

George E. Mattson

上地流

The Father of
American Uechi-ryu
Karate Reflects on
the Old Way.

By Roy R. Bedard, Ph.D.



George E. Mattson shares his journey from American serviceman assigned to the post-war Pacific theater to becoming the first American to be awarded a black belt in Okinawan Karate and reflects upon how he has been influenced by the art of Uechi-ryu karate-jutsu, and how the art has been influenced by him.

It wasn't easy being one of the first Americans to venture into a karate school in Okinawa. Though many dojos dotted the landscape of the post-war Ryukyu Islands, in the 1950s there remained distrust, dislike, and a deep cultural divide with the American troops that occupied the tiny island nation. To many Ryukyuan, American GIs were viewed as invaders and interlopers. Thousands of servicemen stormed the beaches in the spring of 1945 as a springboard to Japan, bringing with them an unfathomable amount of death and destruction. The invasion of Okinawa marked the largest amphibious landing conducted by the United States military during the Pacific War. In concert with massive air bombardment, ground fighting spread throughout the farming and fishing villages and left roughly half of Okinawa's population dead or wounded.

Rather than withdrawing from their homeland at the close of the war, Okinawans saw an increase in US military presence in the coming years. Americans set up military bases in Okinawa, considering it a critical, strategic location for monitoring events in the east. With the threat of communist expansion and the growing power of the Soviet Union during the Cold War, Okinawan farmland was steadily appropriated for building US Navy and Army bases.

In 1956 George E. Mattson appeared on the island of Okinawa.

His arrival, a trivial part of the steady and continuous transport of Americans in and out of Okinawa was seen by islanders as nothing more than carcinogenic residue, a vestige of the terrible war. Mattson, a private in the US Army and just a couple years out of high school was optimistic and excited about the new world he was entering, but to the Okinawans he was just one of the nameless, faceless rabble that made up still another unwelcome contingent of American troops.

At 20 years old, Mattson was tall with a razor-thin build. His stature more resembled a stalk of wheat picked from the midwestern farm fields of his hometown than having any semblance to the rough and tumble military figures that had become iconic to fans of the silver screen. To be sure, he was no John Wayne, but still, in spite of his boyish appearance and midwestern charm, arriving in the Okinawan Prefecture at the tail end of hostilities, he had been cautioned by military command that like all Americans assigned to Pacific command, he would be *persona non grata*.

Mattson was assigned to the Army Security Agency, the Army's signals intelligence branch located at Sobe Camp in the village of Yomitan. The tiny island community lacked the sophistication of neighboring Japan's large mainland cities, but to Mattson, born and raised in the river port town of Hastings, Minnesota, it was rich with new experiences. Out of curiosity



1957 Seisan: Demonstrating the Seisan knee strike at moment of Kimi (contact)

and perhaps partly out of good stewardship, Mattson took peculiar interest in Okinawan culture. He quickly noticed the genteel way in which the Okinawan people carried themselves. Their focused attention to detail intrigued him. He noticed their stoic mannerisms and paid close attention to the amount of respect they afforded everyone and everything in both formal and informal meetings. Gifted with a penchant for curiosity and an amicable personality Mattson ignored warnings from his peers and set out to bridge the cultural divide.

When interacting with the Okinawan people Mattson was sure to portray himself not as an unwelcome occupier, but rather a displaced and humble student of life, eager to learn and participate in Okinawa's deeply treasured history and culture. In contrast, Mattson's willingness to show humility to the Okinawan people, coupled with his avid and overt enthusiasm for Asian culture left him

¹The Army Security Intelligence Agency (1945-1987) was later combined with the United States Army Intelligence and Security Command (INSCOM). After 1987 it was deactivated then reactivated as the 147th Military Intelligence Battalion (CEWI), assigned to the Army Reserve.

vulnerable to criticism from his own troops. Why, they wondered, would any American be so interested in cozying up with the *enemy*? Though it wasn't forbidden to fraternize with the locals, it was looked down upon by many of Mattson's peers and superiors, who mostly viewed Asians as primitive, uncivilized, and barbaric people. Indeed, such deeply held prejudices often led to a variety of depraved behaviors perpetrated upon the Okinawan people, behaviors Mattson wanted no part of. It should be noted that there had been many reports of human rights violations occurring on the Ryukyu islands by American servicemen during this period.² This unenviable legacy is one that modern American servicemen continue to be reminded of.

