such as framework, history, and ultimate purpose (self-improvement), then you can call what you practice anything you want – but you cannot say that it is “Martial Arts,” because it really is only a collection of fighting techniques.

It is up to us to decide whether Karate will become just one of many physical activities or – in accordance with the hopes of many practitioners – remain a unique art. Full of expressive beauty, philosophy, and respect for one’s opponent, the true skill of the art and sport of Karate lies in knowing how to move the body and mind along a path that lasts a lifetime, consummated in the contentment of a job well done. Experience is the best teacher and Karate, in its instruction, adheres to this philosophy.

Our time on earth is limited, so don’t waste it living someone else’s life. Don’t be trapped by living with the results of other people’s thinking. Do not try to be like Buddha or any other leader or champion – it is good to follow what is wise in their teachings but another matter entirely to try to wear their clothes. Don’t let the noise of others’ opinions drown out your own inner voice. Have the courage to follow your heart and intuition. Rather than fight to destroy others, we should fight to destroy the separation of mind and body within ourselves.

It is written that those “who increase the knowledge increase the sorrow.” The more we know, the more responsible we are. It is that simple and it’s all up to us. USANKF.

Jose M. Fraguas
Editor-in-Chief
USA KARATE JR. TEAM
The Future is Bright

I write this column today filled with optimism and pride after reflecting on our organization’s progress and momentum over the last year. Developing and supporting karate athletes has always been the driving force behind USA KARATE, and after having several recent opportunities to observe our athletes and coaches in action, I’m pleased to say we are accomplishing our goal.

In my previous column, I highlighted the marked improvement and recent accomplishments of our Senior National Team at the XXXI Pan American Karate Championships in Curacao in May. Now, after returning from the Junior PKF in Buenos Aires, I am also amazed by the development of our junior team.

In the last couple of years, I’ve seen the transformation of athletes who had good technique but weren’t able to finish, to athletes who now are able to close out their divisions by winning crucial final matches. It is an important development for any athlete to learn the difference between being competitive, and being competitor who is able to close out a match in order to win a gold medal. I’m happy to say I’m starting to see our Junior Team is beginning to do the latter.

In addition to the physical and mental growth, I’ve also noticed an increased level of spirit amongst our team. In Buenos Aires, our athletes supported one another tremendously. The cheering and camaraderie throughout the tournament was incredible to witness. Our United States Team was one of the loudest and most boisterous of all the teams present. To me, this showed their great pride for the art and sport of karate, which was very gratifying.

Our athletes were not the only impressive part of this tournament and team. Our coaching staff was also fantastic. They worked alongside our athletes very well and I had an opportunity to listen to the coaches give the team members direction, feedback and advice. I felt that their instruction was spot-on, and I was elated to see the development of our coaches in that regard.

As far as the organization of the Junior PKF tournament, events of this magnitude always produce challenges administratively, and organizationally, but I’m happy to say our new team leaders Elizabeth Sottile and Jose Fraguas did a great job disseminating information to our parents and athletes, and helped our athletes get to the venues safely and on schedule. Ms. Sottile worked tirelessly to make this event a safe and wonderful experience for the kids, and the work she did was nothing short of outstanding. Mr. Fraguas was invaluable when helping interpret for the team and administration.

Despite our accomplishments and progress, it is my belief that there is always room for growth. If there’s an area we need to improve, I believe it’s synchronized team kata. Some other countries, like Mexico and Brazil tend to have a lot of synchronized kata teams, and therefore, are able to garner medals in those divisions, which puts them in a position to where they can pull away from us in the medal count. So perhaps, moving forward, we need to refocus our efforts in that area and try to get more synchronized teams competing in those events.

Overall, the United States junior program tends to be one of the best in the Pan Americas, and I’d like to continue that. However, now the bigger challenge is stepping up to world-level events where we will be fighting athletes who train very hard, are remarkably disciplined, and extremely well coached. So, in order for us to do well at the Jr. World Championships next month in Santa Cruz de Tenerife, Spain, we’re going to have to be on our A-game, and step it up.

I’m looking forward to the kids doing well and making progress on their way to becoming a winning team on the world level, as well as the Pan American level.

John DiPasquale
President

USA KARATE JR. TEAM
The Future is Bright

John DiPasquale
President
We just completed an amazing National Championships! Returning to the newly remodeled Bon Secours Center in Greenville, South Carolina, we had our largest championship ever. We had some of our most exciting matches ever over 4 days of competition with 1,700 competitors from across the country. It was really fun for us to feature the Juniors in the finals. Our young athletes left everything on the tatami as they competed for the chance to represent the United States in the Junior PKF Championship in Buenos Aires, Argentina and the Junior WKF World Championships in Tenerife, Spain. The performance of our Juniors shows us that the future of karate in the United States is strong.

As we take this Olympic journey, one of the major questions has been how do we unite karate in the United States. I don’t think we need to have just one united organization. It is uniquely American to have organizations that serve different constituents. What I think matters is that USA Karate, as the National Governing Body, has created an opportunity where any athlete, from any organization can compete in the National Championships and Team Trials. Our selection procedure is all about winning regardless of where an athlete comes from. We had athletes from many other Karate organization represented at the championship. We are united in competition under the rules of the WKF. While this is different than most other countries, I think it is very much in line with our American values. That being said, I do believe as the National Governing Body we are building a great program and our membership is continuing to grow as we work to bring greater value to the clubs and athletes within USA Karate.

In the coming months, the path to our first Olympic Games will become much clearer as the WKF announces the final selection procedures. As the National Governing Body, we will do our very best to ensure that the best athletes represent the United States in the Games. We are very excited about the possibilities. We have some of the best athletes in the world within the Federation. USA Karate is fortunate to have 6 athletes currently ranked in the top 25 in the world:

• Tom Scott ranked #1 in -75kg Kumite;
• Sakura Kokumai ranked #4 in Female Kata;
• Maya Wasowiscz ranked #11 in +68kg Kumite;
• Ashley Davis ranked #15 and Cheryl Murphy ranked #19 in -68kg Kumite;
• Joseph Martinez ranked #22 in Male Kata.

The journey is just beginning and we are all a part of making Olympic Dreams come true. Let’s enjoy the journey! USANKF

Phil Hampel
Chief Executive Officer
USA National Karate-do Federation
2017 Pan American Championships in Curacao…what can I say? WOW!
It has been about 10 years since I last was with Team USA Karate. It was a privilege
and honor to be a part of the coaching staff this past PKF Championship. To be
honest, I was excited and a little nervous at the same time but my experience could not have
been better. I was fortunate to work with coaches who were all former teammates, athletes who
I once competed alongside with, and new and veteran athletes who I have been watching as a
junior and now competing as a senior team member.

The camaraderie and spirit within the team from practices, leisure time and on to game time on
competition days was on a positive high! Having a stacked team for kata, kumite and team kumite, the
energy and hunger to succeed for Team USA was present from the very first day. The level of experi-
ence and skills amongst our athletes was top notch on both the men and women’s side bringing home
the most medals with three gold, one silver and seven bronze. An event that I got to experience for

the first time was the Para-Karate event. It was such an incredible event to experience live during our
trainings and on competition with our very own USA Para-Karate athletes. Looking back, we’ve come
a long ways for the better. The hard work of the Federation, from all the officers, board members, team
manager, media and medical personnel, to the parents and volunteers and everyone in between…USA
Karate would not be where they are without their love, support, and belief in the team.

