

IN THE MID-20TH CENTURY, SOMETHING SPECIAL WAS DEVELOPING IN AMERICA

By Adam James

Martial arts have been developed and existed in cultures and communities all over the world from ancient Greece, Roman and African martial training, to the Asian nations and modern European and American fighting systems. Throughout the history of martial arts, there have been several extremely influential people, places and periods in time that have substantially impacted and changed the trajectory and success of the martial arts. However, the Sport Karate Era (starting in the 1950's) and the American martial artists have inspired, influenced and improved the martial arts forever - through the development of martial arts competitions, the incorporation into the American film industry and creation of the martial arts celebrities.





Hawaii was the hub of early martial arts in America and the pipeline of many great Asian instructors to the United States. In addition, California, New York City and cities all over the country also saw martial arts schools spring up from military veterans who learned martial arts overseas and then returned home to teach.

There were many important people who led the way into the future including Robert Trias, who opened the first professional karate school on the continental United States, as well as Ed Parker the founder of American Kenpo and the International Karate Championships, Jhoon Rhee, often known as the “Father of American Tae Kwon Do” and many others.

With the creation of the International Karate Championships and other tournaments across the country, the Blood & Guts Era of Sport Karate was born, and some of the world’s greatest martial artists competed against each other and pushed the martial arts to a higher level. Pat Burleson won the first US Karate Championship and went on to develop one of the most successful martial arts organizations. Other pioneers and champions of Sport Karate include Jim Butin, Superfoot Bill Wallace, Chuck Norris, Bob Wall, Joe Lewis, Mike Stone, Howard Jackson and so many other amazing martial artists.

During this time, the movie industry was increasingly utilizing martial arts techniques in action/fight scenes and martial arts instructors were beginning to work as fight choreographers, stunt performers and as actors. Ed Parker, Bruce Tegner and Emil Farkas are some of the first martial artists to work as consultants and choreographers. Soon the movie industry was incorporating martial arts in the films, such as the James Bond movie “You Only Live Twice” with Sean Connery and martial arts coordinator Donn F. Draeger, an American karate pioneer.

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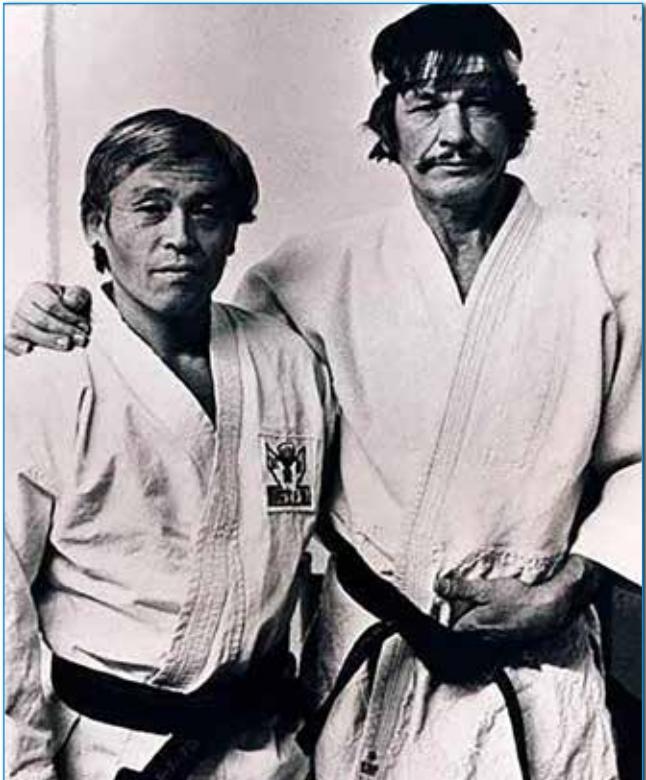
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Next, the iconic Bruce Lee performed a mesmerizing demonstration at Ed Parker's International Karate Championships, and eventually ignited into the world's most famous martial arts actor and starred in several revolutionary films for the industry. Bruce tragically died at a young age, but the stage was set for a new era of martial arts actors and celebrities.

The American entertainment industry embraced the martial arts with the television show "Kung Fu" becoming the number one show in the US. While there is controversy in casting David Carradine in the lead role, the show itself was a tremendous commercial success and in turn, it inspired a generation of Americans to pursue the martial arts.

Soon after, films were featuring top martial artists in lead roles and people like Chuck Norris, Joe Lewis, Cyntia Rothrock, Leo Fong and others were starring in movies with exciting action and fight scenes. Also, martial arts experts like Tak Kubota were used in cameo roles for films like "The Mechanic" to show real fighting and training techniques, which further enhanced the martial arts connection to the film industry.

Another key development in America was the further refinement of combat competition and eventually the creation of Kickboxing and MMA. These combat sports are the natural progression of the Blood and Guts era of Sport Karate. Martial Artists are constantly seeking better ways to train and fight, and it makes complete sense that Kickboxing and MMA would come about.





American martial artists are sometimes criticized for not adhering to the original techniques and traditions. For example, some people frown upon Americans who pronounce Karate without the proper Japanese diction (saying “Ka-rotty” as opposed to “Ka-ra-tay”), as well as using the name Sensei improperly. However, it’s common for people (especially Americans) to adopt and adapt things into their melting pot approach. There is nothing inherently wrong or disrespectful about the pronunciation and use of the name Sensei, and in many ways it’s an example of American ingenuity and integration.

As we move forward into the future, it’s important to remember and honor the pioneers of the Blood and Guts era of Sport Karate. Gary Lee and the Sports Karate Museum are dedicated to preserving and promoting these pioneers and champions. The museum has a virtual platform to learn more about this era and provides opportunities to contribute and get involved. Furthermore Gary along with Dr. Reginal Lee as well as Rich and Marie Shannahan have developed a virtual reality based training system that will revolutionize the martial arts. In addition, the Sport Karate Museum is currently seeking a permanent location to display the thousands of historical artifacts, and we encourage everyone to get involved by donating funds or artifacts, as well as volunteering to support the museum.

Yes, something truly special developed in America during the Blood and Guts era, and we all now have the opportunity and responsibility to respect and remember the pioneers and champions. In fact, we must also carry their spirit and make something special happen now.

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