In Futenma City, about a half-hour from Yomitan, Uechi Kanei, the oldest son of Uechi Kanbun was teaching his father's style of Southern Chinese kung fu. Uechi-ryu (上地流), as it became known, was a derivative form of Paingai-noon (half hard/half soft skills) that had been developed in Fuzhou, in the Fujan province of Southern China, by the legendary Shushiwa [Zhouzihe].³ Uechi Kanbun was a direct student of Shushiwa and is rumored to have been the first non-Chinese martial artist to open a school in China. For personal reasons, Uechi Kanbun left China and briefly returned to Okinawa before traveling to the Wakayama Province of Japan in 1926 to seek employment. In 1927, at the age of 16, Uechi Kanei, reported to have been in poor health, traveled to Japan to improve his fitness through the practice of the martial arts. After more than a decade of intensive training, Uechi Kanei received his "certificate of full proficiency" from Uechi Kanbun in the art of Paingai-noon.

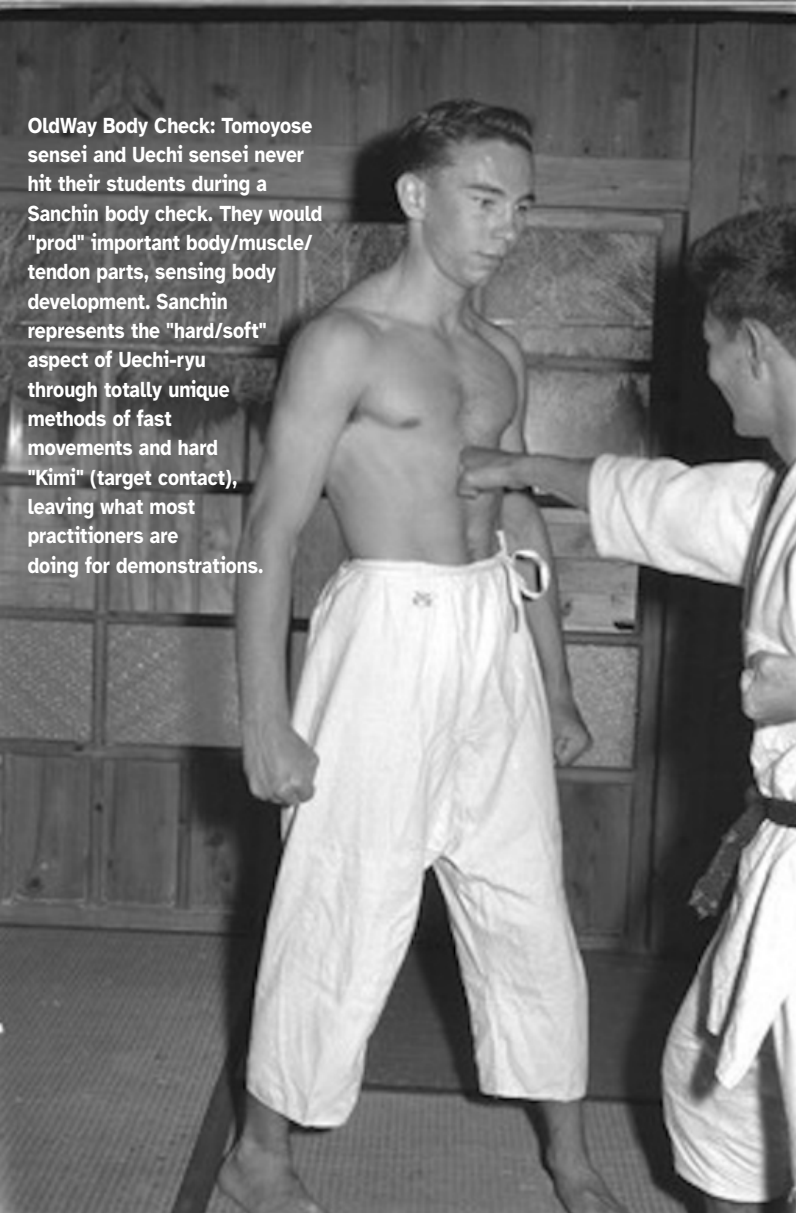
For several years, Uechi Kanei taught Paingai-noon-ryu in various location throughout Japan. In 1942 he returned to Okinawa and began teaching for approximately two years, before he and his students were conscripted to the war



² "List of Main Crimes Committed and Incidents Concerning the U.S. Military on Okinawa—Excerpts." Okinawa Times. 1995-10-12. Retrieved 10 March 2021.

