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SENSEI SAKAGAMI

MANNERS, ETIQUETTE AND DISCIPLINE

by PAUL CLIFTON

Mr Sakagami is one of the most popular Japanese karate instructors in this country but he doesn't think he'll come across as well as the other Japanese instructors we've previously interviewed. I think he's given an extremely good interview. What do you think?

PAUL CLIFTON: When did you begin training in Wado Ryu Karate?

SENSEI SAKAGAMI: I began training during 1959, when I was 14 years old. Right from the beginning I practised Wado ryu karate under Mr Tatsuo Suzuki, though this only came about because his dojo happened to be the one I came across first. I was young and knew nothing then of the various styles of karate.

PAUL CLIFTON: Did you ever meet Wado's founder, Mr Ohtsuka?

SENSEI SAKAGAMI: Yes. The first time I ever met Grandmaster Ohtsuka was in 1961 and I was amazed to see this old man of seventy-odd years still practising karate in such a fast and fluid way. After that, I trained with him about once each month.

PAUL CLIFTON: What sort of person was he?

SENSEI SAKAGAMI: My first impression of him as a person was that he was a perfect gentleman. I used to imagine a katateka as typically a hard, mean, aggressive and arrogant individual but Mr

Ohtsuka was quite the opposite! I don't think this was because he was an old man at the time I met him. The impression I got was that even as a man aged forty or fifty years old, he was always a gentleman.

Mr Ohtsuka began training in jiu jitsu from a very early age and he was already a master of that art when, in his late twenties, he began to study karate under Mr Funakoshi.

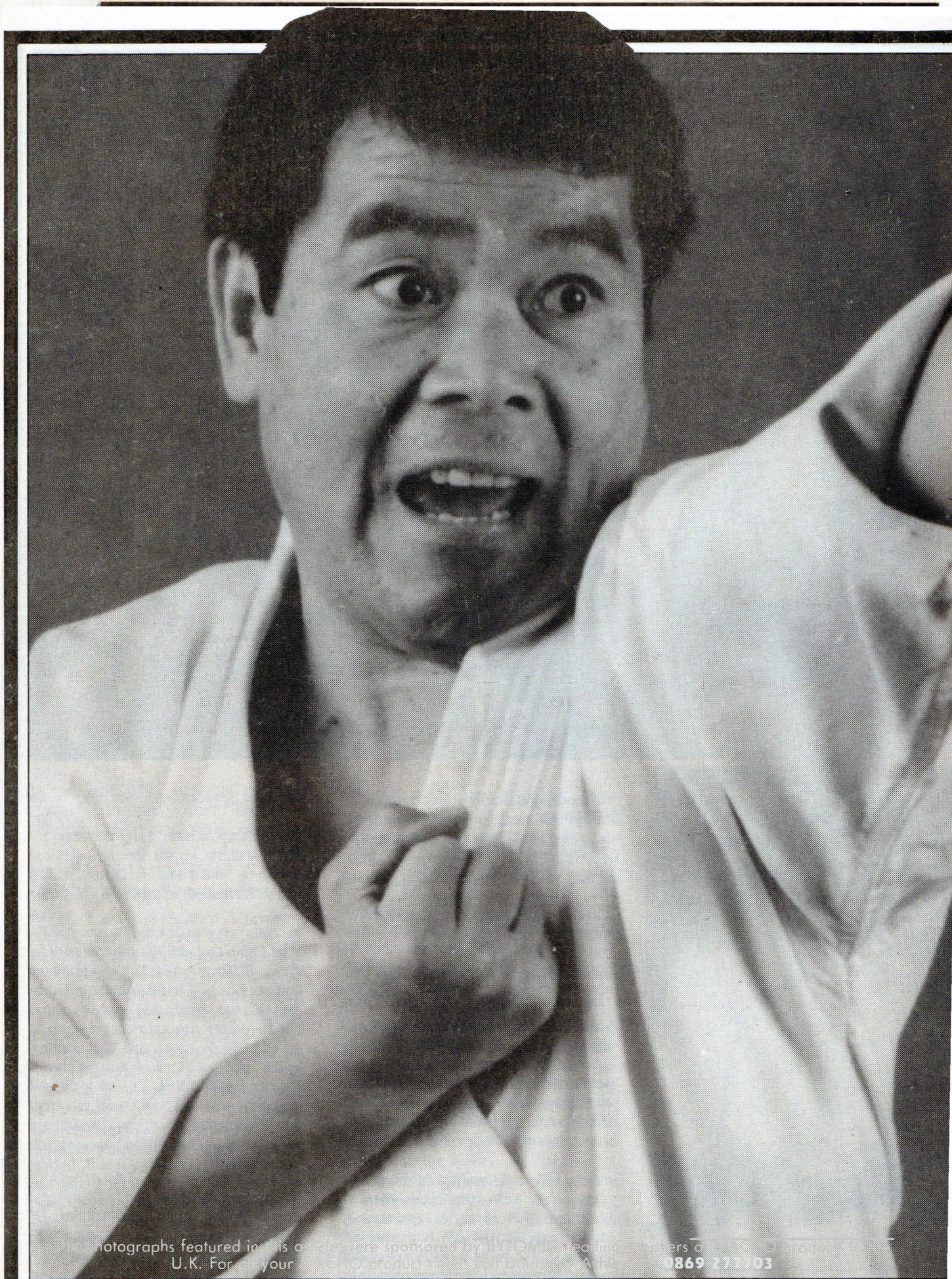
PAUL CLIFTON: What was your early training like?

