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KUMITE: A LEARNING EXPERIENCE

by John Stewart

Once in a lifetime . . .



From time to time, BLACK BELT learns of unusual events or occurrences in the martial arts; events that—either because of their nature or because they occurred in the distant past—cannot be easily verified. Because we do not want our readers to be misinformed, BLACK BELT has a policy of strict verification of all facts pertaining to any article. In this case, several members of the staff have invested considerable amounts of time and energy checking the details of the following article, which was the product of a series of four interviews conducted over a period of three months. Although there is no convenient way to verify each and every detail connected with this story, the editors have verified enough of the basic facts to feel confident in publishing it. But since we are not at liberty to share the corroborating evidence with the public, we acknowledge that each reader may have a different idea of what the facts permit him to believe.

For years the rumors have circulated. Those with an ear to the ground have heard fantastic tales of an invisible organization, an organization that sponsors an international, no-holds-barred tournament pitting dedicated martial artists of all arts against each other in bare-knuckle kumite.

According to the whispers, this kumite takes place at a secret location once every five years. Teams from dozens of countries are alleged to be transported to a secluded location to compete against other martial artists of all styles, providing feedback on new techniques and putting traditional favorites to a very real test. And for a variety of reasons, including legal reasons, the organizers are said to extract a written promise of silence from each participant. Regardless of the outcome, the competitors are not permitted to talk about what they saw and experienced. And none of them do.

Fantastic exaggerations? Perhaps. Totally impossible? Not at all.

Because one member of the organization has received permission to talk publically about such an event, the martial arts world may gain an insight into the reality that has fueled these continuing rumors. And although it may come as a shock to some that these rumors have a basis in fact, the actual truth

is not so startling as it would seem at first.

The truth is that a full-contact kumite event is indeed held at a private location once every five years. The event is sponsored by the International Fighting Arts Association (I.F.A.A.) which, although not a publicity-seeking organization, is far from secret.

An international organization that has many members in the Orient, the I.F.A.A. provides a variety of conventional services to its members. But among those who know, the group's kumite event is considered to be a kind of martial arts Olympics, and to qualify to participate is no easy task.

The man who has been given the green light to break silence on this subject is Frank Dux, 24, a six-foot, two-inch heavyweight martial artist who compiled a distinguished military record during the Vietnam conflict. To say that Dux is an unusual person would be an understatement bordering on the absurd. And his motivation for wanting the story to become public is understandable, as we shall see later.

To Dux, participation in the I.F.A.A. kumite event was little more than the natural culmination of years of martial arts training. Although the details of his story are impossible to check out completely, BLACK BELT has spoken with other I.F.A.A. members from the United States and abroad who have privately confirmed that the basic facts are indeed as Dux says they are.

According to Dux, the event runs three days and losing competitors are expected to leave at the end of each day.

"You have three matches going at once," Dux explained, "and then, in the finals, you have only one. You fight 20 matches each day—ten in the morning and ten in the afternoon. And you use the whole evening to rest, maybe see the doctor, and get your strategy planned with your team."

The rules are brief and simple.

"There's no point system; you fight to a knockout or until one guy says 'Maitta' (I submit). The matches don't really go that long; the average match would last about 18 to 30 seconds. And it's very decisive, very easy to see the winner," he said.

According to Dux, there are none of the artificial rules that make other forms of martial arts competition a compromise activity. There are no kick requirements, for example, and although there is a judge, he is there only to call a knockout or to step in when it becomes plain that one competitor has won. "The judge makes sure there is no gouging or biting, and steps in if one guy starts to go a little bit too far. But that's all he does," Dux explained.

Dux described the facilities at the event he attended as "Just like a regular cabin at a camp. You might have a couple of heavy bags to warm up with, and each team goes off and they have their own little section. You warm up there and come out all psyched up."

Although Dux did not go into detail, he made the point that these martial artists are "treated like kings" and that,



once they qualify, all their needs are seen to as a matter of routine.

Dux has no first-hand information about previous events, but he was able to describe the conditions of the matches that were held the year he attended, 1975.

"You fight on a platform about 12 x 12 feet, and about four feet high. The first day, you fight there. Then, the next day, you go to another platform, about 12 x 4 feet, which we called 'the runway.' The final day, we fought on kind of a rooftop, which was sort of a traditional setting. They had it shingled with red ceramic tiles, and that's where balance came in—if you're not used to it, you slid all over the place," he said casually with a very small smile on his face.

Each setting becomes more difficult as the competition progresses, and naturally, each setting requires a different set of tactics. "The reason they have the ring (the 12 x 12 platform) is to allow circular movement—most people are able to fight in a circular fashion. Then, on the runway, you have to be able to fight in a linear fashion. In the ring, you can utilize more body movement and slip, whereas if you are on the runway, all you've got is linear. If you are a linear fighter, this is where you can really shine—that is where the spinning kicks pay off," Dux said.