³ There is some speculation that Uechi Kanbun was also influenced by other, eclectic styles of his day. There are unmistakable commonalities between Uechi-ryu and other Okinawan karate systems that are reported to have no historic link.

OldWay Body Check: Tomoyose sensei and Uechi sensei never hit their students during a Sanchin body check. They would "prod" important body/muscle/tendon parts, sensing body development. Sanchin represents the "hard/soft" aspect of Uechi-ryu through totally unique methods of fast movements and hard "Kimi" (target contact), leaving what most practitioners are doing for demonstrations.



effort, to defend Okinawa. After the war, Uechi Kanei returned to civilian life and in 1949, with the help of Ryuko Tomoyose, Uechi Kanei set up a dojo in Kanzatobaru, Naha City, and another in the Nodake area of Ginowan-son. Paingai-noon-ryu was renamed "Uechi-ryu Karatejutsu" in honor of Uechi Kanbun, who had died of nephritis in 1948. The two dojos were consolidated in 1957 to form the now famous Futenma dojo, a year before Mattson arrived.

Similar to the way modern gymnasiums operate today, village students would enroll in class, pay dues and exercise in the martial arts to develop physical fitness. But unlike today, the art they were studying was steeped in oral tradition, allegory, and philosophical teachings that would be passed along from teacher to student in an idyllic way. Along with developing overt attributes of physical strength, students partook in a venerated form of moral development that underlay the very foundations of the ancient Chinese system they had come to learn. Any outsider would naturally be considered an interloper, not only disinclined but wholly

unworthy of inheriting the virtues and sacred teachings that had been meticulously cultivated for centuries by men protective of their stylistic secrets.

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For personal reasons, Uechi Kanbun



Shu Shiwa (Chinese: Zhou Zihe 周子和 1874-1926) The original autographed photo, presented to the American delegation's senior representative, George E. Mattson by the Fuzhou Research group, dated August, 1984.

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Entering into this world would

A Japanese film crew came to Boston and interviewed George as part of a cultural research project, that focused on "The keys to a successful Okinawan military tour of duty" commissioned by the Ministry of Foreign affairs, Japan.



require a mentor, and in Mattson's case it was Tomoyose Ryuko. "Tommy Sensei" as Mattson called him, was held in the highest regard by Uechi Kanei and Tomoyose gambled that he could convince Uechi Kanei that it was time for Uechi-ryu to grow and expand into the western world. Tomoyose was a gentleman, quiet and insightful, a student of budo, a timely renaissance man who realized that the way to build a movement was through assimilation of ideas and a willingness to allow foreign interactions. Tomoyose wanted to spread Okinawa karate-do throughout the world because he believed that karate held the secret to making its practitioners better people.

Tommy's father, Tomoyose Ryuyo, was responsible for encouraging Uechi Kanbun to teach karate again, after Kanbun became contemptuous of his martial art and vowed never to teach it again. As the story goes, a student of Uechi Kanbun took the life of his neighbor using an open-hand technique taught to him by Uechi Kanbun. The dispute was civil in nature, not an act of warfare, and it had occurred over a land irrigation dispute. To Uechi Kanbun, the death of another over such an insignificant matter was a betrayal to his teachings. Kanbun shouldered much of the blame, viewing his teachings as partly responsible for the death of another. He vowed to never teach again. It could be said that without Ryuyo's encouragement and counsel, Paingai-noon-ryu would have ceased to exist and that Uechi-ryu would have never been born.

Mattson met Tommy Sensei through a mutual military friend. Mattson recalled upon meeting Tommy for the first time that he was a modest, kind, gregarious figure who enjoyed fellowship and cultural exchange.

Somewhat unique among the Okinawan people, Tommy was always happy to share his thoughts with Americans, giving Mattson the impression that he valued people on their own merits, unencumbered by any hint of social prejudice. If Tommy held any grudges, perhaps implicit in the crevices of his own cultural identity, he was able, masterfully, to suspend them. This was precisely the type of person that Mattson needed to help bridge the cultural gap, guide his exploration into Okinawan society, and formally introduce him to the hidden world of the martial arts. Through Tomoyose Ryuko, Mattson would become the conduit for introducing not only the art of Uechi-ryu Karate, but also its philosophical precepts to the Western world.

