

# True



When Katsumi Iba Sensei first came to Australia in 1974 after an invitation from an already flourishing karate organisation based in Brisbane, he was a 34-year-old 6th Dan known for rocking makiwara boards with his thunderous reverse-punch. Highly regarded in Japan as one of karate's hard men, his tough, traditional ways were readily accepted by his new Australian students — at least, those who could stand the pace.

Katsumi Iba began his training at the age of 17 in Himeji in Japan's west, which is famous for its heritage-listed castle, featured in the film *The Last Samurai*. He began training under Tani Sensei of the Shukokai school, but his principle teacher was Fujiwara Sensei, who was a student of Shito-ryu karate's founder, Kenwa Mabuni.

Master Iba remembers his early training as very hard and basic. There was no formulated sport-style sparring as it's practised today; instead they did *ippon-kumite* (one-step or combination training) or a more complicated form whereby each karate-ka used a combination, both in attack and defence. Technical mistakes resulted in many injuries and served to sharpen the senses for freestyle sparring, which was much more serious and realistic then, and was imperative to improve one's grade. To be promoted, students simply had to defeat a fighter of the grade they wished to attain. Iba Sensei was awarded 6th Dan at just 24 years of age.

Today, Shito-ryu is one of the most widely practised karate styles in the world, but in the 1970s it was still on the rise. Before coming to Australia, Iba Sensei was responsible for establishing Shito-ryu in South Africa, after

being invited to train their armed forces in the late 1960s. At the time, there was much racial unrest in the country and Iba was even declared a white man so that he would be allowed to teach karate during apartheid.

He was later invited to teach in France, at a time when he and a few senior Japanese Shito-ryu instructors (then under the Shukokai banner) were sent to expand the style around the world. They included Iba Sensei's friends, Senseis Shigeru Kimura (who also instructed in South Africa in 1965) and Yoshinao Nambu.

When Master Iba arrived in Australia with his family in 1974, the Aussies were keen to train with him, as he was then the highest graded karate instructor in Australia. The late Tsuji Sensei and Takahashi Sensei from Japan Karate Association, both then 5th Dan, were the only other highly graded Japanese instructors in Brisbane.

"Mr Iba proved a hard taskmaster in the dojo and many students could not take the pace," says one of his original students, Shihan Ross Roberts, 6th Dan, of Renbukan's Yamba NSW dojo. "Those who did went on to form their own clubs and many became champions at state, national and international levels. In those days, there

# Karate-Do

Renbukan Shito-ryu Karate's Master Katsumi Iba By Ben Stone | Images by Ross



weren't as many rules as today and there was a real combat content involved, so what Mr Iba taught was hard and true, and this enabled so many to do so well."

Prior to Master Iba's arrival in Australia, Roberts and his fellow students were with the Australasian Shukokai Karate Association under Master Tani. When Master Iba was invited to instruct in Australia for three years by Mr Lori Vann — who had met and trained with Master Iba in South Africa — the Australasian Renbukan Shito-Ryu Association was formed.

Although the Renbukan then had around 1000 students, the only ones from that time still training, other than Roberts, are Shihan Paul Hallas, 6th Dan, and Senseis Stan Prokuda, David Macgregor, Mike Jordan and Peter Bayliss, all ranked 5th Dan.

"The first year of training was basic and Kancho Iba instructed all classes at the honbu dojo and visited the regional dojos every three months. He trained very hard, and was a leader by example," says Roberts. "In the second year, many of the students had quit, as the training was too hard, and in the third year the association shrunk even further. I asked Master Iba about this and he said he had only three years to teach what would

normally take 10 years. He could have done much easier training and created greater numbers of students, but in the long run the standard would not have been maintained."

The hard and regular training was peppered with traditional Japanese etiquette, with students receiving regular invitations to Mr Iba's house after training for drinks and Japanese meals cooked by his wife, Reiko. For many, it was their first experience of Japanese hospitality and culture.

However, such accommodation was not extended in the dojo. The Renbukan's dojo-kun (creed), preaching effort, patience, moderation and respect, was only of use to those willing to learn the lessons of success through the heartache of failure and sacrifice.

