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World Oyama Karate

Honbu Newsletter

Issue 14 - Spring, 2007

大会

Championship

TAI

KAI

By Saiko Shihan Y. Oyama



Heavyweight Champion Sensei Masa and Saiko Shihan

大会 Tai Kai (Championship)

Tai Kai is the Big Goal—its also the new beginning. On April 21st, we held the 33rd Annual Ultimate Challenge Knockdown Tournament here in Birmingham. This year's tournament was another great success. I can still feel the excitement reverberating in my body and spirit. Such a wonderful feeling!

Tournaments are the pinnacle of competition. Throughout human history, we've always been in competition with each other and the world around us for survival. Competition is one of our most basic instincts, just as much as eating and sleeping. Not only in the world of Budo (martial arts), but in any individual or team sport, **competition, tournaments, and championships** play a crucial role in developing the athletes and sport as a whole. Every sport has some sort of championship. From the mass media, we're constantly bombarded with news of competitions. Our daily life is filled with scores and stats and live coverage. Golf has the Masters, baseball has the World Series, there's the Super Bowl in football, basketball's NBA Playoffs, the World Cup in soccer, the Stanley Cup in hockey. Every sport

has some sort of championship that teams and individuals look forward to.

Beyond the world of sports, in every aspect of daily life, competition is prevalent: in politics, science, the arts, economics, between kids and adults alike. Some people may disagree, but I think that even awards like the Oscars and the Nobel Prize involve a competitive spirit. Of course, winning a Nobel Prize isn't like winning a race, but the existence of the prize fosters healthy competition and encourages people to challenge themselves and make improvements in their field.

Can you imagine a world without competitions or championships? What would it be like if there was no 1st place—in anything? I think life would become unbearably dull and flat, like living in an infinite desert, with no trees or mountains or lakes to give life to the terrain. Think about the Olympics. People from every culture and background come together to share in the basic human element of competition. Most likely, the people watching the games don't do gymnastics, or



Shihan John, Shihan Mary, Shihan Suzuki, Saiko Shihan and all Tournament participants

Tai Kai (Championship) ... Continue

can't swim 1500 meters, run a marathon, or throw a javelin. But they still feel a sense of excitement as they watch the games. Athletes compete on the same level, free of the constraints of race, religion, nationality, and economic conditions. As they battle each other for a gold medal, all of their emotions come to the surface. As we watch, we share in their joy and sadness, their trepidation and courage, their victories and disappointments. Some of them fight through unbearable pain and fatigue to make it to the finish line. Sometimes those favored to win must pull out at the last minute. The Olympics are essentially an incredible human drama.

Competing is a cyclical journey. When a championship finishes, athletes start a new phase in their training—the ending becomes the new beginning. Competitors review their performance and set new goals for themselves in the areas they need to improve. From careful analysis, they discover more about themselves, both good and bad. Their journey begins again each time they turn their eyes to the next tournament and begin pushing themselves forward once more.

This sense of a new beginning even touches those who only watched a tournament. Spectators become inspired by the competitors' efforts and try to approach matters in their own lives with the same passion and perseverance. Fans, family members, coaches, and friends become motivated by an athlete's dedication and discipline. They find courage and strength through their performance—the competitor is like a stone dropped in a pond, sending out ripples of encouragement to all who watch him/her.

As I said before, competition gives rise to improvement. Without competition, development and progress become impossible. In the world of economics, science, music, art, technology, etc., all of the innovations and improvements were made because of competition and rivalry in some form. When scientists first discovered DNA, other researchers felt compelled to step up their own research in order to make other discoveries of equal significance. The space race between NASA and the former Soviet Union led to incredible technological improvements over a relatively short period of time.



Tai Kai (Championship) ... Continue



Knockdown Tournament Winners

All this is to say that competitions allow us to turn our natural instincts into a source of improvement.

Anyway, back to Tai Kai. In Karate, tournaments and championships are essential to maintaining the quality and excitement of training. Of course, training is something that you do for yourself, no question. But even in training, you must compete against yourself, against the voice inside that tells you to give up. The world of Karate is very big, and tournaments play a key role. A Karate tournament is like a showcase of that style. It's a chance for the pride that people feel in their organization to come to the surface and shine.

