



Episode 208 – Sensei JD Swanson | whistlekickMartialArtsRadio.com



JEREMY: Sensei Swanson, welcome to whistlekick martial arts radio.

SWANSON: Yeah, Good day! How are you doing?

J: I'm doing well and, how are you?

S: I'm really good.

J: Now the listeners are going to hear your accent, they're going to assume you're much farther away from where I am than where you actually are. Let's get that part out of the way.

S: Right now, I'm sitting in my office at Salve Regina University but I'm originally from Rotorua, New Zealand.

J: And there we go. So, wave got an accent coming to us from America.

S: Exactly.

J: Maybe we'll make everybody happy. We've got international flavor to the American based show.



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S: Here we go.

J: Alright. I'm sure were going to hear about martial arts in New Zealand, I'm sure were going to hear some martial arts in the us and maybe even in other places. Before we get in to any if that though, we've got to know some contacts. We've got to know how you got started. Your super hero martial arts origin story if you will. So why don't you take us a minute and tell us how you get going as a martial artist.

S: Yeah. So, it really kind of funny story. I was about five years old, were at some friends of the family's house. I was playing with my friend, he was 4 or 5 years old and I threw him onto the ground and my parents happened to watch it. They were like "oh my goodness, what are you doing? You are throwing your friend! What's going on? If you're going to learn how to do that, you're going to learn how to do it properly." And so, what they did was they brought me down into an old boxing gym that happened to have a karate school in it, in my hometown of Rotorua. I remember walking into the place, it smelled funny. For anyone that has traveled to New Zealand, Rotorua is really odd. It has a lot of guises and hopples so there's always the sulfur smell or the smell of rotten eggs around the town. And this particular boxing gym had that smell and it's one of those things I will always associate with my early days of training. The instructor walked in and looked me up and down and he just said: he ain't going to stick. So, I ended up going to my first class and I still remember it really clearly, we learned Maegeri front kick. It was literally ich nee sam chi. Lifting the leg out, pushing it out, bringing it back, placing it back down. That's what we did, all of the class. At the end of the class, the instructor is like: nyeah, he's not going to stick and I kept coming back. After about six months of me just sort of coming back as a five-year-old, my parents of course encouraging me, the instructor finally said do you want still join up? Do you want to start? And my parents said, well if we are going to pay, they're going to put out a massive investment of thirty dollars to buy you a gear, buy you a uniform and pay the dues things like that. You have to stay through your black belt. You know, they are looking at me, you know this little five year old and I'm like: okay that sounds like a really good idea. They held me to it. Fourteen years later, I finally get to sit my first black belt exam. That sort of allowed me the resilience. I wanted to quit so many times when I was like seven or eight. You know, when my friends were off doing other things, I just stuck. I just never stopped and eventually it became a part of me. It's part of my blood now.

J: So, you and I a similar origin story in terms of age and in terms of parental attitudes. It was never laid as formally to me as it was to you that you are going to stay and make this



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full commitment to black belt. But I can relate to what you're saying with the desire to step away.

S: Yeah. The club I was in was not.. You know now I guess, I look around a lot of martial arts schools and they have a lot of kid's classes and things like that. And in the very early eighties, they just didn't have them. It was, you know, I was one of maybe two kids that were training, sorry the kid's a baby girl, two children that were training. That was it. The rest of them was sixteen, seventeen, eighteen year olds. So, it was tough. You know, I think they were misunderstanding how karate was done. When we did one step for example, you were blocking counter attack and your goal was to hit the person as hard as you could on the counter attack because it would toughen you up. You know, things like that you just didn't want to really, as a young child, you just didn't want to go and deal with. And again, it took a while for you to sort of toughen up, get used to it and then sort of move on. It wasn't until much later, I think until I was fifteen or sixteen that everything just clicked for me. You know, I'd grow into my body, puberty had hit. Normally I joke with my students saying I was twenty-four when I had it. You know and it hit, my limbs have grown and I was able to move and really understood how much I have sort of, encapsulated I think.

J: Interesting. Now when you look back on that time. When you look back on being so much younger than everyone else. Knowing what you know now, are you happy that that's the upbringing you had? Do you wish you had an alternative path through a more, let's say, age appropriate class? Or did you take things from being the sort of odd man out?

S: Yeah. No, it was really interesting I mean, you know. I got funny stories of my best friend and I. You know we used to be, the dojo was really interesting, it used to be across the road, a fairly busy road from a horse track. You know, they were funny experiences like I remember we used to do line work round this horse track, that would be our training. We would run around the horse track the first time. And I remember running along and you know, the assistant instructor came along, picked us both up by the belt and he's doing arm curls while he's running along with us. These kinds of silly things. But you know, you had that piece, sort of funny little kid's sort of stories. But in terms of training, what it did was it taught me the body training. So, it wasn't until much later onto my training that I started to ask questions why. Why you did things, how you did things, how your body works you know? At 5-6-7-8-9-10, you just didn't have the ability or the sort of the ability to ask those questions so you just did. And so, it was really useful to learn the body part of karate. Some of the mechanics were wrong, you know I look back now. But it was interesting to learn and learning how to just train hard and not be afraid of that. And I think these pieces were ingrained in me. Training wise, for the actual question, the quality of the training what you



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do now, starting much later you would've gotten a far better quality of training rather than just the slugging away. I've been very lucky that I haven't had any injuries or things like that, that have come out because of it.

J: It's always interesting to me to hear how people start in such a differently, such varied ways whether it be different age, different style and we all seemed to end up having such similar experiences. I think this analogy has been shared in the show before and it is certainly not something I made up but it's on my mind because I was talking to someone just the other day and using it. As martial artist, we all start all around the base of the mountain, and the further you go the closer you get to the top and the closer you get to each other.

S: Yeah. I agree. It's so funny, when you move away, you know I'm a traditional Shotokan person, I had a good fortune to training with some just amazing people in their styles. I met, General Choi, the founder of taekwondo for example. I met Remy Presas at one point for Filipino stick fighting. But at the end of the day what you realize is this, no matter what martial art or no matter what art you do, they're all the same. The human body and the mechanics of the human body are all the same. And I think, that's just amazing to me. You know, I started traditional karate and kind of got away from it a little while and came back to it. And it just gave you that broader view that teaches you exactly that we all want to quest the same way. It's the quality of the training that really matters, it doesn't matter what style.

