

Exclusive Interview with Sensei Bakkies Laubscher



Conducted by: David Lambert - IOGKF International Editor

I was fortunate enough to have IOGKF World Technical advisor, Sensei Bakkies Laubscher in my home recently, following a National 3 day camp he taught where I live in Goulburn, NSW. Whilst here, Sensei Bakkies was gracious enough to sit down with me and let me conduct the below and exclusive interview with him. Sensei Bakkies covers everything from Budo principles to his own personal training methods...

All Photography by: Tom Sebo – Photo's taken IOGKF Lambert Dojo, Goulburn, NSW

SENSEI BAKKIES LAUBSCHER – IOGKF 8th Dan

Please tell us about what growing up in South Africa was like for you and how you game across fighting arts?

Growing up in South Africa, I mean we only had television test programs in 1974, we only really had TV from 1975-76. So we amused ourselves. With the climate in South Africa, as kids we really played a lot outside, doing the typical things like climbing trees and shooting catapults at each other, or playing rugby or playing in the street. It was very physical and obviously with that you get to fighting as well.

I grew up in a very small town in the centre of the country. I was a bit of a naughty boy, so my mother sent me to school at the age of 5, instead of 7. So I was always the youngest in the class, so I always got bullied. When I went to high school we settled down in the Cape Province where my father was originally from. My mother had a boarding house for university students; I was still at high school. So when I was about 13 years old, every night at 9 O'clock they would get tea and my mother would make them some homemade scones or something for them. Then they would take out boxing gloves. Some of them were small and frail and so they picked on me, being about 13 years old, I was about the same size as them and they beat the living daylights out of me. So eventually, after a year or two, I was able to hold my own against them in boxing, then I heard someone say there was this new, lethal fighting art called 'Karate' coming to the university. They were all going to join up there and I thought to myself, there I go again, back to the bottom of the ladder. If they've got these new skills they are going to beat the daylights out of me again.

So I went along and I cheated my age, I said I was at university – I was kind of tall, but skinny – but that's how it started. We didn't know about styles or anything, we just knew about Karate. At that stage there was basically only one style and that was Kyokushinkai, or a very rough version of it and a little bit of Shotokan had started up North, but very, very little of it. There was some Shito ryu, where blue and brown belts would go away for a few months and come backs as Yondan's and that was about it.

In the 1970's you travelled to and trained at Yoyogi Dojo under Higaonna Sensei. What are your most vivid memories of this time and how would you rate the training compare to today's standards?



Yeah, it was 1973. I went on a cargo ship and it was 25 days a sea and there was a typhoon in the South China Sea. At Yoyogi Dojo in those days there was basically 3 classes daily. Classes were two hours. There was one in the morning, one in the afternoon and one in the evening, and the last class would end at about 8 O'clock. After that it was basically free training. A lot of the seniors and the black belts, they'd been working through the day, so that's when they started rocking up

– for the last class from 6 – 8pm – and they would stay on afterwards and some would only rock up after 8pm. That was just black belt training and seniors and Sensei would be taking individuals. Then Sensei would go out and have his dinner and that would leave some of the senior guys to get at the junior guys, etc.

The training per se was tonnes of basics and I don't think a lot of people would buy into it today – doing all that amount of basics, etc, etc. We've become a lazy and an instant culture, but back then that was the only way. I think that's why today I'm labelled wherever I go as 'boring, basic Bakkies', but unfortunately, as I explained at the Gasshuku yesterday in Goulburn, a swimmer swims and a runner runs and a Karate person must Karate. You have to develop your basic skills - kick, punch, move.

Your style of teaching basics is very dynamic compared to many other Karate instructors around the world. What is your reasoning for teaching basics this way and is it something you were taught or is it something you've developed over time?

I think I answered that in the previous question. That's the way Higaonna Sensei trained and that's the way I trained in the old days and that's the reason why his basics are still unbelievable, because he had that huge input in his younger days. You've got to put hours and hours of basics in.

