

My Karate Journey, Part 16 -- From Students, to Instructors, to

Best Friends!

I can safely say that throughout my career I have taught thousands of students Shotokan karate. Some I remember vividly, others are a blur in my memory. Some stick it out for a while, others leave as quickly as they come! Every group has heard my very frank but true speech when they start their karate journey — “Karate will probably be the hardest thing you will EVER do in your life!!! You will experience pain and fatigue like never before, yet some of you will find yourself coming back for MORE! Why? SOME of you will discover that the physical and mental gains that you achieve FAR outweigh the discomforts of the art!!”

The great thing about karate is that there are no gray areas — you either love it, or you hate it! At HSK we allow our new beginners two practice sessions to give it a try. I tell the parents that they and/or their child will know after JUST ONE DAY whether they like it or not. That's how black and white karate is! This trial period is essential because karate is too hard to do well without a definite commitment from the student.

Another great thing about karate is that it is an individual sport. Unlike team sports like baseball, basketball, football, etc, YOU GET from karate exactly WHAT YOU PUT INTO IT! In team sports you can always blame someone ELSE for your loss -- "... we lost because he dropped the ball," or "... we lost because so-and-so struck out!" In karate, you have no one else to blame but yourself for failure. If you end up mediocre or with little skill, that reflects exactly how you practiced! I LOVE THAT ABOUT KARATE!!!

Those that train regularly and with passion constantly feel satisfied and encouraged to learn more and improve. Enter -- my Senpais! Most started with their family and the hope that their child would stick it out — even if THEY quietly left. The OPPOSITE happened! Like me, they found what they were looking for — something that would challenge their BODY, MIND, and SOUL!!! Although they have started at different times and stages of their lives, they have found a common thread that keeps them coming back for more — and for EACH OTHER!!!

Although earning a shodan rank (1st degree black belt) takes a LOT of time and dedication, not all shodans are created equal! Even after spending years honing their skills, some black belts have narrower goals. All they are interested in is obtaining a black belt. It may be an ego or self-satisfaction thing, just so that they can say, “There, I did it! What's next?” They have no wish to help others or share their hard-earned knowledge with anyone. For those I feel a deep disappointment -- not only for the years they spent to earn this prestigious award, but the YEARS and EFFORT THAT I SPENT teaching them!!!

I have given my classes, especially the Senpais, this analogy: "When you begin your training, you are underwater holding your breath and trying to reach the surface so you can take your first breath. Throughout your training, you struggle but get closer and closer to the surface. It is ONLY when you get your black belt that your head breaks the surface and you are able to take your first breath! NOW YOU BEGIN TO LIVE!!! Your black belt is NOT the end of your journey. It is only the BEGINNING!!" Unfortunately, not all who receive this honor see it this way!! I am, however, quite aware of the fact that 'life happens,' and for many of the Senpais this is exactly what ended their karate journey.



HSK's many Senpais gathering for our 20th anniversary celebration in 2003!

HSK has had many Senpais, yet few have had the drive and dedication to continue their quest for excellence! A big part of being a Senpai in HSK is to willingly and generously give back to the club. No, I do NOT mean \$\$\$- wise, but time-wise. The true and dedicated Senpais will take it upon themselves to spend as much time teaching students as they do training for themselves. In doing this, the Senpais climb to a new height on the karate ladder. Teaching is a completely new and different facet of karate, and soon the Senpais are torn between which they love more -- training or teaching!

For me, it was ALWAYS easy. I LOVE TO TRAIN!!! Although I love to do both, training has ALWAYS had the edge over teaching. The Senpais who are presently with me have mixed feelings. Many of them rather teach than train. However, ALL of them know that their training is what keeps them on their feet, in great health, and out of the hospital!

Let's look at who these special people are. Currently, HSK has 7 Senpais who regularly teach and train in our classes. One just retired due to health concerns this month. Senpai Mel Choy, with the advice from his doctor, decided that his striking and kicking days have come to an end. BUT ... think about this -- Senpai Mel has trained for almost 30 years with HSK and is over 80 years of age!!! Don't you wish that you could do what HE has done when you are his age? I bet EVERYONE DOES!!! We wish Senpai Mel the best of health, happiness, and a long life! MEL -- don't make yourself a stranger. Drop by ANYTIME to talk story, socialize, or just get a HUG!! We will MISS YOU DEARLY!!!

By seniority, these are your current Senpais:

- 1) Ray Ikeda -- started with HSK in 1984, and has been training for 38 years!
- 2) Remy Toyama -- the very reason Sensei started HSK! She trained from 1983 to 2000 (17 years), left, and returned with her daughter in 2012, for a total of 27 years of training!
- 3) Clifford Lau -- started with HSK in 1997, and has been training for 25 years!
- 4) Scott Oshiro -- started with Sensei's old club, Karate Association of Hawaii, as a youngster and trained for about 8 years. After a 29-year break, he returned with his children, earned his black belt, and has been with HSK for 16 years! Total training -- 24 years!
- 5) Todd China -- also started with HSK as a youngster in 1990, took a 15-year break, then returned to earn his black belt. Total training time -- 19 years!
- 6) Alan and 7) Tracy Reynolds -- HSK's only husband-wife Senpai tandem! Started karate in 2004, and have been training for 18 years!

HSK Senpais and Best Friends!



(l to r): Remy Toyama, Ray Ikeda, Todd China, Tracy Reynolds, Alan Reynolds, Scott Oshiro, Cliff Lau.

These Senpai represent the heart and soul of HSK -- and the SECRET to our success!!! Their dedication, generosity, and willingness to help in any way possible have made MY job a complete JOY!! Their contributions extend WAY beyond the dojo, including planning, preparing, and executing our fundraisers for the Food Bank and Blood Bank, our annual beach training, picnic, and Christmas parties, and whatever surprise event that may pop up unexpectedly.

My life has been totally enhanced and enriched because of this incredible group of people. As students, they were focused, determined, and relentless in their pursuit of knowledge. As instructors, I would match them against anyone in terms of knowledge and teaching ability. As best friends, I feel TOTALLY BLESSED to have them by my side!!!