J: Tell me about that time that you stepped away from being traditional.

S: Yeah. So, I went to uhm, I ended up going to a boarding school when I was about thirteen. My parents just thought the high school where I grew up was actually a fairly rough area of Rotorua. They sort of moved me off to boarding school with the idea of education. And what was there at the time was they didn't have any martial arts whatsoever that was offered at the school. I am at the age of thirteen and fourteen, what I did was I trained by myself every single day and so I was given the gym to myself, which was really lucky, and I would train from thirty minutes to an hour everyday just by myself. During that time, they actually started a taekwondo club there. And what happened was at the end of those two years, I'm sort of hitting fourteen I'm sort of, I can't do this. I can't just train by myself all the time. You know, you're training was kind of being stagnant and so my parents, in consultation with them and my instructor back home, it was like let's just join this TKD club and see how it goes. So, it went into that and it was really neat, you had to start from the beginning again. You know, starting at a white belt which was fine. As you kind of move through that it was really interesting to me, you know things like side thrust kick for example,



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the way the TKD people do it, completely and utterly change the way I was taught to do it in karate. And even though I teach traditional Shotokan karate, the way I teach side kick you know --- is exactly the same way that TKD people teach it. I think that's really important because I think generally I find most instructors have traveled teaching the kick correctly you know it's really interesting that way. So, it really broadened my views and understanding that within TKD there are problems, within Shotokan there are problems but finding the correct way, it really helped me do that. Training in Filipino stick fighting, understanding that closing feel, the way that you control your elbows in stick fighting is just amazing and that has bought directly to the way that you hold -- 10:26 or your ready positions when you are fighting in 10:31. You know things like that, it was interesting that the bits and pieces that broaden your view when you train these non-traditional styles. The use of the center line 10:37 and Wing Chun is just amazing you know, the way that they do it. And for Shotokan style is, I think it is really important that you don't just jump out and train in million different styles and become a mile wide and inch deep, you've got to go very, very deep. But when you look at traditional styles, they are very deep. It's one of my pet peeves when people here you know, you do Shotokan it's just Shotokan. People who know the style like I'm an expert in this, they tell me what Shotokan is about and they tell what it has and what it doesn't have. But my view on that after training it for so long is really, it's all air. Most people don't look deep enough. And it took me to look through the lens of these other styles to understand exactly what Shotokan has to offer and where it was heading. Because it's all there, you just have to look. I think that it's something people really need to do over the long term.

J: I would completely agree. One of the things I find myself sharing or even telling myself as I consider my training and how I'm training and why I'm training of late, is that a diverse martial artist is a better martial artist.

S: Yeah, I agree. And I think it's got to be the verse in terms you've been thinking, as I say, the thing that you've got to watch is this, these ideas of you know training in everything but not being a jack of all trades and master of none. You've definitely got to focus and understand what your training is it whether its tang soo do taekwondo, Shotokan karate, Goju Ryu, wing chun, it doesn't matter what but you've got to apply that. I think, you know, Bruce Lee's idea of jeet kune do, you know the idea of figuring out what works for your body. The thing is, when you look at Bruce Lee when he was training and when he was moving, he was a wing chun boy. It was really clear. You look at any of his movies its clear what's his base style was. But what he did that was clever is he surveyed the other martial arts to figure out what things worked for him. And he always looked at it through the lens of a, in my opinion, wing chun person. And I think we have to do that with all our arts. You



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can't just go out after a year of training in one style then going to another. You've got to look at it through the lens of whatever your art is and expand and build from there. I think that's really important. You know, for me I'll never regard myself as anything as a Shotokan guy. Yeah, I have trained in other styles and study for a long period of time like taekwondo in eight years but I'm still a Shotokan person. The neat part, is you can go train with Isshin Ryu or taekwondo or whatever. And because I understand my body and how it moves, I can sort of blend in with any of those other styles and it is really fun to do that. [13:25](#)

J: I can certainly relate to that. I have often been accused of *karateing* up my taekwondo forms.

S: (chuckles) same

J: You told us some stories there. You wandered around a little bit, we heard about the race track, we heard about some bits and we know you've got a lot more. No one trained as long as you have and in multiple continents without having some great stories. So, I'd like you to take a minute, tell us your best martial arts story.

S: Yeah. It's funny. Out of all of the questions that you sort of gave me before hand, I sort of checked out, this was the one I struggled with the most. Fairly enough. You know, it's funny to me, I look at things and I've had good fortune of training to train with some very big names. The way that seems, I've already ----- Okazaki sensei ---, Kanazawa sensei [14:14](#) I was in Australia and happen to hang out with Kanazawa sensei and we went to a cook your own food place. I was nixing and I look over and I'm cooking Kanazawa sensei's steak. I got to ask him sensei is there a time that you don't want to put your gear on and train? He just looks at me and goes: yeah. And I thought cool. If that's good enough for him, it's good enough for me. I could talk about when I was young you know, going around, running around the blue lake in New Zealand, it's a 6-kilometer run. My parent driving off with my shoes and having to do it in barefoot. I could talk about my goram exam where I got called up to fight a very famous Shotokan instructor ----[14:56](#) I was sitting my fifth and he was on the 1973 team but he just had a liver transplant. It's like, how do you even deal with doing [15:06](#) --- with a person like that. You know even more so, something I'd like to sort of say out there is, I was diagnosed with cancer about twelve years ago. But even when I was going through radio therapy, I still showed up in the dojo and taught class. It was something hard and it was something that was really important for me to do and I think it was showing that resilience and spirit is really important. It's funny, my best martial arts story out of all of these things, is just training with my club, its training with them every day. Seeing these people that come in, you know. Within collegiate clubs you get this very limited window of



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like four years that you get to work with students yet someone you meet, when you're very fortunate, you get them longer. But generally, its four years, and you see this progression in these humans from they come in at least 18 year olds that sort of quite often never trained before and they're just wide-eyed and some of them when you go, make agike 16:01 make rising bock and their arms flail about. But you see them progress but physically and just mentally and you see them walk out the door at the end of four years, they're transformed. Some of them have gone on to go on to the US National team. Some of them have made these coast team. Some of them they're doctors and it's nice to think that my best martial arts story is the story through them. It's the story that they have moved on and they've have the opportunities that they would never have otherwise gotten. A good example of this, one of my students at Penn state, he would have been 350 pounds when he joined. He trained with me for about a year or two years I think in the end and he was a cancer patient when he was a kid. Half-way through, about 6 months into the training, he sort of holds up his pants and he puts them on, holds them out and there's this massive gap. You know, and he goes: see this, see all this weight I've lost? It's your fault! Seeing that, this student that would never had the opportunity to represent his university, he represented Penn state at collegiate tournaments. He wouldn't have those kinds opportunities if it hadn't been for karate. So, you know, stories like that I think about, by far and away my favorite martial arts story. It's the fact that you have this very small window of time to really make an impact on people's lives and something that's so allegorical to why they are actually in the university. They're in college to learn with any disciplines and arts but they get to this other and it becomes really meaningful to them. I think that's by far my favorite thing, hands down.