Looking and reflecting back on it now, I would say that from all the input we've had from sports science fields that you can actually do the same amount of basics and get a hell of a lot more out of it by doing it correctly. I mean you can stand there and punch for two hours and not really gain or progress from it. But you can punch for half an hour and really put a lot of thought into every movement with focus, etc and you would progress, that's as simple as that.

In Goju-ryu Karate, a lot of our training has sliding movements. What value do you think these movements have in real fight scenario where shoes might be worn?

Absolutely the same! Chojun Miyagi's students trained in the garden, so I think we have to be careful to not fixate on something like the suri ashi or the sliding movements in something like Sesan Kata. A lot of people forget about the other techniques in the Kata and think well he has a good Sesan because he can do a long slide. They couldn't slide in that garden and you can't slide on the road.

It's a way of explaining to your body that you've mastered a certain level. With suri ashi, your legs have to be strong enough to take the strain and not buckle, etc, but from a practical self defence point of view, it's just a training tool. There's no practical application.

What are your opinions on Sport Karate in general and how does it differ from classical Karate?



I'm an anti-sport Karate man. All together when we're talking about the ippon kumite tournaments or the WUKO people, I think there's too much controversy, the point scoring is too controversial. There is too much politics involved. If you have two referees, from your Dojo or your country, your chance of winning is 100% better than the other guy, so unfortunately the best guy does not always win, in fact very rarely wins at a competition.

You use the tournament Karate for your juniors and your kids. They cannot see long term objectives, so you need short term objectives for them. You have to control it unbelievably carefully and you have to be strict, which we do in South Africa with the tournament system we have there, which you will see in October. We've been doing it for 20 odd years. We get very positive results back from it, because we keep it controlled. We don't have injuries, we don't have contact – but still hard and strong – and that's our objective.

With any activity of this kind, you have to determine the outcome beforehand. What do you want to get out of the tournament? Then you've got to put the systems in place to get to that outcome. In South Africa, we decided we wanted a fair form of competition that creates or enhances the ambiance in the organisation. So we said how are we going to get that? You need very well trained instructors and referees, who have got to be absolutely unbiased, etc, etc. It can be a part of your own growth as well. It works in two ways. It's great for the growth of the student and it's great for the growth of the instructor to say well, am I unbiased or am I not.

We always start off every tournament with me telling the referees that the best performer must win. Not your best performer or the best from your Dojo, but the overall best performer must win.

But I think just to finish up on sports Karate, it is the biggest threat to Karate, because a lot of the classical skills and the real art, and we were talking about moving, all the real moving that you need in a conflicting environment is going straight out the back door. So once you take the Budo and art aspect away, along with the Dojo kun and our code of conduct, you just have another pugilistic activity like boxing or stick fighting or whatever.

There seems to be an ever growing range of oyo bunkai (variation Kata applications) being created world wide. Do you think spending too much time on oyo bunkai can be counter productive to a Karate-ka?

Absolutely, absolutely. You've got to punch and kick and build up your body. The moment you stop and start doing all these fancy little oyo bunkai, it's an excuse for not doing hard basics. I'm quite a critic of it.

If you take Kakie for example, when I did Kakie on this Gasshuku with the senior group, I called it 'power' Kakie. It wasn't all the little fancy things that'll get you killed in the street. When I started training, I guess for the first 20 years in Goju-ryu, we knew very little oyo bunkai, but we could handle ourselves because we concentrated on our strong kicking, punching and moving. This develops good fighting strategy, etc.

There are those who say that the value of drills like two man Kata and San Dan Gi are a waste of time in the pursuit to developing into a good fighter. Do you believe this to be true?

No, I think it's absolutely the opposite. I think some of the bad fighters are defined by those kinds of comments. They're clumsy and they lack control. When you look at people who are skilled in their suri ashi, san dan gi, their moving skills, their sanbon ippon kumite, ju ippon kumite. When you see someone who is really drilled in that, when it comes to free fighting, you'll see a guy who is moving fast, whose techniques are well controlled, who doesn't make unnecessary contact and who can go all the way if he wants to. Once again, it's back to the basics. Any good golfer will practice teeing off 90% of their career, they don't play a tournament every day to get good.