SENSEI SAKAGAMI: I particularly remember my university training days because in those days, it wasn't just physical training, it was really mentally hard as well. In addition to training, new recruits had to wash the sempai's 'gi and to clean the dojo floor before and after training.

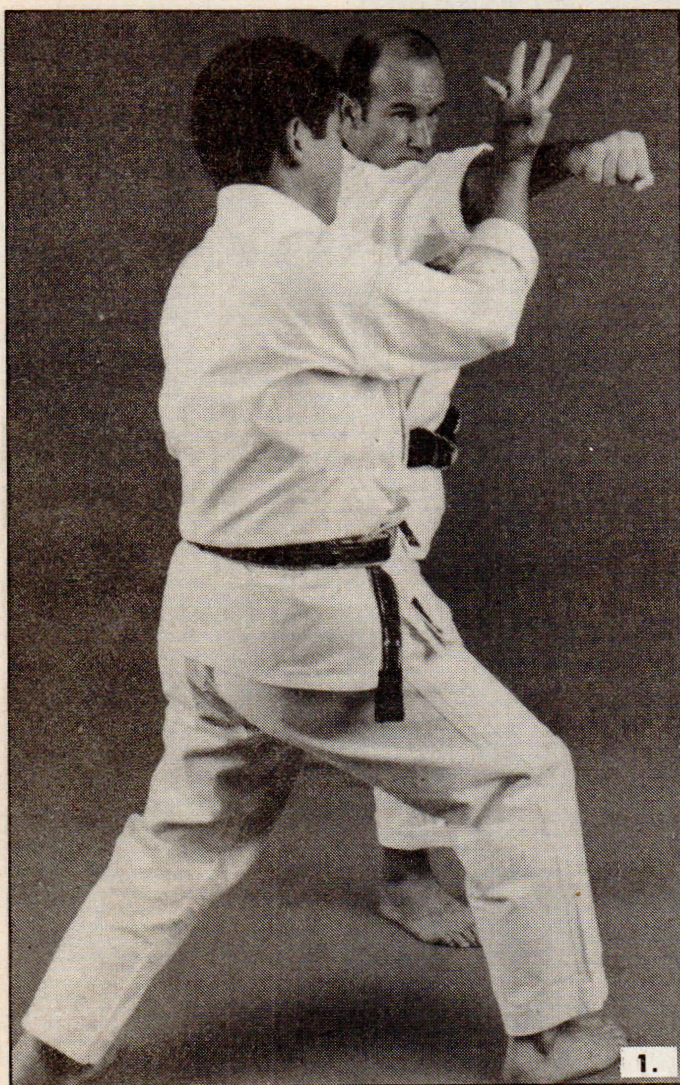
Summer time in Japan is very hot and another of our jobs consisted of taking a cold towel and a cup of tea to the senior student during breaks in training. I suppose we were rather like slaves! I remember that as a second year student, I was so relieved when new recruits join-

Photographs by Sylvio Dokov





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ed to take my place looking after the seniors.

I spent so much time at karate that I scarcely had time for my studies! It was karate-karate-karate all the time, so it's not surprising that a lot of students dropped out.

Each year, about 150 new recruits joined the club, though the dojo didn't have anything like that sort of capacity. Every senior student realised that and the first training session was always very easy with all the sempais being very kind to us and we thought "This isn't so bad!" The second session wasn't so bad either, though it was a little bit harder. On the third day they said: "Ok, now we're going to teach you manners, etiquette and discipline and by the end of the week, we started free-fighting. We hardly knew anything! They used us literally as human punchbags and the following week, they asked how many students wanted to leave. Before they could leave, however, they all had to fight the fifteen to twenty black belts!

