

Peter Allen 6th Dan; AMA Vice President

Peter Allen is a man of seemingly boundless energy. Constantly on the go, there always seem to be half a dozen projects that need, and get, his urgent attention. Much is known of his involvement with the EKGB on the Management Board, so in this interview I concentrated on the AMA- a subject that Pete is happy to discuss, and with considerable passion. He looks up to the AMA General Secretary and founder Tom Hibbert, MBE whom he readily acknowledges as a seminal influence: "Everything I do and how I conduct myself (in official meetings with bodies such as EKGB, AMA, Sport England etc.) is down to Tom", he tells me, with no effort to hide his admiration for the man.

Throughout our chat, Peter is constantly acknowledging the influence of those around him. He recalls Roy Stanhope ("he still phones me up for a chat from time to time"), Brian Seabright and Tommy Kwan as early role models, and cites men of great charisma such as Hibbert, WKF Referee Tommy Morris, and Ticky Donovan- "if you didn't know who he was you could tell as soon as he walked in the room that he was someone special- he has that aura". I noted that at the top of his list were no Japanese. I wondered if only the Europeans possess that charisma? "Oh no", he corrected me, "Kimura Sensei had that quality, and (Meiji) Suzuki".

Allen was introduced to martial arts in the Navy. After leaving the Navy, having tried various styles he settled on Shukokai under Stanhope and Kwan, and joined the then AKA (Amateur Karate Association) in 1977, by which time Hibbert's organisation had already been around for some 7 years. An active competitor at kata and kumite, "my best years were between 1984 and 1989" he says it was a bad day if he didn't come home with at least a couple of trophies. "I used to walk into a tournament saying to myself-'I am going to win this'- not that I always did, mind!". This positive attitude on the tatami led ultimately to his appointment as AMA team manager in 1990 for what he believed was a 12 month tenure, but a post he has held ever since! The following year the EKGB, formed from an alliance between the EKB and the EKC, held their first National championships, at Ponds Forge, Sheffield. "We had a small squad then, but we achieved our first EKGB title with Gary Foxwell that year." Since he amassed a great support team around him, notably Darren Snell, assistant team manager, Simon O'Brien, Christine Pullan, Herron Chisolm and Steve Scott.

So why has the AKA, now the AMA, achieved the successes and sustained popularity it has? "I think because we started to get our own house in order. We very quickly brought into play the guidelines of the EKGB, the governing body, for example in coaching and refereeing qualification programmes. We also push the youth policy. As well as the A & B squads we have C and youth squads to bring on the new talent."

He cites European developments as influential. In the old days "you could go to Europe (to club tournaments) and find four matted tatami with all the referees, and come back to England and find chairs at the corners, and no mats. I tried very quickly to change that. Now we have a series of regional tournaments throughout the country- the North East, North West, Midlands, Southern and Eastern Championships. On top of that we have our own closed championships- which I organise to those high standards."

Pete believes that the AMA provides a service to karate not necessarily provided by other groups. Hence, he claims new groups are applying to join both from outside the existing governing structure, but also groups from within the EKGB.

But what of the so-called "traditional" karate side of the AMA? Pete claims "I am very traditional. Lots of people do not recognise this, unless they come on courses with me". In a previous interview he declared an aspiration to learn all the 40-odd katas in the Shitoryu canon, and he still practices and teaches regularly the traditional kata, "I am up to 35 so far", and their bunkai. "We also run a traditional Summer Camp, run by Kevin Hamilton-Stewart" (Wado-Ryu 6th Dan and AMA Technical Director). He insists, therefore that although competition is the "shop window" of karate, the traditional budo values are being promoted (and supported) by the membership and the Association.

Peter still harbours ambitions within karate. He gets involved not only at local, association and national level, but also within the EKF (European Karate Federation). He says that the

AMA has always been active in Europe but believes that the EKGB need to do more to encourage and nurture a junior and youth squad with regular overseas competition. "I can't believe this but we (EKGB) still do not have a full National under 16 team" he complains. He draws attention to the success of the French at the recent BKF British Open, where the French national junior squad took many honours in senior and youth categories. He contrasts this with programmes seen in English sport generally, for example football, cricket, athletics and tennis. "I think the EKGB can learn from other sports" he says.

Peter expresses hope that the new unified governing body, scheduled to launch on 6th November 2005 will embrace new, innovative ideas to the good of karate in general. Will the failure of the IOC to accept karate into the 2012 programme mean that karate will fall by the wayside as hopeful Olympians embrace the opportunities to represent their country in the accepted Olympic sports? Peter thinks not. In any case, his understanding is that we have "seven years, seven more opportunities" to get accepted by the IOC. "There is no reason why WKF can't lobby over the next seven years. And Sport England have said they will support us".