When I first went to Okinawa, when it came to fighting, what we now call iri kumi or randori, just free sparring in the dojo, there was no such thing there. All they did was solid san dan gi, with applications and ippon kumite and sanbon kumite type of attacks and they could handle themselves.

Another point on free sparring. In the Dojo it's done soft and flowing and you know the other guys not really going to get into you, so you really develop a lot of bad habits that'll make you come unstuck outside. That's why if I take it back 35 – 40 years ago, Karate guys had quite a reputation in the street, now today they've got a reputation of being laughed at in the street. That's because of the soft sparring in the dojo which takes away a lot of the key Karate techniques and the fundamentals, like Kime, muchime, focus, speed, balance, etc.

What would you rate as more important to you, good Karate or good character?



You can't have good Karate without good character. No matter what it looks like on the inside, the flaws will show. I've always had the saying give me a guy with good character and bad Karate and I can always fix his Karate. But I can't fix your character. You can be the best Karate person in the world, but if you have bad character, you're going to end up a lonely old person.

What is your opinion of Dojo instructors who give students what they want, rather than teaching what a traditional Goju-ryu Karate-ka needs?

It goes against everything that I stand for and I've written it before in an article or two in the past. You have to be so careful not to 'follow the market', unfortunately we are in a competitive market, there are a lot of martial arts around, claiming the short cuts, claiming they've got more benefits, more stylish, etc. If you look at marketing, the best food in the

world has not been marketed, as the junk food has, so people go for the junk food. You've got to be careful for 'junk food Karate'. Traditional Goju-ryu is hard, it's intense, it's not an easy instant load. It's the way you package it to your students, that's the most important part. You can still do the hard basics, like I explained in the previous question, but as long as they understand why they are doing it. You can't do it every day because people don't want to walk around with sore muscles and bruises every day. So you've got to vary it in a subtle way, to get to your ultimate objective.

If a student walks into my Dojo, I feel from him 'help me to help myself', then I've got to realise what do I need to teach this guy to help himself outside in the street and not to amuse him to help him to give me a good income. And that's the difficult situations with a lot of professional Karate students. That's why my whole life I always had another vocation. I started professional Karate at a young age and I thought no, I don't want to be dependent on an income where people just leave you if the training becomes a bit harder. I knew if I had a full time job I could then teach the Karate I believed in.

On a typical day at home in South Africa, how much time do you spend training and what do you mostly concentrate on?

At least three mornings a week I do gymnasium work. It takes me exactly an hour and a half – and that includes the shower. Anyone who is on the gymnasium floor more than an hour is wasting his time or bonding. With the gymnasium work, I do multiple joint exercises related to Karate. So I wouldn't just sit there doing bicep curls, I like the pulley machines and the pulley cross over machines, those kind of things. I would do individual dumbbell presses instead of bench press with two hands, which means you've got to stabilise the body. And I would do it to try and simulate the Karate movements, so the punches, the strikes. Also at least three mornings a week, I would do a 40 – 45 minute cardiovascular workout. I like good walking and I do the step machines, etc. The bicycle is good, but it's a bit bad for my back.

Then back in the Dojo in the afternoon, it would be a least an hour and a half – two hours with or without a class, working on my Karate skills. I would do a lot of leg work or foot work. As you get older, which I am at that phase now, your kicks, etc are becoming a bit suspect, but you still have to be able to move. When I was younger I realised I needed to build my arms up because they are going to last the longest, hopefully. But my legs still have to carry me, so not so much for kicking, but I work on my legs for foundation work to cart my body around.

With your personal Kata training do you spend time breaking down the movements individually or is your personal training more about practicing the whole sequence?