Tommy did not have a commercial dojo; rather, he taught Uechi-ryu Karate from his home to select students. In his living room and yard, Tommy developed young men's bodies and minds through the expression of karate forms which relied upon various movements comprised of tensing, relaxing, and breathing. Mattson was able to observe these forms and he quickly took an interest trying them himself. But first, there were some politics involved. Tommy required that Mattson have permission from Uechi Kanei, before any direct training could commence.

This might seem easy enough but recall dear reader that such a thing had never been done before. Accepting an American into the otherwise secret world of Okinawan karate would require the right man, at the right time, having the right motivations. Unbeknownst to Mattson, Tommy had been mindfully screening him since the first day they met. Mattson managed to leave Tommy with the impression that he was indeed worthy to have the honor bestowed upon him, so Tommy decided to leverage his relationship with Uechi Kanei to get the required permission. Upon Tommy's artful diplomacy, Uechi Kanei agreed.

This was an enormous breakthrough in Okinawan/American relations, and



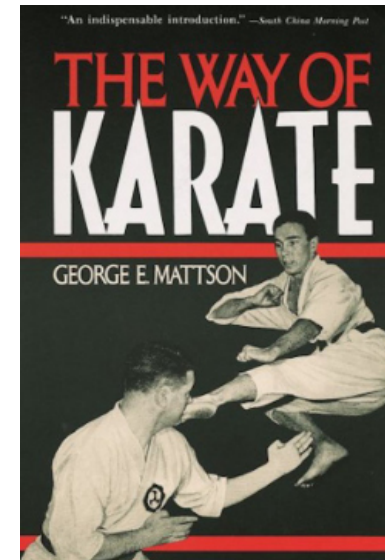
in particular for the world of marital arts. Mattson would be the first American permitted to study Uechi-ryu Karate, ever, an opportunity that Mattson would be sure not to squander. Six days a week Mattson would visit with Tommy to learn and develop karate skills. A great emphasis was placed on learning the three original forms of Uechi-ryu, *Sanchin*, *Seisan* and *Sanseiryu*, the most important of which is *Sanchin* (*the three conflicts of body, mind and spirit*). Uechi Kanei and other Okinawan karate masters have often said that “all is in *Sanchin*,” revealing their reverence to this form as the crown jewel of Okinawan karate. A “*Sanchin check*,” performed by lightly

pounding on a student's body, allowed the masters to examine muscle tension, mental acuity, and breathing in a consolidated state. Once a week Mattson would transit to the Futenma dojo, where Uechi Kanei would observe his progress and help him perfect his forms. In less than two years of robust training under the direct tutelage of Uechi Kanei and Tomoyose Ryuko, Mattson was awarded the rank of Shodan. He holds the distinction of being the first American to receive a black-belt in Okinawan karate.

Mattson published his first work, *The Way of Karate* (1962), in which he introduced the Okinawan fighting arts in book form to a global audience. He

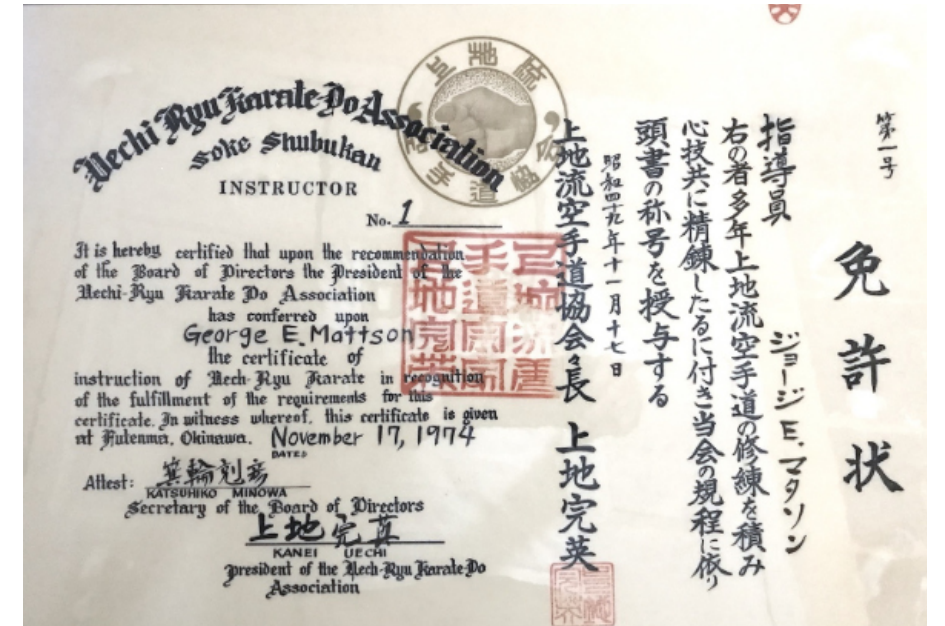
then published a more style-specific book, titled *Uechi-Ryu Karate Do* (1974) and followed with a descriptive compendium of the style that helped organize the Uechi-ryu system, titled *The Black Belt Test Guide* (1984). A historical account of his time in Okinawa was later published. A memoir that took over 20 years to write, *The Way of Uechi-ryu Karate* (2010) was released in a commemorative coffee table publication, filed with remarkable pictures and endearing stories of Mattson's time in Okinawa. The book was limited to only 500 copies. I was honored to serve as Mattson's editor during the development of this riveting and revealing publication.

