

BLITZ

AUSTRALASIAN MARTIAL ARTS MAGAZINE

What You Don't Know About Kata
Long-lost karate secrets uncovered

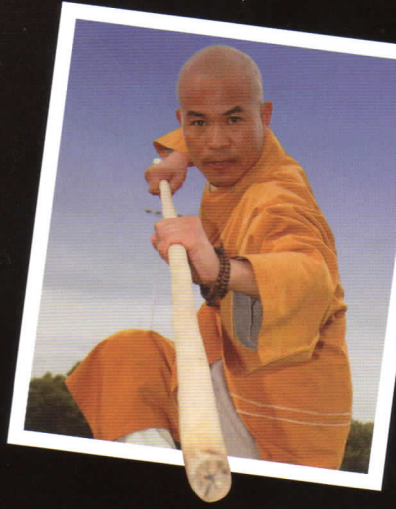


Don't Get Choked!
Tips for surviving the stranglehold

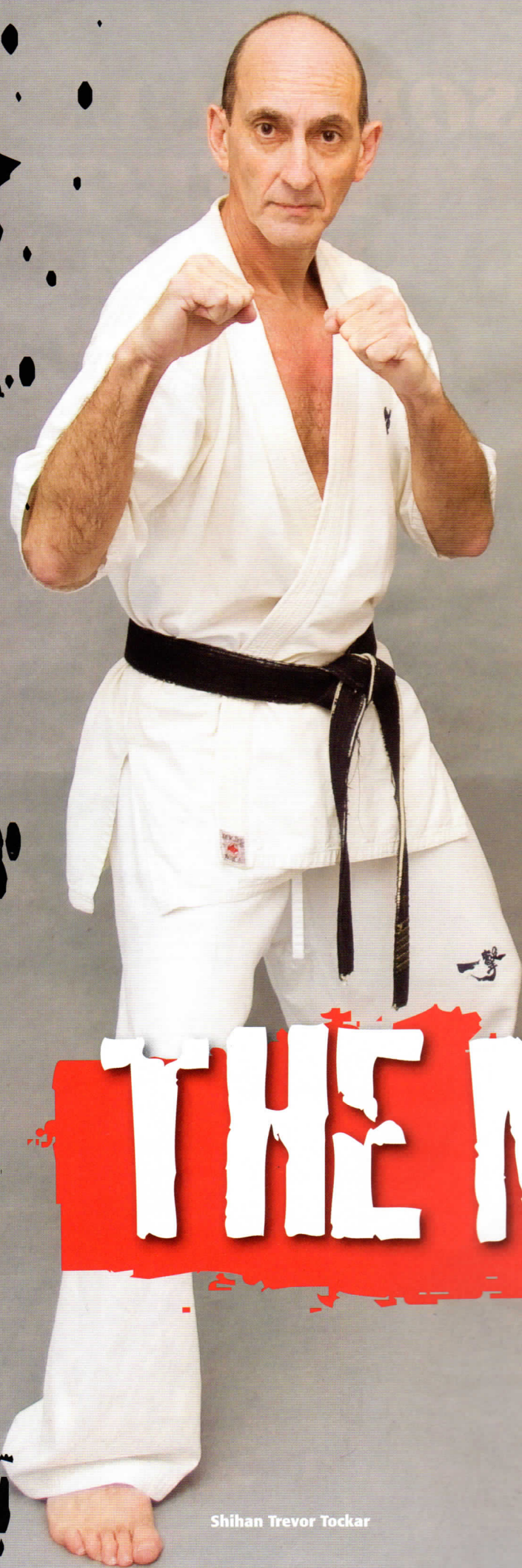
Shaolin Life
Inside the Temple with a warrior monk

STARTING FROM SCRATCH

The kung fu master who became a karate novice



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Shihan Trevor Tockar



Sigung Rick Spain

THE MASTER

Grandmaster Rick Spain's return to Kyokushin

Even today, when the martial arts seem more open than ever and cross-training is trendier than trucker caps, Sigung Rick Spain is still a rare find. A master of his chosen art, Wing Chun kung fu, and a martial artist of nearly 40 years' experience, he has chosen to also become a student of a completely different style to the one he's dedicated most of his life to. But it's not the first time he's begun a new journey in such a fashion.

STORY BY BEN STONE
IMAGES BY CLIVE GIRDHAM

Sigung Spain is no stranger to cross-training, having long dabbled in kickboxing and, in more recent years, taken a serious interest in the grappling arts. So much so that, in the years since starting as a White-belt in Brazilian Jiu-Jitsu, he has now reworked his Wing Chun syllabus to include grappling and ground-fighting. He has held a Purple-belt in BJJ under BJJ Australia head John B Will for over three years now — "I hope John is reading this!" Spain quips — and is aiming to achieve a Black-belt in the not-too-distant future.

