



国際大山空手道連盟総本部

World Oyama Karate

Honbu Newsletter

Issue 20 - January, 2009

黒帯審査

**Black Belt
Promotion**

By Founder Saiko Shihan Y. Oyama



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ミック空手20章

The biggest Karate organization in the world, Kyokushinkai, started when Mas Oyama fought a bull with his bare hands and chopped off its horn with a *shuto* (knife-hand) technique.



MESSAGE FROM FOUNDER, SAIKO SHIHAN Y. OYAMA

Happy New Year to everyone! I wish you all peace, happiness and good health in 2009!

Starting from the middle of last year, the economy's been going downhill fast. It started with the sub-prime housing loan problems and spread like a virus from there. Everyday we hear about the "economic crisis", with people pointing fingers as to who or what's to blame. The government has admitted that we're in a bad recession, while other economic analysts are now saying that we're close to or already in a depression.

I have no idea what the future holds—I'm a Karate master, not an economist. But then again, all the big shots in Wall Street, who studied economics at the best schools in the world, they don't seem to have much of an idea either. They got greedy and screwed everything up. So, I don't know what's going to happen, but I do know one thing. If you look around at those who are happy in this world, they're the ones who have good health. Without good health, it extremely difficult, if not impossible, to be happy in life.

When I first tried for my Black Belt, I was in high school. Most likely, my pockets were always empty. But every now and then, I'd have a 10 or 20 yen coin (about a nickel). Back then, 360 yen = 1 dollar.

Mas Oyama's dojo was in Ikebukuro Ward (Tokyo) behind Rikyo University. It was an old 2-story apartment building, about a 20 – 25 minute walk from the train station. After World War II, Japan was in a state of reconstruction, but we still had a lot of old rickety wooden buildings crammed side by side. The shops, marketplaces, and apartments weren't arranged in any kind of uniform design. Buildings were just piled against each other, wherever there was space. Some were small, others tiny, some tinier. There were shops and tunnels underground too. It was spooky sometimes to

walk there between the dojo and train station.

In the cold winter, after a hard night of training, there were days when I had a 20-yen coin in my pocket (a nickel). I'd stop at this tiny little *udon* (noodle soup) kiosk. I'd pay my nickel and get a bowl of soup. The soup was simple—noodles and broth. You could also put in as much red pepper and scallions as you wanted. I'd sit there with my snotty nose and no jacket and be in heaven after the first couple bites. The soup would warm my body from the pit of my stomach. It gave me power and happiness.

I was 17 years old then, 50 years ago. But I can still remember that taste and how I felt lucky to be alive when I ate those noodles...because I was healthy. People can have a billion dollars and still be miserable, but a nickel can buy you excitement and contentment if you're healthy. So, it's important to train hard and sweat to build up your body and increase your quality of life.

Once again, this year I'm working hard on lots of projects. I hope you're doing the same. No matter what happens in this economy, if we keep our health we can be happy and know we're loved by God. It doesn't matter what type of religion you practice (or don't practice). If you have health, you can feel that something out there wants you to be happy.

- ◆ *So, if something is making you upset—you need to sweat!*
- ◆ *If you feel no excitement in life, nothing to look forward to—you need to sweat!*
- ◆ *If you're happy and enjoying life—you still need to sweat!*

I hope everyone has a happy, healthy 2009. I'll pray for you.

OSU!



黒帯審査 **Black Belt Promotion**

I failed my Black Belt promotion twice.

Everyone has thoughts running through their head the night before testing. Some people might think, “Have I done everything? Am I prepared?” But, for most people, these thoughts sound more like, “I wish I had just another day, or week to get ready.” Like Hamlet, they

have to decide whether “to be or not to be.” This is the question.

I was 17 years old when I first tried for my Black Belt. Although I was pretty nervous, I also felt really confident. Growing up, I wasn’t much for academics. I wasn’t a failure, but if you wanted to find my name in the

school rankings, it’d be faster to count from the bottom than the top. But when it came to P.E., I was a model student. That was my time to shine. My other teachers weren’t particularly fond of me, but I felt as though my P.E. teachers were chanting, “Oyama, Oyama! Oyama, Oyama!” whenever I got to class.