The original Uechi-ryu training may have been a little different than Mattson experienced it. At Master Uechi's dojo, Mattson was subject to various tests of strength, not by Master Uechi, but by senior students who were not as readily accepting of an American outsider. Though no student would think to argue with the master's



decision to allow Mattson to train, they had their own practical ways to express subtle shades of intolerance. This was, after all, a combat art that provided more than ample opportunity for the young karateka to show their displeasure with Mattson's participation in their art, in a most direct and memorable way.

Mattson found himself in a deeply competitive environment where senior students would find ways to challenge each other to contests of strength always examining his countenance and enthusiasm to learn. To not seem too obvious, training drills progressively evolved from 'finger touch' checks of muscle resiliency, to punching and striking tests,



Teacher's certificate: George was proud to have received the first issued teacher's certificate from the Okinawa Uechi-ryu Karate Association in 1974.

performed with such ferocity that it became clear that the new ritual was to see who could endure the hardest impact. Drills further evolved to what Mattson humbly cited as “strong contact drills” and “free-fighting” with the other students, practices that at that time were not common in Okinawan karate schools, and in

particular not with newer students.

Uechi-ryu Karate was already legendary for its ability to develop powerful muscles and sinewy strength in the limbs, joints, and torsos of its participants. Often, the power developed by Uechi-ryu practitioners would be showcased in front of audiences during village demonstrations. But now these attributes were on regular display in Master Uechi's dojo. The perversion of the traditional "Sanchin check" had a surprisingly opposite effect. Instead of running Mattson off, the Okinawan students may have discovered that they too were fascinated with this new way of training. Subjecting young men to regular bouts of hard body impact

was extraordinarily satisfying to new students, affirming the development that was rumored to occur from the continuous practice of Sanchin.

It was a new way of examining human performance on a regular basis and it became slowly adopted by meaningful practitioners, not as a form of punishing examination directed at troubling students, but rather as a way to explore the style's ancestral Chinese origins. Exhibitions of strength, like board and tile breaking, once reserved for public demonstrations, could now manifest into everyday dojo practice.

Mattson recalled that the relaxed but firm movements he was learning from Tommy took on an unnatural hardness when practicing with the others in Uechi's dojo. He said he begged Tomoyose to hit him harder as he underwent the Sanchin check. Tommy balked at the request assuring Mattson that his rigid, overly tense movements were creating an imbalance in his physical and mental development, that was surely unhealthy in the long-term. But Mattson, running on the jet fuel of youth, refused to listen and continued to pound his arms and body vigorously during *kote-kitai* and *karada-kitai*.

In the 1950s, the finely tuned

kinesiological mechanisms designed by the Chinese over centuries to promote holistic coordination of body and mind gave way to an extreme form of muscle tension resulting in a robotic dance of isometric and isokinetic movements that burned huge amounts of calories and exploited the euphoric feelings from the surge of energy that accompanies innervation.

Mattson admits that at that time he loved the experience of being constantly tested. He could feel his frail youthful body growing stronger, and he was appreciative that the hard work he was putting into his training was both noticeable and instantly gratifying. Blows to his body and limbs would seemingly bounce off of him as if an invisible force field had taken the place of his skin. The ritualistic pounding that was being popularized among the Okinawan karateka would one day become a signature practice in Uechi-ryu dojos throughout the world.