I know that not everyone can compete at the Knockdown or Semi-Knockdown level. But even if they don't compete, those people can feel a connection to the fighters. Competitors sacrifice normal pleasures and resist the daily temptations to take the easier, softer way. They dedicate their daily life to reaching their goal of winning. Some of them even have to make sacrifices in the areas of their job and family. But they do so for the opportunity to compete and show the world their spirit. That moment is their time to shine. Even if

they lose, their shining spirit radiates to all those who watch, and effects them in a positive way. Those moments make their sacrifice and dedication worthwhile. I want everyone to experience a moment like that. That's why I recommend that all students of World Oyama Karate try to compete at least once.

There's an ancient proverb about the difference between sugar and salt. Poured out on a table, they look identical. How can you tell which is which? You can't tell just by looking; you can sit and stare at both piles all day and still never know. The only way to know for sure is to touch and taste each one. The same is true for competing—the only way to understand what it's like is to get out there and do it!

I'm All In

I have many stories I could tell you about students competing in tournaments. I'd like to share this one with you. One of my black belts told me a couple years ago that he'd like to compete in the Senior Knockdown Division. "I'd like to try to fight," he told me. "I think I can handle it." I looked at his face. He was never the

Tai Kai (Championship) ... Continue

type of person to have a big mouth or try to show off. He was a pure, straightforward, hard-working man. But he must've figured that he could tell the difference between sugar and salt just by looking. Often times, people will watch a sport and think to themselves, "I could probably do that." But guess what? Being a *real* quarterback is much harder than being an *armchair* quarterback. Analyzing a game is much easier than actually playing. The moment they step up and try it, they realize that it is much harder than it looks. But by that time, it's too late. They can't turn back..

Well, this particular black belt seemed to have the same idea of what it would be like to fight in a knockdown tournament. I knew that he would be in for a shock the moment he stepped out on the mat for the first time. He was in good shape and looked young, but was over 40 years old. He was strong, but not very limber. He had a difficult time doing a *jodan mawashi geri*. But he trained hard—3/4 times a week, and even came to the special fight classes on Sunday mornings. Of course it's my job to watch everyone in the dojo, but I paid special attention to him during his training for the tournament because he'd be making his debut.

Two years ago, when the tournament finally came, about 1,000 spectators were seated in the stands that night to watch him and the other knockdown fighters. When the announcer called out his and his opponent's name, I watched him closely as he made his way onto the mat. His legs looked like they weighed five hundred pounds each. His heart was lodged in his throat, and his normally suntanned face was starkly pale. He was a totally different person—dry mouth, tight muscles, and desperate for air (and this was before the fight even started!).

When the chief referee shouted, "Face me!" he seemed to turn and bow in slow motion. He assumed his fighting stance, unable to feel his legs. I'm sure he wanted more time, time to relax, but the tournament couldn't wait for him. The harsh reality was that it was time to fight—ready or not. The first round in the senior division is two minutes. But after just thirty seconds, this black belt looked like he'd already fought for a hundred hours. Everything about him seemed heavy and slow. He lost the match.

At the after-tournament party, I asked him how he felt. Of course, I also told him he did a good job. He turned

to me and said, "Saiko Shihan, that was the most brutal experience of my life. I couldn't feel my hands or feet. I had no idea where I was." I bet then that he really knew the difference between sugar and salt—he'd tasted a lot of salt that night. I looked at him, nodded, and said, "Fighting in a tournament isn't easy, is it? But you stepped forward and gave it your best shot, so now you know what it's like." He answered, "Osu, I'll be more ready next year."

After that, he approached his training with more appreciation and dedication. Even Kihon and Kata training. This past year, he fought in the All-Japan tournament and finished in the top 3. He's continuing to get stronger and look younger.

Everyone has a little different experience when competing in a tournament. But as I said before, competition is part of human nature—everyone should try to compete. I want every student to have this chance to really discover themselves. That's why we have so many different divisions—Knockdown, Senior Knockdown, Semi Knockdown, Middle Age Semi Knockdown, etc.

Whenever you set a goal like fighting in a tournament, you become motivated to challenge yourself. During your training, you'll be tempted to make excuses. You'll discover new dimensions to your character. When you compete, your first opponent is yourself.

Sa Sa Yaki—Your Own Personal Siren

When you decide to fight in a tournament—whether from the recommendation of your instructor, senior students, or your own desire—you'll have to face yourself, and will be surprised to find out who you really are.