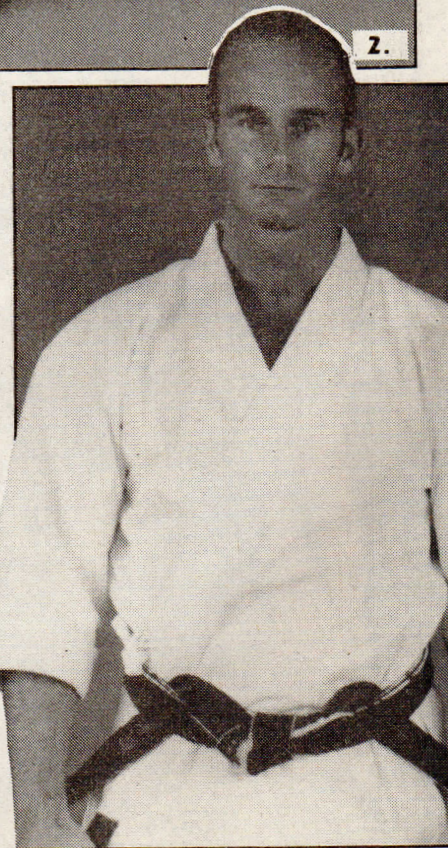
So after three months, only about thirty students remained from the original one hundred and thirty. Ninety-five percent of those who survived the first six months generally stayed with the club until they finally left university.

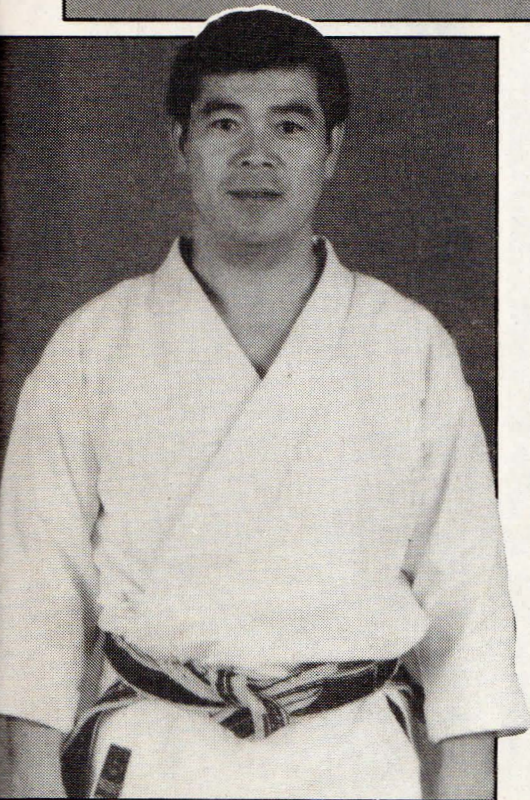
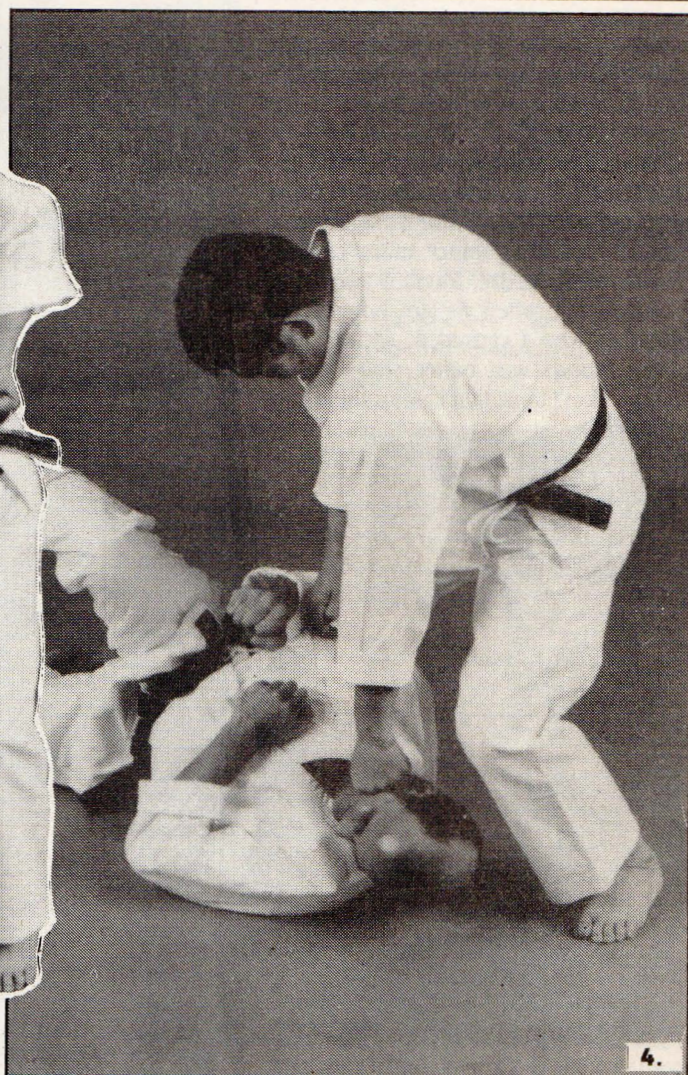
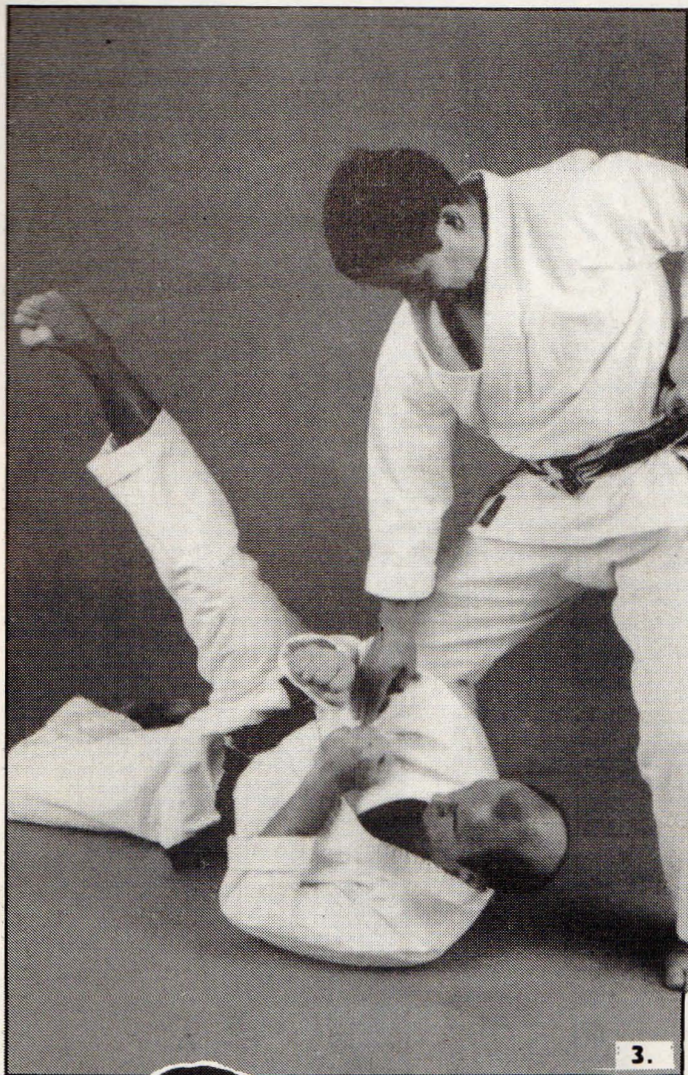
Anyway, I gained my first dan in October 1962 after 3½ years of training.