So what next for the AMA. "We have learnt a lot over the years. At the EKGB Nationals we came second in the overall medal table (but highest in the total number of medals), and in the British Juniors (the future of karate) we were top of the table."

Peter hopes to repeat that at the forthcoming British Senior and Cadet Championships in September 2005. He talks of better preparation, dietary and psychological considerations, a programme of coach development, and a "vetting form" for squad members, allowing him and his team to work upon areas of weakness and capitalise on strengths. He acknowledges that a few key squad members left the AMA in the last year or so but notes "this opened up doorways for some other squad members, who saw opportunities. Many of these squad members are now medalists themselves".

I pushed Peter on the "traditional budo" question. With such effort and focus on a modern athletic approach to the sport of karate, why should potential athletes concern themselves with kata, kihon, bunkai etc.? He gets quite animated at this point. "Preparation is key" he insists, "and discipline is important for preparation". To do sport karate and not attend to the non-sporting disciplines "is like having a treasure chest without the key". This is why traditional karate and its roots are so important, he says. And furthermore, other sports could learn from that discipline. The wayward youthful football superstar may benefit from better discipline, and better understanding of the rules of the game.

Of his personal aspirations, "I would still like the English National Coach's job, either senior or junior". He admits that when he joined the EKGB board 4 years ago it was with the express intent to play a part in the unification of English karate. He recalls that the KUGB (the largest member of the ETKB) and the then AKA were fellow members of the former EKB (English Karate Board) and therefore feels there are still affinities within the groups that can be exploited. (The EKGB, ETKB and NAKMAS meet with Sport England on 6th November to formally launch this unified body, likely to be known as "Karate England". Potential candidates for Chief Executive of this new body are being interviewed at time of writing.) He harbours ambitions to play a significant part in the new body, but readily acknowledges a commitment to both the AMA and his club, which would preclude him from taking any full time office.

On top of all this, Peter is still an active competitor. In 1999 aged 42 he won the kumite at the Scandinavian Open, and the kata at the AMA International Open. As recently as 2004 he won the Masters kata at the Budo Nord Wold Cup in Eslov, Sweden. This year he took bronze, but intends to go back and reclaim "his" title in 2006. "I will continue to compete as long as I am not organising- doing the two does not give out the right messages".

This year he was awarded his Rokudan by the AMA, which was ratified by the EKGB. (He is keen to point this out as he says there are still high grades being awarded in the UK based upon patronage.) "I have had many emails recently saying come (and join our organisation) and you will get your seventh dan!" Such practice, says Pete makes a mockery of the ethos of karate. He believes that it is the responsibility of the Governing Body to stamp out such practices. He cites "40 year old 10th dans" as extreme examples of such abuse, and

believes that the UK and USA are amongst the worst offenders. Perhaps the national black belt register in France for example limits such practices elsewhere? "The worst thing the EKGB did was get rid of the Technical Committee" he claims. He believes the new body will have a Technical Committee and it is up to this body to "Stamp hard" on any abuses from whatever association "even the AMA".

Ever looking to new horizons, Peter is working a lot with traditional kobudo weapons these days. Introduced to weapons during one of his many European trips, he and his club now demonstrate across the country and in Europe their largely self-taught prowess. (The AMA demo team put on a display at the 2003 Commonwealth Championships and are regulars at the Seni show at the NEC. The team were voted the best display at the recent "MADFORIT" martial arts show in Preston in aid of the Tsunami Appeal). He is keen to do more such demonstrations, and sees his next move as affiliating to a recognised kobudo group, such as Julian Mead's organisation, as he feels "accreditation is important, and I want to learn from the best".

This modesty is typical of the man who says of his place on the EKGB management board "I was in awe of these people. I am very aware that I am the youngest, and the lowest grade amongst them, and I class myself as the 'tea-boy' but I am just glad to be in their presence". He was insistent that I make mention of the many people whom he respects from his 33 years in karate: As well as those mentioned above, he cites: Doug James, Brian Noble, Billy Brennan ("a fantastic Chairman, and I think he'd make a fantastic Chairman of the new body, if that's what he chooses to do") Ticky, "an Inspiration"; Stan Knighton, Andy Sherry and Bob Poynton, Mick Billman, Terry Pottage and the EKGB Board. "I look up to them and I have tried to emulate these people but to add a flavour of my own". Acknowledgements too, go to Tom Hibbert and to his wife of 28 years, Anne, the archetypal "karate widow", for her great support. He also speaks with pride of his clubs, the United Styles Karate Academy (USKA) and praises the support of his black belts and the parents who give the clubs energy and vitality.

Finally, of his AMA colleagues, he says "My good fighters keep me on my toes" (literally and figuratively!) There is a lot of strength in the association. I take each year as it comes. I'm 49 this year. Life is too short to fall out with anyone. Enjoy life and what God's given us."