I could do whatever they wanted—run, jump, flip...piece of cake. I was a natural, born to excel. Some people are born musicians—I’m tone deaf. Some people are born scientists—I still have a problem with explaining the meaning of “H2O”. But, if you needed someone to sprint to the end of the field and jump over the bleachers...that was me, my true calling.

In those days, Mas Oyama never made any kind of detailed yearly schedule. He might just say something like, “We’re going to have a Black Belt promotion sometime in spring.” If we were lucky, we might get a month’s notice. But, I trained hard all the time, so I felt ready when he announced the promotion date.

I spent the weeks before the promotion polishing my basic stances and techniques, especially kicks. I was really limber, so I favored kick techniques—



I failed my Black Belt promotion twice, but in later years, Mas Oyama said I was his best student.

黒帯審査 Black Belt Promotion ... Continued

especially when they knocked someone out. That made me feel *alive*! When it came to Kata, I was incredibly dramatic—sometimes too dramatic. Mas Oyama would start laughing. *Pian Sono Go* was one of the Kata we practiced in those days. There was a movement where you busted the opponent's groin with a *nukite* and ripped it out into the air above your head. I was so theatrical when I executed this movement! Mas Oyama would start laughing until tears streamed down his cheeks. Maybe if we'd had a video camera in the dojo, I could've been making movies with Jackie Chan.

Anyway, before the promotion, I felt that I was ready. But I was also nervous. I wanted to show my abilities and do a good job, but I also needed to keep some humility.

In those days, promotions followed this progression: we'd start with basic techniques, then *ido geiko*, *yaku-soku kumite*, and Kata. Kumite was the last part, but before we started fighting, we had a conditioning/physical skill test. One of the requirements was jumping techniques. We'd have to jump over a large wooden sawhorse while executing various kicks. You can see examples of me doing this in *This is Karate* (pg. 344). Most people couldn't jump and kick—they'd jump OK, but their kicks would be terrible. Or they couldn't do either. In my promotion, only one other guy besides me could complete all the jump kicks. We concluded the promotion with Kumite.

Now, World Oyama Karate requires students to com-



My brother, Soshu (right) and I fighting. We fought each other so hard in the dojo that Mas Oyama banned us from fighting one another.

黑帶審查 Black Belt Promotion ... Continued

plete a minimum of 10 fights at the Black Belt promotion. (This number can vary depending on a student's age). But at that time, Mas Oyama didn't require a set number of fights. Students might fight twice, five times, seven times, and so on. Before the fighting, I felt like I could beat hundreds and hundreds of opponents. "Give 'em to me, and I'll show you!" I think I ended up fighting about six people. Piece of cake.

After the testing finished I asked my older brother, Soshu, "So, what'd you think?"

"I think you did pretty good," he answered.

"Yeah, me too."

"But," he continued, "who knows? Only Mas Oyama knows the results."

In the days following the testing, we resumed training as usual. Each day I'd come to the dojo and hope to see the results posted. One week passed...no results. Two weeks passed...no results. A month went by, and still nothing was posted.

Then one day, I came in and saw a piece of paper posted on the wall. The results! My heart started racing. I thought in my head, "Yes! I get my Black Belt today! I finally made it! Yes, yes, yes!" I went up to the list and looked.

My name was no where on it.

I saw the names of some other guys, guys that I thought had made lots of mistakes. Where was my name? I think there were five of us that tried for Black Belt. Another guy and I were the only ones without our names on the list. I could understand why he didn't pass. He'd made lots of mistakes and wasn't in good enough shape. But not me! It didn't make sense.

Everything went dark. I was in shock. I did better than all these other guys, and everyone knew it. Why wasn't I on the list? All the other students were looking at the list. When they saw my name wasn't there, they tried not to make eye contact with me. Soshu went up and looked too. When he didn't see my name, he shrugged his shoulders and walked off. I followed him. "My name's not on the list," I said.

"Yeah, I guess you failed."

"I failed?"

"I think so." He started laughing.

"What's so funny!?"

"Nothing, it's just funny."

I just stood there, boiling in my anger. Mas Oyama wasn't at the dojo yet. I couldn't wait to see him and get some answers. I looked hard at the other three guys that passed. I made up my mind that I'd put them in their place.

I think most people know how we used to fight in the Kyokushin dojo back then. You could do whatever you wanted during Kumite. It wasn't full contact, it was *more* than full contact.

