A High-Performance Sport Coach Part II

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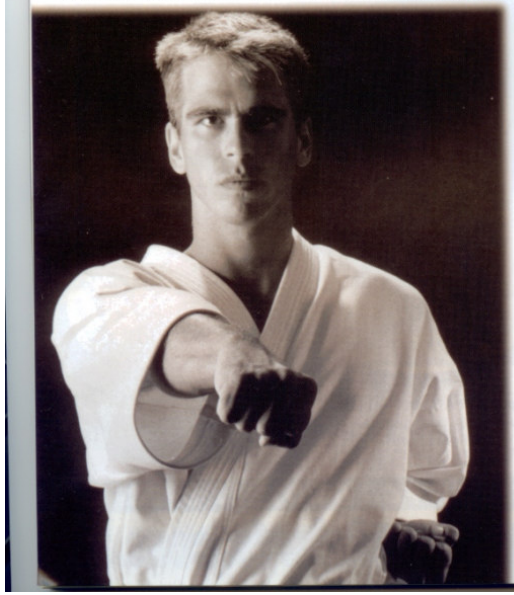
I believe you have trained in Okinawa. Was it productive and what did you gain from the experience? Yes I travelled to Okinawa on a number of different occasions and was lucky enough to have trained in different traditional schools of Okinawa-te. I have learned that while these traditional schools appear to be quite separate from sport competition, the biomechanical and physiological characteristics of traditional methods in Okinawa are very coherent for the sport scientist. I have learned that the art of karate can be extremely effective and wonderfully simple when taught correctly. I have then appreciated the humility and the passion of some great and old masters dedicated to teach their art and their culture correctly. Okinawa's teaching pedagogy is really different to that of the various Japanese usual methodologies. A way of explaining this difference is through music. Learning Blues traditionally is somewhat different to common academic method used to teach classical music, but what is important in conclusion is that the musician acquire and is able to express his own maturity.

What motivated you to go to Okinawa? My personal passion of karate and my willingness to discover and better understand the origins of this art. The first time I just took the opportunity to go for the Uchinan-chu festival at the first inauguration of the new Budokan in Naha.



You have made 5 trips to Australia so far. What is your impression of Australian karate and its sport development? I don't agree with what people commonly say about Australian's relaxed attitude, Australian athletes have an excellent commitment. However, and particularly in sport karate, there is a latent time before they realize the importance of finding the best coach they can work with if they want to build a successful career (which is short in sport!) and to gain international recognition. Due to relative isolation of your country, Australian karate behave sometimes like a teenager, always looking for an idol rather in building its own identity.

At first, of course international exposure, and in particular across Europe, is very important. However this will never be THE solution for developing the general level of the athletes and coaches on short to mid term in your country. As a comparison example, countries such as Switzerland or Belgium which are in the middle of Europe, have lacked for many years to grow their general pool of potential even if they always had the opportunity to meet top level athletes or sparing opponents all across Europe. Therefore except for rare and exceptional individuals with an outstanding long-term motivation, international exposure only is not the solution if the objective is to raise the potential of an entire country to multiply your chances of winning a major event. Coaching knowledge is a powerful advantage that professional sport managers in major sports value as a main key for success. In the victory of the Alinghi Team over New Zealand during the last America's Cup, the strength and conditioning coach was a pioneer of Swiss Olympic program, and the legendary New Zealander skipper were chosen for their value in a very specific area. Put together with a clear teamwork objective they built a winning team.

As a second example, I would mention the tennis player Roger Federer, number 1 ATP, who has been always looking for the best coach to manage his preparation and is now training under an Australian mentor. This shows that Australia has also a lot to offer. In contrast, Martina Hingis, previously number 1, was closer to her local familial coach and mother, demonstrated that even without importing any support, a local coach or even a motivated parent too, can bring success to its athletes. If I compare with the actual development of karate, the only limitation is that people often mix up traditional grading system with professional coaching expertise.

A final example related to your interest, is my Swiss and close friend Fehmi Mahala who just won the European championships in +80kg with an impressive score of 8-0. He succeeds under no world authority other than his own maturity based on the advise of his father. By only training two or three times a week maximum he challenges regularly and with great virtuosity all the best European athletes, professional or not, which stand on his way…

Karatekas love traditional metaphors, here is one: "The wise man points his finger to the moon, and the student sees only a hand". In other words, what is interesting is to understand how a champion builds up his success.

Usually inexperienced athletes or student coaches are looking to reinforce their own self-confidence in being in contact with stars. On the other hand successful champions who get to the moon have developed step-by-step real shuttle under the supervision of competent engineers.

What do you think you can give to Australia's karate-ka? I can develop new partnerships with Australian interested karate associations to improve regionally the level of coaching education, particularly regarding high-performance requirements, by clarifying the hidden bio-mechanisms and emotional links supporting a performance. If there is a request from individuals that I can fulfil, then, I will carry on my on going partnership with some of your leading athletes developing lasting trustful relationship and thereby assist in building up the degree of maturity necessary for athletes to take greater benefit from international exposure.

Four years ago, I brought strength and conditioning advice to the Australian Karate Federation and will continue to be at the disposal of coaches to build a common professional vision among karate coaches, athletes and sport commissions.

Karate is a very coordinative sport, which associates peaks of stress and hence undesired muscular contraction. In that condition and at high speed, to reach a world level requires more professionalism than before. During my seminars, I focus on athletic maturity, scientific knowledge and coaching education.

I have an excellent overview of your nation and have to say that you have some experienced coaches here and the potential for your country to succeed is evident. In case anyone would like further information regarding my Australian visits, I can be contacted by email at aus seminars@kumite.ch.

