

JERRY FIGGIANI

A Loyal Leader

By Brad Wells

In 2007 while attending a Koryu Uchinadi seminar in Frederick, Maryland, Hanshi Patrick McCarthy walked up to me and told me that he had someone I needed to meet. We walked across the gym floor, and he introduced me to Jerry Figgiani. He said we had a lot in common and that we needed to talk. We quickly discovered our mutual interest in judo and in particular Matsubayashi Shorin Ryu.

Sensei Figgiani holds seventh dan in Shorin ryu, and recently established Shorin ryu Karate-do International. In addition, he holds Yudansha accreditation in Koryu Uchinadi Kenpo-jutsu under Patrick McCarthy's direction. He is a sought-after workshop presenter in both Shorin ryu and Koryu Uchinadi. He also has the distinction of being the subject of a New York Times article not for sports achievement but for his work with others.

Figgiani Sensei has maintained a nearly thirty-year relationship with Hanshi Joseph Carbonara. Always searching for new knowledge, he has been a member of the International Ryukyu Karate Research Society since 2005. He became a student of Hanshi McCarthy's Koryu Uchinadi Kenpo-jutsu, masterfully integrating KU-HAPV theory and two-person application drills into his curriculum. He continually works to help karateka understand the depth of Okinawan karate, its history and culture. His kindness as well as the comprehensive nature of his teaching show a great deal of humanity in Figgiani Sensei's daily life and practice.

MM. You just celebrated the 20th anniversary of your dojo and the first year of your organization Shorin Ryu Karatedo International. Congratulations. I would like to talk more about this later. First, can we talk about how you got your start in Karate-do?

J.F. I was first introduced to martial arts by my parents; there was a program at the local recreation center. I was very drawn to the martial arts at that time, but I was interested in playing football as well. It was not until my senior year in high school that my good friend and black belt, Jeff Iorio, got me into the martial arts. That was in December of 1977. After my senior year of playing football, I did not know if I wanted to continue playing in college.

I was drawn to the martial arts and wanted to continue to pursue and study the martial arts. Not being a good student in school, martial arts gave me a sense of direction. A year after I graduated, I was talked back into playing football in college. About two months into the season, my football career ended with a back injury. It was then that I made the decision to pursue the study of martial arts.

MM. Who did you get your black belt with initially?

J.F. Though I first began my studies in Matsubayashi Shorin Ryu, I wound up getting my black belt with Richard Chun in Moo Duk Kwan. I was recently married and had relocated to New York City. I trained at the 86th Street



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Dojang. I actually came full circle back to Matsubayashi when I moved from the city back to Long Island. I joined the Karate U.S.A. dojo and started training with Sensei Terry Maccarrone. It was Sensei Maccarrone who introduced me to Sensei Carbonara.

MM. *Nowadays many people know you for your background in Shorin-ryu and as a leading exponent of the style, as founded by Grandmaster Shoshin Nagamine and taught by his student, Sensei Chotoku Omine, and their student, Sensei Joseph Carbonara. But prior to Matsubayashi Shorin-Ryu, you were a nationally-rated forms and fighting champion. In 1995, you were actually ranked number one by the Professional Karate League (P.K.L.).*

J.F. I actually studied Shorin Ryu before I went on the tournament circuit. However, I did compete in some tournaments in Madison Square Garden promoted by Henry Cho of New York City. I liked tournaments because of my competitive nature. I was rated No. 1 in 1995 by the National Karate League PKL.

MM. *Sensei Joseph Carbonara, as I understand it, is not a big fan of tournaments and never has been. How was that worked out between you?*

J.F. I understood that Sensei Carbonara did not like tournaments. I understood his reasoning for it, and I respected his decisions for not supporting them. As somebody involved in the martial arts, I truly believe there is a need for the sporting aspect of the martial arts---tournaments can draw people's attention to the arts, or they can help the practitioner raise his or her level by being judged or critiqued. People have to understand, also, there is a deeper meaning to the arts. Just because a person comes in No. 1, doesn't mean that person has a deep understanding for the art itself as far as the history and traditions, as well as self defense situations. They have to have an understanding that in self defense there are no rules. Anything applies that could help you escape confrontations.

MM. *So you looked beyond association sport rules and accomplishments early in your practice?*



J.F. I always knew that the most important part of training was to have a deeper understanding of the art--not just the aspects of rule-bound sport but also the history and traditions of the art. It was my pursuit of self-improvement, rather than competition, that has kept me in this art all these years.

MM. *What are your strongest recollections of your first impressions of being in Sensei Carbonara's dojo?*

J.F. I actually first met Sensei Carbonara at a tournament. He was voicing his displeasure with the open kata division. When I realized who he was, I could see why he had a reputation the way he did. He was very vocal about voicing his likes and dislikes. People either loved him or disliked him. But if you were actually part of his group, he would give you everything he could. His students were extremely, and still are to this day, very loyal.

Classes were very traditional in setting and very challenging physically as well as mentally. Hanging out and talking about the martial arts and different experiences were always part of the routine. It gave the student the understanding that there was something deeper than just kicking and punching.

