

TESTING THE SPIRIT

By Michael Busha

We boarded the plane, headed to Japan to visit my wife's family and to train. I was very nervous. It had been almost two years since my double total hip replacement surgery at Mayo Clinic. The chief surgeon had told me to "show me your karate spirit and attack the physical therapy like you are on the dojo floor", upon release. I did what he said (when possible I always follow Sensei's advice).



After a reasonable length of time, I returned to my home dojo in Central Illinois where Sensei Rick Brewer and Sensei James Hartman have been teaching and supporting hundreds of hungry young and old karateka for many years. It was not easy. I had done strengthening exercises at home and was in good shape. But I was afraid of fast moves, backwards moves and sweeps. I kept Sensei Carl Hartter's advice in mind - "don't line up across from any new black belts or energetic brown belts".

It is my home dojo and everyone was very understanding and patient, quite possibly on strict orders from Sensei's Brewer and Hartman. But traveling to another dojo and especially a dojo in Japan, is different. I did not know anyone at the JKA Honbu dojo and just one person at the Hoitsugan, both dojos well known for tough training, especially kumite.

Having first visited Japan in 1985, I trained at the JKA Honbu dojo in Ebisu and was invited to train and stay at the Hoitsugan dojo for a short time. I fell in love with Japan and eventually quit my job and relocated to that wonderful country, staying almost twelve years. But that was thirty years ago, I was younger and did not have any physical issues.

I have visited Japan almost yearly with my wife and we always stayed at her parent's house, usually training at one or more of the dojos in that area, including Uno Sensei's dojo in Kobe when I was doing some work for Caterpillar. All the dojos offered hard, focused, sweat inducing training, usually including a few bumps and bruises, and the dreaded foot sweeps.

We boarded the flight in Chicago, after a thirty-minute local flight. We always fly ANA, the professionalism of the flight crew, cleanliness and pleasant atmosphere is much better than the domestic airlines. Twelve hours, one audio book, and four glasses of wine later, we arrived at Narita airport, taking a short flight to Kanazawa (the seat of the Maeda clan in the Edo period) to visit Kenroku-en, one of the three top traditional gardens in Japan. After a long, much needed sleep, we awoke to a beautiful, sunny day. We walked from our hotel to Kenroku-en and frolicked in the park all day, meeting and having wonderful conversation with people from all over the world, all of them just as happy as we were. We visited the Yamato Shoyu (soy sauce) factory and showroom and tasted multiple variations and formulations, all great. From there, we walked about two miles to the Japan Sea, to the Port Ono Karakuri Museum where we saw Karakuri puppets, complete with their mechanical systems visible. And I was so impressed with just walking around the city with the temples and shrines still intact that I had to do some kata outside the gates of one of the temples. Felt like going back in time.

Tourist activities basically finished, we took the train back to Tokyo and stayed at the very nice Toyoku-Inn in Suidobashi. Anyone traveling to Japan should give this hotel chain a try.



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They are super clean and serve a delicious typical Japanese breakfast. Be aware that they are small though. Two people will feel cramped if you stay indoors all day. But who wants to stay indoors when you are in Japan?

Staying in Suidobashi made it an easy twenty-minute walk to the JKA Honbu dojo although it was still a forty-five-minute commute to train at the Hoitsugan dojo in Ebisu. My wife and I had exchanged letters (we all remember letters, right?) with Kawawada Sensei since he visited the Illinois Shotokan Karate Association dojos the previous June. Then, when we arrived in Japan, we called him and chatted with him at his home and was invited to come train on that Monday night.

We had some time to kill so walked around for a good place to have lunch. The hotel is also near the Tokyo Dome and there are many restaurants in the area. But we noticed something different and strange. As we approached the Dome area, there were hundreds of police roaming the streets, especially at the intersections. As we got closer to the Dome, their presence increased. We had our lunch and were walking down the sidewalk, past the park and were greeted by a group of them, one officer, very politely asked us to change course and to take a right turn and head up to an overpass to cross the road. We did so. But it was apparent that something big was happening. I thought maybe some big government event with some important people in attendance, so I googled 'events at the Tokyo Dome'. And there it was. The Pope was to visit and speak to his flock that day. I knew he was in Hiroshima and Nagasaki over the weekend, but had no idea he was also coming to Tokyo. I am not Catholic but I do respect all religions and the spirit that comes from being close to their respective leaders. There was excitement in the air and many non-Japanese visitors, as indicated by the various languages spoken, had made the trip from other cities to Tokyo for this event. We were finally relegated to the overpass

as the only way to not be nicely but firmly told to avoid the area, which my wife said was the back entrance to the Dome. Probably two hundred uniformed police officers were in the immediate area. Plus, a number of plain clothed officials. It was a fun and frolicking atmosphere so we stayed on the bridge and looked through our iPhone cameras, hoping to spot the Pope. Limousine after limousine came and went, with dignitaries and officials getting out and walking up the sidewalk and into the Dome. Interestingly, there were many other religious leaders also showing up as evidenced by their various dress.