What areas do you think Australian athletes could improve on? In general, Australian athletes have an excellent coordination level, which is above the average. Many of your elite athletes have excellent lucidity, a predisposition for strategic thinking, and the strongest ones are always willing to learn.

However, to improve their chances of international success, kumite athletes need rapidly to work on advanced technico-tactical maturity, for example, to improve their efficiency at longer fighting distances when it is necessary, or reduce the wasted energy to do it, particularly if their strength and conditioning level is not comparable to full time professional European athletes. Advanced strategy, based on body types' strength and individual typology helps athletes to reach their objectives.

In regard to the kata, the biomechanical fundamentals have to be improved to easily reach a virtuosic level of coordination, by enhancing only the necessary mechanical levers. These factors must be understood by the athlete, and periodized in its training with strength and conditioning, in order to have the sufficient confidence to challenge international standards that are set and maintained by current world champions.

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You seem to have gained the respect of several high-ranking karate-ka in Australia. How did you achieve this? By offering athletes to develop their optimal performance and at the same time improving their own individual maturity. Through this process I am able to gain confidence and a sense of trust from the individual. Many of these interactions have turned into true friendships.

More specifically, firstly, I try to always place the athlete interests at the centre of my interactions, thereby going, beyond any political or personal interest considerations. I take the time to analyse the athlete's own real objective (implicit motivation) and respect it as a professional code of conduct. Secondly, I have a broad knowledge as well as a scientific understanding of their performance. Thirdly, my passion for education and my teaching commitment towards the athlete even if I can be very hard when necessary, but never for nothing, demonstrates my passion and my care for the athlete.

When an athlete or his coach sees that during a given session the athlete is able to perform some things, apparently without effort, that for a long time they attempted to correct but without success often creates quite an impact, and turns the relationship that I have with the coach into a trustful working partnership.

If you were responsible for developing Australia's kata and kumite athletes. Can you briefly describe how would you achieve this? By encouraging each athlete to explore new advanced tactical possibilities based on the advantage that one can have through a thorough understanding of the physiological or biomechanical options behind its performance.

In kumite, after implementing some fundamental knowledge regarding the natural advantages of an athlete, I would progressively encourage the coach to use simple and then advanced tactics to fit an optimal fighting strategy for its individual typology. When the athlete feels confident with the above skills, I will ensure the athlete is exposed to various stressful situations. For example I would create opportunities for the athlete to compete against international top class fighters, with clear objectives to work on. This necessary process is known in coaching as stabilizing–destabilizing learning cycles. While the first phase helps to integrate a basic understanding, it is during the end of the second phase when the real process of skill acquisition happens. In the successive cycles we start to talk about skills refinement. During these various phases the athlete's subjective self-confidence is challenged which forces in return to explore its optimal "motricity" (i.e.: skills in mobility based on the individual typology). This is the best way to develop intuitive and spontaneous solutions that can respond to unexpected fighting situations. Frequent stimulation of this optimal motricity is an excellent preparation for an international championship.

In kata, a similar process is used to produce higher skills and develop technical coordination. I usually reinforce and challenge the self-confidence of the athlete to force there focus on just a few essential components of the performance, rather than on secondary details. Thereby avoiding the common approach training to nonessential or subjective factors, which might change under different degrees of stress, and are therefore unreliable for a high performance.

For both types of athletes, the development of self-confidence built on a strong knowledge of the mechanisms involved is a suggested solution I would offer you because it can be explained rationally to professional coaches in using sport sciences expertise.

Do you think competition karate is the most important aspect of karate at this point in time? I do not think that the competitive aspect of karate is its most valuable component. Healthy education, gaining maturity or knowledge are for me more important in developing a long term champion, rather than just pushing an athlete to win a medal and then looking at him making false excuses when experiencing some inevitable failures. For that reason even though competition karate is a wonderful sport, karate is really a tool to educate your athlete's own level and foster a sense of maturity. Michael Jordan reported in his book named "I can't accept not trying!" the following quote: "Talent wins games, but teamwork and intelligence wins championships" (Ed. Rare Air Ltd).

Do you think there are areas of kata training that should be concentrated on more than others? Or do aspects such as speed, balance, posture, power, bunkai all have to be treated equally when training? There is a biomechanical relationship between the rhythm of a kata and the ability of the athlete to express its maturity (more speed, more fighting spirit or more power without loosing balance). The real issue of kata preparation is here.

Every aspect looked by the competition referees have to be assimilated by the coaches and then used by the athlete. Therefore I describe during my lectures just a few key elements that coaches need to be mindful of to assist the ease with which their athletes are able to train on high speed. I usually focus the coaches on the natural abilities of their athletes based on concrete parameters. Regardless of the sport, successful countries have in common this training approach in understanding and using sport sciences as start-up tool to facilitate communication during high performance training.

A project is actually being developed to share a cohesive vision of the key elements that all stakeholders of sport karate - the athletes, coaches and referees must be mindful of in performing, coaching and refereeing the sport. The project is currently being trialed in the Western Australian and the New South Wales Karate Federations. This model seems to meet these objectives and has recently been extended to South Australia followed by Victoria. I am sure most state athletes will appreciate these efforts set up for them.

Do you think it comes down to smart training or hard training or aspects of both? At high-level of performance, without smart training, hard training is not necessary.

In your opinion, when do most athletes peak? Skills in training periodisation are indispensable for any coach in charge of an athlete involved in a performance objective. In karate, it is recommended for a good training periodisation to engage in strength and conditioning progressively increasing the work load a long time prior to peak event, and then focus gradually the training on specific technico-tactical close to the major event. It is also important to respect the athlete's need to recovery and therefore include recovery phases to improve the performance and avoid the overtraining syndrome, which is counterproductive and destructive close to a major event.

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