J: You fill a dual role in university. You're teaching academic classes and you're teaching martial arts, how does your experience as an academic instructor impact your martial arts instruction and vice versa?

S: Well yeah. Funny it's the vice versa ones the most interesting. I can tell you for a fact, the only reason I ever got a job or the only reason I'm actually able to teach, well, is because of karate. I remember when I was a student in college, I used to be so shy it would be like: I don't want to have to fill up the car with gas cause I'm going to, you know, have to interact with someone. You know, it was that kind of thing. And then, you stick white pajamas on me and I'm running around like an idiot in front of the class, it taught me that confidence. So, what that did was that impacted, and just the way I teach, I teach by allegories all the time. I always by allegories and analogies all the time you know, this is like this, this is like that. I teach biology the same way. The classes I teach at the university are things like kinesiology, developmental biology, genetics, you know those are sort of my wheel house. The lessons that I learned from the dojo floor to be able to teach somebody how to

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physically move their body, when you think about it's like saying describe the color orange, describe Gyakuzuki 19:04 you know. Techniques in karate are not named, like in my mind, when I think of Gyakuzuki reverse punch, it's not the finished product, it's not the finished shape, it is rather how you get there. So, you know, just the way that you think about how to teach somebody how to physically move their hand from their hip out to make that punch is really hard and it takes a lot of thought and I put the same amount of thought into my college classes. You know, when you're sitting there and you talk about DNA transcription or RNAI and trying to describe how that works and why it's important and why you should do that? That becomes important, same thing when you're talking in karate, why does your front foot have to be forward in forward stance? Why should the back foot be turned around? How does the muscle work for you to do that? That becomes important and so that your role in terms of just the way I approach pedagogy in general is the same to me. It's the same whether I'm teaching genetics or if I'm teaching Heian Shodan, it doesn't really differentiate out of my mind.

J: I've had the opportunity to teach a number of things, usually technical stuff back from my IT days and in every instance, I was followed back on my experience teaching martial arts.

S: Absolutely. You know it's funny, I've been teaching college classes for a little over ten years now and I still get butterflies in my stomach. You know when I walk into that class for the first day, ohhh are they going to hate me, how is it going to be? And you know, it's really embarrassing to admit that I guess now --- 20:37 that's okay. You still get those butterflies, but at the end of the day, as soon as you get in you've got this confidence in what you know. Just going up there and enjoying being in front of them is so huge. Again, karate is the same way. When I'm out there teaching, seeing these light bulbs go off or getting people move a certain way or getting them to do something, you see their karate sort of the beginning of class to the end of class and if one small miniscule point is better and then you've done your job. Yuguchi sensei always says step by step. You know, just make these baby steps and that's so true whether is, again, genetics, development, karate, it doesn't matter you know.

J: Absolutely. Outside of teaching in academia and martial arts, are there any hobbies? Is there anything else you are passionate about?

S: Yeah. So, I'm a science nerd of course, you know. I've got my back teeth, glasses and lab coat with a pocket 21:40 protector. I have an active research lab so we actually work on understanding how natural fruit compounds can actually combat stomach cancer. So, we grow cancer cells in the lab and we treat them with these compounds and we pull out the



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rna and we look at what the cells are doing. We work at some algal blooms, understanding how environmental effects sort of control algal blooms here in Rhode Island and Narragansett bay. Those are really fun and again, I have a really active group of students that work with me doing that. It's really fun. I surf and sup, you know, out in the ocean, I'm in New Zealand and you know you got to enjoy these things. So, I do that really badly, mind you. I really enjoy spending time, other than sort of biology teaching or karate, the other thing of course is spending time with my family. I have a three-year-old, Mr. Human, and also the boss, my wife. So, hanging out with them, we have two dogs. One, sort of a weird half snel and half dachshund and a mad labradoodle. And so just hanging out with them and doing stuff with them you know. I love to travel. You know, those kinds of things I think that's really important. I'm still trying to talk Mr. Human into you know, he's only three. But you know, one of the big conundrums of course is when is he going to do karate? You know, and at the moment he's always whenever people come over to train he'll be: oh hayyaa. You know the hayaa girls coming, those kinds of things. He'll probably grow up and hate it but my goal is when he's ready he will start. I'm in no hurry for him to obviously, and I think what I am going to do, Scott Langley coined this a little while ago that he heard that when people should start training is when they can dress for karate. So, I think I'm going to use that as my gauge. But you know, I'm never going to force him into it until he starts dating and then he has to be a black belt. He'll be in good shape.

J: Now I'm curious because this is always an interesting subject for me as someone who does not have children as you are someone who is a martial arts instructor and has children, will he train under you? Or will you send him to someone else?

Chuckles

S: It's funny. I'm struggling with that right now and you know, I wonder is it worthwhile sending him down to one of the dojos and grasp actually paying for karate. You know, I don't want them to go like my approach to karate is you know I teach eighteen year olds. Putting a child into that is very similar to what I went through and I don't know, maturity wise, if he'll be able to handle that. Yeah, he is growing up around it eventually I'll train with him and get him to where he needs to go. But you know, I've always wonder, should he be introduced to it through a lot of these dojos that really cater and do a really good job catering to younger children. I know I couldn't do it but I see others doing it. You know, if there are things that I don't agree with technique wise, I know I could fix that later. Yeah, it's one of those that I really struggled with, fairly enough.