Breaking down. Breaking down the whole movements and the whole Kata and on alternative days it would be the whole Kata. Some days 2 or 3 repetitions, sometimes 20 of the same Kata. You go with your body, sometimes if I'm feeling energetic and strong, I would try and do 10 – 20 times of the same Kata. Or I might say for example, I'm going to do all the Kata from Seiyunchin to Seipai, 3 times each, then start again from Seiyunchin 3 times, Shisochin 3 times, etc. And even the 3 would be a variation. I might do one slow & strong and focus on everything. And then I would maybe do a combination of slow and strong and the third one would be like, really fast. But I still try to generate full power in every technique.

So many Karate-ka concentrate a lot on iri kumi as their ‘fighter development training’ and don’t spend a lot of time on Kihon, Kakie, Yakusoku Kumite, etc. Is a lot regular Iri Kumi training a substitute for exercises like these?



No. In my Dojo, we would do maybe in one month only two nights of Iri Kumi training. The rest is Junbi Undo, Kihon and Hojo Undo and with sparring we concentrate on a lot of side moving and angular moving, to basics, to free flowing, it’s the same thing.

From all the years you’ve spent training under Higaonna Sensei, what is are the main moments that stand out as awe inspiring to you, on and off the floor?

The first demonstration I saw Sensei do live was in 1975 in Long Beach at the second WUKO World championships, I was on the South African team. He and Teruo Chinen Sensei did a demonstration, which I actually have on video tape, and that was awe inspiring and that was even after I stayed in Japan.

In Japan, I guess sometimes when you went in on a Sunday morning and there wasn’t training, if I’d just gone to the Dojo by myself for an hour or something, Higaonna Sensei would be there for one hour, one and a half hours just doing the same technique. One – two hours just doing the one technique from the Kata non-stop. So that for me was the inspiration and that comes back to what I previously said about breaking down the Kata. I once saw Sensei, and my wife did too – she was actually pregnant at the time – for two and a half hours do one technique from Suparimpei; The Soto Geri and the spin and the block, again and again for two hours non-stop.

You have a very busy travel and Karate schedule. How do you balance family life and Karate?

That’s really difficult. Luckily when my family and my children were younger, I have 3 of them, I didn’t travel that much. I had the job security and the work situation. I was in the military, so I couldn’t really travel a lot. I have a very supportive wife and even my family are very supportive – but I think it was also for their own good too that they have a happy father doing Karate.

From what you know and your vast experience, what advice would you offer to the next generation of senior IOGKF Instructors to preserve traditional Okinawan Goju-ryu?

I think the most important thing would be to keep the family bond between them. They should stay friends, cohere and accept each other’s mistakes and weaknesses. They should cross feed. One man cannot know every thing; we have to cross feed from everybody. I mean, I’m lucky to encompass a background from 3 different major styles, which I can feed on along with a lot of senior Goju-ryu members who I’ve learnt from, and even on this Gasshuku, I learnt things from junior students. They did something and I went, ah, I never thought of that. So you’ve got to always be open and you’ve got to be very careful of group forming. That’s the downfall of any organisation. When people get around

in little groups, that is a problem, because the little people outside that little group start forming their own little organisations. That's why you'll see major styles like Shotokan and Kyokushinkai, who were the major styles in the 1960's, have now fragmented into hundreds of styles. And that's something we can take back to Okinawan Goju-ryu too, there are so many different styles of Okinawan Goju-ryu World wide now, that are just fragmentations.

And finally, how do you stay motivated after all these years?



I think travelling and teaching has a lot to do with it. If you're a teacher, you can't just talk the walk, you've got to walk the talk too. Higaonna Sensei, at one European Gasshuku made the comment to the senior instructors, I don't know if they all heard him, 'there is no use telling your students how to move, you have to show them how to move'. As for myself, I've never done Karate to teach, I've done Karate to practice Karate. The number one always has to be someone practicing Karate and the

number two has to be someone teaching Karate. But, you cannot teach if you don't practice by yourself. I think that is where a lot of styles have gone down. The moment you stop training, you stagnate your mind and you start teaching stagnated stuff and students will pick that up. The moment they can see 'useful & motivated' and that your enjoying it and walking the talk, they will try and walk the talk.

Thanks to Sensei Laubscher for taking the time to participate in this interview!