With karate now being accepted into the Olympics, it is very exciting to see what we have in store
for Team USA Karate with many talented athletes that are now transitioning from the junior to senior
team and our athletes who are ranked amongst the best in the world. PKF Karate Championships is
definitely a turf that USA is comfortable and confident with and I am excited to see the team continue
to succeed in other events such as the Premier Leagues and WKF World Championships. Again, a big
MAHALO (thank you) to all on the Senior Team USA, Curacao for giving me this opportunity and
making my first time back after MANY years an AWESOME one!!! Looking forward to the GREAT
things that lie ahead of us. Stay humble and hungry!

USANKF
Expecting the Unexpected

Just about the time we start having a good grasp of and feel comfortable with the rules of competition, here comes another change! Sometimes athletes and coaches change strategy to use the rules in their favor. That takes the fairness of the competition away, so we need to modify the rules again. Winning might be the priority for an athlete or coach, but for officials, applying the rules is!

It has been only a few months since Senshu was added to the rules of the competition. It took us a while to understand it and there have been some adjustments to the gesture used to announce it, but we officials have it down pat now. The main reason for adding Senshu to the rules was to bring excitement to the matches. Before Senshu, there were many boring matches, matches that were mostly competitors bouncing on their feet until the very end. There were also many matches that ended in Hantei, which shifts the responsibility for winning from the athlete to the referee panel. Many times, Hantei was influenced as much by the country of origin of the athlete or his or her reputation as by the performance of the athlete during entire match.

Senshu brought a new enthusiasm to competitions, and passivity calls dropped to the minimum. The fight to get the first point created lots of different tactics and techniques. But then, athletes started to take advantage of Senshu by avoiding combat. This particular abuse once again took away the excitement of the competition, especially in the final 30 seconds of matches.

A new recommendation is now under consideration to remove the Senshu advantage if the competitor with this advantage gets any category 2 penalty for avoiding combat with less than 15 seconds in the match. This change is still under consideration by the WKF rules committee, but many hope for it to be put into place, because it would ensure an exciting match right up to the last second of any bout.

If it were to be put into place, however, officials must be especially diligent in penalizing any avoiding of combat. In the heat of many matches I have seen, referees often disregard and do not punish a competitor for wasting time or taking away an opportunity of opponent to score or win, and seem to do so for all the wrong reasons: because of the reputation of the athlete or the country they represent or a point advantage. As referees, we don’t always like to make the difficult decision to apply a penalty correctly, thereby disqualifying a competitor, and yet it is our responsibility to do so. We shouldn’t simply have the competitors control the matches to get the outcome want, even if they are the world champion.

In the recent world games held in Poland, I observed this weakness in some of matches. I had the privilege of being one of the appeal jury members and had to reverse the results of several matches due to the mistakes of the referee who did have the courage to disqualify an athlete with a point advantage.

The lesson is very simple. Our message to our athletes is this: follow the rules of the competition or you will not win. This is how we need to train our athletes. This is how we need apply the rules in the rings. This is how they need to get the message. This is how they will stop manipulating the rules. This is how the right athlete advances. This is how we will make our matches more exciting. This is how we will not need to change the rules again. This is how we will save our spot in the Olympics far beyond 2020!.
You may have heard of the term mushin. Mushin means “no mind,” which is the ideal mindset of the karate student. This principle is about the importance of keeping an open, flexible mind, both in the dojo and in the everyday world.

Although you have to concentrate on what you are doing, and give it your full attention, you must not close your mind off to the world around you. While you are completing a task you must concentrate on that task and at the same time keep your mind open and flexible enough to react to a sudden change in your situation. You have probably heard this before, and it is true: The one constant in life is change. Change happens all the time. It never stops. Remember: nothing is static. You must therefore be prepared to react to a change in whatever situation you are in, as it happens. Without such an open mindset, it is impossible to defend yourself against multiple opponents.

If you are able to maintain a flexible mind—if you can “release” your mind—then, and only then, can you release your body and ready it for movement and defense. If your mind is fixed in one place, then your body will also be fixed in place.

So you understand, the term mushin, or “no mind,” does not mean you do not use your mind at all. That is impossible. As human beings, the mind is of course an important tool in our ability to function. But what Master Funakoshi is talking about is releasing your mind—not attaching yourself to your mind—so that you are able to step back and see your mind just as you can see, say, a tree in your yard. You are not your mind, just as you are not that tree in your yard. You have a connection to both, but you should not entirely identify with either. It is essential to understand what it is to detach your “self” from “yourself.” This may sound confusing, but think about it. At one time or another, you have probably heard someone say, “I can’t live with myself anymore!” One person is talking about two different selves, “I” and “myself.” And unless you are hearing incorrectly, you have just learned that the one cannot live with the other. How can this be?

If we examine this problem, we will better understand the old saying, one that I believe very much to be true, that every person is his or her “own worst enemy.” Think of the “I” as your true self, the self that is able to step back and objectively observe your thoughts and feelings, completely without judgment. The “I” is pure consciousness, with nothing getting in the way. That, again, is your true self.

What, then, is the “myself” in this one person?

“Myself” is none other than your ego—that part of you that considers your thoughts and your feelings as you. As far as your ego is concerned, you don’t merely have thoughts and feelings—you are your thoughts and feeling! The ego is that part of you that wants this or that, and desires the world to be a certain way, and judges right and wrong. Ultimately, it is the source of all human suffering, both individually and on a grand scale, because it is the ego that tells us not to accept what is. The extreme example of how destructive the ego can be is when we see the terrible atrocities of war. At the root of every war are a relatively few human egos. So great is the ego’s potential for destruction, that all it really takes is one.

To say the least, this ego, this “myself,” can really get in the way of a person seeing reality for what it really is. You cannot see what is, if you refuse to accept what is. And that is what the ego does: It refuses to accept what is. That is why it is true that each of us is our own worst enemy. By refusing to accept what is, we refuse inner peace, wherein lies true happiness.
There will always be challenges that will require mental fortitude to overcome. Some of the best athletes have gone on to become tremendously successful inside and outside of the karate realm, and I think it is a testament to the mindset high level athletes have. I love proving people wrong and accomplishing the unlikely. That part of me will never change. There is no reason to not be able to practice the philosophy of karate all day long: we can always try to be a better person in every facet of our life. We can always work harder, be kinder, more considerate, more compassionate more whatever it is. Karate is just about becoming a better person, with an intentional ambiguity because there are so many dynamics at play in each our lives. But regardless, we can always strive to be better. “To seek perfection of character.” is one the tenants of karate. It doesn’t say: “Become perfect” because you can’t be perfect, you can always be better.

Mental strength, self-understanding, confidence, work ethic, adaptability and an X-factor are the key elements for success. Every high level athlete I have spent time with has these. Each high level athlete also has something unique about them that makes them special, something you can’t really emulate or learn, but rather embrace from within. Without these you won’t be successful. There’s a framework to be successful, but there will only be one of you and you will never be a carbon copy of someone else.

The final acceptance in the Olympic Games is the best thing for sport karate! It’s been a dream for decades for so many people who have put their lives in pursuit of it. I can only imagine sponsorship opportunities will blossom as a result of this which will only help increase the level of competition around the world. USA Karate has been doing a great job with the current setup, and I can only imagine with some more assistance on the backend things will get better for the athletes and the overall program. One underrated and very interesting aspect to look at going forward is now that the WKF/NKF are in the Olympics, there is no more squabbling from different organizations to fight for dominance and have their federation be the official brand, the fight is over. Now if other styles want to go to the Olympics they will have to go through the WKF/NKF, so it will be interesting to see how some of the open circuit and other karate styles transition over. There are some really talented athletes in the open circuit and other systems can mix things up here at home. USANKF
Although I have been deeply involved in the Referee Committee of the World Karate Federation and USA National Karate-do Federation, I have always thought that it is important to adhere to the traditional values of the martial arts and the art of karate. The sport aspect of karate is very important nowadays, but we should maintain the traditional roots and moral values for the future generations. I truly believe that both worlds can live together – they are not the opposite of each other. It’s up to the teachers to preserve the ethical principles of karate such as loyalty, pride, honor, respect, integrity, etc… for future generations, and at the same time keep it an interesting and enjoyable sporting activity.