MM. *Today your workshops are largely centered around expanding the traditional applications of Okinawan Karate, its kata and principles, by integrating the teachings and principles of Hanshi Patrick McCarthy of Australia. How do you see his concepts in relation to your practice Shorin-ryu in particular Futarigeiko, two-person practice?*

J.F. Hanshi McCarthy's concepts and methodology does

not only apply to Shorin Ryu; they are universal and apply to any system. The methodology deals with human movement. What he has created with the futari geiko, the two-person practice, is something that a student can follow as a pattern or a drill. More importantly, it allows the student to be able to interpret techniques from the pattern itself. His concept of HAPV (Habitual Acts of Physical Violence) and effective responses drawn from kata can also easily be understood through this practice as well.

MM. *How did you meet Patrick McCarthy?*

J.F. I first was introduced to Hanshi McCarthy though Sensei Terry Maccarrone, who has also been a very big influence in my studies and career as a martial artist. Sensei encouraged me to contact him and become a member of his organization IRKRS which I did in 2005. I first came in contact with his top student here in the United States, Sensei Darrin Johnson, who encouraged me to participate in a "Gasshuku" in Maryland. When the "Gasshuku" ended and I got in the car to go back to New York, I knew right away which direction the course of my training would lead. The light bulb was burning bright and it was a pivotal point after training for almost 30 years.

MM. *Moving from traditional Karate-do into sport karate, running a commercial dojo where the students participate in tournament karate, as well as your own practice in KU, and your relationships with the people in various organizations. How do you manage expectations?*

J.F. As far as it affecting my relationship with other people, let's just say that when someone is not secure with what they are doing, it is very easy to be intimidated rather than to look in the mirror and say, "Hey, this guy's got something." I think one of my qualities, not only as an instructor but as a student, is not to be afraid to look at myself and ask, "Can I learn from this situation? Can I improve?" I still continue to seek and will never stop. There are a lot of great people out there teaching martial arts, and by meeting Hanshi McCarthy, I was at the right place at the right time.

MM. *In your experience where do most of the conflicts come from?*

J.F. I've found it interesting how people can create a reputation off of becoming a black belt. To think that they know it all and are superior to other people---these are the people who when they find themselves in situations may be surprised that they will not be able to handle themselves as well as they think because of a false sense of security. Students as well as instructors have to be open to the fact that martial arts is continually evolving. Tunnel vision and not being open to a variation on a move or adapting to a move can be very critical in a life or death situation.

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and, in fact, in 2010 you were awarded international instructor of the year. What was that process like?

J.F. In my studies with Sensei McCarthy, I really never thought about becoming an instructor in his organization or having my dojo affiliated with him. It kind of took a natural process as I continued to train in K.U. and bring the material back to my dojo. The excitement that it created helped to lead me in that direction. I continued to attend seminars as well as get assistance from Sensei Darrin Johnson and, in fact, have had the opportunity to teach KU seminars with Hanshi's approval. Of course, whenever I get a chance to train with Sensei McCarthy, I jump at that opportunity as well. In September of 2010, I was promoted to Nidan in K.U. as well as Shido-in instructor level. It is an honor I am truly proud of. I was particularly taken aback by the Instructor of the Year Award, especially coming from an international organization like Hanshi McCarthy's, where there are so many highly qualified instructors around the world. It was truly an honor.

MM. *The dojo you brought K.U. home to is East Coast Black Belt Academy, in Middle Island, New York. It has been open since 1990 and is a partnership, I understand. What are your thoughts on 20 years of being in business, working with a partner, a quick primer if you will on how to keep the doors open. Let alone the stellar reputation the dojo has.*

J.F. Looking back on it 20 years later, I really had no idea what path I was on when I first opened the dojo back in 1990. I still have the same partner I opened the school with 20 years ago, Sensei Tony Aloe. I feel I am truly blessed to be able to have a partner work along with me so I can achieve my personal goals as well. The secret to our success, bottom line, is to become involved in the community. We have used the martial arts as a vehicle to help motivate our students to give back. Some of the examples would be fundraisers such as MDA, community blood drives, helping families in need as well as being recognized by the Suffolk County Police Athletic League which helped us get the martial arts into the school system here on Long Island as an extra curriculum activity.

MM. *In addition to your dojo and your own personal studies, you also run a martial arts program in the County of Suffolk on Long Island that has been written up in the New York Times, The R.E.A.C.H. Program (Respect Education and Always Climb Higher). This program is funded by the P.A.L. (Police Athletic League) correct?*

MM. *Sensei McCarthy travels extensively, and I understand that you were in Europe recently as one of his assistants. Tell us about that experience.*

J.F. Sensei McCarthy's travel is very extensive. Sometimes between doing 70 – 80 seminars per year, up to 15 different countries; it can be a pretty demanding schedule. I was honored to participate in his first Italian seminar which was held in Rome. Actually, I was one of the participants and flew over with three of my students as well as Sensei Darrin Johnson, who is Sensei McCarthy's U.S.A. representative. For the first time being in that country, it was fascinating watching Hanshi McCarthy break down the katas of various systems and really having everybody on the same page executing the same techniques whether you were Goju Ryu, Shorin Ryu, or Wado Ryu. His organization, I.R.K.R.S., is worldwide and it gives the practitioners plenty of opportunities to train with people from around the world, which I find is very exciting.