Once you make up your mind to fight, you set your goal. For some people, their goal is simply, "I want to try it, and make it out in one piece." Other people say, "I want to be champion." Whatever the case may be, you need a goal to strive and work towards. Working toward your goal will determine how you live your daily life, even what you eat and drink, and when you sleep.

It's my opinion that if you completely focus yourself on reaching a goal, whatever it may be, you'll discover a new side to yourself as you work towards it. Once you

Tai Kai (Championship) ... Continue

obtain your goal, you'll realize that all of your hard work and sacrifice have made you a bigger and better person than when you started. But to get to that point, you first have to battle yourself and the countless **Sa Sa Yaki** (whispers) that will plague you along the way.

Most people will tell you with complete confidence, "I know myself. You don't know everything about who I am, but I do." This includes me. But guess what? Sometimes you *don't* know everything. When you're faced with extraordinary circumstances, suddenly the real you comes to the surface. We all have some sneaky, clever side hiding deep within ourselves, determined never to come to light. Like the wizard Voldermort in *Harry Potter*, this side of yourself clings to the shadows undetected until you force it to the surface. At that point you realize, "Oh, so *this* is who I really am." You can see countless examples of this in stories about people who are diagnosed with a terminal disease, like cancer, or finally overcome a debilitating illness. The situation they're thrown into transforms them. This is also true for people who suffer a terrible accident in a car, or boat, or plane. In a split second, they're facing life or death. The sudden crisis forces their inner strength and courage to the surface and surprises everyone, including them.

A karate championship isn't as dramatic as those things, but competitors experience similar inner change, especially those competing for the first time. In the time leading up to the tournament, they begin hearing a sweet and tempting voice in the back of their head—**Sa Sa Yaki**. All competitors hear these whispers, but people preparing for their first tournament hear them constantly. Especially when their training isn't right, or their techniques aren't working, and they become frustrated. They begin looking for excuses and ways to skip training. Alone in the car, driving home from the dojo, or office, restaurant, theatre, they suddenly hear a calm and soothing voice:

"Hey, you *really* want to fight? Don't you have things you need to catch up on at work? All this training is cutting into your free time. Why don't you just spend the weekend with your girlfriend? (You're boyfriend's strong arms are waiting to hold you. If you keep brushing him off, he might leave you.) You deserve a break. Why're you pushing yourself so much—it's not like you're a professional fighter. You realize,

don't you, that your opponent's going to punch and kick you. He's gonna try and knock you out, you might get hurt. And you have to pay an *entry fee*? Is that joke or what? You really think it's worth it?"

The student gets home, relaxes, maybe watches TV, and lies down in bed. As they stare up at the ceiling, a different type of whisper comes to them. They think about their fellow students, and see the face of their instructors, maybe even **my face**, and they all say, "Hey, don't give up. I know you—you can do it. Hang in there!" The student realizes he can't run away from himself and resolves to continue training the next day. Long before you face your opponent, you must win the battle against yourself.

Some days during hard training, a fighter will feel the power of their kiai, they'll feel themselves moving forward and improving. At other times, they feel stuck, like nothing is working, like they aren't making any progress at all. Throughout the time they spend preparing for a tournament, whether it is for 3 months, 1 month, or 2 weeks, a fighter will find themselves in a state of uncertainty and doubt. Like Hamlet, they struggle to choose their course of action. To be or not to be?—To fight or not to fight? That is the million dollar question. As they claw their way forward, they find that the encouragement from their instructors and fellow students can motivate them to continue reaching for their goal. The path toward any goals is filled with highs and lows, triumphs and setbacks, but in the end, the view from the top is well worth the struggle it required to get there—that's the beauty of karate training.

So, before you fight your opponent, you first have to fight against yourself. You must resolve to face yourself in the mirror every day and resist the temptation to make excuses and escape. Sometimes, legitimate obligations, such as your job and family, will require your time and attention while you are training. But often times, people will use these obligations as a convenient excuse to skip training. If you are really dedicated to your goal, you can arrange your schedule so that you can still train for a competition and attend to your duties at work and home. I'll tell you, some of the students who stuck it out and competed on April 21st did a great job.

Especially Troy Burns from Florida, Michael Haiston

Tai Kai (Championship) ... Continue

from Charleston, Tony Ching and Stuart McAtee from Birmingham—you guys inspire me and make me more dedicated to training and teaching.