PAUL CLIFTON: Had you used to enjoy kata?

SENSEI SAKAGAMI Although we all practised kata from an early stage, we didn't fully understand what we were actually doing. We just followed the seniors like children following their parents - doing what we were told. Even so, ku shanku was my favourite and I didn't bother so much with the others.

You see, as a younger man I was mainly interested in improving my punching power and speed to help me fight, because that was why I joined karate. Wado has always built upon kata in order to go into kumite and compared to other





styles, we have very many two-men techniques.

PAUL CLIFTON: Did you take part in many competitions?

SENSEI SAKAGAMI No, only about three official ones each year, plus one or two other open competitions between different schools. We used to have special training sessions before these events and some of these were so hard that a couple of students wanted to escape. I remember one crying for his mother!

Wado ryu is very well suited to competition because it emphasizes relaxed and fast moves. Mawashigeri was always my personal favourite technique, along with ushirogeri and left hand counter punching.

I always found Goju Ryu students a bit difficult to fight - they were awkward because of their short nekoashi stances. It was easy to tell which school the various fighters came from because Shotokan stances were always very long

and low whereas Goju Ryu people favoured short, upright stances. Nowadays, all the fighters look exactly the same!

PAUL CLIFTON: Did different styles ever come together to train?

SENSEI SAKAGAMI Some times our university club would meet with others of different styles to take part in what we called a kokan geiko (it means 'friendly training exchange'). At these, we used to compare techniques to see how the other styles performed them. That was the idea, but in reality, there was very strong rivalry and we were told "During tomorrow's free fighting, do not take one step backwards - because if you do, we'll be waiting for you with a shinai!" What a friendly training that turned out to be.

PAUL CLIFTON: You spoke of the mental approach to training: did you practise much meditation?

SENSEI SAKAGAMI No, we hardly practised mokuso at all, though we often knelt for long periods - up to two hours

on a hard floor. However, that wasn't to meditate - it was a punishment because one of the junior members had made a single mistake, or perhaps hadn't turned up for training!