In order to accomplish this fact, the Technical Committee of USA Karate has developed a plan and protocol to recognize those individual and their ranks in order to embrace the “old” and the “new” of the art and sport of Karate in the United States of America. USA Karate is promoting its program to offer cross ranking. We are inviting all those who wish to have their current rank considered for cross ranking to complete the application on the website under member resources.

We’ll be happy to verify and eventually recognize the rank that you have already earned in your style and Association, with years of training and dedication to the art and sport of karate. There will be the option of testing directly under USA Karate for future degrees and ranks.

It is important to adapt to the new times and make adjustments to better serve the young generations and the challenging times we’ll be facing for the Olympic Games.

Old masters said that studying karate is like walking on a stony road. It’s very painful – nothing but pain. But that’s how you learn the answers of life. The real truths come from fighting with yourself. No matter how good anything seems on the surface, you must be convinced – you have to convince yourself. That is the real answer. In the process of unifying and embrace all practitioners we’ll have to leave things behind to gain new things that will help us in the future.

Tokyo 2020 is getting close and USA Karate wants to open the doors to everyone who is interested in walking that wonderful journey with us.

Perfection in karate is to make the mind and body work together. That is exactly how all of us should work together. Unity is the key in achieving the ultimate goal. USANKF
Para-Karate Programs

Last month at USA Karate Nationals in South Carolina, I gave a coaches course presentation on the topic of starting and growing a para-karate program at the local dojo level. It was very well received. Coaches came from all over the United States to attend the coaches course offerings and during the break out sessions they had the opportunity to ask questions regarding the para-karate students they encounter and currently teach in their dojos. Here are some of the questions I was asked and my replies.

“Coach Kohn, how do you start a para-karate program?”

That was the first question I was asked. I responded with “Before we answer HOW, can we talk about WHY?” The importance of these programs cannot be stressed enough. But even MORE importantly, the importance of starting and maintaining these programs, in the proper manner, is critical.

I applaud all teachers who wish to provide instruction for our para-karate athletes. Having an inclusive program, with blended classes is amazing and wonderful. Most dojos do not have the resources to fund entirely separate classes with a higher staff to student ratio, but the ability to include one or two athletes into their typical classes is fantastic. The methodology in teaching para-karate athletes varies on a case by case basis, but some items are exactly the same. Strength training, core, balance, footwork, stances, conditioning all are a part of the para-karate training practice. There are times when the speed or number of repetitions needs to be modified, but that's largely it.

“Should I slow down the rest of the class? Or make the para-karate athlete just try to keep up?”

One challenge is maintaining both a para-karate program and a typical program at the same time. Yes, this is a question that comes up all the time. The answer depends on the individual circumstances and is YES to both. Sometimes building success by slowing down the rest of the class, sometimes pushing athletes by having all people try to keep up, and above all, having an awareness of needs of all individuals in the room.

“Is there good money to be made in para-karate programs?”

I’ve heard colleagues say “I’m going to start a para-karate program because it’s a great revenue stream and there is a need in the community.” Okay, there IS a need, for sure and that's coming from a good place, I’m positive. But I would caution my colleagues that it’s NOT an easy revenue stream. As every person with disabilities is different and has different levels of ability and need, you could require 4 or 5 more advanced teachers in the room. When I teach my para-karate classes at my dojo, I often have 20 students with disabilities in a class at once, with everything from Autism Spectrum Disorder to Cerebral Palsy, to Down’s Syndrome and more, and I’ll be assisted by 4 other advanced karate teachers, plus a few junior teachers. In my typical classes, of
athletes without disabilities, one Sensei for 20 kids is usually no problem. And then of course you need teachers who have been trained in working with athletes with disabilities, and have the temperament for it. It's a bigger picture, in order to be safe and have a constructive learning environment for all concerned.

Is it okay to discipline or make corrections to a para-karate athlete? Haven't they been through enough? Maybe I should just be nice to them?

Discipline? Respect? Are these things we can expect of our para-karate athletes? YES!!!! We spent time talking about the difference between behaviors associated with someone's individual profile versus disrespect. For example, in the para-karate division at the 2016 World Championships (see picture), there was a young man on the Autism Spectrum who became distracted by the noise and motion of the female kumite match taking place in the next ring. When the group was bowing in, he was turned around and not paying attention. I believe that was part of his profile, and he did not mean any disrespect to karate or to the referees or other athletes. But, should he be called out on it? Sure! He could be told “Hey! Wake up! We are bowing now!” and then he could absolutely be expected to fall in line. So, should he or she be expected to show respect, follow instructions and protocol? Yes, for sure. Should accommodations be made for the occasional distraction? Yes, for sure. Should we, as coaches or teachers be nervous or afraid to reprimand, correct or discipline an athlete with disabilities the same way we do our typical athletes? No. Not afraid. We should make accommodations for an individual’s profile, as needed, and then hold them to the same expectations we do everyone else.

“Have you learned from it? Have you enjoyed this experience?”

Well, I’ve devoted my life’s work to it, so naturally I love it. I have learned SO much from the para-karate athletes in my dojo about perseverance, strength, determination and heart. I have watched people transform right before my eyes. I have seen miracles occur, things that we were all told would never be possible. It’s an honor and a privilege to do this work and to be the USA NKF National Coach for Para-karate USANKF
In the future, Tom Scott will hold a very special place in the history of karate in the United States of America. His personality, polished manners, and immaculate technique earned him a reputation that crossed frontiers, reaching to the very corner of the World Karate Federation. His determination, self-confidence, and drive made him an icon and an example for many younger athletes. He always wanted to be a karateka. He loves the art, the sport and the challenge, the training and the sweat. His talent, backed by unshakable self-belief, proved he had made the right choice. He - definitely - has one of the keenest and more analytical brains that ever graced the sport of karate in the USA. This is a fresh interview and revealing insight into the life and times of one of the most relevant Karate athletes in the United States of America.
How long have you been practicing Karate and, who is your teacher?
I have studied Karate for 18 years under my sensei Brody Burns.
I have to say that I was never known to be a ‘natural.’ I feel that as a junior athlete, my story was full of difficult losses and tough choices I had to make to be better. The movements became easier as my desire for progress grew.
When I started at our school, we were a small dojo but a close group. As a teenage athlete I was always the youngest person at elite practices. Those were difficult years of fighting adults as a young teen. But today I feel those practices made me who I am now.

How different from other karate styles are the principles and concepts of the style that you practice, Wado Ryu?
When Otsuka Sensei founded Wado he took his background in Jiu Jitsu and combined it with karate. He created a style of karate with smooth movements, a plethora of partner work, and the importance of using minimal effort for maximum results.
Wado is not overpowering but flowing and evasive.

Do you think that Wado style – because its technical structure - fits into the WKF kumite format, better than other karate styles like Goju, Shito, Shotokan, etc?
Having been born and raised in Wado, I am very familiar with how my style has helped me achieve new heights in sports. I cannot speak for the other styles because I have not trained them. Other styles like Goju, Shito, and Shotokan all have plenty of proven champions. With the large amount of partner work kata inherent to Wado, I feel that I have had a better chance to understand distance, timing, and movement than most.
Why did you start to compete and how were your beginnings in competition?

