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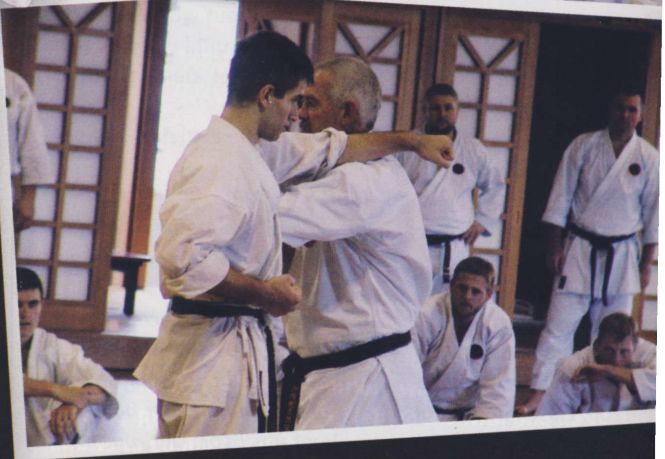
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TAKING I

Goju Ryu karate master Bakkies Laubscher

Promoted to 8th Dan by renowned Goju Ryu karate master Morio Higaonna Sensei in 2004, Bakkies Laubscher Sensei is one of the International Okinawa Goju Ryu Federation's senior teachers and its technical director. The South African regularly travels the world to hold seminars, and will land in Canberra this month. Pending his visit to Australia, Mike Clarke conducted the following interview with Laubscher and discovered what drives this karate man to keep training hard, day in, day out, and devote his life to passing on the art of Goju Ryu.

STORY BY MIKE CLARKE



Above: Laubscher teaching at the Japan Budosai, 2

KARATE TO THE WORLD

I first met Bakkies Laubscher Sensei in October 1989. I was in California training at the Higaonna dojo in San Marcos for two weeks prior to the first IOGKF Miyagi Chojun Festival in San Diego. Laubscher Sensei had also arrived early, and for the week leading up to the festival he instructed in a morning class at Higaonna Sensei's dojo. The thing I remember most about his classes was how fit he was — and quick. He was big too — really big! His training followed a similar format each morning: lots of *junbi undo* (warm-up) exercises, *hojo undo* (conditioning drills) and partner work, with relatively little training done in thin air. I couldn't help but notice the numbers dropped off at the dojo each morning as the week progressed, and later, I took some solace from the fact I had accepted the challenge placed before me every day by Laubscher Sensei, and the other Sensei who conducted the afternoon training. As the evening training was always taken by Higaonna Sensei, getting to the end of the day was never a signal to slow down; actually, it was just the opposite.

Born in 1948 in South Africa's Free State, as a boy his family moved to the Cape and the wine growing region of Stellenbosch. Gaining a Bachelors Degree in physical education and a Higher Teacher's Diploma, he spent six years teaching before joining the South African Defence Force as a sports and physical

training officer, rising to the rank of Lieutenant Colonel. Now retired from the military, he spends most of his time training, travelling and teaching karate.

Laubscher became interested in karate as a teenager, enrolling in a Kyokushin class in 1964. Just one year later, his club switched to training in Shotokan karate under the auspices of the Japan Karate Association (JKA). He was promoted to Shodan that same year by Kase and Shirai Senseis, and while still only 16 years old, he won the title of

dojo. He has since returned to Japan and Okinawa many times.

Although well known within the ranks of the IOGKF, Laubscher Sensei is relatively unknown outside of it. Hopefully that will change with this brief conversation:

Laubscher Sensei, like many South Africans you are tall and powerfully built. Do you think your physique has helped or hindered your karate?

There's an old saying in the fighting disciplines, 'The bigger they are, the harder they fall' but

So I was contemplating what the next dimension [to my karate] would have to be. From my boxing days, I recalled that the lighter weights could easily spar against the middle and heavyweights and not really get hurt, as they could really move quickly and not get hit. Of course, they could not hurt the heavier guys either. So I thought that if one could be as strong as the heavyweights and be able to move like the lightweights, it would help. I was also now studying physical education at university, which broadened my horizons as far as a scientific approach in my karate training was concerned.

