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Martial Arts Associations & Legitimacy

THE LEGACY OF A LIFETIME MARTIAL ARTIST
HANSHI DON OWENS - 9TH DAN

Andries Pruij | May 2022

Formal Introductions

I had been training in Shotokan Karate for well over 20 years when I received an invitation to attend a small dojo in the suburbs of Vancouver, Canada. It was the early 1990 's and I had just returned from Japan, having trained at the world-renowned Honbu Dojo of Hirokazu Kanazawa. I had just moved to Vancouver following my banking career and was looking for a similarly high-quality dojo near my new home.

I was pleasantly surprised to find such a dojo located in a small school gym, with no more than a dozen or so very dedicated students. Through a mutual friend, I was introduced to a well-respected JKA instructor named Don Owens-Sensei. He was extremely friendly and generous with his time, especially considering his high rank. I later found out that Owens-Sensei was also a high-ranking Vancouver police officer and taught Shotokan karate on his off hours (and for almost no compensation).

Unfortunately, as my banking career started to take off, the hours I was available for training became sporadic. I soon fell out of touch with Owens-Sensei, but never forgot him or his kind personality and incredible talent.

One day, about 10 years later, I was thumbing through a martial arts book when Owens-Sensei's name leapt out at me from the forward. His email address was included, and I decided to reach out to him. Not only did he remember me, he actually phoned me directly to follow up.

Luckily for me, Owens-Sensei was not only still in the teaching game, but was located not too far from me. It was then that I finally had the chance to really train under him. The quality of his karate, his students and his knowledge kept me coming back for years. To this day, I continue to train with Hanshi Owens any chance I get.

In my discussions with Hanshi Owens, now 74 years old and still going strong, I discovered that he was on the board of several sizable international karate organizations. I was intrigued – for all my respect for the Hanshi, my view of such organizations was not favourable. I decided to sit down with Hanshi and interview him about the business side of these associations and their structure, purpose and relevancy. I thought this article would be an excellent follow up to my [Consolidation series](#) published by MA Success Blog in late 2020.

Legitimate Beginnings

Hanshi Owens grew up in East Vancouver (Canada), which was and still is the rougher part of town. It was also a very diverse community including people Chinese, Japanese, East Indian and a variety of European descent, as well as number of other ethnic communities. Because of this, some of Hanshi's closest childhood friends were Chinese and Japanese, which meant he was exposed to kung fu and judo at an early age. After trying both martial arts, another one of Hanshi Owen's Japanese friends introduced him to karate. It was soon apparent this was where he belonged.

After training at a couple of different dojos, Hanshi Owens met someone who became his lifelong sensei: Yamashiro Hiroo, a local JKA instructor. It was while training with this local dojo that Hanshi Owens decided to join the Vancouver Police Department, where he would eventually found the VPD Karate Club, one of the first of its kind in Canada.



Don Owens and Hiroo Yamashiro

Since the VPD Dojo was one of the first in Canada to cater exclusively to police, it garnered a lot of interest from other schools in the area. VPD got frequent requests to host senior instructors from other dojos, including international visitors from Japan, the US, and other countries. Hanshi Owens has always maintained an open-door policy and welcomed many senior Shotokan personalities into his Police Dojo, a policy that has only enhanced the reputations of both the VPD Dojo and Hanshi Owens himself.

Through his connections from the Club and his commitment to Yamashiro-sensei, Hanshi Owens was afforded the opportunity to train with a myriad of Shotokan karate greats like Masatoshi Nakayama, Jun Sugano, Masao Kagawa and Masayuki Shimoda. After years of learning from these legends, Owens was approached to join one of the major factions of the JKA that had sprung up after the passing of Nakayama Soke, head of the worldwide JKA organization. An additional factor for Owens' consideration for joining came from the fact that most of his ranks had come from Asai Tetsuhiko, the former technical director of the JKA.



Asai 9th Degree Black Belt - World Famous Karate Instructor

Organizational Karate

After the main JKA association fell apart, the various smaller factions it splintered into in the 1980's and 90's were left looking for legitimacy. Many of them reached out to try and recruit Hanshi Owens to their Board of Directors, due to his extensive background in Shotokan karate. It was because of these connections that I decided to interview Hanshi Owens. I wanted to see how these organizations worked from an insider's perspective.

I have written extensively on my belief that most independent martial arts schools will eventually consolidate, whether through licensing of a brand or via outright franchising of their operations. The recent purchase of the Premier Martial Arts franchise by a massive private equity fund corroborated my analysis. For this reason, I also wanted to get a perspective on the third form of consolidation: associating one's school with a national or international martial arts association. Considering the number of associations that have approached Hanshi Owens over the years, I thought he would be the ideal person to discuss the relevancy of today's martial art associations.

As mentioned, due to the many years Hanshi Owens had dedicated to promoting Shotokan karate, he was approached by several national and international martial arts organizations. His primary reason for associating with the JKA was that his instructor, Yamashiro Sensei, had also been part of the JKA. While his involvement in the organizational aspect of the JKA was limited, it did afford him the opportunity to train with some high-quality Shotokan instructors and in turn garner rank over the years.