I began competing when I was about 10 years old. I have always loved the excitement of fighting. In our humble beginnings, we started in a league created by local dojos inside of the state of Texas. That was the extent of our competitions. My hunger for more matched my Sensei’s desire for a higher level. We both wanted to be the best at what we did, as an athlete and coach. Once we had reached the highest levels of an organization, we looked beyond for more. From the Texas league, to USA Karate, to the Pan American Karate Federation, and now to the WKF, we enjoy setting goals and achieving them. It’s what we do.

What advice would you give to those who already have been training karate and are getting ready to enter in national and international competitions?

The most important thing is to enjoy what you are doing. If you desire to win more than you desire to kick and punch, you will grow weary, and your love for the sport will fade. When you have a match, enjoy the fundamental parts first! Kick and punch and move around the ring with a smile! Then the wins will come. There will always be losses, but an athlete who understands this will find true joy in their sport. These athletes’ identity and reputation is tied to how they fight and not what they’ve won or lost.

What do you consider to be the most important qualities - physical and mental - of a successful karate competitor?

Calmness. In Wado it is called “Kokoro wa Shizuka”. Calmness of mind when you score, when you get scored on, beginning of a match, last ten seconds. Calmness is what keeps you in the game no matter what the situation may be.

What are the most important points in your current personal training methods?

Do things that are harder than fighting in the ring. I run sprints at the track, swim in the pool, and other things that burn the lungs and legs more than a three-minute karate match ever would. This ensures that entering the ring is the easy part, and the fun part.

I have found that I prefer not to change my mindset much the closer I get to competition time. Yes I want to remind myself of what I want to do out there, but I have to be relaxed and happy and smiling when I go into the ring. Tournament time is when I feel so alive and appreciative for everything I have going back at home.

Do you think the Olympic recognition could help karate?

I think Olympic recognition has already been great for Karate. Athletes of all ages from across the world have been inspired to dream big and dedicate themselves to something great. Also, many schools from many countries are looking inward and renewing their traditions knowing that it is now more important than ever to reinforce traditional Karate values.
How do you think karate athletes should adapt their training to the demands of an Olympic-level competition?

I believe that we are already there. Karate has made it into the Olympic Games because all aspects were ready to be Olympic level. The athletes are Olympic level, the organizations are Olympic level, and the stage is now set. Karate in the Olympic Games will follow a very similar competition format as our current invitational events. The Pan American Games, World Games and World Combat Games each display the type of competition formula we will see at the Olympics.

How do you approach your training back at the dojo when you have not been successful in a competition?

I am eager to train after a loss and after a win. After a few years in this game now, I recognize that my losses are valuable. My wins cannot come without the losses that got me there, that taught me lessons, and that make me hungry. I am not afraid to lose.

Karate is nowadays often referred to as a sport... would you agree with this definition or you think it is also traditional Budo?

For me tradition comes first. Karate comes first. But the sport side is very dear to me as well. I think it is the perfect sport for teaching core values we all want our kids to have.

The best part about our sport is that a person’s character is always under the microscope. In other sports you are even encouraged to over celebrate and get angry. But with Karate, character comes first, its why we joined karate or became enamored with karate.

Do you have any general advice you would care to pass on the practitioners in general?

Your progress is directly tied to your daily efforts. The work you put in is a choice therefore how good you become is a choice. Surround yourself with good people, and find every way you can to separate yourself from the competition. Whether it’s building stamina, having better technique, studying your sport through video, taking notes on your competitions, there are many ways one can ‘pull ahead’ from the competition. Try it out! If you don’t step on and try you will never know what you are missing.

Some people think going to Japan to train is highly necessary, do you share this point of view?

I do not. Suzuki Sensei was in England. I was fortunate enough to train with him several times. I think for the experience it can be fun, but not necessary. I’d love to have trained with Otsuka Sensei, the founder of Wado Karate.

What is it that keeps you motivated after all these years?

My faith keeps me going. My faith helps me understand how short life is, and I appreciate what I can get done in this lifetime.

What is your philosophical basis for your karate training today?

The mission statement for our Karate school is “Better Lives Through the Study of Karate.” I really feel I am fortunate to be a living example of our own mission statement. My life is truly better with Karate in it, and I am happy to be able to pass on the chance at a better life to everyone who walks through our doors.
You have become an “icon” in Karate in the USA, how much influence do you think you have in upcoming generations of athletes and how do you manage that pressure knowing that many young competitors look at you as a role model?

Thank you very much for saying so. To me, the honor of being respected by other athletes and looked up to by younger generations is greater than any medal or victory. I definitely don’t see this as added pressure but rather as fuel for me. I thrive off of making a young person’s day, and I will always have great reverence for those opportunities to speak with or motivate anyone who reaches out to me. I wish to be the spearhead for “USA Karate” as we drive onward to the Olympic Games. I see now how my trials and experiences thus far in my career, have become the foundation for me to dream big. I am going to give it everything I have. St. Sebastian be with us!

Finally, what are your thoughts on the future of the art?

Karate continues to sweep the world. I hope it will always be seen as a positive way for our youth to build character, stay healthy, and be courageous......USANKF
Brandi Robinson has gained much respect over the recent years in the world of karate for her high level of skill and competitiveness in the international arena. She started practicing karate at age 7 under Sensei Mike Nanay. From when she was 16 years old until she completed College and graduate school, she focused strictly on Track and Field. After College, she continued her karate training under Sensei Elisa Au and John Fonseca. Currently, she lives in Honolulu, Hawaii where she trains under Shannon Nishi-Patton at “Kachi Karate” in Honolulu, Hawai‘i and is one of the members of the USA Karate Team who gained a Bronze medal in the WKF World Championships in Linz, Austria in 2016.
Would you tell us some interesting stories of your early days in training?

One story that stands out to me is when I was about 8 years old. My mother made me miss karate class because I hadn’t finished all of my math homework. Up until then, I had perfect attendance in class. I was really upset that I had to miss karate training. From that day on, I made sure that all of my homework was done on time.

I always felt that I was more natural at kumite than kata. Maybe this is the main reason why I focused more on the combative aspect.

What made you enter in the competition world?

I have always wanted to be on the U.S. National Team, this has always been a goal of mine. So that is what made me enter the competition world.

What are the most important points in your current training methods, as an elite athlete?

The most important thing that I try to focus on now is the mental aspect of my training. At the elite level of competition majority of the athletes are good. My coach always tells me that what separates on elite fighter from the other is the one who has the most mental endurance.

How has your understanding and perception of karate developed over the years?

Over the years I began to learn that the concepts and lessons that I have through karate often coincide with life outside of karate. I perceive karate as a character building sport on and off the mat. Karate doesn’t end inside the competition arena.

Have been times when you had doubts about in your karate training?

There has never been a time when I have doubted my training; I believe whole-heartedly that I am receiving the best possible training there is to get. I am fortunate enough to have a training environment that is selfless, genuine, and positively challenging.

Do you think that karate in the West has ‘caught up’ with the technical level in Japan?

I feel like both approaches have attributes that the other can learn from. Never thought that they were exclusive. You need to find that perfect balance. But in general terms, I don’t feel that traveling to Japan is necessary to reach a certain technical level; as long as you are confident in your own training, no other country matters.

What do you consider to be the most important qualities of a successful karate competitor?

One quality that a successful competitor will have is resiliency and the ability to quick adjust. And the most important attributes of a student, no matter what their level may be, are self-discipline, self-confidence, being humble and coachable.

Do you feel that you still have further to go in your studies of the art?
As far as national and international competition, I do plan to continue with that. As far as belt testing and dan certifications, no. I want to strictly focus on the competition aspect of sport karate.

What do you think it is the most important element; self defense, sport, health or tradition?

Health would be the most important element for me. If the body is not healthy or capable of taking training to the level it needs to be at in order to be successful, then none of the other elements will have any relevance.

Do you have any general advice you would care to pass onto young competitors?