Gimme More Time

Another common thought students have while they are training is, “I wish I had just one more month to get in better shape.” Or, “If I could just have two more weeks, I’d really be ready.” Even on the day of the tournament, they might think, “I just need one more hour so I can relax and really focus myself.” When I was in college, I always had thoughts like this in the time leading up to a big exam. “If I could just have one more day to study with my friends, I’d really know the material and make a better grade.” Everyone has these kinds of thoughts; people always think that if they just had a little more time, they’d *really* be ready. The truth is, whenever you set an ambitious goal for yourself, like fighting in a tournament, you’ll always have some degree of apprehension when the big moment arrives. The important point is that you don’t think, “I wish I had more time.” Instead, you have to show your spirit, kiai, and say, “Oisha! I’m ready!” That’s the only way you’re going to discover the difference between sugar and salt. After all, nobody wants salt in their coffee (at least I hope not).

As they prepare for a tournament, students tell me all



Sensei Masa attacks with a Jodan Mawashi Geri

the time, “I’m training hard Saiko Shihan, but I wish I had just one more week, then I’d really be ready.” I just listen and nod and reply, “Tomorrow morning, you look at yourself hard in the mirror and ask ‘Have I got any guts at all, or am I just...?’”. Sometimes people will tell you that they’re 100% ready, but in reality, no one is ever 100%. The point is, are you gonna jump in or stay put? Are you gonna step forward, or walk away?

You Have All the Time in the World

Now I’m going to try and give you some tips to help you succeed in your tournament fighting. The first thing you need to understand is that you have a limited amount of time. This is a key point. Also, in a tournament, you’ll be under tremendous pressure. Fighting in a tournament is much different than fighting in the dojo. In the dojo, you are familiar with the people and your surroundings. You already know the favorite techniques, habits, and strategy of your opponent. But in a tournament, you are in a completely unfamiliar environment. You know nothing about the person you’re fighting—are they right or left-handed, a tiger or a sheep, crazy or sweet? On top of that, there will be a large crowd of people cheering for you—your friends, family, boss, coworkers, girlfriend, etc. Your opponent will also have their friends, family, boss, coworkers, and fellow students out cheering for them.

So, you need to focus your mind and energy in order to make the best of the limited time you have to fight. Under all this pressure, many novice fighters will try to do everything at once. They’ll try to attack their opponent from every angle, and the result is that none of what they do is effective in the end.

People without much experience get shaken up before the fight even starts. They bow to the chief referee, then to their opponent. Their heart pounds as they get into a fighting stance; they begin sweating like they’ve just completed a full marathon. At the word “Hajime!” they frantically burst into gear, attacking wildly with nervous energy.

After about 30 seconds of this, an inexperienced fighter becomes exhausted. They gasp desperately for air, and their hands and feet

Tai Kai (Championship) ... Continue

seem to become rooted to the ground, making it impossible to move. At the same time, their spirit, their *ki*, begins to shrink up. Somehow, their opponent starts getting bigger and bigger. They're still the same size, but the power and spirit of his opponent dwarfs the inexperienced fighter at this point. He begins thinking to himself, "Man! Whenever I punch this guy once, he punches me two or three times. And his kicks are getting stronger. Oh, my leg...my stomach...my air!" He can hear his coach screaming, "Don't back up! Go forward—punch, kick!" "I'm trying, I'm trying!" the fighter thinks. "But my legs are too heavy. I can't move an inch!" Finally he hears a voice of rescue and hope, "Time!" shouts the timekeeper, and the round is over. "Time, time, thank God! I've been waiting for this moment my whole life. Please, no overtime! I can't take anymore!"

Well, I don't know if everyone's first fight feels like this, but for most people, this scenario is pretty much accurate. Whenever you fight, your *ki*—guts—is very important. That's why we use *kiai* in all aspects of training: Kihon, Kata, bag training, partner training, everything. Your instructor always tells you to *kiai* ("Kiai Irete!") because using *kiai* puts your spirit into that technique or movement. Having a strong *kiai* doesn't just mean that you can shout really loud. It means that your mind and body are tightly connected, giving you the confidence and determination to fight hard. As I mentioned before, a fighter without a strong *kiai* will use up all of their energy in the first 30 seconds in a completely unfocused and ineffective attack. People without much experience will try to attack the most vulnerable areas of their opponent first, such as the face or solar plexus. Even if the opponent blocks, they keep attacking these same targets because they can't see the bigger picture. They just attack and attack and hope that somehow it will suddenly work.

