

History of Karate

The Role of Master Hohan Soken in Hakutsuru (White Swan), the Most Coveted of Okinawa's Karate Techniques

by Don Lucas

*Above:
Hohan Soken
enjoys the serenity
of a garden in Shuri,
Okinawa, where
he often goes to
meditate.*

*Right:
The master works
out with his karate
heir, Fusei Kise.*



Possibly nowhere else in the world are there so many seventh-, eighth-, ninth- and 10th-degree black belts in karate — all of them authentic — as in the Ryukyu Island chain that sweeps southeastward from Japan to China.

Here, in this long necklace of islands, of which Okinawa is the principal jewel, modern karate was born and refined from a Chinese foot-fighting system first introduced 400 years ago. And a fertile seedbed for karate the islands proved to be, with *shorin-ryu*, *goju-ryu*, *uechi-ryu*, *Okinawa-te*, Okinawan *kenpo* and other systems sprouting and thriving.

But even with all those arts and experts, little is known elsewhere of Okinawan karate, which formed the basis for all modern Japanese and Korean karate styles, as well. Even in Japan, virtually everyone who learns the art today is training not under Okinawans but under other Japanese. And Koreans learned their karate not from Okinawans but from Japanese *sensei*.

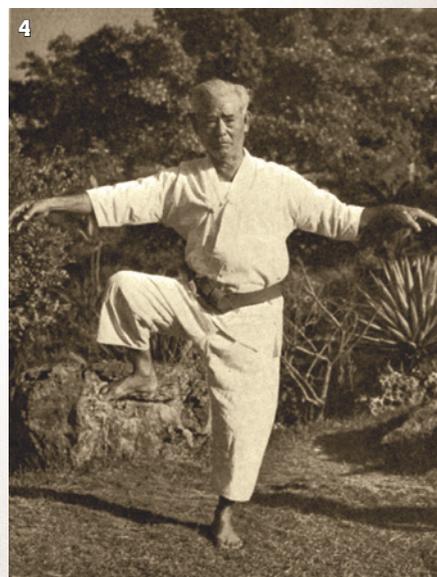
Thus, the outside world has gained knowledge of Okinawan karate mainly through teachers from Korea and Japan, two countries that have been aggressive in exporting their styles around the world. Okinawa, on the other hand, has sent very few of its masters abroad. (Notable exceptions include Gichin Funakoshi, who introduced karate to Japan in 1917 and thus opened the eyes of the world to this great fighting art.)



Hohan Soken has mastered many traditional karate weapons.

Interestingly enough, Americans form the only non-Okinawan group today to be studying the original karate arts of the islands directly under Okinawans on any kind of scale. That's because of the number of big American military bases set up here. Ever since the end of World War II, thousands of young American servicemen have studied Okinawan karate while stationed here, and some of the top U.S. karate men, like Mike Stone and Joe Lewis, have been followers of the Okinawan style.

One Okinawan who has had a lot to do with the karate

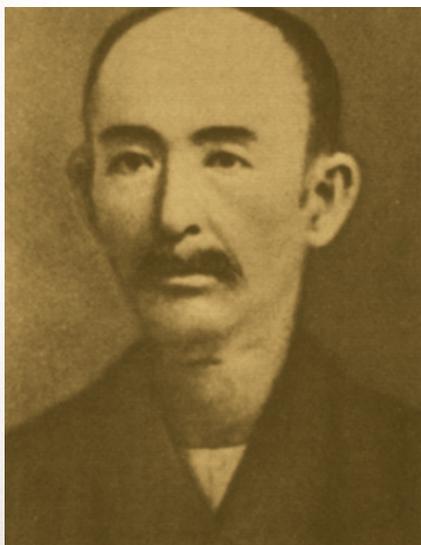


Hohan Soken assumes the ready position (1). He then executes a finger strike with his right hand while protecting himself with his left (2). Next, he does the naihanchi kata block (3) and assumes a stance from the white swan (4).

training of Americans is a still-spry 78-year-old master named Hohan Soken.* The almond-eyed Soken, who still retains a good thatch of silver-white hair, lives not far from Kadena Air Base. Airmen studying the art here during the past few years have been learning his brand of shorin-ryu karate, though they may not know much about Soken himself. Actually, he doesn't teach at the base, but his prize pupil, Fusei Kise, does. Kise will be the successor to Soken's school when the master retires.