To the younger competitors I would say to form good training habits while you are young so that once you start to enter the adult divisions, those habits are already engraved in you. Also, never become satisfied, always look for ways to improve in karate and in life. I would say to go for it, be open-minded, and have fun.

For more advance athletes I’d like to say that cross training is absolutely necessary; running, jumping, bounding, band resistance, and strength training, in my opinion, are all crucial elements of ones training.

What is it that keeps you motivated to keep training?

The personal goals that I have set for myself, the people that I get to train with, and being away from my family all play a key role in motivating me to keep training.

Karate is finally part of the Olympic Games, what is your opinion about it?

I feel that it is an awesome opportunity for the sport of karate, and hopefully I can be part of its history.

Finally, what are your plans for the future?

My plans for the future are to continue training and competing as a member of Team USA, reach the goals I have set for myself, and enjoy doing what I love the most.

“One quality that a successful competitor will have is resiliency and the ability to quick adjust.”
EliTE KATA TrAiNiNg

He is one of the most respected Kata Coaches in the World Karate Federation community, not only for his insight in the sportive aspects of elite competition but for his deep knowledge of the traditional techniques as well – a coveted perfect balance hard to achieve. “There is so much here that athletes can take home to their own practice of the sport. Most notably that it is our love of karate for its own sake, rather than our desire for a medal or a trophy, that really makes us champions,” he says.

In this exclusive interview with USA KARATE magazine, Sensei Del Moral shared some of the insights used in the training of some of the best kata athletes in the world. He also reveals many little-known facts about his personal life, view of the sport and the art of karate.

Some say that he is the obsessive, that he studies and works non-stop trying to find the best way. His athletes say that he demands a very high standard of near-perfection. Many in the sport seem to think he is a motivational guru. Perhaps it’s best to just look at the evidence.

“Do it again,” Sensei Del Moral tells to one athlete getting ready for the World Championship. Do it again. Do it again. Do it again.

I am sitting with him when he is watching a video of an old championship trying to find minuscule details. He plays it again. Plays it again. He watches every single kata, slows down every movement, every section of the kata. Writes down the tempo and cadence of the sequences and how to adjust them for better performance. What could he possibly gain out of watching every kata over and over? What could he possibly learn watching a block, a kick or a punch 500 times? Well, it’s obvious what there is to learn. Tokyo 2020 is waiting and he says, “We are now in a ‘different world’. This is it!”

THE pErFECT BaLaNcE

By Jose M. Fraguas • Photos by: Armando F. Arango
Tell me about your first memory of Karate training and why did you start karate?

I started practicing karate when I was very young but to be honest, I could have started to train in any other martial art style. I loved the Kung Fu movies and of course, Bruce Lee. My brother and I used to go together to the summer theatres and as soon as we got back home, we tried to duplicate the movements we just saw in the movie! I was around 6 years old at that time.

One interesting thing occurred one day while we were going back home. On our way back, we were stopped by a group of guys asking us for our money. I got into a fighting position right away without realizing that my brother was yelling at me, “run, silly, run!” from 20 or 30 yards away already!

I often remember that moment, and I think, in many ways, I am still the same innocent guy who “took the fighting stance” that afternoon!

After a while, I started to ask my parents about taking martial arts classes. They signed us up for Judo but I wanted something different. After looking around, I’ve found a karate school that I joined.

I had a lot of passion about it and couldn’t wait to go to class everyday. As soon as I could get a little more freedom to move around the city, I joined Sensei Yashunari Ishimi dojo. He truly became a turning point in my karate journey. I started to meet other teachers, not only from the Shito Ryu style but from many different disciplines and the methods. Many trips to Japan, Okinawa, China, etc…made me realize how little I know and how fortunate I am having access to these great masters who are willing to share their knowledge and experience with me.

What is your single favorite memory of your career and why?

I could share many stories but probably the most rewarding, as a Karate teacher, is to see how old students of mine are bringing their children to train with me. A very special one is when my daughter passed the black belt test under the National Federation in Spain. I wasn’t there and she knew how much that meant to me. And last but not least, to see Sandra winning her first National Championship. It was the beginning of a long journey that still continues.

How and why did you get involved in coaching?

It was at a very early age. At 14, I started to help my teacher in the kid classes. Later on, I went through all the requirements and Coaching ranks by the Spanish National Federation required to become a teacher and a coach. Once I realized that it was that what I really wanted to do for the rest of my life, I began to expand my education and studied Physical Education, Personal Training, Sport Coaching Science, Sport Psychology, etc, in order to “invest” in myself as a professional Coach. Eventually, I opened my own school and it was there where I could finally combine the two things that I like the most: teaching karate-do and the elite competition training and coaching.
You were hired by United Arab Emirates to teach karate in that country, what is your favorite part about living there?

It was an amazing experience that lasted over 3 years. I did learn a lot and it was for me a phase of personal introspection and development. I had a lot of time and I focused on developing a specific methodology and protocol for elite Kata competition. I had the time to focus on Sandra Sanchez's development for competition and build a solid training program involving all the aspects of elite physical conditioning and traditional karate kata.

Of course, I enjoyed the free time, a free time that allowed me to do other things like reading and continue my personal education.

You are the coach of two number 1 kata athletes in the world ranking: Sandra Sanchez and Damian Quintero. What is that part of their coaching that you enjoy the most?

It is a pleasure to coach and train these two elite athletes. They are some of the very best in the world. Their dedication and passion is second to none. They give their best in every practice session and are always looking for new ways to get better and raise their level of performance.

Every Coach has to be a sort of a psychologist, a sensei, a friend, a personal trainer, etc…it is the combination of many aspects that a coach has to balance and coordinate to get the best results from the athlete. It is very rewarding for me to watch them training every day. They are really impressive. I feel very proud and at the same time very humbled.

The rules in WKF kata competition have changed a few times in the past. How do you adapt to the changes of the rules and how do you coach the athletes to focus on these aspects?

I have to say that I liked the old [point] system more. I believe the system was more fair but maybe less attractive for the spectator. When the system was changed and became divided in three aspects: technical conformity, technical level and athletic level, we had to re-structure the way we work on each individual aspect in order to reach the highest possible level for each. It is true though that the referee gets a general view of the athlete's performance and does not goes in depth on each aspect. We work hard on the audible cues, the breathing, etc… all these aspects are very important at elite level. We focus on the physical aspect, obviously but always maintaining the perfect technique.

One of the most difficult aspects of coaching is managing the stress associated with large competitions. Can you share with us some of the things you would do to calm your athletes before competing?

The mental aspect is extremely important when two athletes are at the same level. The winner will be the one who better controls their emotions and feelings. As a base, I have developed ways of visualization, breath control and methods for immediate relaxation; I have developed protocols of action for different situations so they know what to do when things are not going the way we expected.

But I’d like to add that the most important thing is for the athlete to know that they must give their 100% in every practice, every day. When you give your best every day and put all your heart and mind in what you are doing, the results will come.
What expert advice can you give to other coaches about how to deal with pressure while coaching at such a high level?

Pressure will always be there! Pressure is good! Use it to improve! What it is important is to know how to guide the athlete to reach the correct level of activation in order to perform their best. That’s the key!

Over thinking about the mistakes we did in the last championship won’t help us at all. Don’t ruin your present with mistakes from the past that have no future!

Don’t worry about who you are going to face in semi-finals or the final. We must focus on “here and now”. This round. That’s all. Give the best on each round. Don’t “save” anything for later rounds…that’s suicidal in today’s competition.

I always tell them: “Go out there and do your best! Whatever will be…will be!” Do your best and the rest….will be alright.