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J: It's such a paradox because you've got on one hand, the recognition that your teaching style is not necessarily appropriate for someone who is younger. But on the other side, when you talk about traditional martial arts, who was it handed down from and to back in the day, it was a familial thing. So, to have that conflict is what I find very interesting.

S: Yeah. In my brain, the way I've kind of flipped it out is that you know he'll start out maybe somewhere else and then eventually come back to me when he's sort of older. Especially, you know, I think that he'll dress when he is ready. When he can dress himself, he will be ready to sort of train but you know I'm sort of weighing up those things. I might have some other instructors that trained with me who I trust, who I'm considering in a few years a thing about children's classes but it's really, you know, I think of specialized children's classes is definitely the way to go initially especially while they're young. When he's older he can mentally handle the way I teach because it is very information driven, I'm a scientist. Then I think he'll be ready you know, but he's going to wait until then. The nice thing is I have kind of a gauge because I went through it as a child so I very much remember that it wasn't until I was eleven or twelve or thirteen that karate started clicking with me in terms of understanding what you were doing, you know.

J: We heard you hint at something so I'm not sure if that's where you're going to go with this next one. But I'd like you to tell us about a time in your life that was difficult, challenging and how your martial arts was able to help you get through.

S: Yeah. There's been a number. Fairly enough, I've brought up the cancer stage one before, that was tough and karate really... I'm going to have to sort of pull out three examples, three major turning points I think and very personal to me. One of them was of course cancer you know, I was diagnosed and nothing kind of freaks you out when go on to have your appendix out. The doctor runs out of the room screaming thinking he was looking at a dead man. Good thing there were lots of morphine in my veins at that time, well okay that's nice. But it was interesting because I think martial arts teaches you never to give up and it teaches you how to just keep going. When I was going through radio therapy I was asked to go to a full camp because Okazaki sensei asked me to be there for the collegiate meeting and I'm like yeah sure as long as I get to do a training. So, I did a training full blown with you know, a hundred and fifty other people in the room. I remember sensei Riley was teaching it and I went half way through and oh my goodness I am gassed. I'm like done and next thing I just kept doing it as much as I could and I remember Okazaki sensei in the meeting actually coming up and coming over to me which is very rare for a Japanese senior instructor like that and ask me how I was. But it never entered my mind that I was going to die. I was like I'm going to keep going, I'm going to keep doing this radio therapy big deal



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you know, you just muscle through it. Karate teaches you that. The second time was when I was doing was my Ph.D. Thesis. I remember I'm typing up, I'm on chapter number four or five or whatever, you know. I am twenty pages in and then I did a stupid thing like save over my original file and poof that chapter is gone. I'm just about ready to pick up my computer and throw it out the window you know I'm like: I'm done screw it no more thesis I don't need this Ph.D. Thing! And then I remembered, wait a minute, it took me 16 years to figure out how to do a stepping punch. So, this PhD thing, really easy. So, what I've found was karate has always been my bench mark. It's always been the thing in my life where I realize that anytime a challenge has come up in my life, I've realized that karate has been something that has always been there. It's been as constant that's not easy and if you can muscle through that and I have muscled through it in karate than any other challenge that life gives me, I've got something larger that I've been plugging away at. If that makes sense. And so, I think that whether it was cancer, whether it was my PhD thesis, I think that's really important. What I have found at the pressing points of my life for example, my father passed away in the second year of my PhD program over here, there's nothing like a parent disappearing away on you when you are sort of fourteen thousand miles away. What I realized very quickly was that I started delving too deep into karate, it became sort of a crutch. I started to neglect other things in my life and I think that's a really important point just to bring up that you've always got to keep your karate in balance with the rest of your life. Everything about what you do should be kept in balance. You know, I've found for that brief period of time of about six months or so, karate really took over and it was what I needed at that time but it wasn't healthy either. Just like not doing any karate I think you can go too far the other way as well. And so, I think all of those things sort of tying together really point out that karate was always a benchmark, but it was very important to not let it take over, if that makes sense.

J: It does and I thank you for sharing that. Certainly, circumstances that at least impart many of us with experience. Certainly, lost things that I've worked on and wanted to throw computers.

S: They are very good at that, aren't they? (chuckles)

J: They are (chuckles). Not that this has anything to do with martial arts but just business-wise now on my primary computer there is an external drive that I run once a week so if it gets infected, it can't spread. I've got three different layers of backup running continuously because I have lost some very important things over the years and longer-term listeners will remember my career prior on IT. I ran a consulting firm for a number of years and saw so much of this that I've just become so paranoid of it in my own life.



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S: I have a mac and just fact that it has an automatic backup that I've got to an outside hard drive is just huge to me you know, I have like three of them that I plug in. One at home, one here just in case.

J: Its good stuff. We are in a good place now with the cloud if it is used properly. You've dropped some pretty big names earlier. People that you've been fortunate to train with or at least meet. If we were to take out that first instructor, because I think for most of us that's the person that really sets our direction. But other than them, who would you say is the person that has been the most influential in the martial arts?

S: So, it's funny, I think people come along in your martial arts career at particular times. I've been very fortunate to being taken, sort of, under the wing of some people throughout my career. You know, Okazaki sensei, robin riley who's just been amazing to me over the last couple of years but I think as you go through I've always seen particular turning points, if this makes sense, in your karate career. So, one guy who just amazes me, he lives on a little town called [32:29 kodo](#), New Zealand. It's a really interesting place if you want to check it out, but he was running a karate, I was there for the internship and he was running a karate dojo there. He was a guy who never graduated high school, he had a job that paid well but was very sort of monotonous, but what he did was he was the first person that made me ask the question why in karate. It's just one of those things that's really important. I don't think, you know, I always believe there's a difference between education and intelligence. And then Nick was one of those guys who was incredibly intelligent. He didn't have the education but man, he had the intelligence and what he did was he had me going: why do you have the back leg straightened in forward stance? Why is the back leg bent? What's the point of this? It just blew my mind. I'm like twenty years old and I'm gone. Oh my goodness, a third year in college. He started me down the path of which I never looked back. And he really showed me that piece. The next person who came along a couple of years later was an instructor called Goran Glucina out of New Zealand as well. He had trained in japan and did the Japanese instructor training course and he showed me what real, Shotokan traditional karate was. Like, if you had told me that I would meet Kanazawa sensei or train with people of that caliber I would have left a new phase sixteen years before that. And I remember that the first training I had with him I'd step forward in forward stance and: no, you're doing it wrong, hey you doing this wrong, hey you you're doing that wrong. And this after sixteen years of training I thought I was pretty hot. And I remember going home at the end of that training and I just burst into tears. I stared at this twenty there, twenty-four-year-old just burst into tears, oh my goodness a waste of the last sixteen years, I hadn't. But it showed me there was so much further to go. Training with a guy very

