

Interview with Steve Carless

By James Martin – Bunbu Dojo



Like all good interviews Steve Carless Sensei left me with more questions than I asked.

I did not choose these questions to 'suck up' or put this instructor on a pedestal. His karate speaks volumes and that is why he features in the pages of this blog. If I train hard maybe I could hold my head up and live up to the 5th Dan grade standard set by instructors such as this.

Anyway enjoy:

I'm always interested to know people's strength in karate. Teaching, fighting, kicking. So my question is this when you stand in front of class and you are delivering a 'Steve Sensei' lesson what would it comprise of?

I find it very hard to put myself in one kind of category. My senior students would probably be better placed to answer this question. I do see myself as an all-rounder really. I was an all-rounder when I competed and I teach all aspects of Karate as I enjoy them. I think that's important.

There are a couple of points I would like to make, regarding this question. The first one is that my teaching has developed over the years massively and I continue to strive to become better at it, both in my knowledge and in my delivery. As a result, the way I teach today is different to five years ago and much different to ten years ago. Secondly, as a result of being an all-rounder, a 'Steve Sensei' lesson, as you put it, is very much dependent on who is in front of me and the broad subject matter I have decided to teach.

In general I feel as though my regular classes are more than often physical but I do always find time to explain points to the students. I try to ensure that I explain why we practise the technique and why so much emphasis is placed on it within our art. I often break out parts of a technique for practise and build exercises around them to maximise benefits. I will then perhaps later emphasise it in a kumite routine of some kind. I always try to explain how the technique develops us in terms of jiyu-kumite or self defence and often, more importantly what it is doing for our long term well-being. I fully believe that this link exists within good quality shotokan karate.

I would not say that many of my classes focus solely on one single technique but I will often spend quite a long period of time on a concept which will be the key take-away from the lesson. I suppose I can waffle on sometimes, but that's just the passion I have for this and a determination to pass on what I have learnt!



You obviously have a very successful competition career. Before you go on 'show' do you wind up or wind down?

First of all I believe that I had a reasonably successful career. There are many people around who've had far stronger competition careers than me. Much of my success was within my federation and style, although I did win all-styles tournaments too. However, that was what I wanted and really I see competition as an extremely important part of karate, although it's only a small part. I did have a great time along the way though.

I don't compete anymore. I have not competed since I left SKI. My first karate trophy was won in 1982 and my last one in 2006. I entered competition continuously through this period and twenty-four years of that is enough!

When I did compete I would often wind down. I am slightly introverted by nature so I naturally get my energy from myself and don't need others in order to get energised. Some people do. I often focussed on the task ahead in my own head and this worked for me. There is no right or wrong here, it's down to the how the individual is wired. However, it is important that they try to work this out and share it with the people who are trying to help them succeed.

How do you stay flexible?

Quite simply, work at it. I have always worked hard at this part of my physical development. Of the entire S-Factors fundamental to physical activity, suppleness is the one that we deteriorate in the earliest in life. Therefore it's of extreme importance to work hard at it.

I build stretching into my everyday life and encourage my students to do the same. Often, whilst relaxing at home in front of the television I am in some kind of a stretch. My wife is used to it!

You talk about fitness playing a part in good kumite - what do you recommend for those wishing to increase their 'martial fitness'?

First question anyone should ask themselves is whether they doing enough time in the dojo anyway. There is no substitute for regular dojo training with a good quality instructor where they are learning good quality karate. I often get asked questions about increasing fitness levels for kumite and when I look at the student's attendance it often shows a low level of regular consistent training.

Once regular dojo training is happening I would encourage all students to run to help build up fitness. Bruce Lee said that this was the Mother of all exercises. However, this has to be regulated and should not be long distance. As a general rule of thumb I would say that running one mile will help building up endurance for a one minute kumite fight. Therefore I never really run any more than 3 miles at a time unless it has been for a fun-run. I often then stick with the same distance and modify the speed and intensity of the run. I do not run all year long but do go through periods of running to build up my fitness. This is great building up for peak performance in kumite training when a competition is on the horizon. No exercise is a 'silver bullet' but I believe that running can help more than anything for building up fitness for kumite. There are many other ways of increasing fitness and if a student trains with a long term injury it's just about finding something that works for them.