Now you are the National Coach for Spain, in the last European Championship in Turkey, Spain took gold medals in Individual Male (Damian Quintero), Individual Female (Sandra Sanchez) and Male Team, with a bronze in Female Team. What protocols are you using to achieve this exceptional level and results with the kata athletes?

Maybe the real secret is that there is “no secret”! We work very very hard. Extremely hard, I must say. We dedicate all our time to study, improve and work toward one single goal. Honestly, I don’t know any other way to achieve what we have achieved. We plan what we are going to do, find the best way to do it, and do it; not holding anything back. Without plannification and hard work there is no success. But allow me to say that hard work must be invested in the right direction. There are many other countries that are working very hard and that pushes us even more!
You use very specific training methods developed from a professional Strength and Conditioning approach matching the art of karate. Can you walk us through what a typical training session in as much detail as possible?

We practice 5-6 hours per day. This training is divided in two sessions, morning from 10am to 1pm and afternoon from 3pm or 4pm to 6pm or 7pm (depending of the season).

In the morning session we focus on technique, specific kata training and physical conditioning (usually, we dedicate one hour for each element depending of the training cycle). During the afternoon sesión, we work more specifically on kata, flexibility and injury prevention.

How much physical conditioning does a modern athlete needs to become a world kata champion, is it not only about technique?

In elite competition nowadays 50% is technical work and the other 50% to the physical aspect and what I like to call “the invisible training”. I think that many people train the physical part but they don’t have the right protocols, the proper methodology and they don’t know how to make these aspects to work together in order for one aspect to improve the other. It is not as simple as it sounds though. Definitely not when what you want is to have an European, a World or an Olympic champion.

How much do your top athletes train per week? How many hours and how do you divide the training time?

The members of the National Spanish Team train 5-6 days per week and around 5-6 hours per day. The 50% of the training is exclusively technical training for kata; 40% is dedicated to the physical and conditioning aspect and the final 10% to injury prevention and physical recovery. Depending on the day of the week, the month and the date of the championship, we adjust training, loads, intensity and volume for each training session.

What kind of mental preparation do you have your athletes undergo leading up to major competitions?

I emphazise very much the mental aspect of the training. We focus on three different aspects: establishing the confidence by reinforcing their practice in a positive way and taking away a little of the relevancy and pressure of the competition. For instance, I tell them, “how are you not going to be able to face a 5 kata competition if you train 5-6 hours every day?”

On a second note, I focus with them on controlling the breathing patterns and the element of relaxation. I have developed protocols for stress and pressure control and different levels of activation.

And last but not least, I work on visualization of certain circumstances in order to better control them if they happen.

What do you think is the proper way to coach an athlete in the final moment of a European or World title final match?

The most important thing right before the final is to give them confidence and serenity. I remind them how hard they have worked to be there and that now all that they have to do is to put all their heart and feeling in the kata. The work that has already been done.

What is the most important piece of advice you can pass on to kata competitor breaking into the world kata circuit?

I think the Premiere League, the K-1 events, etc… are very valuable for all athletes. These events are a great opportunity for competitors to compete against high level
athletes that can only be found in European and World Championships.
My best advise to them would be the same I gave Sandra Sanchez, “don’t think
about the result. Don’t put pressure on yourself. Enjoy the journey, train hard, gather
a lot of knowledge and experience and get better in each competition. The results
will come.

**What do you need to work with Sandra Sanchez and Damian Quintero between
now and the 2020 Tokyo Olympics to best position them for a gold medal?**

Well, we need to remember that it is all very new, specially for kata people. Kumite
people have a reference with other combat sports like Tae Kwon Do, but kata people
don’t. The first thing is to qualify for the Olympics. For that, year 2018 will be the
key. We must be at the top of the world ranking like number 1 in the world. We’ll
focus mainly on the European and World Championships.

After those, we’ll calculate very well the events where we are going to compete
because that will be the key factor: make sure that we dosify the training and the
competition load to arrive to Tokyo 2020 at the very top of our possibilites.
What can coaches do to instill a love of the sport in their athletes?

It is important that the athletes truly enjoy what they do. They need to feel the positiveness of the training and always remember that all the years spent in competition will remain as great memories in their future. Along the way, they will meet friends, have new experiences, and grow as human beings. They need to realize that they are very fortunate people...they are doing what the love the most...training karate!

Finally, an open-ended question for you: why do you love coaching karate?

Since I was a kid, I always wanted to become a teacher; I love to help others and specially to guide the young people to achieve their goals. The art of karate-do, like all other martial arts, bring a lot of positive things in the education of the young and I think they should be mandatory in school, High Schools and Universities. A good friend of mine used to say; “Karate is so great that it is even a tool for self-defense!”
Team USA came to Curacao for the XXXI Pan American Karate Championships with a purpose. With significant improvement over the 2016 SR PKF where Team USA earned 1 gold, 4 bronze and a 5th place. The 2017 results had 3 gold, 1 silver, 7 bronze and four 5th Place finishes. This outstanding performance put Team USA in 4th place overall, up from 7th last year. An amazing outing by the entire US Delegation with 21 officials, 5 coaches, an Athletic Trainer, a Doctor and a team leader all supporting our athletes. Every single athlete stayed in their match to the very end.

Our referees had the opportunity to learn and work with WKF Referee Commission Chairman, Mr. Javier Escalante, and represented the United States with great pride. Congratulations to the our newest PKF officials Lorri Meske, Suresh Manuel Raman and Gilvan Gavin!

Our leadership position in the PKF remains strong with our President Mr. John DiPasquale being reelected to the 1st Vice President position in the PKF Executive Committee, Mr. Cleve Baxter was named Chairman of the PKF Referee Commission, Mr. Tokey Hill was reinstated to the Technical Commission and Mr. Jeff Kohn was reinstated to the Para-Karate Commission along with Mrs. Fariba Madani. It is extremely important for the United States to hold positions of leadership to keep the PKF strong and have a voice for North America within the PKF.
XXXI SR. PAN AMERICAN CHAMPIONSHIP USA TEAM

* FEMALE KATA
SAKURA KOKUMAI AND JESSICA KWONG

* MALE KATA
JOSEPH MARTINEZ AND ARIEL TORRES

* FEMALE –50 KG
SHANNON NISHI–PATTON AND GISELLE KANEDA

* FEMALE –55 KG
BRANDI ROBINSON AND JENNA BROWN

* FEMALE –61 KG
JOANE ORBON AND SABRINA HOSTETTLER

* FEMALE –68 KG
ASHLEY DAVIS AND EIMI KURITA

* FEMALE +68 KG
MAYA WASOWICZ AND CIRRUS LINGL

* MALE –60 KG
DANNY CABELLO AND ALEX JINESTA

* MALE –67 KG
BRAIN RAMRUP AND MANNY TAVARES

* MALE –75 KG
TOM SCOTT AND TYLER YAMAZAKI

* MALE –84 KG
KAM MADANI AND EUZEBIUSZ WASOWICZ

* MALE +84 KG
DAVID MUHAMMAD AND BRIAN IRR

* PARA-KARATE VISUALLY IMPAIRED
SABAUDIN TRICIC

* PARA-KARATE INTELLECTUALLY IMPAIRED
RYAN ROGERS

* PARA-KARATE INTELLECTUALLY IMPAIRED
KEVIN KUCBOR
Gold Medalists
SAKURA KOKUMAI – FEMALE KATA
ASHLEY DAVIS – FEMALE -68 KG
SABAHUDIN TRICIC – PARA-KARATE VISUALLY IMPAIRED

