

Letters and Essays from Sydney 2.0 – Volume 20

~ Exchange through martial arts ~

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Recently, I had several opportunities to meet martial arts practitioners who were visiting from Japan, so I thought I would introduce them together in this newsletter.

From March through April, people involved in the Japanese martial arts of *kendo*, *judo*, *karate* and *jodo* visited NSW including Sydney to participate in championships and other events. I was also invited to attend and I was struck by how many Australians know and follow Japanese martial arts. In fact, when I was a junior and senior high school student, I belonged to the kendo club (I achieved 2nd dan). Having been into martial arts when I was younger, I am also personally happy to see how widespread Japanese martial arts have become in Australia.

Let me introduce the events chronologically.

On 17 March, the Sydney Junior Games and All-Australia Karate Championships were held at a sports centre in The Rocks, with a participation of the delegation of Kyokushin Karate, led by Mr Soeno Yoshiji, Shidokan Karate. Events took place in different categories, such as “kata” and “semi-contact” events, to the ever-present sound of people greeting one another with “OSU!”. What was particularly noticeable was how many children took part, even as young as primary school. And all of the competitors wore their karate uniforms properly.



During their stay, the delegation received the support of Mr Stephen Bali MP and they visited NSW Parliament House. I also accompanied them. The group paid courtesy calls on the President of the Legislative Council, the Hon. Ben Franklin MLC, and the Speaker of the Legislative Assembly, the Hon. Greg Piper MP, and also observed Question Time. At the opening of the session, Speaker Piper welcomed visitors to the Legislative Chamber mentioning that a group of karate champions from Japan was observing, and there was a stir in the Chamber as all attention was suddenly focused on them.



Two weeks later, on 31 March, the Australian Kendo Championships were held at a sports centre at the University of Sydney. It was the 46th championship and you could feel the history behind the event. The 8 Australian states and territories compete against each other, and what surprised me was the high level of the competition. It is some time since I did kendo myself, and my eye is not what it once was, but I could see the clever footwork and the astonishing technique of the participants. Before going, I had expected to see many techniques that relied on brute force, but instead, the techniques employed relied on skilled timing (instantaneous force). And it was not only technique that impressed; correct manners had been thoroughly taught. I exchanged greetings with a senior European diplomat dressed in kendo uniform who had travelled up from Canberra to participate. The teachers (sensei) who came from Japan and gave instruction were Hanshi 8-Dan and Kyoshi 8-Dan. I heard that the Hanshi 8-Dan sensei also participated and judged Dan promotions. I was so impressed by the high-level of the competition, which was far above what I had expected, and I left the sports centre my head filled with memories of competing during my student days.



On 12 April, the Australian Jodo Championships were held at a sports centre in Menai. Jodo 杖道 is the character 杖 (TSUE) plus 道 (DOU); the latter is the same character as in kendo, and the first means 'staff', 'stick' or 'cane'. In addition to kendo, the Australian Kendo Renmei organizes jodo and iaido (居合道) competitions. Five Hanshi 8-Dan teachers came from Japan to participate. Mrs Tina Ayyad MP, the NSW Member for Holsworthy, is originally from Menai and she came to the venue and showed her support. In contrast to kendo and karate, the fencing took place in silence and I watched with deep interest. It was the first time I had seen the instruments called 鎖がま (KUSARIGAMA) and 十手 (JITTE) in use.



The next day, 13 April, it was judo at the Illawarra International Judo Club in Wollongong. The Club invited Mr TAKATO Naohisa, Tokyo gold medallist in the judo 60-kg event, to coach a seminar. The serious focus shown by so many people as they practised drew me in. Here, too, primary-school aged children were noticeable. Also, I noticed the high number of female participants. It was clear to me that judo has really become part of the community as an international sport that has transcended borders. Takato-senshu's¹ demonstrations had a flowing grace that only a gold medallist possesses. The seminar participants' eyes showed a steely determination as they tried to master some of his skills. It must have been their excellent athleticism, because it seemed that they absorbed Takato-senshu's lessons in no time at all.



So, that is my brief recollection of the four martial arts events I attended recently.

At each of them, it was not just techniques on show. I could see there was also thorough instruction to develop manners and cultivate the spirit behind each of the martial arts. Over the two months, I realised just how well Japanese martial arts have been taught and taken root in Australia.

(Ends)

¹ Translator's note: SENSHU 選手 is often used when referring to athletes by name instead of the usual honorific suffix SAN さん or SAMA 様, which most readers would be familiar with. There is no equivalent in English.