"I love the grappling — can't do without it. We have successfully integrated it into all aspects of our game. We are a better and more

a mutual friend, was asked to come and do a class with Tockar's Black-belts around eight months ago. "I had a great time and it really inspired me to get back into Kyokushin," says Spain. "I guess it's unfinished business and I like taking on new challenges."

Unfinished business, in that before Spain discovered Wing Chun kung fu in his late teens and left his New Zealand home to train under Grandmaster William Cheung in Melbourne, he had trained in Kyokushin for just over a year at his local Scout hall. Aged 13, he'd been inspired to take it up by his uncle, NZ Kyokushin legend Gary Spears. The training, however, was inconsistent due to the long distance his instructor had to travel, and not

That reinvention sees Spain sweating it out in Tockar's Saturday morning Kyokushin class each week. Though usually an open class with visitors from other styles and less strict adherence to the syllabus, says Tockar, "Since Rick has come into it we're kind of taking it back to more traditional Kyokushin, so he can have that opportunity of learning [it]."

Though both Spain and Tockar agree that Spain will need to invest more time in classes as he gets closer to his Black-belt grading, he knows it won't be easy given he's already flat out running his own full-time school and dabbling in real estate investments.

"I do three classes a day and I'll train all three classes with

Surely it can't be easy, given he's already a master in his own right — and already in possession of a much broader skill set than most?

"Not really, I mean the way they're doing it, they're being very generous to me. I'm sort of at the head of the class with Trevor and conducting a warm-up sometimes, or just being a part of the warm-up, and then, because everyone drills together, you're in the mix. What they're been very good at is giving me some extra time working on kata."

And how have his fellow Kyokushin students reacted to the master in their midst?

"They probably think I'm mad," he jokes. "It's been fantastic, they have been very generous. I've been having a ball; we all just go hard and have fun. I've learned that you can find friends in the martial arts, regardless of style or cultural differences. It's been very enriching."

In turn, Tockar says of his Grandmaster-student, "I think he's a brilliant martial artist, but he comes in with such a modest and open-minded approach that it's been an absolute breath of fresh air. It's been very stimulating for us as well; it ups the whole 'ante' in the class. I find it quite stimulating and in some ways almost a little bit intimidating — a guy of his status in the class evaluating everything I say and do, which you do automatically, although he's not in any way critical. He's just so positive and so enthusiastic."

As for the reaction of others in his martial arts peer group, Spain shows little concern whether it's positive or otherwise. "My grappling buddies probably think

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complete art because of it," says Spain, who has also been building a team of Mixed Martial Arts fighters through his Combat Centres schools, with some success.

So why take on a traditional karate style, and why now?

It all started when Spain, who met Sydney Kyokushin stalwart Shihan Trevor Tockar through