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recently after about thirty-five years of training, I started training with a guy out here in the states, Steve Ubl, just absolutely showed me that karate didn't have to be fancy its Kihon, its straight basics. He showed that there's this whole new level of basics and basic training that you can do and apply to karate how the principles of these things can be applied to everything. So, what you find is there's these people that come along you know, karate seems to, you train, train, train, and then your skills kind of plateau and then you meet someone who just profoundly changes it and then boom you shoot up in terms of your thinking and move along and then they plateau again and then you meet somebody else and it continues on that upward arc. Then you have constant people who are there, correcting you. Okazaki sensei, riley sensei you know who are constantly picking on you but seeing these people who are still training are just inspiring to me. They blow me away every single day and I'm always amazed they spend time with me. You know, hey JD you're doing this wrong, hey JD you're doing that wrong you know these kinds of things are just phenomenal to me. I'm always thankful about that.

J: I want to go back to something you spoke on very briefly because it's something that I'm starting to hear come through in more and more conversations on this show. But it's something that prior to this show, I've never heard anyone talk about. It's that moment where you step back and question if you have wasted all of your training. That moment that brought you to tears, the same moment I had last year that brought me to tears. And I've talked to a few others, we've had one or two more on the show volunteer that. Would you be willing to talk about that for a moment?

S: Yeah. This is the funny thing, you can get into trouble for as I say, when I talk about this I just want to be clear under no way bashing any other style, systems of anything like that. But what you find is that there are dogmas that have been introduced and Shotokan as well. A lot of different martial arts style where they're just wrong and the way that I was originally taught to do Yoko Geri Keage, your side snap kick for example. Where you simply lifted the leg up and it was the knee that rotates out exactly the wrong angle but mechanically it does that and that is how you were taught. And the reason it was taught that way is because the instructor, whoever the head of the system is or the sensei was never taught to do it properly and chances are, their instructors were never taught to do it properly and so forth as you work back. So, it's not anyone's fault, it was just never taught. And all things have been handed down, things like the back leg and forward stance you know, it should be locked. It's like no it shouldn't be locked because that raises the rear hip up and pushes your bum out, it should be straight but not locked. You know there's a difference and the things that I think my gut feelings sort of says, there were things that were lost in translation from Japanese to English and that was taken as dogma from there. So, what happens when

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you end up under somebody with these critical eyes who are just phenomenal or amazing, they can see that and so you realize that you have been trained, depending on how sort of detached you were from these sort of mainstream, these styles that are closer to the source, what you find is that, other things start to creep in more and more often of these weird dogmas, of these weird sorts of texts I'd you like that are not necessarily mechanically correct. Something that always interested me when I started, you know I grow up in one organization in the Kanazawa sensei, that's who Glucina sensei was affiliated with and he really changed me. When I came to America, I started training with the ISKF under Okazaki sensei, you know it was only three hours away in Philadelphia. What I noticed was I did things that were different to traditional ISKF training you know, just my approach was very different because that was how I learned and I had a taekwondo background and you know karate background extending all the way back. But what I noticed was Okazaki sensei would never correct me in these things because they were mechanically correct. And when you look across the different senior instructors, if you look at Ochi sensei, Okazaki sensei, Kanazawa sensei, Oda sensei, Yuguchi sensei, they all do karate slightly differently [39:10](#) and it's to their body type. So, I think karate is a lot looser than what we make it but it's got to be built on solid fundamentals but those fundamentals come from mechanics. So, what I think happens is over time I think, train under a single instructor and they develop that single lens and so there are things either the instructor doesn't do because their body doesn't do it or they're trying to fix everybody else so they over emphasize one particular point I call that a training aid or they go in and teach those kinds, you know, they teach that and the students become indoctrinated that's "the way". And it may not be, it's sometimes you teach a mistake, a wrong way to do something to fix other things that sometimes can get ingrained in people. I think every karateka needs to ask the question why. Why is it done this way? If you're training with an instructor and you got [40:06](#), why do you do it this way? And if they can't come up with an answer then well you got to query it, you got to question it and I think that's really healthy and vital. And even things with sensei Glucin, we would have discussions and there are things that I don't agree with him, you know there are things, that almost all of my instructors I don't agree with but I want to listen and understand why they do it that way. Most of the time, the good instructors have reasons but if they don't they need to be questioned why it's there in the first place. And so, these kinds of, this is what I learned to do by you know, I don't think any training is wasted. This is sort of I reconcile it in my head but rather I think when you are just in one type of training and you accept it as a dogma, that becomes a waste of training because you are not being critical of yourself. You are not working to make your karate better, you're just doing what you're told. You know, there's a point where you have to do what you're told but eventually, you got to make it your own and understand why and how you're doing it and that's important.

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J: And this kind of tie us back to the very earliest points that you made as we were talking about training in different things and the benefit there, but it also supports your comment that you have to go deep enough with it. There are so many instances where someone will see something on the internet or hear something or go to a weekend seminar and allow that to completely unsettle everything that they have done when they haven't necessarily gone deep enough to see that you know, to borrow back the mountain analogy, things are far closer as you get into it than they may seem.

S: That's exactly right. There's a lot of trends when you see things like in basic karate, everybody tells me knows more about Shotokan than I do, tells me, I'm being sarcastic there sorry. They'll come up to me and say: well in karate there's no circular technics or there's no throwing techniques and it's like, karate is full of them. Oh my goodness, you're not looking? But it's just looking through the lens you know, and so I find people you know, actually going out and making businesses teaching different principle or teaching things that are separate or that it's something particularly new and it isn't, it's just looking through the lens. One of the things that I like about traditional, for me Shotokan karate but you see the same in Goju Ryu, any of the mainstream deep, solid martial arts, they have everything. There all there, it's just you've just got to look deep and it may take training in something else to see it, you know, but it's always been there. If you look at those movements and analyze those movements, look at bongkay [42:56](#) that analysis of what you do, it's all there. And furthermore, the part that's really freaky about it is if you look at somebody who's bigger, then grappling applications works them. You know, I always joke at some fat but I'm not really, I like punching people and that's what I'm good at. For me or I look at a hundred and twenty-pound girl that trains with me, there's no way she'd be able to grapple or wrestle with a 200 pound- 300pound guy. She has to strike him the squidgy bits. But those are all in karate, it doesn't matter whether you're a grappler or a striker or whatever. It's all there, you just got to look for it.

