

JOHN FONSECA

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# LEADING OFF

By Jose M. Fraguas

**J**ohn Fonseca has been competing in national and international tournaments since the age of seven. In addition to his impressive competitive credentials, he is a nationally-certified karate coach and referee with solid teaching experience in the martial arts and fitness fields. In 1996, Fonseca became the first American to medal at World Championships in almost twenty years. He is the only male karate athlete in the world to win repeat gold medals at the Pan American Games, and the only American karate athlete to win the Paris Open. His competitive accomplishments are recognized both nationally and internationally, earning him the U.S. Olympic Athlete of the Year award three years running. He is the owner and chief instructor of "Fonseca Martial Arts" in Chicago, which he runs with his wife Elisa Au. This November, he will be one of the members representing the USANKF karate team that will compete in the WKF World Championship in Tokyo, Japan.

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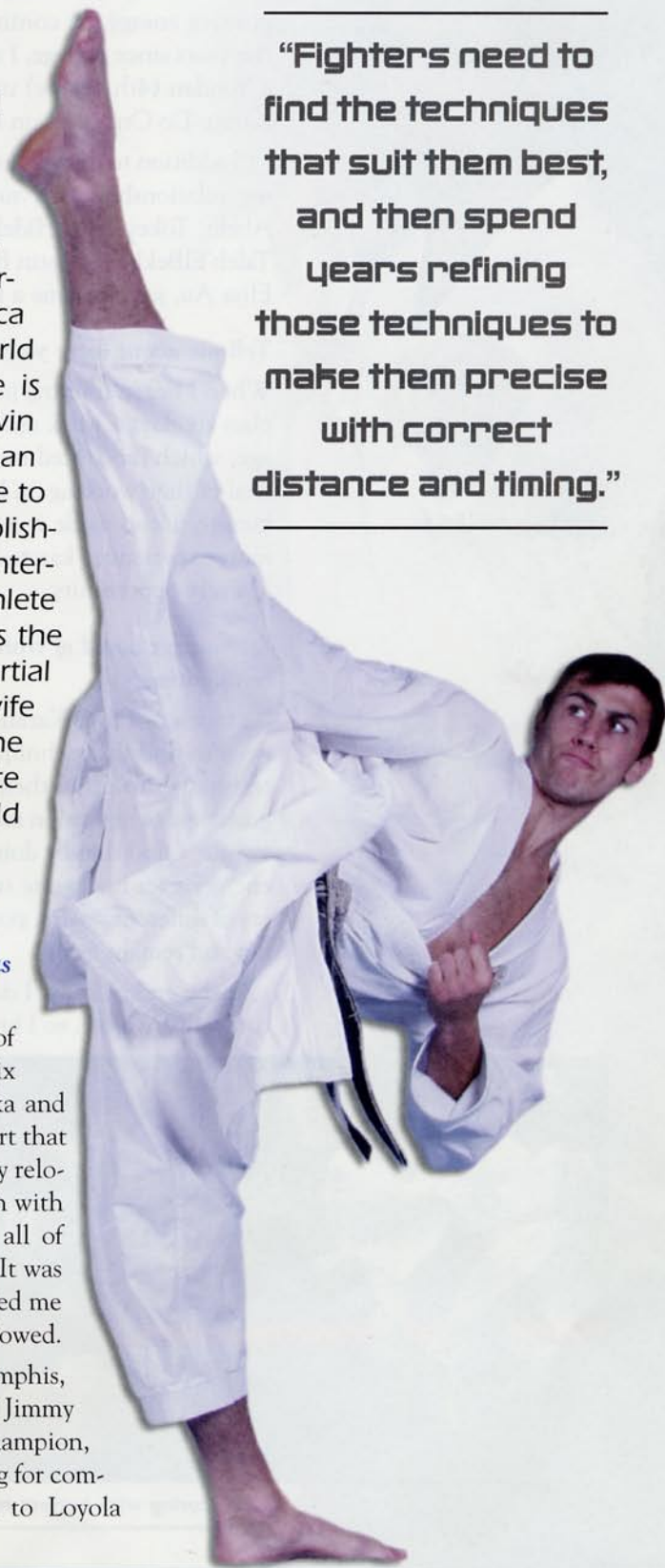
**"Fighters need to find the techniques that suit them best, and then spend years refining those techniques to make them precise with correct distance and timing."**