On the rooftop, the appropriate tactics and techniques change once again. "I used a lot of grappling techniques and worked my hands because I wanted to leave my feet in one position. I tried kicking once and almost fell off," Dux added.

Dux found himself entered in I.F.A.A. competition because his instructor, a Japanese man named Tanaka, had participated in past events. The organization holds smaller kumite matches on a continuing basis, and Dux had done well enough to warrant an invitation to the international event.

"It was very scary," Dux said when asked about his impressions when he arrived at the scene of the event, which was held in Nassau in November of 1975. "I didn't know what to think—I wasn't sure whether the thing was real or not. At first, it was just inconceivable to me," he admitted.

The format of the competition changes each time it is held, as does the location. But some elements remain the same, year after year.

"Each country is allowed a maximum of six entries—six of what they call their best, two in each weight class. That is, lightweight, middleweight and heavyweight. I fought heavyweight at that time. All arts are welcome," Dux continued, "including boxing and wrestling." Each fighter is given an identical groin cup and mouthguard, according to Dux, "and that's it. There are no gloves, because if you are hitting wrong, that should show something right there. If you hit wrong (without a glove), you jam up your fingers; with a glove, you can get away with it," he elaborated.

"Also, they provide a specially built cup that's made out of metal and that covers the hip joint. The cup is made in such a way that it will prevent damage, but will not stop shock transference. So everyone gets identical equipment. No gloves are allowed, but you can wrap your hands and legs—although very few people wrap the legs, because they want the flex in there. The only optional thing is you can wear a gi top. Most of the guys who didn't wear the gi top were the sumo wrestlers, who didn't think it would be fair to them. A lot of guys wore it because it was traditional for them to be in a full gi. I didn't wear it because I didn't want to be hindered grabbing and I felt that I would be quicker without it," Dux said.

According to Dux, even though there are few formal rules, there is an unspoken code of rules that were always kept in mind. "There are unwritten rules, like you never intentionally

hit the throat," Dux said. "If you're totally without control, it makes a lot of enemies, and you could really stand to get hurt," Dux said. "One guy was constantly hitting to the throat," Dux relates, "and it wasn't exactly an accident. So finally, everyone was out to get him and he had to fight a lot of hard matches."

The conditions of the matches change with each event so that the participants will not be able to anticipate the circumstances and gain any advantage.

"One year," Dux said of the previous matches he had heard about, "they had a circle and you had to stay inside a circle. Another time it was not on a rooftop, but on a cone-shaped platform. One year, they did it in mud—they just had a big pit full of mud and you fought in that mud. This is what makes it unique, because you don't know how to prepare for it. You have to be knowledgeable all around."

There may be those readers who would ask why anyone should want to fight under the difficult circumstances that the event demands. The answer is, in part, that there is much for a serious martial artist to learn, if he is willing to put himself in such a challenging position. There is a situation that reveals weaknesses in technique, conditioning and mental attitude quite promptly and without leaving any doubt. And, although fighting to a knockout is an unpleasant way to discover the deficiencies of your technique, it is a far safer and more controlled situation than actual life-or-death combat—either on the street or in military situations—would be. And that is a strong motivation, according to Dux.

"The event is aimed at the person who is a technician, maybe someone who has accumulated a different type of arsenal or technique that would be orthodox. Maybe he is doing something bold and he wants to reflect on a different type of strategy; maybe a different type of hand technique he wants to try out. Now, if he is fighting with somebody whose ability is below his, he will never truly know if his technique works or not. But this gives him the opportunity to try to work the technique against someone from another art and someone he has no knowledge of," Dux explained. "It's a learning experience," he added.