J: When we think about your history, your deep history, your broad history of training and then the people you have worked under, are their names that are missing? Is there someone that you love to either roll back time, or travel around to work out with?

S: So, it's kind of funny. I've been very, very fortunate enough, got into training with a lot of the Shotokan greats and other styles. I've managed training with Hiragana, out of Goju Ryu as I've mentioned. So, I have managed to get all of these but the thing that I'm most jealous of and it is really funny, with some of my conversations with sensei riley, I'm always kind of jealous of him because when I met okazaki sensei or Kanazawa sensei or Oguchi sensei,

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they were all old men by the time I got to train with them. I never got to train with Nakayama sensei, that's one of my regrets, you know he passed away 1987. There was no way I would have gotten the opportunity to train with him. But what I really wish is, I wish that I have had the opportunity to train with some of those guys when they were younger, when they were in their forties. You know, when their karate was peaking, that says what I have really liked. That's not to take away anything from okazaki sensei, you know every time I train with him, he would do the first move out of Heian Shodan and you just see his hip kind of flop and his leg would go out and you would just be down and you're like- my brain couldn't, never quite put it together and this was a man in his eighties. Or he would talk about: oh you know we can do floor training day and he'd lie down and he just pull his feet and stand up but then you'd go- well big deal but then you realize he's in his eighties. I have trouble doing that in my age. But to see them in their prime I think would have been one of those amazing things. Oh, there's one other person I really want to train with, Chuck Norris. Absolutely. Who wouldn't right? I think he is one of those guys who I think would be just really fun to train with. I did get to train with Bill "Superfoot" Wallace, never been kicked on the face so many times by a seventy-year-old before. But yeah, Chuck Norris is definitely on my list.

J: Now, I wouldn't ask this follow up of everyone. Some of the people listening, whether you're Shotokan karate practitioner or not, maybe wondering there is a name that sort of absent on that list but everything that you say has been so intentional that I'm guessing there's a reason. You know, these second to third generation Shotokan practitioner. Why are you honing in on them?

S: So, to me, growing up in New Zealand I think was, for me personally, always so far out of my reach to ever train with any of these guys. Like if you would have asked me, I remember with nick, the other guy that made me think about karate, I remember certainly we were watching a video of Yamada sensei doing Unsu, the Kata Unsu. And they just blew me away- oh my goodness! I have never seen anything like it. Years later, I got to train with him once. I think for me they were so far out of my reach that I still can't believe that I've had the privilege to train with them now and I think they really, cause one of the names that's missing off my list is finekochi sensei [46:53](#). It's kind of purposeful. At the end of the day, he had his way of doing things. I think his words in karatedo: my way of life, that really resonate. I think that's huge. But training with some of these second and third generation people, you've seen where it became, and when, where and how it was interpreted by different people. You know, karate was interpreted by different people because we all have different body types. And seeing that manifestation in those different people, I think it's huge. If that make sense. You know rather than someone who trained with okosha [47:29](#)

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well he had one body type and he was sort of like the central figure but look at the way that these different amazing people train and they're all different. Why are they different and why have they chosen that way to train and why they have got to develop these signature styles and these branching? It's all Shotokan. It's all oranges or it's all apples it's just some of them are Macintosh apples, some of them are pacific grows, some of them are red delicious and so forth. To me, that just blows me away and it would have been amazing to see them, not to mention they can't do it now but it would've been amazing to see them when they were younger. In the 60's and then even through the sort of early eighties.

J: So often whether it's in business or in personality types, we see that there are those that are good at originating things, creating, being first movers. But it is, I don't know if I want to say uncommon but certainly there is a lot of room for others to come in, take what they've created and make it dramatically better.

S: Correct. Two examples have popped straight into my mind are Asai sensei and Kanazawa sensei. You know, in some ways, them leaving the JK was one of the best things that happen to them because it gave them the freedom to really explore what they found interesting. You know, and the karate that they produced out of that, having that solid base, but the karate that they have produced afterwards was just superb as a result you know. They had that, those years and years and years of hard, basic solid training, but where they went to given that freedom is just phenomenal.

J: For sure. Let's talk about competition. Has competition been part of your training?

S: Yeah. It has, when I was younger. I used to compete in New Zealand. I've done it maybe twice in the united states, once at an east coast tournament, basically they needed a third man for kata team [49:27](#) at the university. *Yeah, let's do it! That would be fun.* But really, I made a decision when I came and I was on a New Zealand team, I got to beat up an Australian so that was fun. But really when I came to the united states and I started the Shotokan club at Penn state, I had to make a decision and that was either to train myself, or train my team. And that's what I decided to do, I train my team instead of me and my karate got better because they got better obviously but I was never in a position where I felt comfortable competing anymore, you know that kind of piece happened. It became part of my mantra was to make my students as good as I could possibly get them and you know, again, that showed it. You know, I think back across my collegiate and a number of times they've won US nationals in the ISKF you know it was amazing, they just blew me away with what I could produce. So that was important to me. They've always done extremely well and it doesn't come from me it just comes from me yelling at them and they're doing the



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work. You know, they're amazing. I think that being said, I do think competition is really important for a period of your life. Again, just within life I think karate training has to be kept in balance. So, the reason you want to do tournaments, one reason that I think is really important to do it and same thing with testing. Testing and tournament are the same thing, it's a way to test your karate. That is simply a benchmark mechanism where you can go in and you know, your goal whether you make it through one round or you win it, it doesn't matter, in my mind I tell my students the same thing. What I want you to do is, I want you to step up on the line and do karate. And if you're happy with how that comes out, you know, if you're happy and you've gone out there and you've laid it all out, and your karate was superb in your mind, then your training is good. And it's the same thing with kumite, if you go out there and you fight and you compete, and you feel that kumite happening and you do well, it doesn't matter what you get it's that benchmark of how your karate is progressing to you. You know, that your training is personal and tournaments provide that situation. The other way we could do it is you know, you can go out to drop you off in some dodgy area or town and slap you on the butt and go okay, you know we'll see you in a couple of hours. Doing test and tournaments allow you to put yourself into a high-pressure situation and test to see if your karate works and that's the use and I think that's important and it is important to develop that while you are young and also when you're older. You know, I think it is important to continually test for that. You know.