Silver Medalists
RYAN ROGERS – PARA-KARATE INTELLECTUALLY IMPAIRED

Bronze Medalists
TOM SCOTT - MALE –75 KG
BRIAN IRR – MALE +84 KG
EIMI KURITA – FEMALE -68 KG
KAMRAN MADANI - MALE –84 KG
SHANNON NISHI-PATTON - FEMALE –50 KG
KEVIN KUCBOR – PARA-KARATE INTELLECTUALLY IMPAIRED
WOMEN’S KUMITE TEAM
(SHANNON NISHI, MAYA WASOWICZ, ASHLEY DAVIS, BRANDI ROBINSON)

FINISHING IN 5TH
MAYA WASOWICZ – FEMALE +68 KG
CIRRUS LINGL – FEMALE +68 KG
SABRINA HOSTETLER - FEMALE –61KG
JENNA BROWN BY SENSHU - FEMALE -55KG
MEN’S KUMITE TEAM
(TOM SCOTT, BRIAN IRR, KAMRAN MADANI, BRIAN RAMRUP, KUBA WASOWICZ)

USA KARATE Coaching and Staff Members
HEAD COACH - TOMMY HOOD
HEAD COACH - PARA-KARATE JEFF KOHN
COACH - AKIRA FUKUDA
COACH - CHRISTINA MUCCINI-FINEGAN
COACH - DUSTIN BALDIS
COACH - BARBARA MAILE CHINE
TEAM LEADER – BRODY BURNS
TRAINER – JAY WILLIAMS
DOCTOR – DR. STEPHANIE BAILEY

USA KARATE Senior PKF Officials
CEDRIC BARKSDALE
CLEVE BAXTER
JESUS COSTA
LUIS BRICENO
JOSE DIAZ
JAY FARRELL
DALE GATCHALIAN
GILVAN GENTIL
RAMON HIRALDO
RAY HUGHES
FARIBA MADANI
ENRIQUE MARES
DIANE MARTIN
MICHAEL MCKENZIE
LORRI MESKE
ALEX MILADI
MIKE MUSTOE
BILL PLAPINGER
CARLOS QUINTERO
SURESH MANUEL RAMAN
ROBERT UTSEY
AROUND THE TOURNAMENT

1. USA KARATE President, Mr. John DiPasquale.
2. Coach Tommy Hood in the finals.
3. Coach Hood and Danny Cabello watching the action.
5. USA KARATE CEO, Mr. Phil Hampel and Brody Burns.
6. Mr. Javier Escalante in action.
7. USA Female Kumite Team; Maya, Ashley and Shannon...ready.
AROUND THE TOURNAMENT

1-7 & 9. Maya during two of her initial matches.; 3. Manny Tavares scoring a point.; 2 & 6. Danny Cabello, a Junior athlete, moving up to the Seniors, in a challenging match.; 4-5 & 8. Cirrus Lingl a young gun coming up in the charts, moving up top the Seniors.
KUMITE

KUMITE

1, 3 & 4. Tom Scott during some of his matches.; 2, 5 & 6. Euzebiusz Wasowicz..."show time".
PODIUM

USA KARATE Magazine sat down with WKF President, Mr. Antonio Espinos during his last visit to the USOC Headquarters in Colorado Springs. The leader of karate in the world, opened up about the current situation of the sport, the certainty of Tokyo 2020 and the future after the first Olympic Games.

A long time “karate warrior” in the battlefield of diplomacy and negotiations, Mr. Espinos reveals, in this one-on-one interview, some of the details that led karate to the Olympic Games inclusion and explains how unity is the key to maintain the current status of the sport around the world.
After many years trying to reach Olympic recognition, what does it mean to you seeing Karate accepted in the Tokyo 2020 Olympics?

A great satisfaction! The days before the final acceptance, I felt this time was going to be the “one”. I had that feeling inside of me. At the very moment when the IOC accepted, I was very calm because I knew that, unless something disastrous could happen... this time was going to be a “yes”.

I’d like to share a personal anecdote with the “USA KARATE” Magazine readers. Sometimes after Karate was accepted, I used to dream, during my sleep, that we were not in Tokyo 2020; that things went in the wrong direction again. I used to suddenly wake up in the middle of that nightmare to realize that...“yes, we were in!”. That very moment of waking up and realize that it was just a nightmare and that the reality was different...were the times when I felt “real happiness” of what we all have accomplished.

Many times we were close to get in and always something happened in the very last moment. Finally, we are in. I want to remind everybody that Tokyo 2020 was not the final goal but the very beginning of a long journey that we all just started. We have now our foot in the door. Tokyo 2020 is just a starting point, the real challenge starts now and we must keep working hard together to maintain karate in the Olympics.

After many negatives by the IOC, where did you get the strength to keep pushing forward in the middle of the adversity?

2013 in St Petersburg was very hard for me. In 2005, in Singapore was the first time we had a real chance. We were very close but it didn’t happen. In 2009, in the second process, once again we were close. In 2013, we were very confident. In life the greatest deceptions and the greatest happiness always occur when something unexpected happens. In St. Petersburg, we had everything we needed to achieve that recognition. That was a hard blow to take because we didn’t know what else we could have done to get it. We didn’t do anything wrong, everything was right and still...be as it may, we kept going and pushing forward and here we are in Tokyo 2020.

What is the difference between the Antonio Espinos who arrived at the WKF and the Antonio Espinos who made a dream come true for all karatekas around the world?

I still have the same passion and love for the art and the sport. Once we reach a goal, we move forward. I don’t sit down and think about the things we accomplished. The difference is that I make less mistakes now than I did then. I love to work for karate and the experience one person gathers throughout all the years, it is also very beneficial to make less mistakes in the future. Now, we need to take advantage of this new position that we have in the Olympic Games, make sure we keep doing the right things to stay and make karate accessible to people that can’t practice it now. We are using all social media vehicles like Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, etc... We have very high numbers in these vehicles of promotion and marketing and also we are pushing hard on Television broadcast. The WKF is doing the production for the best Premier League and K-1 events and is selling it to other TV channels in many countries.

All these TV events are very important because putting a World Championship
every two years on TV is not enough. We are working hard to push these events on TV so karate is in everybody's house at a very steady pace like other sports are.

Which aspects had to be changed and modified for traditional karate finally be accepted as a sport by the IOC?

Many people ask me that same question but honestly I don’t think we should look at it from that perspective. There are things that we had to improve, like certain criteria for kumite and kata judging, refereeing protocols, safety for athletes to prevent injuries, etc...but I never felt the improvements on these specific aspects were a negative thing for karate. I never felt the IOC was trying to prevent karate to be in the Olympic Games. Never at all. We, all the karatekas, the WKF, are the ones who improved things; things like lately adding the “video review”, etc...for people and spectators to better understand the sport. It is important to make it clearer and very understandable for those who do not know the elements of karate training and competition.

How can the National Federations help the WKF to improve the sport around the world?

I always tell the Presidents of the National Federations that they are more than just a “National President”, they are the Representatives of the WKF in their country. They are the “WKF man” in that specific country. That is the most important thing for them to remember. They “are” the WKF. They have to transfer and communicate to everybody in their country all the information, tools and marketing vehicles we have to make the sport greater. The main idea is how the National Federations can help the WKF to push the Olympic agenda. That is the key. They [Presidents] are the important ones. We have to be together to be strong and that strength is only possible if we all push in the same direction...looking for unity and not division. WKF gets questions all the time about everything we are doing for them but the National Federations are the ones that must stay in contact with the Olympic Committees in their countries, letting them know what the WKF is doing around the world, what their National Federation is doing in their respective country to promote karate, etc. They are “WKF Ambassadors”. We have very detailed studies and analysis about the sport around the world that were developed by third party professional companies. Well, National Federations have these “tools” in their hands to use in their countries to promote karate.

National Federations are not going in a different direction than WKF. We are all going in the same direction. I try to transmit to all the Presidents that once we get to do that, we can be unstoppable. We must put the personal interests on the side. These personal interests compromise the ultimate goal. The only interest should be the sport and art of karate.

