

SPECIALIST vs GENERALIST

Richard Kim

Specialists exist in all areas of the martial arts. The specialist thrives in his environment. You meet him every day—he is a standout by virtue of his expertness in one particular aspect of his particular art. In judo there is the seionage specialist; in karate, the side kicker, etc. and the list could go on ad infinitum. In sports competition some of them become champions. However, sports is a far cry from the real thing.

The specialist often cannot distinguish the forest from the trees. He has developed his particular specialty and it has worked for him. His perspective is colored by too much attention on a particular technique. He becomes a person who knows more and more about less and less.

In Okinawa, during the time of Karate Sakugawa (1733-1815), karate had its “three musketeers”, inseparable buddies named Okuda, Makabe and Matsumoto. They were assistant instructors to Sakugawa and were granted accolades of recognition commensurate to their reputation by the admiring public. Okuda was the specialist supreme; he was the “one-punch” knockout artist and was aptly named “Iron Hand” Okuda. Villagers would say, “Okuda can kill a bull with one blow,” and whenever Okuda would visit a village, people would say, “Okuda is coming!” and an admiring throng would quickly gather around him.

Makabe was small. He was quick, clever and elusive in his movements. Legend has it that he moved as if borne on the wings of a bird. He was called “Bird Man” Makabe. People flocked around him also.

Matsumoto, among the three, was the generalist. He did all things well, mastered all the basics, and had no specialty. When the “three musketeers” walked into town, no one flocked around him. He was not a specialist. Sometimes someone would inquire and say, “Who is that guy? What is his specialty? What can he do?” And the answer would always be, “Oh him. He is a good teacher. Nothing special.”

One day a ship from China dropped anchor in the harbor of Naha, Okinawa. On board was a ship’s captain named Oshima-Kuryu (koo-ryoo) who was a renowned fighter. Oshima-Kuryu, in all his travels had never been beaten in a real fight and he reveled in his prowess. As his ship lay in anchorage, Oshima-Kuryu was thinking to himself, “I wonder how I can get anyone to fight me. The people here know me and will not accept a challenge. I must come up with something.” And the days went by slowly.

Then one day the idea hit him. That night he went to the town tavern, picked a fight with a town tough and took his clothes as a sign of victory. Following his plan, he repeated this same procedure several other times. After a period of time, the people in Okinawa put in a strong complaint against a Chinese martial artist who took his victim’s clothes after beating them in a fight.

The news came to the town of Shuri, Okinawa, and finally to Karate Sakugawa who also acted as the peace magistrate, a function of most karate masters in those days. One night Karate Sakugawa’s best students, the “three musketeers”, were walking along a mountain path at the edge of town when a large shadow loomed across their path ahead of them, and they saw a huge person with some clothes slung over his shoulder.

Instinctively, they knew it was the man they had heard about. Okuda said, “Halt! You there. Are you the one who has caused all the commotion in the vicinity of Naha? For if you are, turn yourself in or we will force you to do so.”

Oshima-Kuryu slowly turned his head and said, “I’ll turn myself in if I am beaten in a match. Do you see these kimono (clothes)? I have taken them from so-called experts like yourselves.”

Okuda charged like a bull and threw his famous punch, but Kuryu side-stepped and the fight raged on. As hard as Okuda tried he could not land his punch and finally after he ran out of wind, Kuryu knocked him down. And Kuryu said, “Tomorrow night I shall be here at the same time.”

The next night, Makabe the “Bird Man” was waiting. Kuryu appeared and they fought, Makabe was quick and fast. He was clever and he was cunning. But it was not enough. Kuryu met his every maneuver and finally after wearing Makabe down, Kuryu won the fight.

The town people heard the news and were worried. They all beseeched Karate Sakugawa to take care of Oshima-Kuryu himself. But Sakugawa said, “Do not worry. Our two specialists have failed. They failed to see very obvious things because they were too intent with their own specialty. Matsumoto has grown in breadth from specialist to generalist. He will prevail.”

Matsumoto faced Oshima-Kuryu the third night. When they squared off, Oshima-Kuryu realized that he faced his most formidable opponent to date. Matsumoto could do what he could do and better. They fought for a long time without a sound. Finally, Oshima-Kuryu gave a loud kiai and attacked with his last ounce of strength. Matsumoto faded away, and before Oshima-Kuryu knew what had happened, Matsumoto came up from the side and knocked him down.

Oshima-Kuryu said, “The time has come for me to retire. I’m glad that I was beaten by a man who has mastered the basics. All my previous opponents were specialists. They all had a gimmick, but it was not enough.”

The next day, Oshima-Kuryu set sail for China. When Sakugawa retired he passed on his menkyo-kaiden (certificate of full proficiency in an art) to Matsumoto, the generalist.