Physically and mentally that was the hardest thing I remember about training because even though we Japanese were used to kneeling (much more so than Westerners), we still found it agonising!

After that, when we got hold of the member who'd caused it, we told him "You bloody well better shape up or else!" I don't think that kind of thing hap-

pens any more - those days are long gone.

In theory I can understand the thinking behind punishing the group for the individual's mistake because in the military, if one person makes a mistake he can cause the death of the whole unit.

But I want to make it clear that just because the particular club I went to did things like that, it doesn't mean that all Japanese people generally behave in that way! I remember that when they found out about it, some Japanese people criticised the way the club operated. This was especially the case with older Japanese who remembered the way senior soldiers treated juniors in The Second World War, and they didn't like that militaristic sort of training.

PAUL CLIFTON: Were any of the seniors worse than the others?

SENSEI SAKAGAMI I remember one who was much harder than the others, yet outside of the club he was always very kind to us. If he met us in the town he would always ask whether we were hungry and take us for a meal or

for a drink. He was hateful in the dojo but apart from that, we loved him!

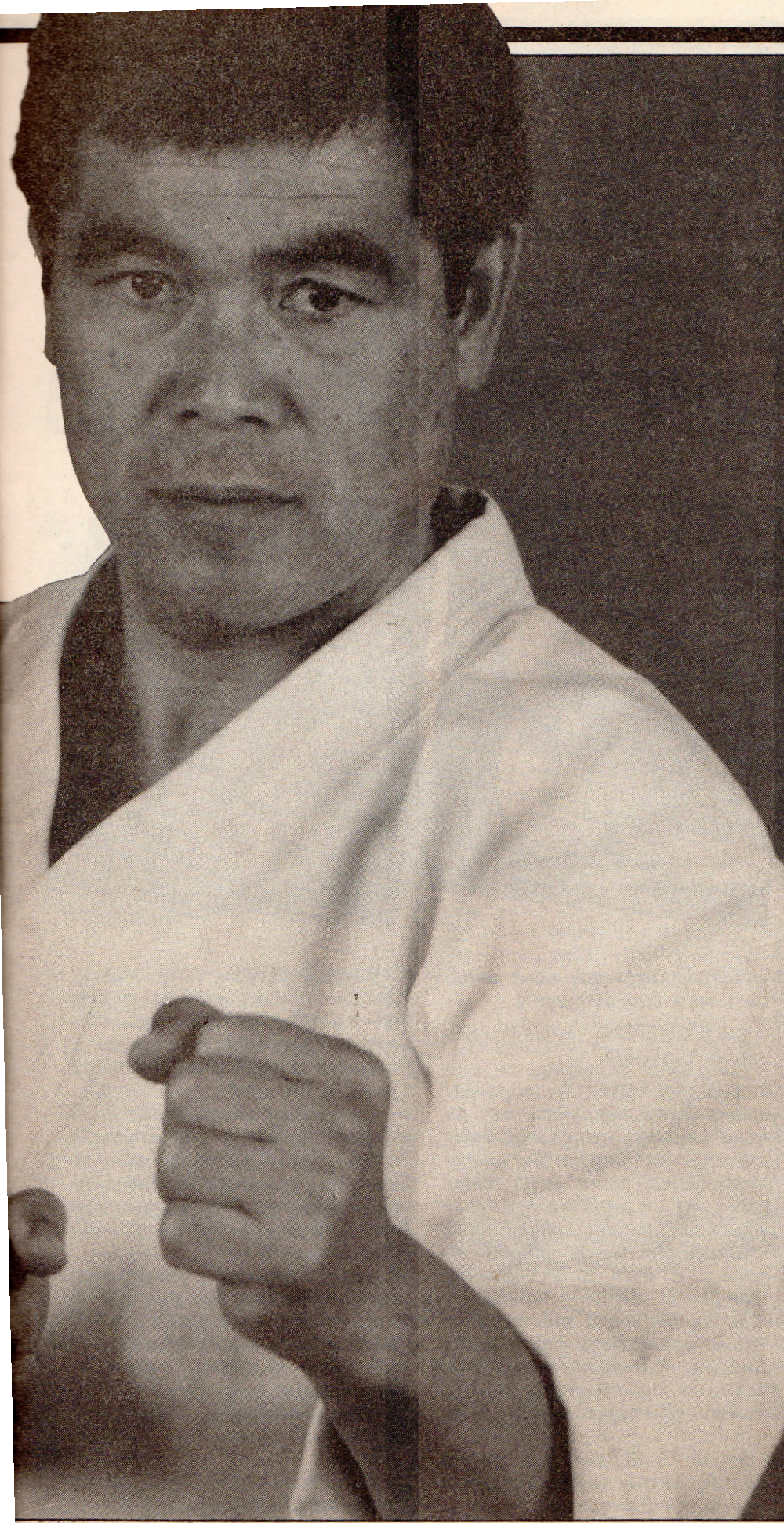
There were many such cases where a truly nasty senior would turn out to be a really nice person outside of the dojo.