J: For sure. You mentioned Chuck Norris earlier. Are you a big chuck Norris fan? Are you a big fan of his movies? Walker, Texas ranger and all that?

S: Yeah, so so. I just think he's cool. You know, my favorite movie hands down, Martial arts movie is Berry Gordy's the last dragon. If you haven't seen that, it is awesome. You know, the characters, Bruce Leroy and the shogun of Harlem. It's just awesome. The reason I like that kind of martial arts film is because it doesn't take itself seriously, it lasted itself. The martial arts in it are really just fun to watch and the story behind it is really neat. My favorite, I think, actor hands down is jet li. Just hands down and you know, his historical stuff, fearless and hero [53:03](#) has just amazing story. But the movie that always clicks on my head is forbidden kingdom, I don't know if you have seen that. There's one line in it that I think is just spectacular, you know. In it, the main protagonist is sort of freaking out, he's got all this trial ahead of him. And he's just like, you know, this thing about what he has to do and he ends up, they end up in a sort of cave and jet li is just sort of sitting there very serene, just mellowing out. The protagonist wakes up and he's just wierded out and he's like: What if I can't handle it, what if I freeze? And jet li is sitting there so incredibly serenely just turns and looks to them and goes: don't forget to breathe. I think that to me just really resonates because I think just in general, we freak out in life. You know, we have these



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kinds of things happening and we forget to breathe sometimes and the thing that it does to me that puts into perspective all of karate training. Karate is a true microcosm of the world. The dojo is a true microcosm of the world. How many times have you stood across from someone like, oh my goodness I'm so going to get my bottom smacked you know, I'm so scared right now. Or you are going up to test and everything just kind of blanks out ---54:12 you walk up and they go: do this 54:16, do what? And then everything stops. But then you breathe and then you do it because the training takes over and I think that happens in everyday in your life. As you train, the same things come out. And so those kinds of things I think are just really neat. I think Jackie Chan is just awesome. You know, Jean Claude Van Damme, he is one of my big heroes growing up. The original kick boxer and I think they were great movies, you know. But really, it's the last dragon totally and the forbidden kingdom are two of my favorites for those reasons.

J: The Last Dragon is a great film and its one that actually doesn't come up on the show too often and I would not be doing my job as host if I didn't remind potentially new listeners that we had the star of that movie, Taimak Guarriello, on the show. Because last year was the 25th or 30th anniversary of the movie and so he did a big media tour and they reached out to us and it's an absolute joy to talk to. I'll drop the link in the show notes for this episode, so if anybody is new, we do those at whistlekickmartialartsradio.com and you can see everything from today's episode and we'll link to Taimak episode as well. It was a fun one and it was quite an honor to get to talk to him.

Yeah, that would've been and I'm so jealous again.

J: I'm a very lucky man. I have a microphone and I get to talk to the world. It's fantastic. How about books? You seem pretty passionate about movies and certainly about martial arts culture and history, does that translate into your reading as well?

S: Yeah, absolutely. I mean, I heard there is this great book by this guy Swanson. No sorry. Really, when you look at martial arts books, there's a lot out there, and I think there are some really neat ones. I can go further without talking about Nakayama's best karate. You know, for me these are the go to books for kata, not necessarily the applications but just how to do the kata. If there's something, how is that hand held or things like that because again, I think every kata is put together and has the hands in a particular place for a particular reason. I'm starting to look into the philosophy stuff, Okazaki sensei's book: perfection of character is really important. I'm actually starting to read terrifyingly enough, a lot of neuro science stuff I'm researching for my next book. A couple that I think are really, really useful that are out there is something that a little bit paradigm shifting for me was the



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little black book of violence by Lawrence Kent and Chris Wilder and also meditations in violence by Rory Miller. Just really talking about the real-world ideas. You know, you always hear people, I teach self-defense classes and this and that. You know, if they've done it without reading those books, man, there's a lot of things missing in self-defense and just your approach to self-defense, you know. At the university here occasionally, I'll be asked to talk about self-defense and it's no longer: oh you woke up somebody and poke their eyes out. Here's the pre-stuff, here's the post stuff, here's verbal de-escalation, all those good things that really came out and really, I think in --- of these podcasts that got me into those books initially. I love a lot of autobiographies of some of these guys. Yuguchi sensei's mind and body like bullet, Kanazawa sensei's karate my way of life, C.W. Nicole's moving Zen, Scott Langley's karate stupid, Stan smith's the way of the empty hand, they're really neat and it's interesting to me to read them. When you read ones that were written by Japanese instructors, Yuguchi and Kanagawa sensei's book and comparing those two instructors that were in japan in the 1960's like C.W. Nicole and Stan Schmidt's and in comparing that with somebody who is there relatively recently like Scott Langley. It's interesting to see the Japanese version of it, it's interesting to see western version in the 1960's and then it's interesting to see the western version in the 2000's and how it's progressed and changed overtime and how somethings haven't changed. I think that's really an interesting analysis from my perspective and to the culture of karate you know. Ideas like what does sempai actually mean? What does Kohai actually mean? What does sensei actually mean? You know, those sorts of things. I think they're really, really useful and healthy.

J: Let's talk about the future. You wrote a book, we'll hear more about that in a second but you're still training, you're still teaching, you have a family so clearly, you've decided this is a priority. What is it about martial arts that's keeping you going and is it going in pursuit of anything?