Which instructor or instructors have inspired you to become the karate-ka you are today?

This is so difficult to answer as the list could go on and on. Some instructors have inspired me due to their ability, some due to their technical knowledge, some because of their motivation and some because they are wonderful people who exhibit the character traits that we are all striving for.

Asano Sensei was probably the person who inspired me more than most to understand that karate was more than just a sport or hobby. I was with him for twenty-six years and he graded me from 9th kyu to 5th Dan. I did not agree with everything Sensei said or did, as you don't with anyone, but he was probably the person that originally inspired me to want to pursue karate-do as a way of life.

My students also inspire me to develop as a karate-ka. Being an instructor pushes me to keep learning and developing my own abilities and knowledge so that I can always deliver something new or a twist on something, in my classes. Many of my students are also very inspirational in many ways and I have some wonderful stories.

Do you have any tips for those wishing to become a successful teacher of karate-do?

- 1) Lead by example.
- 2) Never stop learning and developing yourself.
- 3) Pass on all of your knowledge as it will push you to learn more.
- 4) Learn from other instructors but don't copy them, ensure you are the best you can be and not just a second rate version of someone else, no matter how good they were, or are.
- 5) Build up a good professional student-teacher relationship and communicate regularly outside of class.
- 6) Show humility and understand that people are there for different reasons.
- 7) Discourage laziness and push people along a little both in class and out of class.
- 8) Plan well and be organised but allow yourself flexibility within your broad plan.
- 9) When people decide to leave, ensure you talk to them, shake their hand and stay in touch as one day they will step into the dojo again.
- 10) Enjoy yourself.

If you could change one thing about karate what would it be?

I would like to change many things. However, if I could only change one thing it would be the general understanding within the general public on what constitutes good karate, good teaching and good karate clubs. I cannot see this ever happening though so we must just continue to strive to do things well and ensure that we can look ourselves in the mirror as legitimate instructors teaching good quality karate in a good manner. To do this, dare I say, we probably need some sort of regulation and to achieve this we do need a strong governing body in England with people who truly understand karate in its entirety. Maybe we should lobby Michelin to develop a star system for Karate dojos!

If you could only do one kata for the rest of your karate what would it be?

Sochin

Why?

For me this is the essence of Shotokan Karate. The first time I saw Kagawa Sensei perform this I was blown away. That was many years away but Sochin still does it.

I think the kata is very dynamic blending power with graceful movement. I have seen so many people perform this in dan gradings over the years and do good strong versions. However, what takes this to the next level for me is the smooth graceful movement of the body along with the execution of the two Yokogeri keage.

I see Sochin as taking us back to more close quarter thinking with our kumite. I use the learning's a lot in my classes. Sochin-dachi is rooted and something that needs to be learned when moving in close to reduce the risk of being thrown to the ground. This principle is even valid in today's competition matches. If you watch clips of the WKF World championships and how Rafael Aghayev throws his opponents in such style to score sanbon when they are in close range without a rooted stance. Also watching clips of UFC fighter Lyoto Machida you will see how he uses a rooted stance to combat grappling specialists taking him to the ground.

I spent four years of my life living in Luxembourg with my previous career and whilst there I trained with Kase Sensei and also some of his senior students such as Dirk Heene and Pascal Lecourt. They practise Fudo-dachi most of the time and the kumite was always more rooted and closer. This practise always reminded me of Sochin. I believe Kase Sensei was heavily influenced by Yoshitaka Funakoshi who was pivotal in introducing this kata into Shotokan.

The other part I love about this kata is Yokogeri keage. I am still trying hard all the time to develop my execution of this kick. Many people hate this kick and really struggle. I practise it a lot and also stress the importance of it to my students. For me, this is not about the kick itself but about what it teaches us. I truly believe that if we learn the key principles of a good keage it will help us develop other kicks much more. This can be said of no other kick. When I see Luca Valdesi perform Yokogeri-kekomi rather than keage in kata I think it is sad. Yokogeri keage, in my opinion, is a far more complex and sophisticated kick. I would never encourage anyone to do.

Finally, I would do Sochin as I enjoy it!