I've been extremely fortunate in my karate career to always have had great quality instructors or mentors during my formative years. In Shotokan, we had the late Sensei Kase and Shirai Sensei in Cape Town for six months. I trained with them at least three times per week and every weekend. The most prominent features of both were their power and speed — although linear, they were both exceptionally quick. When I first trained with Higaonna Sensei in 1972, I decided, big or not, I want to move as quickly as that!

When I had speed and strength, I found I was still getting my butt kicked, and after a lot of contemplation, the whole martial arts 'big picture' lit up and I realised that you need speed and strength as a departure point, but then you

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— Laubscher Sensei

Cape Province Grand Champion in both kata and kumite. The fact there were no age or weight limits in those days speaks to the level of his accomplishment and determination.

In 1966, James Rousseau introduced Goju Ryu to South Africa and this is when Laubscher Sensei made the move from Shotokan to Goju Ryu. Morio Higaonna Sensei spent three months in South Africa in 1972 and this became a turning point in Laubscher Sensei's life. The following year, he found himself in Tokyo training with Higaonna Sensei for five months at the Yoyogi

there's also another one that goes, 'The bigger they are, the harder they hit!'

I must start by explaining that I was not born strong. If you look at pictures taken of me when I received my *Shodan* [1st Dan], I was a mere 75kg, skinny and frail. I started karate as a schoolboy in a class of university students (I cheated my age!) so I was always hammered by these older and stronger people and realised that I needed to train doubly hard and get a lot stronger if I was to progress. But later when I got stronger, there was still no edge because they also got stronger!

need something else, based on intelligence, to formulate and adapt strategy. Still, one of my favourite sayings to students at seminars is that you can never be too fast or too strong, and there is always someone bigger and stronger than yourself somewhere! I still work daily on power and speed.

There are many different schools of Goju Ryu karate now, even in Okinawa. Can you tell us a little about the principles you use in your karate?

This is a very interesting question. My approach is traditional or classical karate; in other words, to teach people what they need to know (as opposed to what they want to know) to be able to survive in a hostile civilian environment, as the art was originally intended.

I am very concerned about

the 'theorising' of karate and Goju Ryu. I recall on my first visit to Okinawa in 1973 that there were karateka that could perform incredibly strong *Sanchin* kata and had huge calluses on their hands, but they were no good in sparring! Lately, I have been observing a lot of fancy jujitsu type applications and pressure-point theories by novice grade students, instead of solid basic training. This to me is alarming — they will get themselves killed!

Traditional Goju Ryu is first to condition the body to make power and speed. Later, the other 'martial' aspects of strategy, go and ju, and more subtle applications are understood. My motto is 'keep it simple', which implies basic training. Basic training and good body condition are not negotiable — this is the whole essence of Goju Ryu.

Beyond the kicking and punching aspects, is there a philosophical side to the karate you practise and teach?

I don't teach a specific philosophy per se, but my whole personal reason for being in karate-do, as opposed to merely practising some pugilistic fighting discipline or other, is the budo aspect. The *dojo kun* (creed) and etiquette are the foundation and this is the philosophy I convey to my students as well. It's not easy — we live in a modern society with everything available at the snap of a finger and students expect karate to be the same, with instant results, as opposed to being a lifelong pursuit of challenging the personal weaknesses and flaws in one's own character through training.

If you had to list them in order, what aspects of karate would take priority?

1. Junbi undo — the traditional preparation regime consisting of three phases that Miyagi Chojun Sensei formulated. If you cannot do 10 push-ups, don't waste your time!
2. Hojo undo and *Heishugata* (*Sanchin/Tensho* katas). It is strange to me to see a Goju Ryu dojo without proper *chi'shi* (stone weights) and other hojo undo apparatus. *Chi'shi* training especially is not negotiable in Goju Ryu.
3. *Kihon* (basic training). I always maintain that a swimmer swims, a runner runs, a cyclist cycles, so karateka should 'karate' — kick, punch, block, move, combinations! You need to establish motor reflexes in the 'body memory' so an action comes instinctively, such as blocking an unexpected attack.
4. Kata and *bunkai* [combat applications]. The numerous repetitions of *kihon* and kata help to attain the state of *mushin* or 'no mind', which is so important in any combat regime. A word on kata *bunkai*: these should be practical and executable in a real situation. We should guard against 'nice looking', 'interesting' stuff and practise the *bunkai* in such a way that it actually works.
5. Kumite or sparring. All forms are essential, but 90 per cent of the training should be the regimented routines, such as *sandan-gi*, *sanbon ippon*, *ippon kumite*, *nihon kumite* (two-technique attacks) and *sanbon kumite* (three-technique attacks). Actual weapons training such as defending against a staff or baton is important — if you don't specifically train for it, it does not happen! A word of caution: you do not build up power and speed by doing only free sparring — the other forms mentioned build up your power and speed for free sparring.