It was getting late and we had to leave for Ebisu but other than the police and other visitors-no sign of the Pope. Then-almost exactly at 3:30 pm, the starting time of the posted speech, a chorus of screams from the onlookers ushered in the Pope's car. After two hours of standing on the overpass with thousands of other folks, I was able to see his left arm waving to the crowd as he was driven through the police barricade and into the Dome. Many amazing things happen when you travel!

We made it to Ebisu station and walked the approximately twenty minutes to the Hoitsugan dojo. Like everywhere in Japan, the area surrounding the station had dramatically changed from the last time I was there five years ago. But once we walked across the intersection on the west side of the station, it was still mostly automatic pilot for me to lead my wife and I straight to the dojo. It was her first time and she was impressed by the floor and the austerity and feeling that the dojo emanated, saying later "old Japanese spirit-very comfortable". I was very nervous upon entering the dojo, remembering the hard trainings of five years ago and also from thirty years ago, when I started living in Japan and trained daily at several dojos.

Sensei was in his office, I greeted him and we had a short chat before I went to the locker room to change. A few other students also arrived and changed and we met on the floor. Sensei appeared and we ran through our warmups. The training was excellent. We did some basics and then went through multiple kicking drills, with switch-backs, Sensei stressing the importance of not looking down, the triangle of effective power,



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relaxing the upper body, not coming up in stance, pushing off with the back leg, and setting down in a strong stance. Every drill was performed over and over until Sensei was satisfied. Then we went through Tekki Shodan with a focus on strong, low stance and not turning the lower body (caving in the legs) and Empi, with Sensei again pointing out and making us repeat until he thought we understood the most important parts of the katas. Sensei picked apart my Empi, especially my blocking technique in the multiple kokutsu dachi in the middle of the kata, saying my blocking hand was too far out and too high to be effective, and that I had no connection to my core, proving it by punching at me several times so I could feel the difference. With just four students, Sensei was able to focus on each of us and point out weak spots.

Class was over and we again were able to talk a while before we had to leave. Sensei loves to talk and we had fun just hanging out in the middle of the dojo floor. We said our goodbyes and promised to see each other again in the future. My wife and I made the trip back to Suidobashi and stopped into an Izakaya (local pub). She had not brought her gi and did not train but instead took many photos and videos. She was able to go over more in depth the corrections Sensei made to my techniques. But I felt good. I had been able to keep up with the class and, although it was not a barn burner in terms of an exhaustive workout, I was not fearful of losing my balance or doing some of the drills backwards, or taking a fall. I felt strong.



The next morning my wife went to Nagoya to visit her long-time friend. I got up, stretched, had breakfast, and trudged my way to the JKA Honbu dojo, which was my first training there in five years as well. Walking through the door, I was met by a very nice woman who took my completed application (printed out from the JKA website), and my registration money (3,500 yen), and explained to me where the lockers were and on which floor the class would be held (there are four floors, the first being the offices and administration, the other three are for training). I had brought a note written by my wife in Japanese explaining that I had two new hips and that I would probably have to talk to my partner for jiyu kumite regarding the sweeps and substitute front kicks for the roundhouse kicks. She understood and asked me to show the note to the instructor. But, of course, I never did show it to him, feeling it would be strange and look a bit too lame (a man's ego is his worst enemy). But that also increased my reservations since my greatest fear is to dislocate one of my new hips and have to undergo repair surgery. In the end though, I had come to Japan this time vowing to test myself and try to regain some of the confidence I had lost over the last few years of treatment, therapy, major surgery and then more therapy. I resolved to make very strong stances, making it nearly impossible to be swept. I would, however, limit my round house kicks to the extent it was possible. This was my chance to really test myself and help determine my karate future.

And who better to help me test myself? Imura Sensei walked up onto the dojo floor. I had trained with him often as a kumite partner over thirty-year's ago at the Ebisu Honbu dojo when he was still an instructor trainee. He is one of the main antagonists in my book "Never Heel Up". I remember hitting the floor many times when sparring with him. He was also known for hard drills with exhaustive repetitions. But I had always liked his teaching style and I was happy and of course apprehensive to see him walk to the front of the class.