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*How long have you been practicing karate and who is/was your teacher?*

I started training in Shotokan with Sensei Don Falco of Falco's Karate school in New York in 1982 when I was six years old. He was the perfect teacher for a young karate-ka and played an important role in kindling my love for this art/sport that I have been practicing for the past 26 years. When my family relocated to Chicago in 1985, I continued training in Shotokan with Senseis John DiPasquale, Marty Ceiplik, and Joe Mirza, all of whom were affiliated with the ISKC program at that time. It was a great organization to come up in, and its programs provided me with a strong foundation to build upon in the years that followed.

After high school, I attended Rhodes College in Memphis, Tennessee where I had the opportunity to train with Sensei Jimmy Blann, who, with his background as a World Kickboxing Champion, taught me the importance of conditioning and cross-training for competition. After several years in Memphis, I transferred to Loyola





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University of Chicago to finish my degree and began working with Sensei Jack Pressman, who was to become my instructor, teammate, training partner, and close friend. More than anyone else, Sensei Pressman inspired me to find a sense of joy and accomplishment in the training process itself, teaching me that even when we think we are totally spent, there is always a little more to give. Because of his incredible positive energy, he continues to be a valuable conditioning and sparring partner. In the years since college, I also reconnected with Sensei Joe Mirza and I currently hold a Yondan (4th degree) under Sensei Mirza and Sensei Ray Dalke in the Traditional Karate-Do Organization International.

In addition to formal instructors, over the years, I have also learned a great deal from my relationship with such outstanding senseis, coaches, and athletes as Ridgely Abele, Tokey Hill, Hideharu Igaki, Seiji Nishimura, George Kotaka, Adam Brozer, Taleb ElBekkali, Dustin Baldis, Doug Selchan, Thomas Hood, and, of course, my wife Elisa Au, just to name a few.

#### *Tell me about were your beginnings in the art?*

When I began training in Shotokan, I immediately fell in love with the art. I went to class six days a week and sometimes twice a day. I also began competing at an early age, which motivated me to train harder and improve my technique. I spent a great deal of time working on basics and kata, which I believe really helped strengthen my kumite. I also made it a point in class and at tournaments to closely observe older, more experienced karate-ka who inspired me. I was hungry to learn everything I could at every opportunity.

#### *Do you get bored of training, and what keeps you motivated to keep going in elite competition?*

As much as I love Karate, I must admit there were times when I was bored. Fighters need to find the techniques that suit them best, and then spend years refining those techniques to make them precise with correct distance and timing. Thus, there is a great deal of repetition required, and the constant drilling can seem quite tedious after awhile. I find that by doing a lot of various types of athletic conditioning, I feel more energetic for my karate training. I also try to practice my kumite basics, using a variety of different angles, positions, and situations so the training can be more challenging and remain fresh.

At the end of 2004, I decided to stop competing. I didn't feel the burning desire to compete anymore, so I knew it was time to redirect that energy into growing my dojo



*John scoring with perfect roundhouse kicks during a WKF world championship.*



and teaching my students. However, when I began helping some of my teammates prepare for the 2006 WKF World Championships, the competition bug bit me again. I had several of the National team members training at my dojo at the time, so it was difficult not to feel that urge to compete. My first competition back was the 2007 USA-NKF Nationals, where I won my division and got back my spot on the team. It was a great feeling competing again. When I lose that rush, I know it will be time to stop.

***How important do you think is the supplementary training: running, weight lifting, etc... for a practitioner of karate?***

I think this type of conditioning is crucial for most athletes, especially the karate-ka. I notice there is a big difference in my performance when I am in top athletic condition. I also feel that some of the injuries I have sustained in the past would have been far worse had I not been in good physical condition from weightlifting. When I recently dislocated my shoulder, I eliminated my normal weightlifting regimen. Soon after, I injured one knee, and then the other one that I had been favoring. I am certain that these injuries would not have occurred if I had maintained my weight training routine. So, for injury prevention alone, I think it's worth the investment in time and energy.