MM. *In 2009 you became an accredited branch dojo owner authorized to teach Koryu Uchinadi Kenpo-jutsu*

J.F. The program is funded by the Police Athletic League. With the help of PAL Officer Don Yorje and Assistant Principal Chuck Morea formerly of the Longwood School District, they gave us an opportunity to start a six-week pilot program to see if this program would make a difference in the children who were participating in it. That was back in 2003. Eight years later, we're still going strong and have reached over 1,000 children in the Suffolk County schools. The program lets children participate free of charge and provides uniforms, insurance, and awards. It's geared to help give children at the high school level a sense of direction and there have been numerous success stories attributed to this program. It has received high praise from both local and state government officials.

MM. *You have had the opportunity to travel to Okinawa in 1991 to participate in the demonstration ceremony for Shoshin Nagamine's 85th birthday and the 55th anniversary of Nagamine Dojo. Tell us about that, please.*

J.F. I have had the opportunity to travel to Okinawa in 1991 as a participant in the demonstration ceremony for Shoshin Nagamine's 85th birthday and the 55th anniversary of his dojo. I traveled with Sensei Carbonara, who gave me this opportunity. (By the way, Sensei Maccarrone also accompanied us on the trip.) It was an incredibly exciting time to be able to trace the roots of Matsubayashi back to the Honbo dojo and to meet the man who really put Okinawan karate out in the forefront which included his book *The Essence of Okinawan Karatedo*. I met Master Nagamine one time before when he was here in the United States, but there was never any true conversation between us. I have worked very closely with his son, Soke Takayoshi Nagamine, who has been to my dojo plenty of times. I have also attended his seminars. Even though I am no longer a member of his organization, W.M.K.A., I still have a tremendous amount of respect for him.

MM. *What was it like meeting Master Nagamine?*

J.F. Just meeting Master Nagamine and being in his presence was a rewarding experience. It was amazing to see how people honored and revered him. In spite of the language barrier, I could tell he was very humble.

MM. *You have very deep ties to Matsubayashi, I would very much like to get your thoughts on training in the late 70's, through to today. Your perspective, if you will, on how training on the East Coast affected your own practice, and your decision to start your own organization?*

J.F. The early years here on the East Coast in Matsubayashi--I am glad I started martial arts when I did and was able to have a little taste of the old-school dojo. Workouts consisted of high repetitions of kihons and katas. Sparring was never done with any safety gear. One of the things that I noticed was that even though we had a large group here in New York, there were always political ramifications going on which I truly believe have led to the downfall of the organization. It's so important for people to work together. At one point, there was a sense of that. But again, the seniors followed different senseis from Okinawa. Their differences and opinions, I feel, should have been respected rather than being rejected. This is where problems arose, but there is a tremendous amount of history here on the East Coast that was mainly due to Sensei Joseph Carbonara and Sensei Terry Maccarrone. Many of the masters from Okinawa visited and have stayed

OKINAWAN SHORIN-RYU KARATE MEMBERSHIP



Member Benefits:

- International Rank Certification
- Individual and Dojo Membership
- Rank Advancement

Members Receive Membership Certificate & Patch

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with these senseis. And of course, both Sensei Omine and Sensei Ueshiro lived here in the states till their deaths. We still have some break-off groups of Matsubayashi here that just want to train and not get into any political hassles. Because of this, I formed Shorin Ryu Karatedo International.

MM. *You're known for a decidedly apolitical approach, being involved without trying to dominate. Now you find yourself running an organization. Can you tell me about how you came to this position?*

J.F. I really didn't want to be the head of any organization, but I was encouraged by my peers to help other martial artists in the area who still wanted to continue studying Matsubayashi. Sensei Carbonara and Sensei Maccarrone laid the foundation here in the New York area, however, I am very pleased to have their support to continue their legacy. Both these senseis have given a tremendous amount to Matsubayashi Shorin Ryu and their students here on the East Coast. I also have the support of Hanshi McCarthy and the International Ryukyu Karate Research Society in this endeavor. One of my goals in forming Shorin Ryu Karatedo International was to give a martial arts practitioner an opportunity to be part of an organization without



the organization dominating them. People who know me personally can attest to this fact. Anything I could do to help expand the training and mindset of the student is important. I want my students to grow. It is my obligation to see this through.

MM. *To wrap this up, I would like to ask you a question about your most recent trip to Okinawa. I understand you had the opportunity to work with Osensei Nagamine's student Kensai Taba Founder and President, of the Okinawa Shogen-Ryu Karate-Do Association. Could you tell us a bit about it?*

J.F. Kensai Taba was the most gracious host and true gentleman. If Master Taba were to come to New York, I am not sure how I could repay him for his generosity. He shared his history and martial arts experience, not only with me but with my students as well. His martial arts style is called Shogen Ryu which pays tribute to both Grandmaster Shoshin Nagamine and Matsubayashi Shorin Ryu. I look forward to returning to Okinawa shortly. 