On the other hand, top level fighters always have a strategy for how they will use their time. This is one common example: If the fight is 3 minutes, they will pressure their opponent for the first 40-60 seconds. The aim is to agitate the opponent and provoke him to attack and use up all of his energy and become mentally unfocused.

In the first minute, an experienced fighter will also try to feel out the opponent, i.e. how they block, what kind of power they have, which are their favorite techniques,



Sensei Masa Attacks with a Ushiro Geri

etc. A clever fighter will hold their best techniques in reserve, while trying to get their opponent to lay all their cards out on the table. When you face an opponent like this, you have to fight back, of course, but don't use up all your energy. Don't show them your weaknesses, either.

Most likely, in-fighting techniques such as punches, low kicks, and knee kicks, are used to give pressure. If you're afraid of *ai uchi* (clashing with your opponent) you've already lost the fight. When you fight in close, you need to choose a point of focus for your attack, such as the front/back leg, ribs, solar plexus. Attack your focus point with hard, sharp techniques.

After giving pressure for the opening 40-60 seconds, the experienced fighter then begins to move around more and counter attack. They may do more kicks to the face area, or other techniques that appeal to judges. In the last 30-40 seconds they attack full-out. They don't stop or back up. They charge forward with powerful techniques, especially punches, not worrying about blocking. If their opponent hits them once, they hit him two or three times; he hits them four times, they return ten. To be able to do this, you need a powerful *kiai*. If you can knock your opponent out, that's great. But the majority of fights are won by judges' decision, not by knockout. So, showing strong technique and

Tai Kai (Championship) ... Continue

finishing powerfully leaves a powerful impression in the judges' minds.

Build From the Ground Up

Since you only have a limited amount of time in a tournament fight, don't try to do all sorts of different techniques. Like I said before, focus your attack using powerful techniques that you feel confident in. Your opponent isn't likely to give you much space, so punch techniques, especially your lead-hand punch, become very important. When you focus your attack, your opponent's attention will start going to that spot. At that moment, you have a chance to attack the face or other area that will knock him out. For example, you focus your attack with low kicks to his lead leg. After a while, he begins worrying about protecting that leg. The next time, you fake the low kick, and turn your body sharply to deliver a *kaiten uchi mawashi geri* to the face area.

Remember that tournament fighting is chi vs. chi, guts to guts. It's much different than fighting in the dojo. Some students like to do all sorts of fancy high kicks in the dojo. Other students are impressed by their graceful form and sharp movements. But when they fight in a tournament, all their fancy techniques fly out the window because they haven't put enough kiai into their training. Their mind becomes unbalanced, and they don't know what to do now that their opponent is charging forward, not giving them space to kick.



Sensei Masa Attacks with another Jodan Mawashi Geri

As you start building your own fighting strategy, start with strong, simple techniques that fit your body. Don't take a chance by only relying on fancy high kicks; you can't afford to gamble in a tournament fight. Start with basic in-fighting techniques (punches, low kicks, knee kicks) to form the basis of your fighting strategy. From there, add techniques that fit well with your own size, flexibility, temperament, etc. That is how you make your own Fighting Kata.

Character + Personal Taste + Style = Your Kata

Everyone has their own unique preferences. If someone tells you they have no preferences on anything, they are either lying or from another planet. A fighter's particular strategy comes from their individual character and personal tastes. When they watch a fight, people think they are seeing technique vs. technique. But really, they are watching two personalities battle it out, chi vs. chi. A fighter's personality shines through when they battle an opponent. Sometimes this personality can surprise you—someone who is normally quiet and easy-going becomes a raging bull on the mat. Or a person who is usually loud and boisterous might fight in a very cool and collected manner. The real character that comes out in a fight might be different than the character that presents itself to the world on a day-to-day basis.

Take a look at the world around you. Style (kata) is everywhere; in art, music, business, and so on. There's a big difference between Van Gogh, Picasso and Cézanne; or between Beethoven, Tchaikovsky, and Bach. A Sony Play Station has a different style than a Nintendo Wii, or an Atari. Even restaurants have their own style—McDonald's hamburgers are different than Wendy's, which are different than Hardee's. Starbucks coffee tastes different than McDonald's coffee, or the Maxwell House coffee you brew at home. Japanese animation has a different style than Disney cartoons or Bugs Bunny. Football teams have different styles in how they use the running and passing game. The list is endless. Any place in the world where there is competition, you can see the unique styles of individuals/teams/corporations that are competing for supremacy. Anyway, back to Tai Kai.