Hanshi Owens then became part of NASKA (North American Shotokan Association – now known as [JKA NY](#)), a JKA affiliate based in New York under Masataka Mori. It was also at this time Hanshi Owens became part of [Karate BC/Karate Canada](#) which gave him his first insights into a professional association. It was through these organizations that Hanshi obtained his 5th degree (Godan) as well as his national coaching certificate as a requirement of Karate Canada.

After the passing of Masatoshi Nakayama, the political infighting amongst JKA members resulted in a number of Shotokan associations forming. After some time of reflection (and the stated intention of steering clear of politics) Hanshi Owen agreed to join the All-Shotokan Karate Association (ASKA). Hanshi envisioned a more inclusive organization for disenfranchised Shotokan practitioners.

It was at this same time that a European counterpart to ASKA was being formed. They, in turn, invited Hanshi Owens to join their fledgling organization. This Europe-based association of longtime Shotokan practitioners became known as the [World JKA Karate Association](#) and eventually encompassed over a dozen countries. Coincidentally, the VP of the new WJKA was also a student of Jun Sugano and the main reason Hanshi Owens accepted their invitation.



World JKA Association Affiliated Countries

As both organizations started to grow, they slowly brought together a group of longtime Shotokan practitioners, which in turn brought status and legitimacy to these like-minded martial artists. Both organizations grew steadily over the next twenty or so years. Although they started to formally organize seminars, tournaments and gradings, there was still a gap of recognition for those long-time practitioners who had already attained a high rank but now had nowhere to go for further advancements. What resulted was the ISKS, the [International Shotokan-Ryu Karate-Do Shihankai](#).

Due to the sizable amount of politicking involved in traditional karate, there have been many high-ranking karate masters over the years who have moved away from larger organizations to start their own. Unfortunately, without a formal affiliation with the main associations, these instructors had nowhere to go to obtain additional rank. This was the primary reason for the establishment of the International Shotokan-Ryu Karate-Do Shihankai (ISKS), which was the coming together of several senior ranking Shotokan karate instructors for the sole purpose of “confirming” rank.

This prestigious group of individuals would review an applicant's rank, history and knowledge through a very intense and detailed process. Once the panel of Shihankai (association of masters) reviewed and approved the legitimacy of the applicant, they would then recognize the applicant's higher rank and in some cases even bestow "shogo" titles (i.e.: Renshi, Kyoshi, Hanshi). While the ISKS cannot be considered a true business entity, nevertheless (and surprisingly) these types of recognition associations continue to have some relevancy as there still appears to be a sizable demand for rank recognition amongst the younger generation of career-minded martial artists.

Business Analysis

I have been a member of various karate organizations over the past 45+ years. Most have not impressed me to any great degree. While I believe the intentions of their founders to be noble and even altruistic, unfortunately, the value they provide to their members and their overall relevancy is questionable. When researching martial arts associations, I discovered can be sorted into one of three levels (not including Licensing and Franchising):

Number 1: National Governing Bodies. This more recently-established category includes groups like [KarateCanada](#) and [USA-NKF](#), both of which oversee the Olympic type of qualifications for their respective countries. They focus on competitive regulations, coaching requirements and will usually have a relationship with the government sports authorities in some way.

Number 2: Established International Organizations. Although these associations lack the official regulative abilities and governmental ties of the first, they nevertheless play an important role. This level includes organizations like the [JKA \(Japan Karate Association\)](#), the [ITF/WTF \(International/World Taekwondo Associations\)](#) or the [IJF \(International Judo Federation\)](#). They are well-funded, entrenched and continue to maintain considerable weight in the industry.

Number 3: Rank-Granting Organizations. This is where most martial artists end up. Due to politics and ever-changing loyalties, even many lifelong martial artists do not have a relationship with one of the first two types of organization. In this space, there are a sizable number of national and international organizations whose primary raison d'être is to simply to grant or recognize rank. Some organize seminars and tournaments, but not much else.

From here, this third category, stem most of my reservations about martial arts organizations. Although I don't doubt that their founders had noble intentions, due to the unregulated nature of our industry, it is common for school and individuals to attempt to use them in an attempt to "shop" for rank.

When I voiced this concern to Sensei Owens, he had this to say:

"I agreed to join some of the associations (that I did) because I respected both the karate and personality of the person who asked me to join. I soon became the Director of Qualifications for these associations and, primarily because of my police experience, I was asked to conduct extensive background checks on all new applicants. I am still surprised that there are still many people trying to obtain high ranking certification without proper credentials."

As you can see from his use of “still,” this is an ongoing problem, and not one that can be attributed to one generation of martial artists.



Hanshi Owens with his Osaka Police Kuro-Obi

While there does seem to be a sizable number of disenfranchised martial artists out there trying to get either higher rank or recognition of existing rank, there is also much interest in just being part of a large “like-minded” community of, for example, Shotokan enthusiasts.