Mattson's theory that a "hard style" of training was engineered specifically to discourage foreigners from participating is interesting. When he reflects on those early days of his training, he speculates that his experience in Okinawa might not have



1985 Conference in Fuchou, China: Delegations from Okinawa and the USA converged in China where the Chinese research group released the results of their lengthy study of the Uechi-ryu roots, resulting in the discovery of Shū Shiwa.

been entirely consistent with the original teaching methods that were more commonplace before his arrival. He admits that he locked-on to the superhuman attributes of the style as a bit of a survival mechanism. It was a form of self-promotion and a way for his dojo to gain traction when he returned to the United States.

The corner stone of Okinawan Uechi-ryu has always been Sanchin, the ironically simple while at the same time extraordinarily complex series of movements and positions designed to develop three dimensions of the human experience; graceful movement of body, razor sharp clarity of mind, and deeply emotional attributes that manifest spiritually through the expression of form. It has been described by some as a form of moving meditation, with the capacity for establishing a mental flow state whereby the mind becomes completely absorbed by the task. This coordination of body and mind promotes endurance and longevity in both the short and long-term.

While it is somewhat normal for

new students to find the practice of Sanchin boring over time, the masters emphasize that there are many layers of the kata that must first be recognized before the form can be properly practiced. It is likely that Sanchin's roots lie in the Indian subcontinent where some version of it was practiced religiously for the purpose of achieving what the Buddhist, Hindu, Jaina, and Sikh all call *Nirvana*, a state of spiritual enlightenment and profound peace of mind.

The Old Way

When Mattson returned to the United States, he went to work right away building a karate school in the Boston area. His first students were young men, fascinated by the feats of strength that Mattson was eager to demonstrate. He would allow potential students to pound his body as hard as they could, striking him in the chest and abdomen, his shoulders and lats. He allowed them to pound on his arms and legs. He took pleasure watching them recoil in disbelief, their hands softened by the collision with



Dan test - OldWay body check: George demonstrates the correct body-checking process at Summerfest, held annually in New England.

Mattson's physical frame. It was a natural hook, a marketing strategy that appealed to young men who had too much testosterone and too little good sense. Potential students quickly became serious students, religious in their studies of Uechi-ryu Karate and eager to develop their own bodies to



1984 Summerfest, featuring the second visit to America of the Uechi family and the first visit to America of the China delegation and senior Uechi-ryu teachers from Okinawa. Here, Master Kanei Uechi leads the seniors through Seisan kata.

such an extraordinary degree.

The softer, more balanced system taught by Tomoyose Ryuko had become unevenly weighted towards the hubris. Pride and self-confidence of young men is always at a premium and Mattson was able to capture his earliest audiences with the powerful and impressive displays of Uechi-ryu Karate. His new brand of karate was highly motivating, exciting, and compelling. In Mattson's mind, he was building a school of karate, spreading Uechi-ryu as he had promised Tomoyose Sensei he would do. He was teaching what he had learned in Okinawa, but the asymmetry of the physical attributes over the mental and emotional slowly became more and more seductive. His new training method provided immediate results to the students who were unwittingly relying on their body's extraordinary ability to adapt to sometimes dangerous and punishing situations. Though Mattson concedes that he was always mindful of the importance of mental and emotional development, the American mindset was culturally different from the men he met in Okinawa. He would later reflect on Tommy's constant encouragement to teach and practice the old way.

Slow, methodical, graceful change has never been the hallmark of the American attitude and Mattson knew that emphasizing holistic, spiritual development would not hold the attention of eager young men who entrusted him with their time and money. These men wanted immediate results that they could see and feel, to earn rank quickly, and to win glory by bringing home medals and trophies in competitive martial arts events. They didn't have the monastic attention spans of the Okinawan islanders, who



George demonstrates his Seisan in celebration of his 84th birthday: <https://vimeo.com/451478477/05c3d136aa>

seemed content to take it one day at a time.

