

* **Sword and Mind**



PHOTOS BY YOSHIKO EBIHARA

Few martial arts schools in the United States have a history that stretches back more than a couple of decades, and fewer still attract people from around the world when they come to town. Japan has its Kodokan, the world center of judo for a century. China has the famed Shaolin Temple, the epicenter of kung fu for hundreds of years. On the East Coast of the United States, where Asian arts are a relatively new phenomenon, there's likely only one school that comes close to legendary status.

Since its inception, the Ken-Zen Institute of New York has been the place to practice *kendo*. Founded in 1959 by a handful of enthusiasts, the school has

moved twice over its 50-year existence but continues to be the East Coast mecca of kendo and other Japanese sword arts. Whenever kendo masters from Japan and other countries visit New York, they're guaranteed to drop by. One such guest, a famed Zen monk, calligrapher and master of *kenjutsu* named Omori Sogen, was so moved by his visit to the Ken-Zen Institute years ago that he crafted an ink scroll, which he presented to the school. The artwork hangs at the front of the *dojo*.

This mixture of pure art and martial art is nothing new to the school's founder, Daniel Ebihara. "Where other styles are more sporting, kendo is really more of an art," he said. "Instead of focusing on the

opponent, you focus on the self. It is a *budo*, not a sport."

Ebihara, 70, a seventh-dan in kendo, grew up in Japan as a judo enthusiast. Even though he had uncles who were high-ranked *kendoka*, he wasn't that interested in the style while growing up, achieving only his first dan while living in Japan. Seeking to break out of the shadow of his father, a successful self-made businessman, he ran away from his family at age 18 to come to America.

"My father was the head of his own company at 16 and became very rich," Ebihara recalled. "But I didn't want my life planned out for me. He told me, 'If you don't want to listen to me, do what you want. You're my son. There's no reason you can't succeed.' So I came here and learned to enjoy being hungry."

The hyper-energetic Ebihara took an array of jobs—sometimes two or three at the same time—working as a waiter, truck driver, taxi driver, warehouse manager and, of course, a martial arts instructor. "I'd run my own business in the morning, drive a taxi in the afternoon and work as a waiter at the Copacabana nightclub in the evening," he said, admitting that he was driven by the desire to prove himself to his father.

He began teaching judo at the New

York Athletic Club, but it wasn't until he met a Western-style fencer at a party that he truly became interested in kendo. The man owned some equipment and offered to pit his fencing skills against Ebihara's kendo abilities in a friendly match. Ebihara quickly knocked the other man off his feet, which so impressed him that he asked Ebihara to begin teaching him.

"He had seven fencing students at the time, so they became my students, too," Ebihara said.

Being only a first dan, Ebihara didn't think he had much to offer, so he searched for someone more experienced who could guide the nascent dojo. He finally came across the Rev. Shunshin Kan, a kamikaze pilot turned Buddhist minister. A skilled kendoka, Kan began teaching class, the first official one on the East Coast, in 1959 at the New York Buddhist Academy. Thus was born the Ken-Zen Institute. With little exposure, the class soon grew to 20 students. Ebihara quickly realized that they'd

need their own school to continue expanding. Using his burgeoning real-estate connections, Ebihara found a suitable location on 26th Street and, together with Kan, bought the building. Besides kendo, the new mega-dojō featured a judo school, two karate schools and a school for *shakuhachi*, a traditional bamboo flute, of which Ebihara is also a master.

But such a large enterprise was too much, even for his nearly limitless energy. Under Ebihara's stewardship following Kan's death, the school moved to New York's downtown Tribeca neighborhood eight years ago. In addition to kendo, it still offers classes in *iaido* and classical ken-jutsu. But with more than 100 students and several satellite dojo located around the northeast, kendo is still the focus of the institute.

"I looked online and found a lot of dojo when I became interested in training," said Mark Bieri, a seven-year student at the school. "But this was the only one built specifically as a dojo. There are schools for a lot of different styles located near me, and they all have posters on the walls and neon lights with lots of kids training there. Right away, I got a different feeling here, which appealed to me."

Bieri attributes that feeling to Ebihara and his emphasis on developing character through kendo. In this, Ebihara is uncompromising.

"In other sports," Ebihara said, "when you get hurt, tired or sick, that is when you stop training. But in kendo, that is the time you start to train."

It's not a sadistic attitude. Rather, his intent is to emphasize the type of determination and outlook that kendo is designed to develop.

He compared training in kendo to climbing an infinitely high mountain: "You know you'll never reach the top just like you know you'll never reach perfection in kendo. But the journey is the important thing."

Perhaps that's why the Ken-Zen Institute has lasted as long as it has. ✕

*About the author:
Mark Jacobs is a freelance writer and martial artist based in New York.
For more information, visit blackbeltmag.com/archives/who/.*