Tai Kai (Championship) ... Continue

So how do you form your own unique fighting style? Which techniques will you use as your “bread and butter”? Everyone has their own particular fighting strategy/style (fighting kata). After all, each individual has different strengths and weaknesses and physical ability. It’s hard to tell the fighting style of people with little experience, because they are still working on defining their personal strategy. But fighters at the top level, with lots of experience, have a recognizable kata (style).

We have three primary areas of training—Kihon (basics), Kata (form/strategy), and Kumite (fighting). As I’ve mentioned many times before, these three areas of training are interconnected. As a white belt, you start learning basic punches and kicks (Kihon). When you begin to get familiar with these techniques, you start putting them together into an effective fighting strategy (Kata). The next step is to apply your strategy while facing an actual opponent (Kumite).

When you begin constructing your fighting style, start by identifying your best/strongest technique. This technique should be the one in which you feel the most confident. For example, right-handed people tend to have a strong right hand punch (i.e. *seiken, furi uchi, shita zuki*). A left-footed person might have a strong left foot *mawashi geri*. The first step is to begin building up those techniques that fit you naturally. The more confidence you have in your strong technique, the more calm and focused you can remain during a fight.

If you want to take your fighting style to the next level, you need to continue challenging yourself. Don’t just stop at techniques that fit you naturally. You have to push yourself in your training to build up those techniques that may not come to you so easily. Even for techniques that fit you, you have to find different ways to execute them. The key point here is *ashi no hakobi* (footwork). It’s not enough to just be able to execute a strong technique; you have to be able to do so with different timings and at various distance and angles. This kind of training will make you stronger mentally. When fighters get rattled, they tend to just attack straight on. Remember what I wrote about *hyoshi* in the essay on the *Book of Five Rings*.

If you really focus yourself, the technique will speak to you and tell you what you need to do to improve. That’s why Kihon (Basic) training is so important. When the technique talks, you better listen and do what

it says, or you’ll never reach the next level. As a student progresses from white to black belt, their fighting style evolves as they add more and more strong/favorite techniques into their arsenal. This makes their Karate bigger, deeper, and stronger overall.

Do It!

In order to build your own fighting strategy/style, you have to take a hard look at yourself and become more focused and serious about your training. Training isn’t just about techniques, but about other points such as stamina, conditioning, and mental control. As you build up all of these different areas, you’ll begin to appreciate life on a deeper level; that is the beauty of training. That’s why I recommend that everyone should try to compete. Remember that before you face your opponent, you must first win the battle against yourself in your training. Even while you are fighting in a tournament, whispers will come up. “I don’t care if I win or lose—I just don’t want to go into overtime.” If you keep pushing yourself, you’ll find ways to overcome your own weaknesses. That is a golden experience, even if you lose the match.

If you don’t compete, you should still go to tournaments and work as a member of the staff, or cheer on your fellow students. At these events, you can feel the energy of each fighter’s spirit as they compete before you. Even in the smallest (pee wee) children’s division, you can see a great human drama, filled with courage, apprehension, disappointment and glory, victory and defeat.

For fighters and spectators alike, Tai Kai is extremely important. I’m not going to say that it’s equal to the Olympics, but they share the same qualities. It’s a chance for people to compete at the deepest gut level in a realm that transcends race, religion, and economics. I love all sports, especially Karate. The inner struggle, sacrifice, dedication and perseverance that Karate training requires are essential to the improvement of the quality of human life.

On Sunday **June 10**, we’ll be having the **3rd Annual Fighters Cup Knockdown Tournament in San Francisco**. I hope all of you will come out to show your support and compete. Don’t miss your chance out of fear of facing yourself. There’s a glorious world waiting for you on the other side—Just sweat! ***Osu!***



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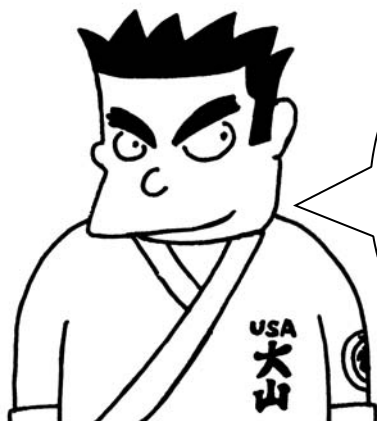
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in
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Issue 14 - Spring, 2007

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