You need it to strengthen the joints, as opposed to gymnasium training, which strengthens the muscles only and the joints in a straight line, such as in a bench press.

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Can you tell us more about your thoughts on kata *bunkai*?

I touched on it in the previous



question — any bunkai should be practical and related to the kata movement. Sometimes we have a kata movement that is maybe a *chudan yoko-uke* [mid-level side block] in the kata, but an open-hand *tsuki-uke* [thrusting block] type application in the bunkai — why bother with the yoko-uke in the kata then? But please remember, I have a very querying nature — if something makes sense, I accept it; if it's wishful thinking, I'm not interested!

My rules or conditions for bunkai are as follows:

1. Bunkai should be applicable in practice. For example, the arm-lock and throw in *Shisochin* kata should be applicable against a swinging boxer's type of punch, because the bad guy in the street is not going to punch straight, karate style!
2. It should be executed at full speed and power, otherwise don't bother.

What I'm saying is, it's no good learning the bunkai in a memorised, regimented, choreographed form only — you should be able to use it in a free *ippon kumite* type scenario.

A last word (maybe harsh) on bunkai: it's personal to each individual and there are no secrets that will only be revealed to you on your deathbed. As your expertise and your own *zanshin* (awareness) develops, and your mind opens up (by remaining a student as opposed to a know-all) you will start realising the potential in each movement.

Is jiyu kumite (free fighting) important to you?

Jiyu kumite is very important. I have already mentioned that it is possible to have the ability to do a very strong Sanchin, know all the kata and the bunkai, but still not be able to apply any of this in a sparring scenario. This is where jiyu kumite comes in as

a handy tool to develop moving and attacking, defending and getting your body to start acting from muscle memory and not from what your brain is trying to instruct. You do not have time to think about things, the body has to react! This is budo.

A word of caution: as I also said, only 10 per cent of your sparring should be jiyu kumite. My experience is that it becomes a 'playing' situation if done too much and the technique, speed and power aspects lose out. To use rugby as an example, South African 15-man rugby teams do not practise 'touch rugby' as a warm-up because it leads to bad habits. It's the same with too much jiyu kumite.

What role does hojo undo play in your karate, and how do you link the various tools to actual karate techniques?

Hojo undo is one of the pillars upon which your Goju Ryu karate is built — weak pillar,

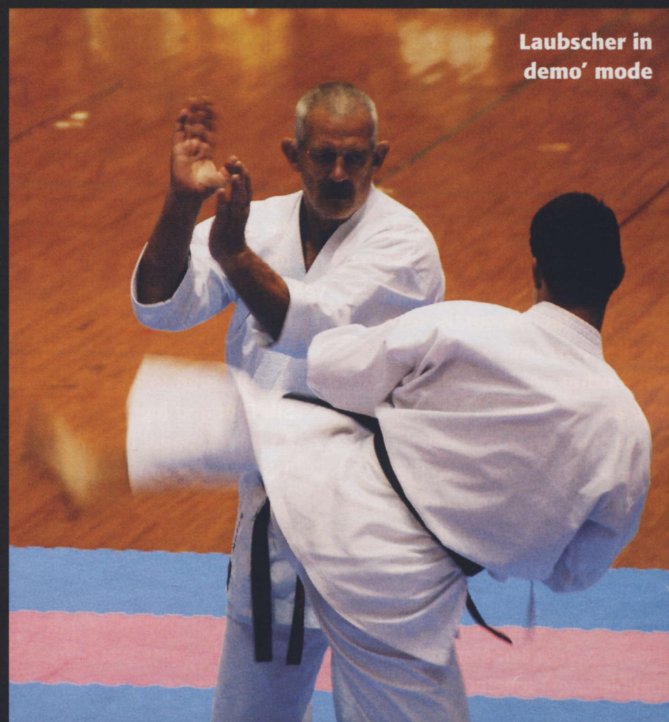
"A last word (maybe harsh) on bunkai: it's personal to each individual and there are no secrets that will only be revealed to you on your deathbed"