The dojo back then was on the ground floor of a two-story wooden building. The 2nd floor was apartments. Some people might think of wooden buildings as very nice, like a log cabin, but this one was pretty dilapidated. If all the students pushed from one side, I'm sure we could've brought it crashing to the ground. Whenever we jumped and moved around during class, the entire building would shake. Originally, there had been a ballet studio on the ground floor, but it went out of business, so Mas Oyama opened his dojo there. It was a pretty small area compared to what we have now. Still, Mas Oyama had concrete free weights in the corner, along with dumbbells and other training equipment. The "dressing room" was a curtain in the corner, attached to the wall by a coat hanger. It didn't quite come up high enough, so you'd have to crouch down as you changed; big guys would cause the curtain to jut out with their bodies. There was only room for one person at a time to change into their dogi. If any women were there, we'd have to wait outside until they finished changing. There were two toilets outside on either end of a row of sinks. The plywood doors were pretty flimsy, so you'd have to hold it shut as you used the bathroom to make sure it didn't fly open.

The windows had all been busted and were covered with thin paper. In winter you needed a real strong

黒帯審査 Black Belt Promotion ... Continued



How young we were! (Pictured left to right: Shihan Miura, Shihan Goda, Saiko Shihan Y. Oyama, Soshu S. Oyama)

Kiai if you wanted to keep from freezing. We didn't have any heating or air conditioning system. However, there was a small wood-burning stove with a tiny fence around it on one side of the dojo. But sometimes there wasn't any wood to put in it.

Each class back then was about 4 ½ hours. Kumite was at the end of class. We fought like real gladiators trying to survive. You could kick the groin, punch the face, poke the eyes...whatever you wanted. If you got hit, it was your fault—you should've blocked. While fighting, people would try things like slamming their opponent into the free weights. If *ten* people joined, *twelve* people would quit. Students were in good shape if they lasted 6 months or a year.

Sometimes, when you punch the face with your bare knuckles, you might pull it back and have a tooth

imbedded in it. This would cause a nasty infection. So, we'd wrap our hands in thin strips of towel. This was to protect our hands, not the other guy's face. I'm right-handed, so my fighting stance is left-foot front. So, my left cheek was always swollen and growing larger and larger. (That's why I'm so beautiful today!) At school, my friends would look at my face, laugh and say, "Oh, you got a present, huh?"

"Yeah, I got a present," I'd answer.

So, while you could do whatever you wanted in Kumite, students still showed some level of control—but not necessarily.

On the day of the results we ended class with Kumite as we always did. As we started getting ready to fight, Mas Oyama came into the dojo. I tried to look him in

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the eye, but his eyes were so strong and sharp. I looked back down. I was determined to show him who was the strongest student, so I fought really hard. When I was against the three guys who passed promotion, I beat them up over and over again.

After class was finished, Mas Oyama was talking with some other students. I wanted to get some answers from him. What was the problem? As I got close to him, I began with, "Osu..."

He turned and looked at me. "You failed." That was all he said.

"Uh, um...um..."

"You failed."

"Um..."

"You need to train harder." That was all he said. I looked at my brother. He was smiling.

RE-TEST

As I prepared for the 2nd time, I figured maybe I'd been too young the first time around. Maybe I'd been too dramatic in my Kata, maybe my techniques were *too* good. I didn't pass because Mas Oyama thought I was a show off. So, at the 2nd promotion, about 7 months after the first, I tried to hold back. I tried not to shine too much, to appear humble.

I thought I did a good job, but when the results were posted, my name was still not there. Maybe Mas Oyama just didn't like me. But I was getting stronger and harder in my fighting. Especially against my brother, Soshu. We would fight so hard that eventually Mas Oyama wouldn't allow us to go against each other in the dojo. Eventually, even guys that started training after I did passed me by and got their Black Belts. Whenever we fought, I'd try to destroy them. It got to where a lot of Black Belts would approach me before or after class and say something like, "Hey, I got a little problem with my ribs/leg/arm, etc. Could you maybe use a little control when we fight?"

"Maybe."

So, after class, they'd buy me food and drinks—like bribes. Of course I liked it. After all, I was still in high school.