S: So, one of the things that terrifies me more than anything is I'm always worried that traditional karate is dying. And it scares me almost to the point of keeping me up at night and it's interesting to me, within the ISKF it's been very interesting. Okazaki sensei recently retired and you know now we have Hiroyoshi Okazaki sensei who's taken over with support of robin riley and the rest of the shihan kai and technical committee. And it's a really neat time to be in the ISKF and the organization because they're now questioning and they're moving forward and they're moving the organization forward and its neat. I was asked to be director of the ECCKU which is the east coast collegiate karate union and the NCKA, the national collegiate karate association just this last year. So, one of the things that concerns me about karate is you know, if it is disappearing, one of the places that we can really build it is in collegiate karate. Both these organizations, ECCKU and the NCKA, while they're



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under the ISKF officially, and I report to okazaki sensei to Hiroyoshi sensei. Any Shotokan based club, as long as affiliated with the collegiate, can be part of this. So, it's really neat to start to build that and build strategies because the way I look at a lot of this is that Shotokan itself has been splintering over the years you know. There was the split between Nishiyama sensei and okazaki sensei in the US then okazaki sensei splitting from the JKA. Kanazawa sensei splitting from the JKA. If you go through the best karate, you know the kumite books, you look at it, and how many of those instructors are still in the JKA and there's very few. And it's interesting now that were the generation underneath that, the way that I was joking to a friend of mine or a friend of mine was joking with me as he said you know it's kind of like we're children of divorced parents. And so, I think now is the time in three collegiate karate, I believe we can start to bring those children together because if we don't I think karate is going to be gone. We can't survive as these many organization, I don't think there needs to be one big organization but we can still kick and punch together and I think collegiate karate is one way we can start to do that. That I think is really, really important. The second major goal is to really help people ask the question why. Don't be forced to accept it and in --- [1:01:52](#) one of his podcast he was talking about whether or not basic kumite was useful or not. He says no it isn't, I totally disagree and I have reasons why. But at the end of that he says, you know, this is my opinion but if you disagree, don't you say you disagree. Come up with why, the burden of proof lies with you. And I really like that approach. I like the idea of getting people to ask why. I see many people out there giving points of view and I think that's really healthy and I think getting general people, you look on web forums and things like that, you see where people's understandings are. Sometimes they're so sort of closed off and it's getting to open their minds and ask why and how does this work, how does the mechanics of that work, how can I be better. Getting them to do that is huge and if I can do a small part of that, I'll be really stoked. And then my major goal of the future is just train day to day. I train every single day and you know, I'm still crap, but everyday I'm making these little tiny small steps to get better and that's huge with me.

J: Excellent. So, let's hear more about this book and the other things you've got going on if people want to reach out to you or find you online, give us your pitch.

S: Yeah. So, the book itself is called Karate Science Dynamic Movement. It was sort of spawned out of, there was a period right after the ISKF split from the JKA. Okazaki sensei asked me to help him with, I was living down in Arkansas at the time, and he asked me to help with the south you know, to keep the sort of organization together and every once in a while, I'd get invited out to teach a seminar in the middle of nowhere Tennessee. What I realized very quickly is that these clubs have been isolated from you know, sort of like the Japanese if you like, not that it's the only right way but sort of the core, solid karate

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foundation type stuff for a really long period of time. There were certain elements you know, like when you go to these clubs you know these things like the stance is too wide or their front knee in forward stance is all the way out there, it's not tucked under and coiled. Their mistake low stances for spread out stances rather than this nice tight coil. And so, what the book was would mean brewing in my head for about fifteen years and the idea of it was what will I tell people on these seminars? How can I improve their fundamental basic training? You know, give them the idea of here's the whys about karate. Here's why we do this, here's why we do that with hope that not everyone has access. As a little boy growing up in New Zealand, I would have never had the access to the Japanese instructors that I do now or the really good western instructors that I do now. The book is like a small attempt to help people who don't have that access to have that access and sort of let them think about that. So, different ways you can get in contact with the book and one of my goals is to publish technical videos, articles. My publisher YMAA, they're direct, you can find them at www.ymaa.com. The book is published through them. It's in every Barnes and noble. I was in Santa Monica a couple of weeks ago, I got to train with sensei Field which was awesome. But I went into a Barnes and noble in Santa Monica and there it was, it kind of freaks me out. You can look at the book, I have a website that a company it sits, it's under www.karatescience.com. I also have a Facebook page, Karate Science. So, you can see these kinds of things in the idea that they're just seeing articles that post up there periodically. The idea of karate science is its going to be a series of different books. The next one I'm looking at it and it's going to be about neuro science now that it can improve your karate. Really sort of integrating simple biology and again it has to be simplified. You know, the physics in karate science had to be simplified for people to sort of follow it, I think. Because again, you know, I think that's really important to make it approachable or accessible. So, when you're on Karatescience.com, one of the things I'm doing is I'm constantly posting up there just different articles and things like that. A couple of exciting things, there's the ISKF master camp coming up, June 10-17 in Philadelphia. That's an amazing opportunity. It's open to anyone in Shotokan, you don't have to be ISKF but they have a bunch of Japanese instructors coming out including yuchi, ushi, takahashi and miyoda. Also, some very famous American instructors are going to be there including sensei Riley, sensei field and sensei Klein. That's just really good to do that. Collegiate karate-wise, check out www.iskf.com, it's under the organization tab you'll see collegiate karate. If you're interested, check it out. I think it's a really good way. We're starting to build sort of international level now really to sort of move that in. The organizations, the collegiate karate and the ISKF, has always been important but just in the last year I got some very clear goals that I want to accomplish there and you know, really just to build it. And then if people are interested in talking about karate or hanging out or whatever, you can always

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email me. One way is through the webpage karatescience.com or through my email address which is jd.swanson@salve.edu.

J: That's great. I want to thank you for coming on and thank you for sharing everything and just a great conversation that was a lot of fun and one of those even if when we're not recording and no one was listening, I would have enjoyed just as much.

S: That's great!

J: I'm hoping we can go out with just a little bit of gold from you. Any parting words for the people listening.

S: Yeah. Just always question your training, always ask why. You've got to train really hard. You know, sometimes people don't train hard enough but you got to train hard both physically and mentally. It's not just about throwing a million punches, it's about asking how does this muscle work, how does that muscle work, how can I make this more efficient. Work on it that way. It's really hard to break down your technique like that. And if you don't have enough knowledge figure that out, find people to do training with the very best you can. Kanazawa sensei is often quoted with a line that practice does not make perfect, its only perfect practice that makes you perfect. And I think it's just so incredibly important in martial arts in general and with anything you do. If you're just practicing, yeah, waste of time. Its working on that, seeking out sources and encompassing it into what you do that I think is very vital and it just takes time. As Yuguchi sensei says, step by step, little baby steps.