

Axe-kick, Anyone?

Brisbane-based Kyokushin karate legend Sensei Gary O'Neill recently made a comeback to full-contact fighting at the NZ Open, bringing out the battering axe-kicks and fast footwork he was famous for before retiring from competition 10 years ago. Now, with a tournament record boasting the best ever Kyokushin World Tournament result achieved by any fighter from the South Pacific region, plus two runner-up trophies from the renowned All Japan Championship tournament, O'Neill has opened his first dojo, keen to pass his skills to the next generation of Kyokushin karateka. The 3rd Dan spoke to *Blitz* about his return to action.

INTERVIEW BY BOON MARK SOUPHANH

Garry, you've just opened a new dojo in Brisbane. What's it like to now run your own Kyokushin school?

It's great. I've sort of always taught karate since I was 15 or 16 years old, so it's not really anything new for me, but it's great to have my own club. I'm really quite relaxed when it comes to teaching my classes, and everyone seems to be having fun.

I believe that because of my unique style of fighting, I have some valuable insights and philosophies on karate and full-contact fighting. I have always been happy and willing to share

my knowledge with anyone interested in learning.

Over the years, karate has had a large influence in my life and has brought me many wonderful friendships, experiences and opportunities. I have always wanted to give back, so I felt that opening a dojo and sharing my knowledge would allow me to do this.

You have spent a large part of your career competing all over the globe. What are some of your most memorable fights, and why?

My most memorable fights are the ones I had at the World Tournament in 1995. That was my first World Tournament and definitely the largest international

tournament I had ever fought in. It was also an open-weight tournament, and probably only the first or second open-weight tournament I'd ever competed in. Being an international tournament, it was a huge event and I had seven or eight fights all up for the whole tournament. I managed to come fourth. That was probably my most memorable tournament because of all the wonderful people I met. I was also the first person from Australia to compete in it. All the fights from the final 32 onwards were great fights because the competition was all very good. I remember having really tough fights with a few of the Japanese and a Brazilian fighter.

What was it like fighting in Japan? Is it different to fighting locally?

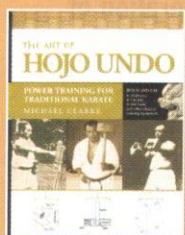
In Japan, karate is viewed very differently. It is part of their culture. You'll go to a big tournament and have probably 6000 to 10,000 people come to watch. They're big events and the crowds are similar to that of small football games over here in Australia. They're really into it over there, and everyone understands it, whereas here, you'll be lucky to have a few hundred spectators. Obviously, the big tournaments over there attract bigger numbers, so the level of competition is also higher. As a non-Japanese, you also have to work harder for the win, as sometimes the judging

"I believe that the fundamental principles behind punching, kicking and footwork can be applied to any martial art. They all have the same basic elements, it's just the philosophies and attitudes that differ."

O'Neill shows his accuracy in Japan



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5 MINUTES WITH GARRY O'NEILL

can be a bit biased, but I guess that is just a part of it.

Have the post-Oyama splits in Kyokushin diluted the competition field, with each organisation having their own events?

I guess the politics have ruined things a bit in regards to what the organisation used to be. It was once quite strong, but it has now become quite diluted. When people from different organisations can't fight each other, it makes things really hard. Sometimes you'll get national competitions with five or six competitors, so it makes it impossible to determine who the best fighter is. I don't think this is going to change, as there are a number of people who have their own ideas on how they think things should be run. In the end, it comes down to people and their egos.

Now that you aren't competing as often as in the past, how does your training and diet regime differ from then and now?

I guess when I was younger I used to eat anything and get away with it. I definitely eat better now than when I was competing and training harder. I've been really into CrossFit lately, and that has really had an impact, as they do have a focus on a light, disciplined diet. Back in 1998, I started really getting into the Zone diet when I was training in the United States. I picked up a book about it and have eaten better ever since.

What are your goals for the future in martial arts?

In regards to the dojo, I would love to pass my experience on to my students and hopefully, with their help, bring Kyokushin in Australia back to what it was. I've noticed recently that the numbers are down, and I really want to help it build back up again. I'd like to get more people into the organisation and start building competitions back up too. For me, this is a big part of my future in martial arts. ■

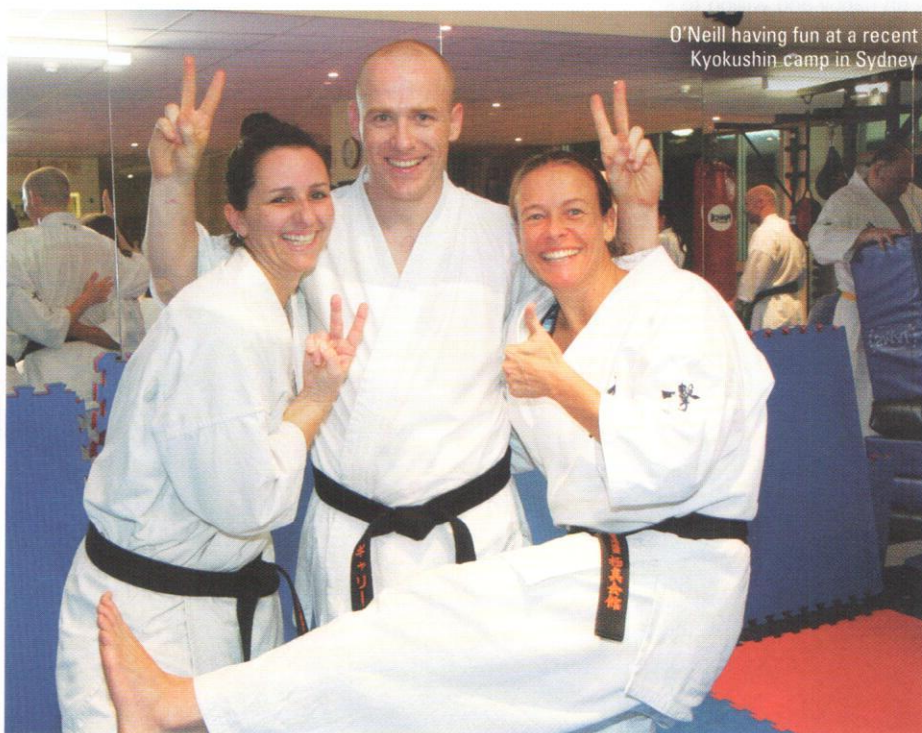
The Fighter's Tips

Sensei O'Neill on how to get over first-competition nerves:

Whenever you compete, you're always going to be nervous to some degree. I have always done a lot of visualisation; this goes a long way to teaching yourself how to remain calm. I like to visualise myself in the fight, and what I plan to execute. This will help you stay calm.

On how to avoid training injuries:

It really comes down to recovery and rest. Overtraining can often lead to unnecessary injuries. It's always tricky to tell whether you're overdoing it but it comes down to listening to your body. Your training has to be incremental; you can't go too hard from the get-go. Recovery is pretty much just warming down correctly, stretching and doing other things like massages and trigger-point release.



O'Neill having fun at a recent Kyokushin camp in Sydney