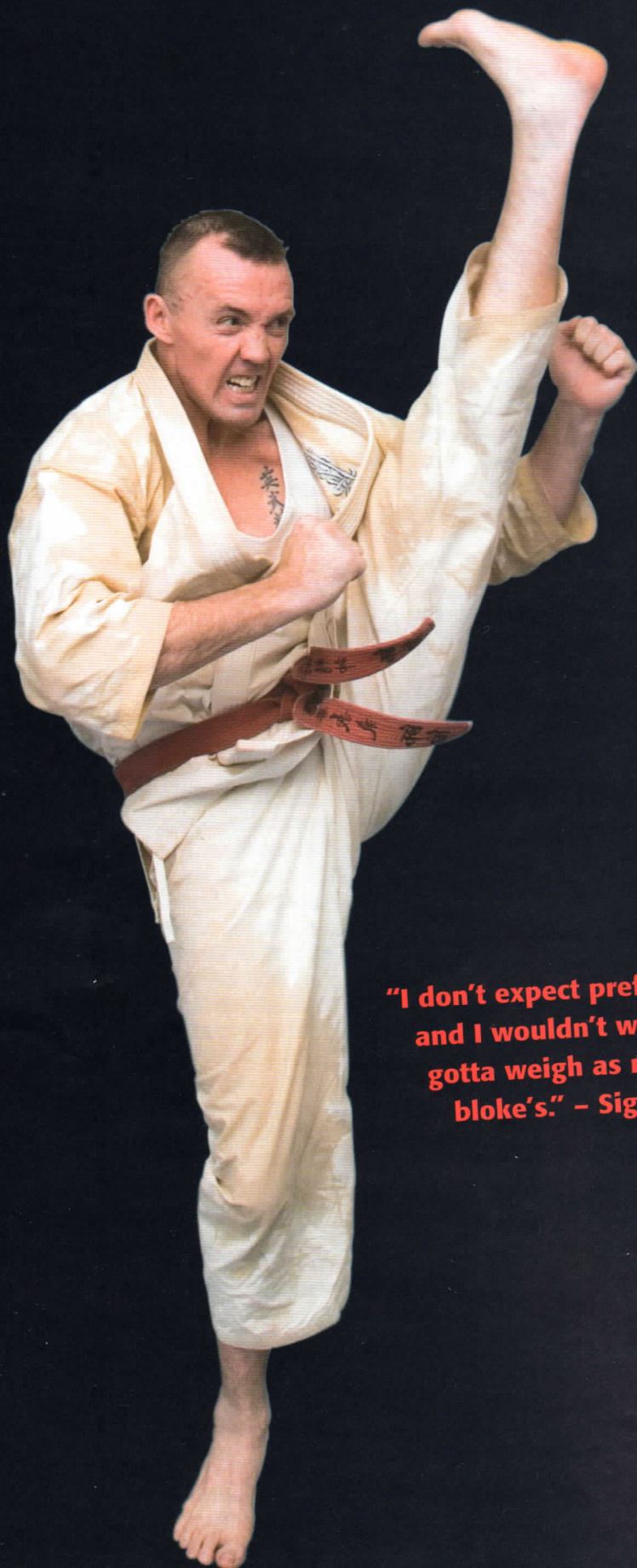
long after, Spain moved to Auckland and discovered Wing Chun.

Now in his late 40s, Spain has, in many ways, come full-circle.

"I've been training for what seems like forever, so taking on new challenges keeps me pumped," says the kung fu master. "I think you have to reinvent yourself every now and then to keep it fresh."

them. Plus I'll do my own training, because that's the discipline for me. If I can't keep it up, I'm not setting a good example," he says.

As fit as he is, the physical element of 'The Hardest Karate' has not been too difficult to deal with — but what about taking instruction from Shihan Tockar and other instructors at the school?



"I don't expect preferential treatment, and I wouldn't want it. Your belt's gotta weigh as much as the next bloke's." – Sigung Rick Spain

I'm mad for doing Kyokushin again," Spain muses, "but I was mad for doing BJJ, wasn't I?"

"I think if you can go from Wing Chun to BJJ, you can do anything. Because that takes you right out of your comfort zone — the finality of being choked or tapped. I took my [red] belt off when I was a White-belt doing BJJ, and I was being tapped by kids I'd never met before in my life. They just went, 'Who the hell are you? You're just a White-belt, here we go'. That was a humbling experience, but [ours] is a far better system because of it. You know the difference."

On the point of difference, Spain has found many between his weekly workouts and his Saturdays at Tockar's dojo.

"We [at Combat Centres] do a lot of bag work and they do a lot of kicking and punching in the air. It actually can be more taxing. There's an old saying in boxing: 'you waste more energy when you miss, than when you hit' — because you get no reactionary force. So I find their stamina is phenomenal. If you took them onto the grappling mat, you'd see a difference, but in the stand-up, they're tough as nails. They go all day. I mean, I don't know if they're hurting or not, but they're certainly not trying to let me know!"

Wisely, Spain too keeps his cards close when in the dojo, even though on a Saturday morning he's recovering from a tough Friday night training session of his own.

"I gotta back it up with a class immediately after; I don't finish 'til eight o'clock on Friday night. On Friday, they all rest, so they're all fresh by the time I get there. But that doesn't matter, you don't say anything — you just do it."

While equally taxing, Spain finds the sparring sessions at the two schools give him a different

style of workout due to variations in their rules.

"They don't punch to the head, [but] they kick to the head, which is good. They punch hard to the body and they give the legs a real workout with the low round-kicks... They won't punch to the head and that's fine — that just makes me work harder on other things. It's got me powering into the body better than I have done for a little while, so there you go."

The biggest difference Spain has noted in the Kyokushin classes is the instructors' participation in every element of the training.

"What I like is that in Kyokushin, everyone works together," he explains. "I think there's a really strong sense of belonging and the class drills as one and your instructors and your seniors are sweating bullets just like you. And the hierarchy is there, but it's almost invisible. We have seniors training with beginners, just to give them a bit of a boost."