After I failed the 2nd time, Soshu told me, "I think the reason you failed is because your character is too cocky. You're too much of a wise guy, you don't appreciate other people. I think that's why you didn't pass."

"But," I replied, "Mas Oyama always says to 'Knock 'em out with one shot! You're fighting, not dancing!'"

"Yeah," Soshu answered, "But you still need to show respect. You should control yourself more while fighting. Especially with middle-age guys."

I'll tell you a little side story. For my generation, I'm tall—172 cm. I was always skinny, though, because we were pretty poor. In elementary, junior and senior high school, we would have about 40 – 45 guys in a class. They'd always sit us according to height, with the biggest ones in back, so everyone could see the chalkboard up front. I and my friends would always start the year or semester off at the back, but somehow the teacher always moved us right up to the very front row so he could keep a close eye on us.

One time my wife went with me for an annual physical exam. They checked my weight and blood pressure, but they just asked me how tall I was.

"Five-seven," I answered.

My wife laughed and burst in with, "No you're not! You're only five-five."

"No, I'm five-seven. Or at least five-six-and-a-half."

The nurse started laughing and just put down five-six.

So, after Soshu's advice, I started using more control in my fighting. Whenever I was teaching someone basic techniques or Kata, if they made a mistake, I tried to not jump on them and shout, "No, you're wrong! That's terrible!" Instead, I tried to say something like, "Well, just do the best you can."

黒帯審査 **Black Belt Promotion ... Continued**

On the third try, I ended up passing. I really learned a lot from the whole experience.

BLACK BELT CHARACTER

After I failed promotion the 2nd time, I started looking around the dojo at those who'd made it. What made them different from me? Now that I think back on it, I knew then that I was definitely stronger and more coordinated than lots of them. But they tried their best with sincere effort. There was a degree of humility about them.

I was more of a show-off when it came to training in basic techniques, Kata, and fighting. My actions seemed to be saying things like, "Look at me, and look at them! Don't you see my power and my skill! I'm here!" Not only in promotion, but in everyday training, I think I exhibited this kind of attitude. I don't think I did it intentionally—I just wanted to get stronger. But in my efforts to improve, I became self-centered and hard-set to prove myself over anyone at anytime.

I looked at my seniors, the Black Belts, more closely. Sometimes when they fought, they used restraint. Sometimes not. But it seemed to me that the really strong Black Belts would hold back when they fought other students. Of course, the fighting was still rough—they'd still dish out bloody noses and broken ribs. But something about their fighting made it seem like they were looking out for and trying to build up their fellow students. I don't know how to explain it exactly, but somehow they were overcoming their own ego and enjoying their training more.

This was especially true with Mas Oyama. One of the parts of my training history that I'm most proud of is that I fought with and trained directly under Mas Oyama. In those days, he was still young and full of fire and power. When we fought, he'd have his towel wrapped around his head and stick out his massive chest and yell, "C'mon!" I'd hit him as hard as possible, and his sweat would spray out into the air. But he'd just smile and yell, "Harder, c'mon, c'mon!" Then he'd do something like hit me on the side of the head with his open hand and send me to the floor.

Sometimes he'd fight the whole class. But he'd never seriously injure anyone. He could've, but he didn't. I have some really great memories of training and fighting with him. When fighting the students, he'd give advice and try to help them improve. So, I started thinking maybe I should act the same way.

I looked at all the different types of people training in the dojo. Some were fat, some skinny, some in good shape, others weren't, some had good coordination, and others didn't. But even if they weren't the best, I could see their effort and appreciate how hard they tried.

Failing the promotion twice made me wake up and start looking at things a little differently. I started to change a little in my attitude. I didn't change dramatically—I was still young and cocky. But I began to see the bigger picture and look at my senior and fellow students in a new way.

WHAT'S THE POINT?

In any pursuit in life, there are always some types of requirements for advancement. Setting and meeting goals is necessary for humans to develop and improve. It gives them something to strive for and a way to evaluate their progress. In the academic world, you can't cram for tests the night before and expect to be successful in the long run. Of course, you might be able to answer questions on exam day, but the information is only in your short-term memory and is quickly forgotten. So, you have to pay attention in class and complete all your assignments if you want to succeed.

Karate is the same way. You can't just decide the day before promotion to try and learn basic techniques and kata and hope to be successful. Even if you're in great shape and really coordinated, last-minute preparation doesn't work in the Karate world.