We did our warm-ups and then Sensei had us line up for a few basic punches and kicks. Then we moved on to stepping in punching san-bon-tsuki. Then stepping forward with rising block three times (the second one a reverse rising block). Then the same with a down-block (again-the second one a reverse down-block). After many repetitions (Imura Sensei's trademark), we each got a partner and practiced the drills with other, first slow speed and then fast speed. Side A steps in with san-bon-tsuki and side B steps back with three rising blocks-as in the practice drill, the second block was a reverse block which had to be very fast with good hip rotation. We did this thirty-times, changed legs and changed sides, and then rotated to a new partner, then another thirty times and rotate again. There were about fifteen students and we partnered with each person. Then we went through the same drill and the same rotation with each partner for down-block and middle block. Hundreds of step-in punches and step back blocking. It was hard and wonderful! One difference I noted very quickly is that if I did not block fast enough or hard enough, I was hit, not that hard because most of my partners used control. But I received tactile reminders when my blocking technique was too slow or too weak.

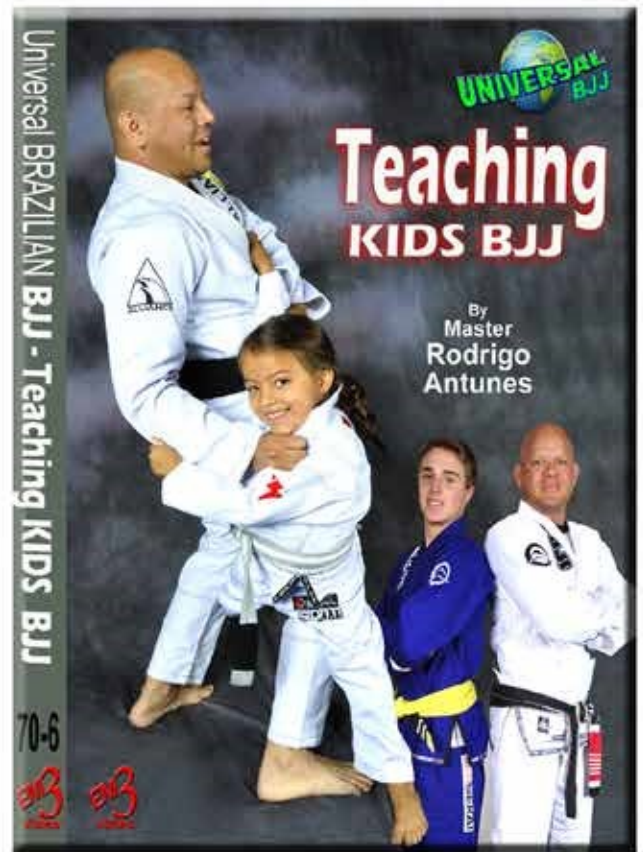
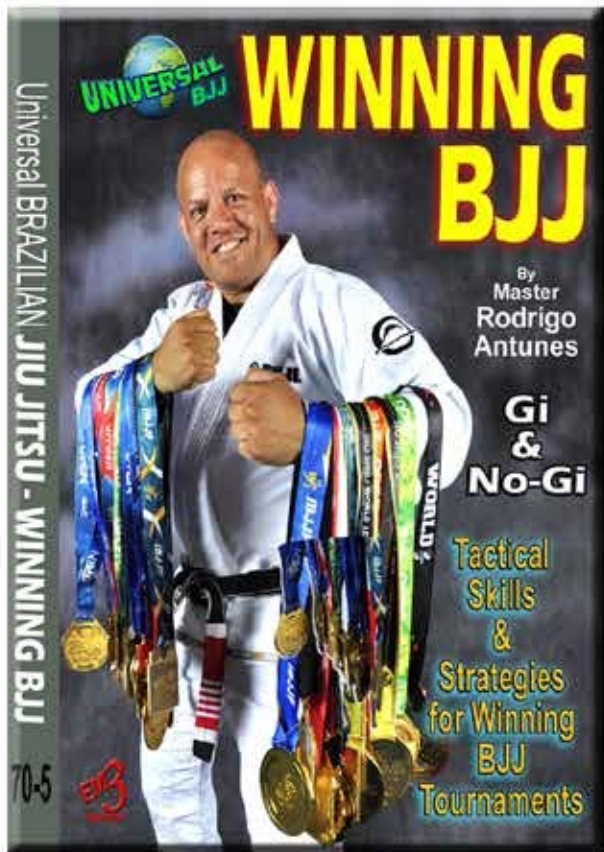
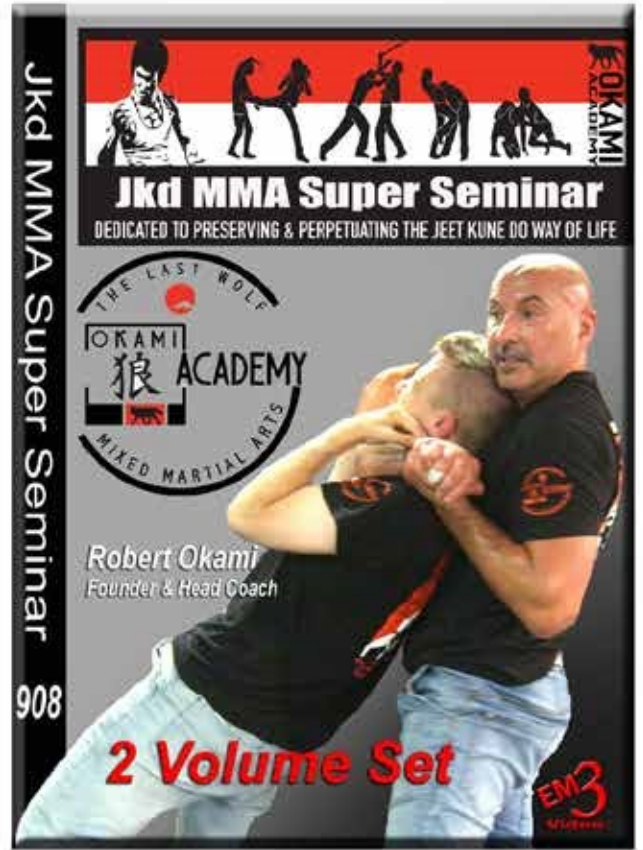
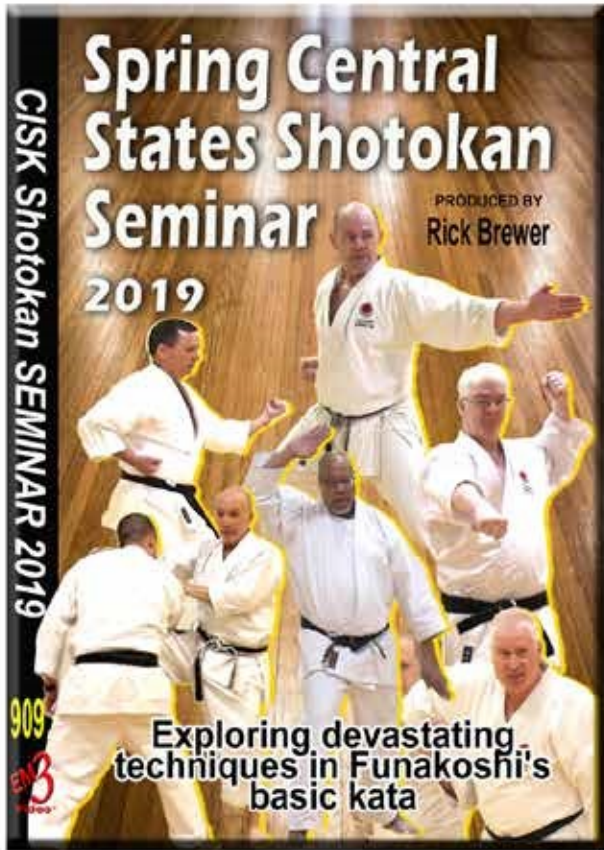
After the basics and kumite, we practiced Heian Godan with Imura Sensei correcting us on the important parts of the kata, such as not opening the hands when going into the X-block and the augmented blocks, staying low when going forward into the cross-legged double inside block towards the end, ensure deep forward strike after the jump/X-block to the rear, and the proper slow strike (going outward first then to the side) at the beginning of the kata.

We bowed out, after first shouting out the dojo-kun, and then we cleaned the dojo, old style, pushing rags across the floor which was about the length of a bowling alley. It was an excellent training with a great group of karateka. Afterwards, just like years ago, I spent some time on the makiwara, and did a few free weights and other strengthening training with a couple of the gentlemen and we laughed and enjoyed ourselves. We were kicked off the fourth floor because the instructor's training was starting at 11:30am. But while packing up my gear, I was able to say hello to Senseis Ueki, Ogura, Kurasako, Naka, Izumiya, Ogane (my partner during the class-with a nice tap to my nose) and Kurihara.

Walking back to the hotel after class, I stopped at a coffee shop, sat down and wrote in my journal. My wife was not due back from her trip until later so I went to a local park, bought a Pocari Sweat from a machine, and rehashed the morning's lessons.

The trip was successful in terms of my karate training. I am more comfortable training in Japan now, even with my new hips, and look forward to visiting the Honbu dojo and the Hoitsugan dojo, along with my friend, Uno Sensei's dojo in Kobe, again next year and every year after that. I made a couple new friends and we exchanged contact information so we can train together again. This trip reminded me why I fell in love with Japan in the first place – expert, tough instruction and a very respectful and tolerant Japanese people. 🐉





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