

# Karate innovator finds virtue in versatility

BY RICK MCCONNELL, EDMONTONJOURNAL.COM APRIL 8, 2012



Edwin Ward, shown here at his Edmonton home, founded his own style of karate about 30 years ago and now teaches all over the world. **Photograph by:** Jason Franson, edmontonjournal.com

EDMONTON - Here's the image: Your wineglass falls off the table and you instinctively grab for it, hand flashing out with focused, blinding speed.

That, in a sense, is kime, and we should keep that word in mind while we talk about Edwin Ward and the karate style he invented and spread around the world.

He is 75 now, white-haired and ruddy-faced, five-foot-seven and a few pounds past his fighting weight, this week hobbled by a badly sprained ankle he turned stepping out of the shower at his acreage home just east of Sherwood Park.

Born in Benoni, a gold-mining town east of Johannesburg, South Africa, Ward grew up playing piano and boxing. He spent seven years in the ring before it dawned on him that you could win fights and still end up with a face that looked like Picasso had rearranged the component parts.

He played rugby, and piano in a jazz band. The guitar player worked in facial reconstruction, and Ward thought that sounded interesting. So he went to university and eventually landed a job in the maxillofacial department at King Edward Hospital in Durban.

He was 22 when he saw a colleague at work smashing plaster of paris tins with the side of his hand. It was Ward's introduction to the martial art that shaped the rest of his life.

Karate (“empty hand” in Japanese) was not popular in Durban, so Ward enrolled in a judo (“peaceful way”) school and got his black belt.

Durban is the busiest port in South Africa. Ward and his friends would haunt the docks on Sundays, waiting for Japanese “Maru” ships to come in. Then they’d find a seaman who knew karate, drag him up to the dojo and pester him for pointers.

By 1964, Ward had learned all he could without going to the source. He didn’t have to. The source came to him. That year, Taiji Kase, the Japanese master of Shotokan karate, spent three months teaching in South Africa. Ward trained with him six hours every day.

But soon he became frustrated by Japanese intransigence, by their absolute insistence on tradition. He began to move, quite literally, in his own direction. He developed a new kamae (variously translated as “posture” or “fighting stance,” but also related to “spiritual attitude”). This new style of the ancient art would see fighters adopt an aggressive-defensive stance, arms not at their sides, but hands up and ready as they made strikes or kicks in any direction. He called it Funakoshi Ryu, after the Japanese master Gichin Funakoshi, considered the founder of modern-day karate.

The new style quickly spread to Belgium, Germany and Australia, and when Ward moved to Canada in 1980, he brought it with him. He had his wife, Eileen, raised three sons and a daughter here. Before he retired, Ward was an instructor in the dental technology program at NAIT.

There is now an international Funakoshi karate organization, with Ward as the Soke Dai Hanshi, the founder and head. His son Darron now runs his own dojo in the Bonnie Doon area.

Ward has travelled the world teaching karate, and continues to oversee classes via Skype. One of his closest friends and best students is now head instructor in Germany.

Marius Bouwer learned karate as a boy in his native South Africa. He studied with a sensei who had, unbeknownst to him, once studied under Ward. Bouwer emigrated to Germany in 1992, and taught traditional karate in Kasierslautern for 15 years. When he wanted to learn Funakoshi, he went in search of its founder and finally found him on Facebook.

They emailed back and forth, and later began talking on Skype. Bouwer learned the new style over the Internet and was soon teaching it himself. His dojo was suddenly crowded with new students.

“What Edwin is doing is, he’s developing all the time,” Bouwer, says, via Skype. “I mean, a guy who runs the 100 metres at the Olympic Games doesn’t train the same today as they did 50 years ago.”

The two finally met, face to face, when Ward visited Germany last summer.

In Ward’s living room, a massive statue of Buddha sits on the creamy carpet facing a smaller bust of composer Franz Liszt. They represent the balance points of his long life, one foot in the western world, the other planted firmly in the East. He admires the Japanese people and respects them deeply.

When Wards talks about all the children he has taught, his blue eyes flash with pride and passion, and well with tears.

Karate demands character, sincerity and respectful self-discipline. “We’ve had so many parents over the years who say they’ve seen a big difference in their kids at school,” he says. “Their marks have gone up. They’re applying the discipline they’ve learned to their school.”

Karate gives you courage. It is about speed and power and finding your inner strength.

Asked where kime resides, Ward speaks about the hara (the centre), raises one arm and snaps off several punches that are startling, even frightening, in their power and wineglass-grabbing speed.

If you still don't understand, imagine a 75-year-old man ripping a phone book in half. Ward has done it many times and swears he still could.

That, too, is kime.

If you know someone you think we should write about, please email me at:

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