Whenever you set a goal or target for yourself, you can focus all your effort and energy. A goal gives you motivation and purpose. I've mentioned this point before when talking about fighting in a tournament. Competing in and/or winning a tournament is a big goal, a culmination of training. But it also marks the beginning of a new phase in your Karate journey. A promotion test is the same way. Reaching the next rank is a motivating goal, but it also marks a new beginning.

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Regardless of whether or not you pass, at a promotion you can see your mistakes and what you do well. This gives you a clear direction of where to go in the future. This is especially true for more advanced promotions. In most styles, students almost *automatically* pass promotions. I don't understand this attitude. Promotions are a time when you can recognize your strong and weak points—discover yourself and what you are capable of. This is an extremely important point. Making these discoveries is more important in the long run than

the results of the test. After trying for promotion, you can see more clearly your strong and weak points and what you need to focus on for the future.

Along the way, as you prepare yourself for testing day, you have to dedicate yourself physically and mentally. You have to make sacrifices in how you spend your time. When you really dedicate yourself in this way, you can discover your true nature, really see your good and bad points. Often, these parts of you lay hidden in daily life, but focusing on your goal brings them to the surface.



Many times, during or after promotion tests I hear students say, “Saiko Shihan I knew the answer, I knew what to do, but I just got nervous, that’s why I messed up.” This is true, being nervous is part of promotion. But how are you going to deal with the pressure and do what is required? That’s the point. Of course you’ll be nervous; of course you’ll make mistakes. But in doing so you can recognize what you need to work on in the future. Sometimes I ask students questions at promotion, such as, “What’s your favorite technique? What techniques are a problem for you? What are your strong/weak points? What do you need to work on after today?” This is my way of hinting what you need to ask yourself. People who mess up in promotion have all sorts of excuses as to why. “I was a little sick that day. I was nervous. I have a lot going on at home and work.” When I was a high school student, we gave the same excuses to our teach-

Soshu (right) visiting the Kyokushinkai Headquarters from New York. I was the chief instructor at the Kyokushinkai Headquarters Dojo .

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ers.

NERVOUS or LAZY?

I went to an all-boys private high school. All the people I was close to were very into sports, and not so much into studying. I did Karate and played soccer. Some of my friends did too, or played baseball or judo. We always had a problem paying attention in class. Especially after lunch. We'd sit there full and sleepy. Whatever the teacher wrote on the board or lectured about sounded exactly the same, something like, "Twinkle, twinkle, little star...how I wonder what you are." And I'd fall asleep. At that time, teachers could hit students. They'd come up to us and hit us in the side of the head with a tight fist. We'd have to answer, "Thank you very much." Our heads would be all bumpy, but still we'd have to say, "Thank you very much." Then when it came time for the test, we'd fail.

After failing, the teacher would ask us, "How come you didn't know the answers to the test questions?"

I would answer, "I knew the answers, but...I, uh, was just nervous."

"Well, can you tell me the answers now?"

"Uh, no sir?"

"Why not?"

"I'm so nervous now."

"You're nervous now?" The teacher was a tiny old man who I could probably crush in my hand. But, I'd still answer, "Yes, I'm nervous. You scare me."

Other times we might make an excuse like, "I had a cold that day."

"How about now?"

"I'm feeling better now."

"So tell me the answer."

"Oh, but now I have a headache."

"Give me your head!" Then he'd wrap his knuckles on my skull and ask, "How about now?"

"Yes, that's better now, but I still don't know the answer."

Anyway, you have to be dedicated and focused in your training if you want to pass a promotion test. That dedication and focus will make you stronger and build you up to the next level. It also helps to solidify your training up to that point. Don't think that advancing in rank is automatic. That might be the case in some other styles, but not ours. Back when I failed my Black Belt tests, Mas Oyama never told me why. I had to figure it out for myself. But times have changed a little, so I try to give all students advice when they fail about what they need to spend more time working on before trying again.

When students try promotion, they give it their best shot, and I can see their good and bad points. At the Honbu dojo, the Black and Brown Belts assist in the promotion testing. I ask them questions during promotion about students' performance. "Senpai Karl!"

"Osu!"

"What advice would you give this student for improving his kata?"