PAUL CLIFTON: When did you first come to Britain?

SENSEI SAKAGAMI November 1967. I graduated from university in March 1967 and found a job in a shipping company in Nagoya city but I quickly became fed up with it. At that time, Mr Tatsuo Suzuki had already been in England for around 2½ years, and he wanted more instructors to join him in Europe to help popularise karate there. One of my seniors asked me whether I was interested in going and I jumped at it! It was more or less perfect timing.

I came to London for a month to learn from Mr Suzuki how to teach. You see, I didn't know how to teach then, so I taught my first ever English class in the





Japanese fashion. I saw a student I thought was being lazy so I kicked him in the back and swept his leg. Afterwards Mr Suzuki explained to me that I shouldn't train them in that way. He said "This is not Japan! What would happen if none of them came back tomorrow? They are paying customers!" Such a thing hadn't occurred to me because in the university club, nobody paid (laughs).

PAUL CLIFTON: So what happened after Mr Suzuki taught you the correct way to teach Westerners?

SENSEI SAKAGAMI I went to teach in Germany. Mr Toyama had been teaching there but he wanted to move to Italy, so I took his place. I stayed in Hamburg, Nuremberg and West Berlin until May 1970, after which I came back to England.

I first taught in Birmingham and have been living in the West Midlands area for over 23 years now. I'm married to an English girl who has no connection whatsoever with karate and I have a twelve year old daughter who doesn't practise karate!

PAUL CLIFTON: Where was your first club?

SENSEI SAKAGAMI Actually I was employed by Mr Takamizawa and Mr Mike Haig. They were in partnership running a big wado karate group in the West Midlands affiliated to the then United Kingdom Karatedo Federation.

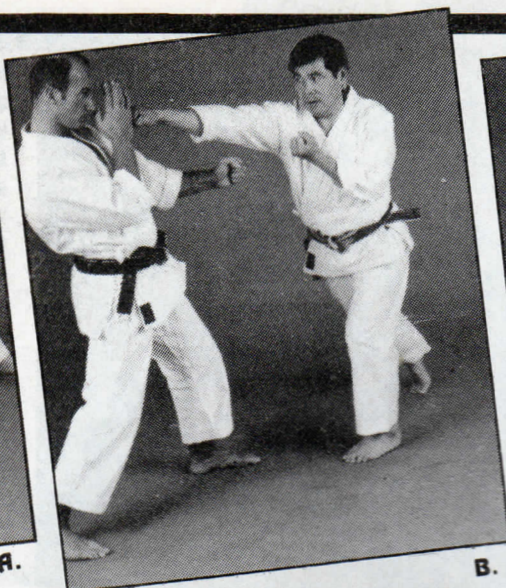
I taught at two clubs in Wolverhampton and one in Coventry, plus the Temple Karate Club in Birmingham. Each night I taught four classes, from beginners, through yellow and green belts to brown/black belts. Each class generally consisted of between 25/30 members so in any one night, I was teaching a hundred or so people. I was quite busy!

PAUL CLIFTON: How did the Japanese split in Wado affect you personally?

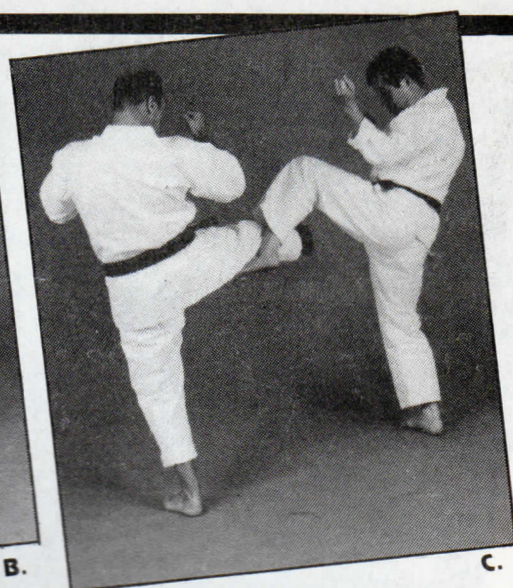
SENSEI SAKAGAMI As you know, during 1982 Grandmaster Ohtsuka's Wado Ryu group split away from the Wado Kai and that made things awkward for us Japanese instructors. We didn't know which path to follow so we discussed the matter and decided that Europe is Europe and Japan is Japan. So though Wado in Japan had split, we didn't have to split here and remained together for a while. Over the years, things became more difficult for us in a political rather than technical sense and some instructors



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- such as Mr Kono in Germany - went with the Wado Kai while others - such as Mr Shiomitsu - opted for the Wado Ryu organisation.