***How do you see the level of the art in America compared to Europe and Japan?***

I think that the level of the art is as high in America as it is in Europe and Japan. However, in terms of traditional sport karate, I think the level is higher overseas. Our country has produced some great champions in the sport of karate, but it is still behind Europe and Japan when you look at the consistency of world medal results. There are many reasons for this. For one thing, many of our top athletes are isolated from one another due to the sheer size of our country. Since there is no sponsorship or real funding, it also is difficult for them to attend the best tournaments overseas. Their European counterparts sometimes receive stipends for training and get to compete far more regularly at very high-level events. There also are more training and competitive opportunities for the Japanese due to the popularity of the sport in Japan. I believe that when karate becomes an Olympic or collegiate sport, it will attract some of our nation's best athletes and the U.S. will dominate the world karate scene. While it won't replace Monday night football, I think karate could be very comparable to a sport like collegiate wrestling.

***Self-defense, sport or tradition: what is karate for you?***

For me, it's all of it. I heard Sensei Yamazaki make a good analogy once: "Karate is like a car and you need all four wheels to make it go – kihon (basics), kata (forms), kumite (sparring), and self-defense." The training of basics and kata strengthens your body, and cleans up your technique, while the elements from sport karate improve your athleticism, adaptability, and your reaction timing. Of course, there are a million variables for a self-defense situation, but with an emphasis on self-defense training you can drill defenses and escapes for the most common attacks while awakening your spirit. So each part has its role. It's when people neglect certain aspects of their training that their overall karate ability suffers.

***What are the main differences in structuring a karate class for children and for adults?***

Since kids seem to have boundless energy, I think it is important to offer them classes that are fun, challenging, and highly energetic. Of course, it's also important for



**Career Highlights**

- ◆ 2004 AAU James E. Sullivan Award Nominee
- ◆ 3X U.S. Olympic Athlete of the Year
- ◆ 2X Pan American Games Gold Medalist
- ◆ 4X Pan American Karate Champion
- ◆ 6X Pan American Bronze Medalist
- ◆ Black Belt Magazine Hall of Fame
- ◆ USAKF Hall of Fame
- ◆ WKC World Championship Gold Medalist
- ◆ 2X WKF World Championship Bronze Medalist
- ◆ 3X WKF World Champion Bronze Medal Contender
- ◆ Paris Open Gold Medalist
- ◆ US Open Gold & Bronze Medalist
- ◆ 12X USANKF National Champion
- ◆ 5X AAU National Champion
- ◆ 3X USAKF National Champion
- ◆ Captain USANKF Karate Team 2000–2005; 2007–2008
- ◆ 4th Degree Black Belt
- ◆ 2008 USA-NKF Distinguished Athlete Award
- ◆ ACE (American Council on Exercise) Certified Personal Trainer
- ◆ ASEP (American Sport Education Program) Certified Coach



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them to have the discipline and self-control to stand or sit still. However, I like our junior students to work on those attributes while they are catching their breath. I think if the instructor encourages the students while challenging them, they will be more engaged in the class as those endorphins get released. Thus, our kids' classes are highly energized workouts. The adult classes also are physically challenging, but they allow for a longer warm-up in the beginning and cool-down at the end. The adult students are encouraged to go at their own pace and rest when it is appropriate. The content also is different as we focus more on self-defense techniques in our adult classes.

*Being an elite competitor, how you have adapted your karate in order to teach it to regular students who are not involved in high-level competition?*



I think the greatest benefit of performing in elite competition is not the physical skills that you develop but the life lessons that you learn, and the values that you then can impart to your students. Being a competitor has taught me the importance of hard work, sacrifice, perseverance, dedication, commitment, overcoming obstacles, and setting and achieving goals. I encourage my students to establish their own goals and persevere until they attain them. It may be losing weight, getting their next rank, or winning a world title.

As far as the physical aspects are concerned, by traveling for training and competition, I have been exposed to a variety of training concepts, which I then can bring home to the student body. These techniques and drills then are tailored to fit the student's age, level, and ability. Of course, there has to be a progression of training, but students often will surprise you with what they are capable of doing if you give them the opportunity by just exposing them to the ideas.

*As a teacher and instructor, what is the most important thing that you want a new student in your schools to obtain from your classes?*

The most important thing would be respect – for themselves and for others. If students do not respect themselves, they will not defend themselves. If someone does not respect others, they will become abusive with their training. This holds true for kids and adults.