The Wing Chun master explains that kung fu schools, on the other hand, tend to be "a little less structured, with people doing techniques at their own pace... The instructor usually comes out, sets the plan for the class, gets three or four instructors to help them and just wanders around — and to be honest I'd rather be sweating on the mat with my students."

While his experience in Kyokushin has led him to do more of the latter in his own classes, Spain believes that, overall, his system and Kyokushin already had more similarities than many would imagine, in part due to his own karate beginnings.

"I definitely feel that the work-ethic of Kyokushin has had an influence on my entire training life," says Spain. "They go hard, and I've always respected that. And as a Wing Chun system, we have a reputation for hard training and pressure-testing our system. We don't just take for granted something that's been in the syllabus for 100 years or 200 years, just because it's there. We take techniques and principles of Wing Chun and we see if they work. We do a lot of sparring and

we try to spar in as realistic an environment as possible — taking into the consideration general safety — and we've found that some things in Wing Chun that are still in the textbook just don't make it under pressure. So, we make modifications and we try to improve the game each day."

This admission raises an interesting question, though. While committed to Wing Chun, Spain is more freestylist than purist and has devoted himself to exploring other systems in an attempt to make his own more well-rounded, and to answer the self-defence problem as it evolves. Why, then, has he gone back to a system with arguably far more rigid parameters than those he broke away from in Wing Chun, and equally strict limitations in its skill-sets?

"You can talk a system up technically and say, 'On paper it works better, because of the mechanics of this...' but at the end of the day, it's got a lot to do with the guy in the gear — [his] fighting spirit and his work ethic," Spain reasons. "And it doesn't always boil down to stylistic differences, whether it's in the ring or on the mat. So I'm enjoying the difference. I guess it's 'cause I've had that small introduction to Kyokushin, I get the way they do things. And I think that's why I moved a little differently in Wing Chun."

Spain admits though, that he instinctively avoids doing certain things as they are done in Kyokushin, due to discoveries he's made in the decades of training gone before. "There are things, if you were being technical, you could say, 'I think this is better, or I think that is better', but I just go in there completely open-minded. I'm celebrating the difference between the two," he explains.

It also helps that Shihan Tockar — who Spain describes as "a great instructor and karateka, very devoted to his Kyokushin" — sees their training sessions as an opportunity to learn, as well as to teach.

"Every now and then Trevor will politely refer to me and say, 'Do you agree or disagree?' and we might come up with a slightly different variation, say, just in the

way we do a round-kick or side-kick, or whatever," Spain reveals.

"We tap into some of his knowledge; every now and then we have him take us on some groundwork stuff or stretching techniques; he shows us his ways of kicking," Tockar confirms, "but generally he's just training with us, learning the full syllabus and the way of Kyokushin."

Spain makes a point of "just being a part of the team and just letting it flow", but at the same time has been eager to share his own knowledge and does not hold back when asked a technical question. "I tell them exactly what I think — but more than anything, I was interested in helping them with some of the grappling skills."

He's been able to do this, he says, because of Tockar's good leadership. "What I've found with these guys is that they're open to some clinching and grappling work now, which I think is a real breath of fresh air. I'm now building a grappling blueprint for them. It's just refreshing to have these guys from such a strong structural background to say, 'We'd like to have a look'. I guess it took me a long time, and I guess it takes a lot of martial artists a long time, to get over that territorial problem — 'my school's better than your school; my style's better than your style'.

While Tockar has had experienced martial artists from other styles, generally karate disciplines, join his club before, this is the first time he's taken on a student as experienced and highly ranked as Spain. "Back in South Africa some fairly senior guys did join us, but that's a very different situation to what Rick has done," he says. "He's a main player in what he does, and he's not going to stop doing that. He's doing this as an auxiliary thing, but doing it in a very open-minded way and wanting to go through the whole gamut of things and get himself graded up to a Black-belt in Kyokushin. Particularly taking into account his status and his ability, I think it's quite incredible."

When other karateka have joined his school, depending on their level, they'd often simply have



Spain works his skills



Spain with Tockar's Saturday team



Tockar takes Spain through his paces

their prior grade confirmed once they know the syllabus, rather than starting again from scratch. However, Spain is not from another karate style — and besides, neither he nor the Kyokushin fraternity is interested in grades that come the easy way. Spain, for his part, wants to do everything by the book. Not that Tockar's team would have it any other way.

"Kyokushin is a very traditional style and we believe strongly in the proper etiquette and approach, because when you lose that everything starts falling apart," Tockar philosophises. "We don't go crazy — we're not wind up soldiers or anything — but all the etiquette, all the proper procedures are followed 100 per cent."

