

Cover Story

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Today's karate is accessible to one and all

The years of a tough-guy scene have long passed. Now, it's women, children and those of advancing years.

By Rusty Pray

INQUIRER STAFF WRITER

Karate is not just for Chuck Norris anymore.

Ed DiMingo can attest to that.

DiMingo, of Marlton, first got involved in the martial art in

1965. So he was there less than 25 years after karate's

introduction in the United States in the early 1940s. He

was there before guys began

breaking boards and bricks and blocks of ice with their bare

hands as novelty acts on television. He was there before

karate shook off the sideshow, but then became a

tough-guy-only activity.

"There was a time when karate was harsh, austere,

without humor," DiMingo said.

"There were no children and very few females. It was not for

everyone."

DiMingo, 67, is a

second-degree black belt who trains under Sal Lopresti at

Shotokan Karate Jutsu, which has its roots in the South

Jersey Karate Club. The South Jersey Karate Club opened in

Collingswood in 1963.

"It was not like today's karate," Lopresti agreed during

a recent interview with both men. "Karate was mostly three

or four guys who would get together and the master would

teach them everything."

Today's karate welcomes

women, children and older people. Folks can study it as

hard and as long as they like and rise in the belt ranks

accordingly. Or they can use it simply as a good way to stay in

shape.

Lopresti's club, which has studios, or dojos, in Sewell and Cherry Hill, has about 150

members. Half are over age 50, and about 10 percent of those

are women.

DiMingo is the oldest active black belt. Lopresti, a

seventh-degree black belt, is 57. Lopresti's wife, Peggy, is a

black belt. The club's longest-standing member is

Camden Police Lt. Jim Phillips, 59, a fourth-degree black belt

who began his training in Collingswood in 1968.

Time was the biggest factor in the change in karate,

DiMingo said. "The old-school instructors who went by

traditional Japanese methods gave way to instructors who

recognized the importance of attracting a wider range of

people," he said. "It was a recognition that the Japanese

style didn't offer a wide-enough appeal in this country."

Karate offers more than physical activity, Lopresti said.

It teaches personal discipline, for instance. "You learn about

yourself," he said. "It's a great teacher of how to handle

situations. It gives you a sense of self-awareness you can't get

from a treadmill."

In karate, "you can get a kid who is maybe overly aggressive,

and it will calm him down," DiMingo said. "You can get a

kid who is timid, and it will give him self-confidence."

Lopresti acknowledged that karate requires commitment.

What sport doesn't?

"If you really want to see what karate is about, you have

to stay with it," he said. "The guys we have who are over 50

and black belts, 95 percent of them have been training for

more than 30 years."

DiMingo, despite his age and his status as elder statesman of



ELIZABETH ROBERTSON / Inquirer Suburban Staff

Ron Romano, 60, of Blackwood, counters as fellow instructor Sal Lopresti (right), 57, of Sewell, prepares to kick. They were demonstrating shotokan karate techniques recently at the Cherry Hill Aquatics Center.

the club, is part of the other 5 percent.

After studying karate for two years, he gave it up to

concentrate on a career in marketing and his family. He

jogged, he lifted weights, he played tennis and golf.

"Everything got boring after a while."

Twenty-seven years after he first took it up, DiMingo

returned to karate in 1992. He started over as a white belt —

a beginner — and earned his black belt four years later. He

was 57.

His two daughters and five of his seven grandchildren —

the other two hadn't been born yet — were there to watch him

pass his test.

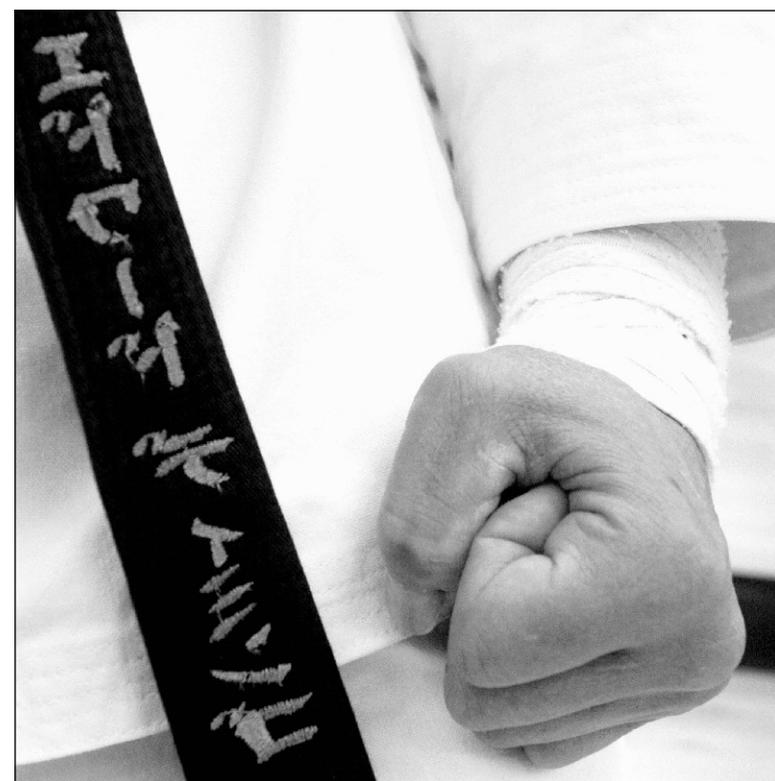
"There are a lot of grandfathers who also have

a black belt," DiMingo said. "In my case, my grandchildren saw

me win it. There's no thrill bigger than that."

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Ed DiMingo displays his black belt — and the iron fist that helped him earn it at age 57. His name is embroidered on the belt in Japanese.

ON THE COVER

Ed DiMingo of Marlton practices his karate technique at the Cherry Hill Aquatics Center. Photo by Elizabeth Robertson.