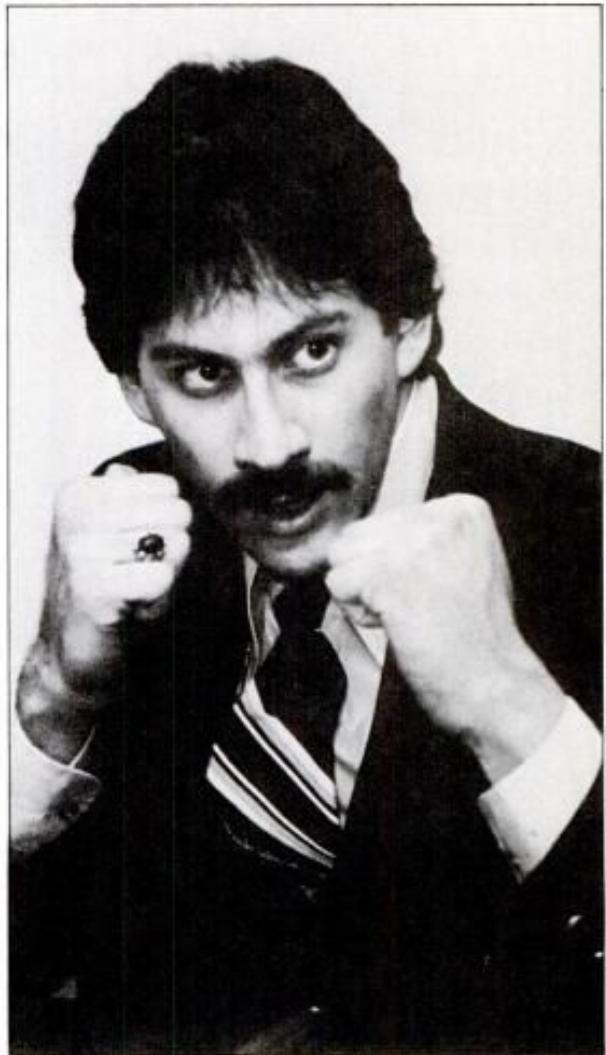
Why the secrecy? "To save face," Dux said. "Because it's in private. Let's say a competitor does a poor job—he doesn't want it reflecting on his art. And also, if you have studied all these years and come up with good techniques, you don't want the whole world knowing them. When you fight, you exchange techniques, and it's sort of even-stein (between the competitors). But if you have a bunch of spectators, they can see these techniques and never risk anything; meanwhile, you're sort of opening yourself up," he explained. "Also, it works as protection. By not publicizing yourself, you don't have to worry about someone always challenging you.

"So you get together, and it's sort of a meeting of minds among equals. The people who are involved get a chance to really analyze technique. Not theoretical garbage on a black board—you really get to find out what works," Dux admits that this kind of experience is not for every martial artist. "I think it takes an unusual type of person and an extremely dedicated type of person," he said.

To anyone who has fought full-contact bouts, 60 matches over three days sounds impossibly demanding, even if the matches are only a few seconds long.

Obviously, in the I.F.F.A. event, it would be important for each competitor to pace himself properly, saving enough stamina and energy for the next round.

"You don't throw head shots all the time," Dux explained. "Otherwise, your hands get numb and you can't use them. You've got to learn to work the body, which is softer. If you



start hitting the head all the time, watch out for what happens to your knuckles—I don't care how much you toughen them. The other thing is that most matches are over within less than 30 seconds, Kumite matches are very quick," he said.

According to Dux, the competitors begin each match in very close proximity to each other, which he described as "most nerve-wracking."

There is a card flip at the start that determines which foot is forward, either left or right. If the card came up black, then the fighters would assume a right forward stance with their knees touching and the back of their right hands touching. The other hand is held at the side, and then, "hajime" is spoken.

"A lot of guys would try to get out (of the starting position) quick, without getting kicked. Others would try to hand trap and pop the other guy, or go for the hooks. Then again, a lot of guys just do a little twist and try to break the knee, which is one of my favorite techniques," Dux said.

How does one find himself in such an event? It doesn't happen by accident.

"In order to fight kumite, first of all, your instructor must be a member of the I.F.A.A. They don't take people from outside," he said firmly. "You are picked. Basically, they go through a competitive exam for a ranking. They send a tester down to test you over the years as you progress from green belt, or whatever, to black. These days the test is videotaped and filed. Along with the videotape, you have the tester who gives the score, which is also based on a difficulty factor. Based on that, they determine whether or not you are worthy to go to kumite. Once you are a senior student and make black belt, then you go into a special program in which you are introduced to the special rules of kumite, which are very few. They tell you what you are expected to do, and the legal ramifications, which are very important. So they give you a true understanding of what you are about to be involved in, and you walk in there knowing that this is not a brawl but a very serious event. The fact that you are asked to participate in kumite is winning in itself," Dux said. "Just to be asked is an honor."

As mentioned, all arts are represented. Although Dux was reluctant to categorize the true effectiveness of the competitors accord to their art, he did consent to making some general observations.

"The traditional judo guys went out quick, because it wasn't too fair—they would be getting in on a flip and all of a sudden, they could feel their hair being torn out. Their training didn't provide a counter for that. You've got to understand that judo is a sport more than a fighting method, like jujitsu."

Boxers, on the other hand, fared better. "We had a couple of boxers come in the event. They were pretty tough, but around the second day, they were lost because they couldn't move that much. A good knee attack started to take them out," Dux said.