"In the early 1970s, training with 'The Boss', as he was affectionately known, was simple: the only time you stayed down when you were hit was if you were unconscious," Roberts remembers. "The message was clear: the Renbukan martial art was about being truthful in training, accepting your own weaknesses and acknowledging that survival was up to the individual. Each person was responsible for honing their own skills through hard and regular training, until

personal safety was achieved through the mastering of the art."

Stan Prokuda Sensei has similar memories of Master Iba: "His advice to nearly all problems was just keep going... keep training. His life-lesson was, break barriers, whether mental or physical; you must do this to understand the power and the concept of karate.

"When we first found a dojo in Brisbane city, it was in the darker, more obscure part of town and we christened it 'The Dungeon', as it had a cement floor and cement pillars through the training area. Master Iba said, 'This is okay; if you fall, keep your tongue tightly closed in your mouth and your chin tucked into your chest' — because this would avoid injury in our first lessons of break falling without mats. The cement pillars were our enemy, and we must always know where our enemy is."

Luckily, among the skills that Master Iba passed on to his students were methods for treating injuries, including manipulation of joints and realigning broken noses. Hurt egos, however, were matters for each individual to deal with on his own.

"Master Iba treated training sessions very seriously, and occasionally fought with



us to demonstrate what he was trying to teach us," Prokuda remembers. "Especially his impenetrable defence-and-counter, his attacks were generally very measured and well controlled. He disliked arrogance and egotism immensely and regularly gave out 'medicine' to those who needed to be brought down to earth during these fights."

"The philosophy of this self-disciplined and shy man was that what happened in the dojo stayed in the dojo," adds Roberts. "There was no place for grudges, arrogance or precious personalities. There was little sympathy for self-inflicted injury through disregard for one's own safety. This was hard for many people who joined the dojo for sport or entertainment and, of course, there was a high student-turnover, but those who stayed and endured developed a lifelong love of the art, and many went on to be very successful in their individual pursuits."

Paul Hallas Shihan, now Australian Chief Instructor for Renbukan, also has fond memories of training at the Dungeon, when he would travel up to Brisbane from the Gold Coast for the 'Fight Nights'.

"In those days, FAKO (now the Australian Karate Federation) was virtually the only form of competition available. Point-fighting with two wazari (half-points for a good technique) or one ippon — a good technique that would have disabled the opponent should it have been completed — you had to be very sharp to win," he remembers.



Master Iba training in the mid sixties with Shihan Fujiwara.



Master Iba with Ross Roberts.

**"We commenced training with Kancho Iba and it was not long before we asked him to hit the makiwara board. Sure enough, it went back and touched the wall like it was hit with a sledge hammer."**

"I was a young Shodan in Shukokai before we brought Mr Iba over to Australia and I thought I knew what fighting was about. Then came Master Iba. His reputation as the hard man in Renbukan was no lie. We started a bout with an opponent and scored a nice point, but there was no 'Yame!' (stop). This was our introduction to dojo fighting — continuous, hard, flowing karate. It was you or the other guy, so you fought hard."

"Because of his power, Master Iba was strict on contact to the face, and one student was always striking the head, so Kancho stopped the class, and made everyone face the brick walls and reverse-punch, hard and fast to his count. If you punched too short, you were in big trouble, and if the punch was too long, then your knuckles knew it. So then everyone knew to focus their technique. I still use this method to teach focus to my students today."

Aside from the brick wall, toughening the knuckles on the makiwara board was an integral part of training in the early years, and at the time no-one around could match the power of the slightly built Master Iba's reverse-punch. Roberts recounts that around this time, Tsuji Sensei invited Master Iba and Takahashi Sensei to his dojo to show the power of his front-fist punch — which was highly regarded by those who knew him — on his makiwara board. Tsuji Sensei proudly pounded the board, almost getting it back to the wall, then invited Master Iba to show the power of his reverse-punch. He did, then apologised for the damage he had just caused to the dojo wall. Needless to say, there were no more demonstrations after this.

Roberts recalls that he and other senior students were at a loss to explain the elusive nature of Iba's power, and those who continued training made it a lifelong journey to find the secret, though few ever did.

"The makiwara board was quite a novelty, as no one really knew what it was for, except for taking skin off your knuckles and hurting your fist. None of the Black-belts could get the board to touch the back of the wall when striking it, no matter how hard we tried," remembers Roberts. "We commenced training with Kancho Iba and it was not long before we asked him to hit the makiwara board. Sure enough, it went back and

touched the wall like it was hit with a sledge hammer. Everyone had renewed interest and thought this skill could be passed on by simply training with the man. Sadly, this was not the case and it was back to the ice packs to soothe our sore knuckles for many years to come."