Mr Suzuki also chose the Wado Ryu until 1989, after which he decided to form his own group called Wado International. Mr Shiomitsu wanted to continue following Mr Ohtsuka's Wado Ryu and I decided to go with him.

Even so, Mr Suzuki was my first karate instructor and as far as I am concerned, he is still my sensei. In Japanese custom, once you have a teacher then that person is always your teacher - right or wrong.

Anyway I followed Mr Shiomitsu's group for a while but found the organisation and administration a little difficult. So I formed my association and now we have about forty-five clubs in England and eight in Wales.

Even so, I would ideally like all the Japanese Wado instructors to be in one

group, but being a professional instructor, I had to look after myself

PAUL CLIFTON: Have you any courses planned?

SENSEI SAKAGAMI We are going to hold a course and seminar with Mr Ohgami at Belper Sports Centre during October. Mr Ohgami is a very knowledgeable person about martial history and was asked to give a lecture about karate's history to European Karate Union delegates. Anyway our course and seminar is open to all karateka., regardless of style.

At our last course and seminar in February, Mr Ohgami showed us the same kata performed in four different ways according to the Wado, Shotokan, Goju Ryu and Shito Ryu styles.

PAUL CLIFTON: How would you like to see your organisation develop in this country?

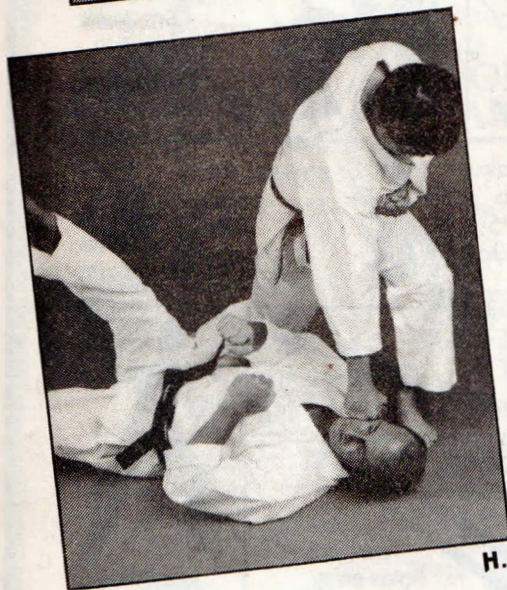
SENSEI SAKAGAMI I want to see our association become a little bigger than it is at present. Also I would like to form a Wado organisation in Europe so we can participate at international level. I hope to see our students doing well in all styles competition and perhaps be selected to represent Great Britain. We have two or three really good prospects at the present time - such as Keith Walker from Leeds, and Ashley Evans and Paul Jones from Wales. We hope they will go into Ticky Donovan's squad.

Next year we are going to Japan to participate in the Wado Cup. This has been my dream ever since I began teaching karate in this country. I also hope to write a book in the near future. Another ambition would be to see everyone in this country working together for the benefit of karate.

PAUL CLIFTON: What do you think about the E.K.G.B.?



D.