"Osu, Saiko Shihan, I didn't see what he did."

"Why not?"

"Osu, I was watching a pretty girl across the street."

As I've said before, when you really start dedicating yourself in your training, basic techniques will talk to you. They might say, "Hey, come spend more time with me. You don't set up your body correctly or rotate your hips enough. You always make me look funny."

"Oh, thank you, Mr. *Furi Uchi*."

"Hey, mister! My name's *Yoko Geri*. You don't spend enough time stretching, so I never get to see you. You

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spend all your time with *Hiza Geri* and *Gedan Mawashi Geri*. I feel like I don't even know you any more! I want you back in my life!"

Sometimes I ask students at promotion which basic techniques are in which *Kyoten* book? Usually, it might sound something like this: "Which volume has *Shita Zuki*?"

"Oo...um,...oooooooo!"

"What do you mean, 'oo—oo'? We don't have anything called 'oo—oo'!"

"Um, uh...*Kyoten* #4."

"That's your final answer?"

"Osu, my final answer."

"You're wrong, you lose a million dollars! You ever open the books? What kind of training are you doing? Who's your instructor?"

"Osu, you are, Saiko Shihan."

"No, I'm not, not me. It's Sensei Dale. I didn't tell you *shita zuki* was in *Kyoten IV*."

Whenever basic techniques talk to you, don't shut them out. Don't let your ego get in the way. Remember that you have to fight yourself before you fight an opponent. Some techniques might fit you better than others. You need to ask yourself why. What do you have to work on to make more of them fit? Speed? Conditioning? Flexibility? It's often been said that "Kumite is the heart of Karate and Kihon is the heart of Kumite."

ALL UP TO YOU!

Karate is not a team sport and promotions are an individual effort. Everyone is different. Some people have the potential and natural ability to reach a high level. But, they're too lazy and don't challenge themselves, so they never get to where they *could* be. I jump on them and shout, "You could do so much more! Why don't you?" So they fail.

There are others who I know aren't able to reach that high level for any number of reasons: age, condition, physical limitations, etc. But at promotion they exceed my expectations of them, and so they pass. I tell them, "You did fantastic!" An outside observer might think, "Yeah, but those other guys *looked* better." My answer to them is that that person showed a lot of guts and dedication in order to exceed their own limitations. That's the point.

When a person first begins training, they have to learn to use their muscles in a much different way than they're used to. For the first week or so, they wake up every morning sore and stiff. That's the first obstacle they have to overcome in training. But, if they keep coming to class, their body will get used to it as their conditioning improves. Students who have been training for years and years, however, face a different type of obstacle. They start to get into a rut and lose all sense of discovery in their training and get sloppy. That's why I have a Black Belt Class. It forces me and the students to re-discover basic techniques and understand them on a deeper level.

I teach a lot of clinics both in the U.S. and overseas. Sometimes students expect that I'll teach some new exciting technique. But, no, that's not the point. The point is to wake you up and check your form and make you *really* understand what you're training for. I watch the students and try to give them individualized advice on what to work on in the future.

I've taught a lot of champion knockdown fighters. I always say that whenever you win, you don't need to reflect a lot on what you did right. But when you give it your best shot and lose, that's when you need to really think about what happened. That's a great opportunity for you to see yourself and your training more clearly and build yourself up to the next level by bouncing back. That's why whenever a student fails a Brown or Black Belt promotion, I always give them a second chance. Don't be afraid to challenge yourself. Black Belts are the face of the World Oyama Karate Organization. When you reach the level of Black Belt, your training *really* starts.

Happy New Year! Keep healthy and *JUST SWEAT!*

OSU!



國際大山空手道連盟

WORLD OYAMA KARATE

presents

ULTIMATE CHALLENGE

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Championship**

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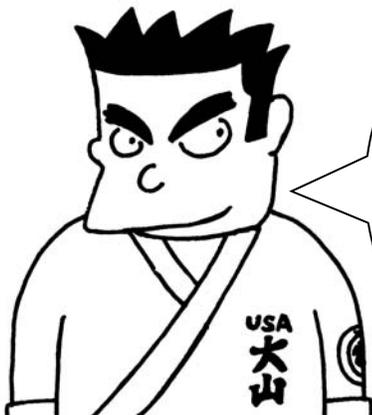
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