While a lot these third-level type of association boards only gets together on an irregular interval, Hanshi Owens has implemented business discipline when possible: any group he is part of holds regular board meetings at least quarterly, and even more often if there are extraordinary issues to be dealt with. Hanshi Owens is one of many forward-looking association members that are trying to professionalize the structure, operations and transparency of any association they are connected with.

Most board sessions are run quite professionally, in that each member is contacted prior to the scheduled meeting date to ensure all necessary business matters can be reviewed before they are voted on. Agenda items for most martial arts associations are similar to regular businesses’ and include items such as financial matters, upcoming events, business analysis, and leadership issues, with the addition of matters exclusive to martial arts like the arranging of seminars, gradings as well as discussing new membership applicants.

Most martial arts associations’ board members do try to conduct all meetings in a business-like manner, and while a good many members have some business experience, sometimes the martial arts’ hierarchical philosophy can stymie necessary criticism or proper reflection on certain topics.

Said Owens: “Associations like the WJKA, ASKA and similar organizations are not really good examples of business models. When considering (what) they do, it must be said that, for all intents and purposes, they *are* businesses, but they are definitely not run like them.”

Association Benefits

Even though the number of these martial arts organizations seems to grow every year, fortunately, there appears to be some consistency in how ranks and titles are bestowed, especially with respect to the age of the applicant. Most associations follow the criteria established by the Japan Karate Association (JKA) decades ago, although the criteria for rank itself can differ from one association to another.

The very respected (and well-established) associations also benefit the higher-ranking instructors who are the head of their organization or school(s) and who do not feel comfortable promoting themselves to higher ranks. These senior practitioners feel it is better to qualify for higher ranks by adhering to an association's requirements, and do so primarily for business purposes as most of these independent instructors have students who are also seeking a career path in the martial arts.

Of course, with children starting the martial arts younger and younger these days, you do occasionally see the 25-year-old *yondan* (4th degree), whereas in the past this rank would not be obtained until someone was well into their 30's at youngest. One of the issues faced by these established associations is that the members of their boards are all quite senior (i.e.: they are old!!). This means there needs to be another generational shift if these associations are to remain relevant. The board members must start bringing in a new generation of instructors in order to learn what will be required of them in the future.

Hanshi Owens' primary reason for accepting higher ranks and titles was to give back to the art form that was a major factor in his life. It was also to garner legitimacy so when he graded his students, it meant something. This way, Hanshi Owens can be assured that there is another generation of Shotokan instructors with the proper philosophy, technical expertise and business knowledge to carry on the traditions of the founders of Shotokan Karate.

Conclusions

I have always found it difficult to research these types of associations. Members willing to discuss their inner workings are few and far between. But my passion is to help the martial arts industry professionalize itself, and to have our industry become a well-regarded career option for upcoming martial artists. Choosing to open or take over a martial arts school should be no different than deciding to work for a corporation or factory, but with far more potential for personal satisfaction.

The question still remains as to whether martial arts associations should remain political organizations or try to restructure themselves along more business-oriented lines. The research I was able to do shows that number of these associations have solid mission statements and a true purpose of trying to provide value to their members. However, others seem to only exist to take advantage of the nebulous definition of rank, peddling to the unscrupulous or scamming the unsuspecting.

The path taken by Hanshi Owens is one way to establish legitimacy, as are all those taken by other lifetime martial artists who have stayed true to their style, tradition and principles. Legitimacy, in my opinion, is when a style is taught in such a way and with such standards that the student, for example, of Shotokan karate, could train at any Shotokan dojo in the world and be welcomed for the quality of their skill. If a school or an association can provide this to their students and/or members, then the legitimacy is there. Just because your sensei and his sensei and his sensei trained with some of the pioneers of a style, it does not mean they have the only valid claim to legitimacy.

My initial impression of martial arts associations was that they lacked transparency and were too mired in tradition and hierarchy to offer much of substance to the modern martial artist. I also felt that while they offered some practical resources like instructor training, they were lacking on the business side, with little or no resources for members pursuing a full-time school-owning career.

After much thought, analysis and talking with people like Hanshi Owens, I've reached the conclusion that perhaps this is for the best. There are some excellent, no-style organizations like [MAIA](#) or [Kovar Systems](#), which have designed very successful business trainings that they are now disseminating across the industry – with substantial success. Organizations like MAIA are only concerned in how best for you to bring your business into the 21st century using proven and well-defined business principles and processes. They leave the politics, style definition, grading and traditions to the school itself and whatever martial arts associations they may be part of.

This combination could be a truly successful and inclusive relationship and probably the best way forward for the industry. In other words, the Martial Arts Associations would be the “*Gatekeepers of Tradition*”, while organizations like [MAIA](#), [Kovar](#) and even my own [MAPS Advisors Group](#) will focus on being the “*Purveyors of Careers*”.

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