The story of Soken's mastery of karate and ancient weapons has seldom been told outside his native Ryukyu. But it's instructive, for his life spans both the old and the new elements of Okinawan karate and provides a glimpse of a society long gone. I talked with him at length at his picturesque Okinawan home near the site of Shuri, the former capital of the old kingdom. Crumbling battlements and grass-grown moats are all that remain of the old palace where samurai once strode defiantly and the last of the Okinawan kings sat in rule over his feudal domain.

Soken says he practices and teaches some of the same techniques of armed and unarmed defense his samurai-warrior ancestors employed hundreds of years



Nabe Matsumura, Hohan Soken's teacher.



Hohan Soken and Fusei Kise use a white-swan technique while sparring.

ago. He's liberal and open-minded about his methods and doesn't claim his is the only true path to karate mastery. Instead, he readily concedes that there are many fine systems.

He was born in 1889 during a period of great upheaval and political unrest in the Ryukyu. The removal of the king by the imperial court of Japan and the destruction of the feudal system imposed many hardships on his family.

Although they were born samurai, he and his family had very little money after the purge and had to work in the fields to earn a living. As a boy, Soken was ridiculed by peasants because he was forced to work side by side with them despite his noble birth.

But the youth had one big advantage that would eventually lift him out of the field forever. His uncle, Nabe Matsumura, was one of the top karate masters in the Ryukyu. Matsumura told the wiry lad that if he could demonstrate the patience and control befitting his samurai heritage, he would tutor him in *bushido*, the way of the warrior. Soken gladly accepted.

Throughout his younger years, Soken had heard of



An old Okinawan karateka with modern ideas, Hohan Soken learned karate when it was still a closely guarded secret. He now teaches not only Okinawans but also an ever-widening audience of Americans.

the exploits of his samurai predecessors. For instance, his uncle's grandfather and teacher, Hohan "Bushi" Matsumura, was well-known. Matsumura had been a master in the Okinawan style of hand-to-hand combat and the use of traditional weapons. Soken says Matsumura was sent by Sho Tai, king of the Ryukyu, to the famous Shaolin Temple in China to increase his knowledge of the martial arts. (Whether he ever found the temple isn't known.) Upon his return, he became a personal bodyguard to the king.

Soken, warming to his tale, even claims that Matsumura fought a number of lethal contests to protect his sovereign. Although challenged frequently because of his high position, he would never oblige his antagonists except in absolute self-defense, according to Soken. He says Matsumura was never defeated and died a natural death. Today, more than a century later, the name of this samurai is still known in the Ryukyu.

With the death of the grizzled old warrior, his grandson, Nabe, was designated to carry on the teachings. In keeping with the samurai tradition, young Soken was chosen to be the next successor to the secrets of his ancestors.

At age 13, his training with his uncle began. Soken was instructed in karate and *kobujutsu* (use of weapons). Work-

ing in the fields during the day and studying the two arts in the evening constituted a rigorous training schedule that developed physical strength and mental discipline.

As the lad grew to manhood, his training was intensified. When he was 23, his sensei said he was ready to begin learning "real" karate. For 10 years, Nabe Matsumura had been drilling Soken in fundamentals; now he decided his student was finally ready to learn the ancient secret of *hakutsuru*, the white swan. According to Soken, many men coveted the knowledge of this technique, but Matsumura refused to reveal it because of its deadly potential were it to fall into the hands of unscrupulous men. Soken says that even Gichin Funakoshi had asked to be taught the white swan but was refused by Matsumura. He believes that Matsumura declined because he wanted to confine the knowledge of the deadly art to his family.