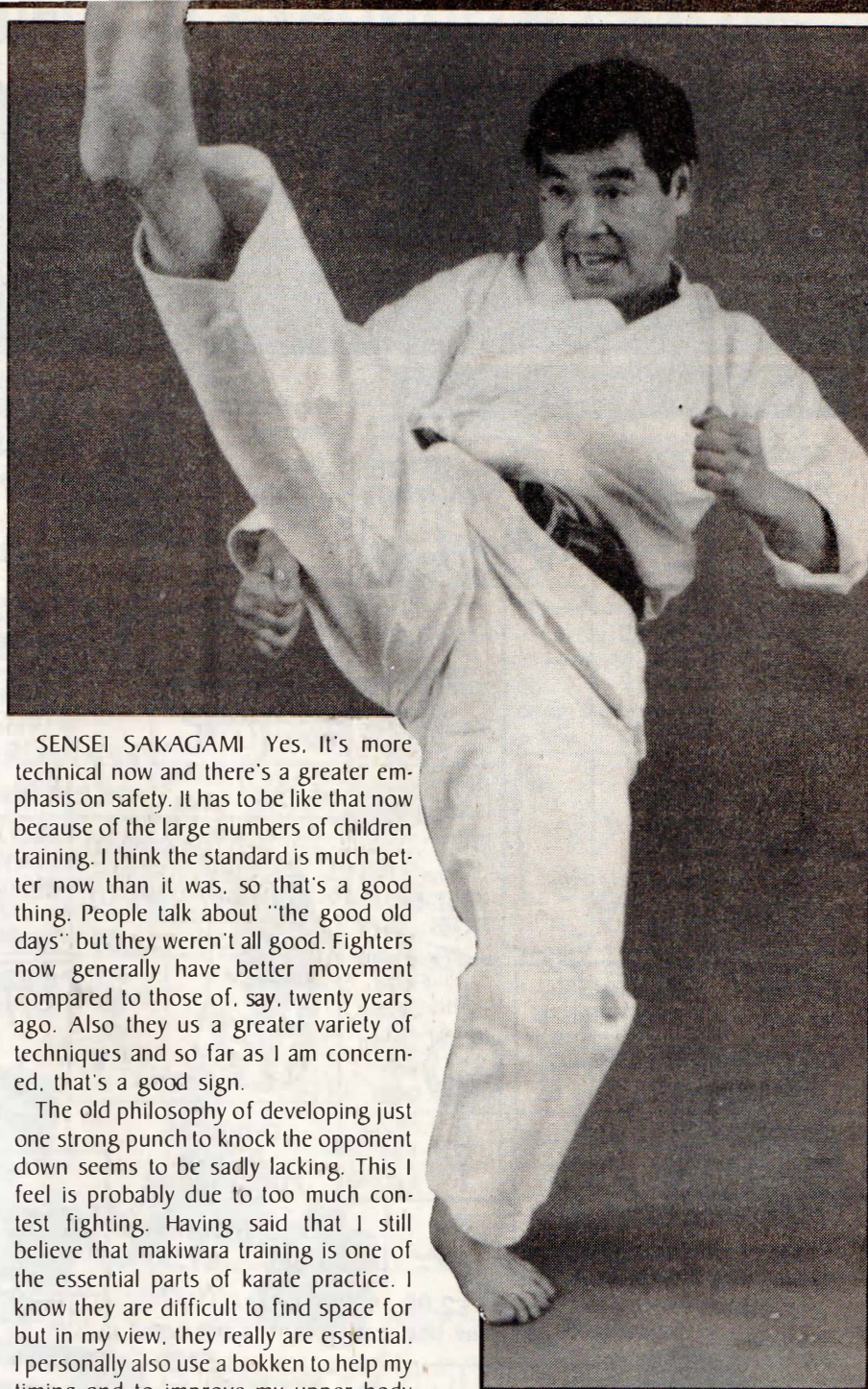
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SENSEI SAKAGAMI Well, I believe in governing bodies and though the E.K.G.B. has only been going for around three years, I believe they generally do a pretty good job. That's why I support them fully.

PAUL CLIFTON: Have you trained with any other Japanese karate instructors here?

SENSEI SAKAGAMI Yes, I've trained with Toiyama-sensei - he practises Shito Ryu. Also, when I was in my first year of university, Mr Shiomitsu was in his fourth year at Nihon University and although he didn't know me, I knew of him. He was quite a well known figure in university karate at that time and when I came over to Europe, I met him properly. (We trained together after that, though I see Mr Shiomitsu only occasionally now - perhaps at a competition or something like that.)

PAUL CLIFTON: Has training changed since the early days?



SENSEI SAKAGAMI Yes, It's more technical now and there's a greater emphasis on safety. It has to be like that now because of the large numbers of children training. I think the standard is much better now than it was, so that's a good thing. People talk about "the good old days" but they weren't all good. Fighters now generally have better movement compared to those of, say, twenty years ago. Also they use a greater variety of techniques and so far as I am concerned, that's a good sign.

The old philosophy of developing just one strong punch to knock the opponent down seems to be sadly lacking. This I feel is probably due to too much contest fighting. Having said that I still believe that makiwara training is one of the essential parts of karate practice. I know they are difficult to find space for but in my view, they really are essential. I personally also use a bokken to help my timing and to improve my upper body power.

PAUL CLIFTON: Has your personal approach to training changed over the years?

SENSEI SAKAGAMI Yes it has. Unfortunately we don't remain young and physical abilities begin to decline. When I turned forty, I realised that I no longer has the same speed or reflexes. On the other hand, I've improved my craftiness! I know exactly where to hit to hurt.

Also, I'm trying to develop my ki, though it's difficult to explain what ki actually is. Some people call it 'spirit'.

though it's much more than that. There needs to be spiritual and physical harmony in order to produce ki.

I'm particularly interested in aikijutsu, though there isn't anybody in the U.K. able to teach it. I'll probably have to go back to Japan.

PAUL CLIFTON: So finally, what then, to you, is the main objective in practising karate?

SENSEI SAKAGAMI So far as I am concerned, the object in practising is to make yourself a better person so you can make a better contribution to society.