*Do you think that your approach/philosophy of karate will change when you stop competing?*

I think I will spend a greater deal of time cross-training in other martial arts, which will help my karate training. Many of the founders cross-trained in various arts. Unfortunately, there was a backlash against this mentality and many people became "purists." Now, with the popularity of mixed martial arts, many instructors are studying various arts and disciplines once again. I think this approach only enhances one's understanding of karate. I know from my training in Brazilian Jiu Jitsu, Judo, and Muay Thai, I have found many techniques, concepts, and applications that are very similar to methods found in karate.



***What do you see as the most important attributes of a Karate competitor?***

Like many athletes, a karate competitor must be in top physical condition. It's important to have agility, quickness, power, flexibility, and a high anaerobic threshold. Equally important is a strong mindset with excellent focus. This mental fortitude is critical to being successful in competition, especially when the sport can be so subjective. The karate athlete also must be adaptive, as what's permissible at one event sometimes can be penalized at another. So sometimes it's not necessarily the most physically skilled competitor who wins, but the one who is able to handle the pressure of the competition and adapt to his or her environment.

***How do you prepare psychologically for an important competition, and how does your mindset change when you are getting close to the competition day?***

I used to do a lot of mental preparation for competition, which involved pre-visualization and revisualization techniques. Now, I find that I am most confident when I am feeling my best from a good, consistent training regimen. If I know I have done everything to prepare physically for the event, and made the necessary sacrifices, I feel the most confident for the tournament. As the event approaches, I try to enjoy the overall experience of the competition. There was a time when my mindset was "I have to win," which I think ultimately creates a pressure that stifles your performance. Now, I just try to be in the moment and enjoy the rush of the competition. As long as I can do it for the enjoyment and the "love of the game," I know I will be at my best mentally.

***Do you think it would be positive or negative for karate to be in the Olympic Games?***

I think it would be nothing but a benefit for karate to be included in the Olympic Games. It would help to legitimize the sport, and increase its popularity. Look what the Olympics did for Taekwondo. There used to be five karate schools to every TKD academy; now that ratio is reversed. Karate's inclusion in the Games would introduce our sport to many new people, which in turn would help popularize the art. Both the art and the sport would benefit. If more kids got involved in the sport, I know more parents would be turned on to the art.

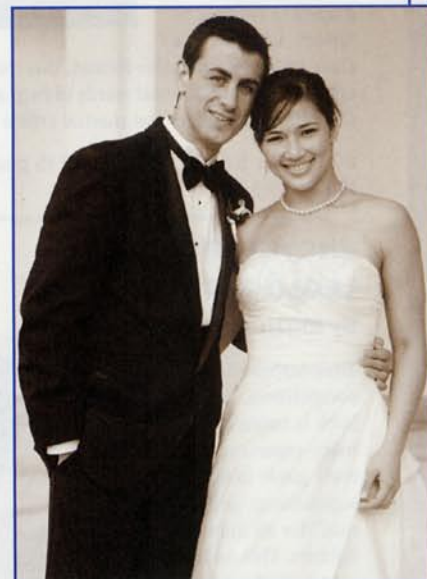
Also, as an athlete, there is no greater venue to participate in than the Olympic Games. I know it always had been a dream of mine and many of my teammates to compete in that arena. Unfortunately, we probably won't see it in our competitive careers. My wife Elisa won three WKF world titles. It's a shame she will not get her chance to represent the U.S. at the Games. I know that there are a lot of kids training really hard in our sport right now. I hope the "powers that be" can put aside their politics and work on getting karate its rightful place in the Olympic Games.

***What advice would you give to those who wish to start training and to those who already have been training for years and are getting ready to enter in national and international competitions?***

The best advice I can give to up-and-coming athletes is to be hungry, work hard, and never lose that desire for self-improvement. Be a sponge. Take advantage of the information that's out there with the Internet, DVDs, books, seminars, camps, etc. Don't let any one event define you. Believe in yourself. Always keep working hard. Take pride in your accomplishments without resting on your laurels. Respect your competitors, but don't be in awe of them. Don't underestimate yourself. I'm sure there are about a million other clichés, but I like them and they still ring true. Oh, and one more ... good luck. 🐼



***John Fonseca leading off in the world of sport karate.***



***The day of his wedding with Elisa Au.***