How much validity there is in all this talk of the white swan is a matter of speculation. Okinawans, like many Asians, tend to revere their ancestors and endow them with seemingly superhuman qualities. However, it also should be noted that karate systems, and specific aspects of these systems, have in fact been kept secret for hundreds of years.

Because the white swan is still cloaked in secrecy, attempts at explaining even Soken's rare demonstrations of the technique become difficult. He only volunteers an Oriental aphorism as an illustrative explanation. He tells of seeing a slender swanlike bird perched on a large rock in a roaring wind. Despite the force of the wind and sudden changes in its speed and direction, the bird maintained perfect balance and control. Perfect control of the body and mind in any situation, then, is one of the keys not only to the white swan but also to all Soken's karate.

To develop this control, Soken was instructed to mount a board just large enough to support his weight and then push it out into a pond. After much practice and concentration, he was able to perform *kata* on his precarious water-borne perch, and later he participated in *kumite* (free sparring) with his sensei, who was balanced on another such board. To reinforce his mastery of this control in virtually any situation, he trained in all kinds of weather.

Among the few other characteristics Soken will reveal about the white-swan technique is the importance of *ki*, the intrinsic energy that's much discussed but

seldom achieved. Another essential element, he says, is breath control, which should be practiced every day but never to exhaustion. A strong point of the white swan is the effectiveness of this method when it's used to turn a more powerful opponent's strength against him. However, it's ki that is the single most emphasized element, and mastery of it is essential and requisite to learning the white swan.

Soken has admitted to teaching some of these esoteric principles to contemporary karate colleagues, but only one man, Fusei Kise, has been told them in full.

Soken's only profession is the teaching of his life's work: karate and kobujutsu. At an age when most men would ordinarily bemoan their aching joints, he practices two hours a day and devotes two more hours to teaching. The students of his rigidly run *dojo* are distinguished by only two kinds of belts other than the distinctive red *obi* (belt) denoting Soken's 10th-*dan* proficiency. Novices wear a white belt until they earn promotion to first-degree black.

The old master also teaches other instructors. Occasionally, there are communication problems because the students speak many different languages; but Soken,

using his native Japanese, a limited amount of English and a perfect command of Spanish, manages to make his meaning clear. (He left the Ryukyu in the 1920s and lived in Argentina until the end of World War II, and it was there that he became fluent in Spanish.)

Although his duties at his *dojo* consume much of his time, he visits other schools to give advanced training throughout the island. One of his favorite stops during the week is the Kadena Karate Club in central Okinawa. The old gentleman admits he's fascinated by modern warplanes and the teeming activity at the base. Kise, chief instructor at the Kadena *dojo*, rigidly follows his master's principles in the teaching of his students.

Despite his heavy schedule, Soken still manages to participate in many Ryukyuan cultural activities, such as those sponsored by the Okinawan Historical Society. In addition, he serves as president of the Okinawa Kobujutsu Association.

Soken conducts karate demonstrations regularly to promote understanding of the art. He disagrees with the traditionalists who frown on demos and who still believe the art should be kept secret. However, he thinks this is an outmoded view that might have been true hundreds of years ago during the Sho dynasty. At that time, the people of the islands were forbidden to possess weapons; karate was indeed a secret not to be displayed and was only used in defense of one's life. Some of the techniques of unarmed combat, like *hakutsuru*, are still kept secret, but karate is known around the globe. Soken believes that if a demonstration is conducted properly, with its sole objective being the education of the audience in the true art and meaning of karate, no harm is done.



Fusei Kise wields a bo against Hohansoken's tonfa.

*** Note From the Editors: The original version of this article appeared in the May 1967 issue of *Black Belt*. Hohansoken was born in 1889 and was 78 years old at the time of that issue's publication. He died in 1982.**

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