How did you become President of the WKF?

To be totally honest I never intended to be. It was never some kind of goal that I planned and pursued like people may think. You, personally, know my story. I ended up being President of the Spanish Federation because things had to be changed at the time in Spain. Some friends wanted me to run to help because they thought I had something to offer. I did and won. The same thing happened in the European Federation. And eventually, the same occurred in WKF. When I was starting and as a karateka, I thought of things and ideas that could improve the sport of karate but I knew that in order to implement these changes you have to be at the top. Changes come from the top. For instance, the high kick and the reverse punch had the same scoring value long time ago, one point. This was not a logical thing, it made no sense at all. Why are you going to take chances of scoring with a high
kick when you can get the same points with a [way less risky and simpler] straight punch? When I got to be President of the WKF, we changed this, so the high kick was awarded three points instead of one; more risk taken, more rewards for the athlete. When you have ideas that can improve the sport and you get to serve in an important position, you need to understand that then it is the time to make those changes. Take the risk and see how it helps the sport. If it doesn’t, then go back. Period. Sometimes you face challenges because some people don’t like to change at all but it is important to keep a clear and open mind and have passion for what we are doing here. I never missed that passion and still have illusion to take karate to be solidly established around the world as an Olympic sport.

Where is the WKF in comparison to other sports World Federations inside the IOC?

I’d like to say that we are very well considered by the IOC; we have a good reputation as a very serious and competent sport. We are in an excellent position when we compared ourselves to other sports. We have proved that we are capable of bringing the highest level of competition and organization in our World Championships. We provide high level in everything we do. The organization of our World Championship is excellent. WKF is very well respected in the world and inside the IOC. We can be proud of what we have accomplished but not satisfied. There is still a lot to do in the future.

After Tokyo 2020, what is going to happen?

We can go to Paris 2024 via two different ways; either karate goes directly, which it means the IOC will select the sport to stay in or, the city/country selected for 2024 (Paris, France) will include the sport. These are the two ways for karate to be in
2024. We'll have to wait and see. France has one of the greatest karate programs in the world so hopefully, the French National Karate Federation will push as much as possible to be there in Paris 2024.

My only regret is that when the final decision for 2024 [will be made in 2017], the world of karate still will be three years away from showing to everybody how good and well organized we are (2020). The selection for 2024 will be three years before we can show everybody what we are made of and what the world of karate represents. But, that is the way it is! One thing we can still do...do our best and show we are here to stay!

How would you like to be remembered by the world of karate?

The first World Championship was in Tokyo at the Budokan 50 years ago. In Tokyo 2020, karate will be at the Budokan for the first time in history in the Olympic Games. That is something for the history books.

I am not concerned about the idea of being remembered as individual. I am only interested in remembering the great memories we all are building together for the art and the sport of karate. USANKF

From left to right; John DiPasquale, President USA-NKF; Antonio Espinos; President WKF; Scott Blackmun USOC CEO, and Phil Hampel, CEO USA-NKF.
A n inspirational story indeed, I had the pleasure of interviewing Kevin Kucbor, USA NKF para-karate team member, about his journey as an athlete, a karate teacher/coach/mentor and now realizing his life goal of being a Special Education teacher in the Illinois Public School system.

Extremely comfortable talking about his journey and the fact that he is a person with Cerebral Palsy, I asked Kevin to give me a little background of his early life and I also asked him to describe a little further what Cerebral Palsy is, since I didn’t fully understand it. And I believe that our readers may also have similar questions, and can sometimes be shy to ask for further information, out of fear of being insensitive or offensive.

In Kevin’s words: “Sure Sasha, no problem at all. I was born in Chicago, 3 months early, at around 20 weeks. As a premature birth, doctors decided that I would have to stay in an incubator for three months in order to help my development. During that time, doctors discovered an infection in my small intestine which prompted emergency intestinal surgery. They had to remove about 6 inches of my small intestine. They weren’t sure if I would even survive, and if I DID, they said that I probably would either have to be on a very restricted diet and/or be on a feeding tube for the rest of my life. Basically that I wouldn’t have any great quality of life. And then a few months after that, I was diagnosed in addition to all that, with Cerebral Palsy (CP).”

This is a partial brain disorder, in Kevin’s words, basically that the brain isn’t wired correctly. The signals on the left hand side of his body don’t connect properly and therefore he can’t use the left side of his body that well. So yes, it is a brain function disorder and it also affects muscular development, fine motor skills, balance and coordination.
As a result of the CP diagnosis, doctors referred him to start physical therapy ASAP, to aid in his development. His parents signed him up for multiple sessions a week of physical therapy, some speech therapy and occupational therapy.

While he was doing physical therapy, his mom noticed that he was itching to be out and be active in the world. Kevin was 6 years old at that time. His best friend from kindergarten was in karate at the North Shore Dojo, in Illinois. That kid’s mom suggested to Kevin’s mom that Kevin should try karate. She had heard about the “Karate teacher in Glenview who does wonders with kids with disabilities, Sensei Jeff Kohn”.

Sensei Jeff Kohn, USA-NKF National Coach of Para-karate, Chairman of the USA-NKF Para-karate Committee, Chairman of the PKF Para-karate Committee and member of the WKF Para-karate Commission, has been Kevin’s teacher and Sensei for the last 18 years. Kohn recalls: “Kevin could hardly walk when he first arrived to my dojo. He was timid and shy and had a lot of physical difficulties managing balance and in regards to his gait.”

And Kevin shared that he also remembers that first day at karate. In Kevin’s words:

“I can recall that very first day at the dojo like it was yesterday. I remember walking in and being SO scared, but also in awe. I didn’t know what to expect and was frankly taken aback and impressed by everything I saw.”

He observed a blended karate class (one containing kids with and without disabilities) and after that his mom asked him if it was something that he was interested in doing. He said YES! At the beginning he had really hard time jumping over hurdles and targets during plyometrics, even the smallest jumps were impossible for Kevin. No matter how hard he tried he couldn’t do it.

“No matter what he had me do, Sensei Kohn always pushed me to my limit. He truly has a gift of being able to find what that limit is for each athlete, and push us to it, with kindness, but a firm hand. He never allowed me to throw in the towel.”
“Sensei Adam Brozer and Sensei Rasko Krajisnik would literally help me by lifting me up and over and building my confidence. I had many privates during that time in addition to participating in the typical classes, which were all inclusive. In addition to jumping over targets, walking across the balance beam was something that was so difficult for me. I can do it now, though!”

Fast forwarding to modern times, he is now almost 24 years old. Kevin has never stopped training and now has achieved his Bachelor’s Degree in Special Education from Northeastern Illinois University. He has competed internationally at the 2014 WKF in Bremen, Germany, in 2016 in Linz, Austria and in 2017 PKF in Curacao. And he just won the GOLD in the Para-karate division last month at USA-NKF Nationals in South Carolina. His international karate career will continue for sure.

“No matter what he had me do, Sensei Kohn always pushed me to my limit. He truly has a gift of being able to find what that limit is for each athlete, and push us to it, with kindness, but a firm hand. He never allowed me to throw in the towel. I kept going until I accomplished my goal. And this is something that I’m really thankful for because it allowed me to reach the heights that I’ve reached. I was SO inspired by working with the younger athletes at our dojo, in the Karate Can Do! Program. This is how I fell in love with teaching, with karate and with helping kids with disabilities. I knew I wanted to do this work for the rest of my life. I’ve experienced so many of the same things that they are going through and I’ve had amazing people, like Sensei Jeff Kohn, on my side to help me. I want to spend the rest of my life giving back to the community in the same way.”
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