Spain addresses Tockar as 'sensei', and says he's actually enjoying the deeply entrenched discipline for which Kyokushin is known.

"I'll tell you one thing — I'm so impressed about the manners of these people," exclaims the Wing Chun master. "I run a pretty tight ship but we have a pretty easy-going relationship with all the students. [Tockar's group] have a great friendship base but, boy, their manners are impeccable. It's a real tradition for them, just to be well mannered and well presented, and it's really refreshing for me. BJJ is more relaxed, you know, and our Wing Chun, it's kind of half way between the two. These guys are so structured and so traditional, but I'm having a ball with them."

When he first joined Shihan Tockar's class, Spain was even prepared to put on a White-belt, but Tockar wouldn't have it. "When he trains with us he's quite happy to put on the white Kyokushin gi, and he was quite happy to stand at the back of the class with a white belt on, but I said 'that's not going to happen'," reveals Tockar.

Instead, over his Kyokushin gi Spain wears his Red-belt — "which we recognise and respect," Tockar adds.

In his own early years as a karateka, Tockar would travel to Johannesburg to train outside his own style, with the likes of Shotokan legend Stan Schmidt

Sensei, and since then has trained with top karate men from Goju, Shukokai and other styles whenever such opportunities have arisen. But when asked whether he could, or would, start over as Spain has done, Tockar isn't so sure.

"I haven't done what Rick's done, where I've actually committed myself to learning another style and getting graded in it. I've just practised with other people to supplement my own training."

As for Spain's efforts to grade in Kyokushin, "there's no way that's going to be something given to him," assures Tockar, who himself has been ranked 6th Dan for the past 13 years, and has no desire to be awarded additional grades simply "for long service".

"Rick is going to have to go through the full syllabus and the 40-man kumite, and the whole bit. Of course, the guys fighting him might be more intimidated than he might be — we'll have to make sure we've got some strong guys there to give him a strong test."

Spain agrees. Whether it's a Black-belt in Kyokushin karate or Brazilian Jiu-Jitsu, he says, "I don't expect preferential treatment, and I wouldn't want it. Your belt's gotta weigh as much as the next bloke's."

For his part, Spain is currently working diligently to learn all the Kyokushin kata (forms). Coming from a system that has only three forms in total, it's certainly offered him the challenge he was after.

"I'm actually challenging myself to see how quickly I can pick them up, without taking any shortcuts," he says. "Just memorising new moves, different postures, different structures, is completely fresh for me. I'm really enjoying it. Completely empty your mind and say, right, let's have some fun with this. I've really tried to respect the guys when they're training me in these things. I take total focus on what they're doing, because I don't want to be seen to be walking through it or receiving special treatment. I just want to give it my best shot."

As for how long his Black-belt will take, Sigung Spain says it's hard to say. "I've picked up many



Spain tests his side-kick



Kyokushin etiquette

of the kata, but there is much more to it than kata. I guess you'll have to talk to Trevor on that one."

Tockar says, "technically, especially with his leg techniques, he's really good... but it's a question of syllabus. I think we'd be able to get him to know the stuff very comfortably and feel at home within a year."

This time line is much shorter than would normally apply, he admits, but insists no shortcuts will be taken when measuring Spain's grasp of the material, and his Kyokushin heart.

Tockar indicates that Spain's biggest hurdle could be getting clearance from Kyokushin organisational heads in Japan, who are strict in their policies when it comes to grading people from other styles who aren't making the complete transition to Kyokushin. To smooth the way, Tockar hopes Spain will consider opening a Kyokushin branch within his own school.

"This is something I haven't discussed with Rick but I've certainly got at the back of my mind," reveals the Kyokushin instructor. "I think that he might be quite interested in it, because I think he could produce

some good kyokushin fighters and also give his whole group another option in their general experience. I hope that because Rick isn't [with] another karate style, they won't have a problem with that."

For he and Spain though, politics is a non-issue.

"I'm at the stage now where it's like, we're all brothers and sisters under the skin, you know?" Spain reasons. "I can go and work out on anybody's mat at any time, with no problems, no territorial issues. And I can have someone come on my mat the same. Life's too short not to."

"To me, Rick embodies so much of what martial artists should be — he's got such an openness to other things and a willingness to learn from sources other than his own," concludes Tockar.

If all goes according to plan, this attitude — and plenty of hard graft — should see Spain adding Black-belts in Kyokushin and Brazilian Jiu-Jitsu to his mantle within a few years. So what will he do after that?

"Who knows? It's a big world out there — lots of choices, lots of challenges and lots of fun to be had." **BLITZ**