Dux relates a story in which the Taiwanese team would come out for their matches psyched, and to prove it, they would smash a stack of boards before the start of each match. "They were pretty scary at first, because they had all this energy. But to break their energy; and this shows the sportiveness of the event; after the first day we took a log and tied it to the front door of their cabin and told them to chop that in half if they wanted to get out, which was really all in fun. They climbed out the window," Dux said, and added, "It's not like you're out there to kill. Some guys do get very psyched up, because it is demanding on the mind, but they are usually the first to go," he said.

"The sumo wrestlers," according to Dux, "were probably





the most devastating of the bunch. In fact, the way they eliminated one of them was when one guy tripped, the sumo got up and as he got up, the first guy ran at his knees and hit him like a football tackle and took him off the platform." (To be thrown off the platform is to lose the match.) "But one sumo made it all the way to the roof. And when he finally went down, he just slid down and it looked like a big beach ball rolling downhill," Dux said, with a grin.

The key to winning, according to Dux, was to be cross-trained in a number of arts. "There would be men out there who were exceptional; with guts, determination, coordination, ability, and some a lot more than me. But extreme traditionalists—I don't want to mention any arts in particular—did not survive. Maybe half the people who were invited fell into the category of staunch traditionalists, and the others were into making themselves more well rounded. By the second day, there was not one strict traditionalist left," he said.

The other key to winning, Dux said, was experience at actual combat. "The people who lasted the longest tended to be people with military experience. The ones who had a high tolerance of pain and who could go beyond the bounds of conventional aggression."

Dux is able to tell of his experience only because he has received permission to act as a spokesman for the I.F.A.A., and because five full years have elapsed since the event took place. The reason the organization is willing to allow the information to become public is, in part, because they are looking for more members among American martial artists. They have realized that there are some exceptional American fighters now that American martial artists have developed so much.

And the reason they are now aware of that is Frank Dux. Dux won the heavyweight class, and because he was the first American to do so, he shocked some of the other participants and the organizers.

Why were the organizers surprised with Frank Dux? "Because of my overall record," he explained. "I'm not trying to sound like a braggard," he added, "but out of 329 fights I have lost only one and had only seven draws. Also, I hold several world records for my association—the fastest knockout (3.2 seconds); the most consecutive knockouts (56); the fastest recorded hook kick (72 MPH) and the fastest recorded knockout punch (.12 seconds). At that point it became obvious that Americans can fight," he said.

Dux explained that the event is recorded by high-speed filming video cameras, and that these provide a way to measure what actually happened in an event where the action is often blindingly fast. "When I got into the event, it was rather spooky because they cover just about every angle you can think of. They had about 16 cameras, regular video cameras and high-speed film cameras. They were researching, seeing whose kick went faster and if they could figure out mathematically whose kicks were harder.

"They took the measurement with high speed film and broke it down, frame by frame. That is probably more accurate than a radar gun—a gun will sometimes lag and I have a feeling that a lot of martial artists are being cheated as far as measuring their speed goes, because it's not being done on high speed film."

Dux won a trophy for his performance in the event. The trophy is, Dux said, "basically a silver urn that is about 18 inches in diameter. It's on a pedestal about two feet high and it has hand-engraved porcelain all around," he said. "But the idea is not just to compete for a trophy—it's a great honor just

[Continued on page 91](#)

KUMITE

Continued from page 34

to compete. For one time in your life you can say 'I saw the best come together.' " He also added that the trophy is never really the property of the winner, and that its value makes it worth keeping in a secure place.

Because some of the competitors recognized Dux as an instructor for the Korean White Horse Corps, he was dubbed "The Flying Horse" after he was observed making leaping attacks. "I used to fly into action," Dux smiled, adding that his aggressive performance helped make the I.F.A.A. more willing to allow him to lead a crusade to attract more American participants.

"I wanted to let people know that the event is around, and that it exists. So when the I.F.A.A. does ask them to think about trying out for it, that they will be serious. I want more Americans to consider it, because it is very real," he said.

"I believe it is a true test of martial arts ability," he continued. "Because you are fighting under different conditions—a martial artist has got to learn to fight in a small, confined space or a big space. It makes it more of a true test, a test of grace, fluidity and power. There are injuries that occur, but at the same time, I think the event is humane."

"It isn't a fight, realistically—psychologically it is more demanding than physically, because you have never seen the fighters before. Also, kumite is not a sport, it is a competition. And there is a big difference between the two. This is a test, a test of one man, a martial artist and his style, versus another man and his style—and what it has done for him."

This event has been known strictly by the members of the I.F.A.A. until now, and it is unlikely that there will be much publicity on it in the future. According to Dux, even the people involved don't know each other well. "They know me only as the Flying Horse," he said. "They don't even know my name."

And as Dux tells the story of what happened five long years ago, preparations are under way for the next martial arts Olympiad—sites are being considered, fighters ranked and chose. They will meet, somewhere in the world, during the month of November—just as they did in 1975 and for decades before.

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