Mattson’s teaching style was working. He began to expand his footprint. His influence in the western world began reaching other nations including Canada, parts of Latin America, and even Europe. Aside from Mattson’s efforts, the martial arts were now becoming more popular in America as other service men returned from their deployments to Okinawa, Japan, and Korea. Many had read Mattson’s first book and were inspired to seize the opportunity to train with the masters who were slowly, albeit reluctantly, becoming more accepting of American GI students. Asians who had immigrated to the United States recognized the surging demand for martial arts among American audiences and found new opportunity to open their own schools. A new genre of television shows and movies began attracting even larger audiences as the proliferation of the martial arts spread into nearly every city in America.

Now, after more than 60 years of teaching and training in the Uechi



Dropblocks: Unique blocking/attacking move from Uechi advanced kata. Downward forearm angle-action deflects powerful kicks, while setting up a powerful take-down move.
<https://vimeo.com/215404301/228474a4e5>

2001 Tomoyose-Mattson meeting on Uechi-ryu organizational plan, agreed to pursue an international agreement that would link world Uechi-ryu dojo and members to the Uechi-ryu homeland, through a unique "registration number I.D." issued by Okinawa for all black belt promotions. Registration Number would be placed on all certificates, regardless where issued. This would enable Okinawa to recognize legitimate dojos and collect a fee for providing a number and recording the number along with the practitioner’s name and rank or honor on an Okinawan database. Okinawa did not follow up on this.

style, Mattson has reflected time and again on the words of Tommy who remained his devoted teacher for many decades after he left Okinawa. Tommy’s continued tutelage of the young George Mattson kept him grounded while he built his martial arts empire. Tommy never interfered with operations of Mattson’s Karate Academy, and he made several trips to the United States to promote Mattson’s efforts. He did say one thing that resonated with Mattson. After watching the students perform their kata, he quietly said, “The only thing about American karate, you are very hard, very tough, but don’t know how to focus.”

Mattson explained that Tomoyose was critical of the American habit of practicing techniques for only raw power. He noted that the *kime*, a moment of extreme muscular tension was being expressed not only at the finish of muscular movement, but throughout the entirety of the technique. Musashi Miyamoto once said, there is timing in everything and to Tomoyose Sensei, there was no clearer example of poorly executed timing than in the application of the American Sanchin form. It was rigid, robotic, and at the completion of the kata, the practitioners were often fatigued and showed signs of mental anguish. Mattson was noticing it too.

What had evolved into a new way of



Ryuko Tomoyose & George E. Mattson
July 26, 2001 Reunion & Reunification

奥妙在鍛錬
Ryuko Tomoyose
1 August 2001

doing Uechi-ryu karate, was in Mattson’s mind running crossways to the proper expressions of Sanchin that he learned all of those years back in Okinawa, a method that he affectionately refers to as “the old way.”

Spoiled with traces of self-promotion and hubris, Mattson now believes that his need to build a school in those early years might have promoted ideas that betrayed the proper expression of Sanchin as it was originally taught. For the last several years he has gone back to the original teachings of Tomoyose Sensei and Uechi Kanei to find the flow that only comes with perfect balance of body, mind, and spirit, and he rejoices in a renewed commitment for teaching the old way.

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Thanks to Darin Yee, 9th dan and President of IUKF and Tim Dando for helping with most recent photographs. Thanks as well to Mac Hutchinson for taking recent photos. And of course, many thanks to Dr. Roy Bedard, for all the time spend interviewing me and composing the enclosed article. Finally, thanks to Susan Sussman for assisting with the photo descriptions.



The Mattson Academy of Okinawan Uechi-ryu Karate



Learn Traditional Okinawan Karate
with the father of Uechi-ryu in America

Proud member of the
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Fighting Arts Forums

Since social media took over all discussions on all subjects, the Forums of old sort of disappeared. . . at least many of them did. The Martial Arts Forums on Uechi-ryu.com remained, although in a rather dormant manner. Thousands of interesting topics and discussions remained available and although not many new topics were initiated, the Forums remained the home to a whole new generation of visitors who dropped in regularly and utilized the forums as a kind of Library, with a huge amount of interesting topics, penned by noted expert in all subjects relating to the fighting arts.

I believe that this new generation, once aware of this resource, will like their predecessors, be drawn into this new/old way to communicate with like-minded individuals to discuss timely, important and relevant topics relating to the sports and arts we are interested in. Hence, we are moving all the archived material in the uechi-ryu.com site to its new home. We are looking for administrators for existing forums and new subjects. Please contact me at gmattson@uechi-ryu.com for more information.

New website coming soon!

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