weak building! One cannot do Goju Ryu without hojo undo. A concern of mine is that one never sees these apparatus during big seminars, where the essence of the system is taught.

Keeping in mind that many dojo are part-time premises with no facility to have permanent apparatus, the most essential hojo undo tools are:

1. Chi'shi. Every member should have his/her own personal one, easy to bring along to class.

2. Punching bag or, alternatively, punching pads



Laubscher in demo' mode

held by a partner, which could be transported by the instructor. The swinging bag offers a lot

more in the sense of hitting a moving target. You cannot expect to simply punch in the air and develop *kime* (focus) and knockdown power.

The rest are optional and could be substituted by gymnasium apparatus. A *kongoken*, for example, is very expensive and a lot of the exercises could be substituted with a cable cross-over apparatus. *Ishi sashi* could be substituted by dumbbells, etc.

You have visited Australia a number of times now, how do you find it here?

Love it. The Aussies are really an example to the rest of the world on how to live: work hard, don't procrastinate or 'major in minor things', and enjoy life. It is also a hard country climate-wise, similar to South Africa, which breeds hard people — good for Goju Ryu!

How much travelling is involved for you in teaching karate these days, and do you enjoy it?

I have taught in 26 countries, which I consider a special blessing. I don't think any of the presidents or prime ministers of the major countries can say the same! It has brought me in contact with the ordinary citizens of countries away from the tourist attractions, which has broadened my outlook on life and provided considerable insight into life. Sharing the concerns and joys of ordinary people is a self-development opportunity. If I were not enjoying it, I would not be doing it! I guess the enjoyment comes

from observing the appreciation on the faces of people you are trying to help. The more I see appreciation, the more I share. I must admit that I choose my countries these days – where I am appreciated, I go.

Is it possible to convey the essence of your karate to large numbers of people all at once, or do you feel seminars serve another purpose, or provide some other benefit to those who attend them?

Big seminars are essential in the sense that they give the student a sensation of belonging to something big, and if it's big, it must be good! Of course, the best type of tuition is one-on-one, but from an organisational point of view, a large seminar makes it possible to get together and there

is always the opportunity to break down into smaller groups.

I believe you are currently working on the largest gathering of IOGKF members ever. Can you tell us a little about this?

We are privileged to be hosting three IOGKF events this year in South Africa:

1. The IOGKF 2010 country chief instructor *gasshuku* [training camp], open to all members 5th Dan and higher.
2. An international IOGKF 'Ubuntu' Gasshuku for all members.
3. An official IOGKF World Friendship Tournament, done according to our unique system of competition where two participants first fight non-stop for one minute,

scoring as many points as possible, and then the same two people do a kata against each other.

The theme of *ubuntu* comes from the African concept of personal interaction – 'A person is a person because of other people'. I think in the material era we live in, with most people in the world technologically 'enslaved' with their PCs, Blackberries, iPods, TV, etc., it offers an opportunity for people to reach out to each other.

We have a website for the event: www.iogkf-ubuntu.co.za

If you could click your fingers and have your life and karate exactly as you want, what would it be like for you?

I don't think I would change a thing – maybe try to be more

open-minded from an earlier age. It will probably come as a shock to many people if I mention that South Africa only got TV in 1976. I was already 26 years old, so it was more important to do physical things, such as sport. We also did not have access to all the knowledge now freely available on the Internet. There is literally hundreds of years of karate experience a click away on the Internet; the only problem is, your body has no left and right click. You still have to walk the entire circle of Goju Ryu.

I think there was a lot more satisfaction in realising or figuring something out for yourself after maybe 10 years of hard training, than merely clicking on YouTube. **BLITZ**

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