Roberts says he eventually discovered Master Iba's secret, but only after following him to Japan when he returned there in 1977. During his visit to Japan, Roberts was shocked to discover that Master Iba was the exception to the rule and that very few of the Japanese senior Black-belts could produce such devastating power. From then on, Roberts began to look much more closely at his teacher's technique.

"He was the picture of precision when doing his basics and his kata and I realised that he would train and train until he got it exactly right. I noticed that there was no real difference between his basics and his kata technique. Most people relax when doing kata and the movements take on a dance-like characteristic; with Kancho Iba, his kata could only be described as combat-style," says Roberts. "His kata was war, and the others were peace. After he had done a kata a few times, he was exhausted, such was the level of effort and intensity. Timing and breathing control also played a major part in his training. When each movement finished, there was no motion. It was like there was an explosion and then nothing. I realised that this was the technique of total joint-lock on impact. Or as Master Iba put it, 'On impact must be weight change; must be shut down your body.'"

However, it would be another five years of makiwara training before Roberts would start to develop the explosive power possessed by his instructor. "By this time I was frustrated, as I felt I'd followed his instructions to the letter," Roberts explains. "I'd looked at all the old super-8 movies from our earlier training days and could not understand what was wrong. Where was the power? At this time I was also reading the Bible and not making much sense of that either, until the penny dropped one day and I realised that the message was right but my interpretation was wrong."

"This understanding changed my life. The answer was with me all along, yet I hadn't

understood it. You can never get power out of a technique unless all the pieces of the puzzle are correct. We'd been taught by a master instructor with English as a second language, so explanations were brief. He always said to keep the back heel on the ground, the front knee over the toe — 'stomach tension, eye level straight, bite the teeth down hard, lock the striking arm joint, pull the other arm back, and finally, lock the shoulder joint down'. I had most of these right except the last one, the shoulder joint. I was locking it before impact, instead of after impact, and therefore could never generate the speed or acceleration required to produce high impact.



Master Iba with senior instructors, Ross Roberts and daughter Hayley.

Master Iba's advice all came together for Roberts in the early 1990s, some 18 years after his first attempt, when he hit the makiwara at his home in Yamba and effortlessly sent it slamming back against the brick wall of his house, causing it to vibrate.

"I got so excited that I kept hitting it harder and harder, eventually injuring my right forearm, as it was not strengthened enough for the new-found power, and it took about six months before I could use it properly again," he remembers.

Master Iba has similarly inspired countless karate-ka world-wide, having guided the development of many other dojos in Japan, South Africa, France, New Caledonia, the USA, South Pacific Islands and New Zealand. The Australasian Renbukan Karate organisation regularly invites Kancho Iba, now 8th Dan, to visit our shores in an effort to maintain the high standard he set 30 years ago.

"The following of the 'do', or 'way', is evident in this man," says Roberts. "Mr Iba's recent Australian and South Pacific visit showed a man who is not only a master of karate but a hard-working, dedicated athlete who gave his best for the student. He took all classes personally, and at 66 years of age, he still demonstrated the speed, power and agility evident some 30 years ago in Australia.

"When training in New Caledonia recently, we had time to sit and chat about our different cultures and the similar problems the youth are experiencing in different countries, including Japan — what causes these problems, and what role karate training can play in improving society. He told me he believed that part of the problem is because people lose their way and don't follow any doctrine that builds the ethics of good character, and therefore are continually looking outside themselves to solve their problems, rather than inwardly.

"He went on to explain how karate's principles of honour and loyalty are the cornerstone of any true martial art; without these qualities, a student or teacher cannot learn. He made a strong point of differentiating between martial arts that are a commercial business, and martial arts that are developed through hard training and the dojo-kun.

Roberts can still recall one of Master Iba's most poignant, life-lessons: "Karate-do means the way of the empty hand. This is the peaceful way of the warrior. Humility, good manners, proper etiquette are the best weapons to ensure a peaceful life. Street trouble will not come at a time of your choosing, and therefore your training and attitude will decide your fate. Avoid trouble where possible, and train hard." **BLITZ**

# Renbukan Karate

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# Shito-Ryu