



Elisa Au

The Princess of Motion

By Jose M. Fraguas

A longtime student of the great Chuzo Kotaka, Elisa Au has an enviable pedigree in the art of karate. Active in competing, teaching, and practicing, Au made U.S. karate history in 2002 when she became the first American woman to capture gold at the world championships. By winning that title again in 2004, Au set a new standard for U.S. karate. The repeat world title made her the only two-time world champion from the United States, solidifying Au's place as one of the world's premier karate athletes.

Elisa Au*The Princess of Motion*

Au not only made her mark on U.S. karate and the World Karate Federation (WKF), she holds a place in the world record books. She is the only person, male or female, to have received double individual event gold medals at the same karate world championships. Au went undefeated, capturing regional, national, international, and world championships. This impressive string of victories has garnered her a nomination for the AAU James E. Sullivan Award, given to the outstanding amateur athlete in the United States each year.

A competitor of superior ability, Au also is known as one of the very best coaches. When teaching, Au is always in perfect form physically, and is in good spirits. She puts everyone at ease with her stress-free manner and friendly approach. When asked about her outstanding record in competition, Au smiles and answers: "The only natural talent I have in karate is my determination. This is definitely an advantage. I will never quit."

At only 23 years of age, with exceptional talent as an athlete, and a charming personality as a martial arts icon, Au will surely be a force on karate's world stage for years to come.



Elita performing kata Seienchin.



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Perfect roundhouse kick

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- Elisa Au

Q: How long have you been practicing Karate, and who is your teacher?

A: I started karate at age five under Sensei Chuzo Kotaka, founder of the International Karate Federation. I have been with Sensei Kotaka, who teaches Shito-ryu, for the past 20 years. I also have received training and coaching from our national coach, Mr. Hideharu Igaki, and from Mr. Seiji Nishimura, who is a former Japan National Coach and world champion.

Q: Would you tell us some interesting stories of your early days and training under Kotaka Sensei?

A: I was never a "girly-girl," but I was quite sensitive as a child. Sensei Kotaka used to spar in the dojo with us, and although he was extremely gentle with me, I inevitably would cry. I think his strong presence intimidated me, but after I let out my first tear, he would let me punch him as hard as I could. That helped. I was an average student. I paid attention well and could pick up katas easily. I lacked power, though, and didn't really develop any strength until I was an adult.

Q: What are the most important points in your teaching methods?

A: I teach a lot of elementary school children who are just starting out in karate. I try to keep a balance of fun and discipline in class. I can be very strict with the kids in the dojo, but as long as practice is fun, they will keep coming back to learn more.

For my advanced students, I assume they are serious about training. I don't hold back when I teach, and I'm not afraid of giving away my "secrets." I want to share everything I know about karate with those who will be able to use my advice and become even better champions than I am. I've always tried to portray a balance of grace and power in my karate, in kata and kumite. I don't use too many flashy moves, but

being the meticulous person I am, I try to perfect whatever I do. As long as karate is changing, I will always have more to learn in the art.

Q: With all the technical changes during past decades, do you think there are still "pure" styles of karate?

A: I believe karate is an evolving sport, so you cannot call the karate of 30 years ago "pure." What about everything that happened before that? If we refuse to change, the sport dies. The only problem I have with today's karate is that the styles do not stress quality kihon. It is the foundation for everything in karate, and without it, you are doing only fancy moves. I think it is great that we have different styles of karate. It shows diversity in the sport. I love to watch good Shotokan katas; however, a beauti-

ful Shito-ryu kata is also very nice. We should not forget that styles result from historic events and people.

Q: *How different from other karate styles do you see the principles and concepts of the style taught by Kotaka Sensei?*

A: Kotaka-ha Shito-ryu differs from other Shito-ryu styles because it incorporates dynamic movement into a very graceful style. Some non-Shito-ryu practitioners may believe Shito-ryu is a weak style. Kotaka Sensei, who had some Shotokan training, tried to change that perception of weak style by making movements bigger and more dynamic. I think this is why my idea of karate is what I stated earlier—a balance of grace and power.

Q: *Do you think karate in the West has "caught up" with the technical level in Japan?*

A: No. Technically, I still think that Japan is better than anyone else is. However, I do not believe that being technical is everything in modern karate. The Western world definitely has better karate athletes than Japan does, which is why so many of them win. As for myself, I do a lot of conditioning training to increase my athleticism. Along with working on the technical aspects, that has made me successful in modern karate competition.

Q: *Currently, karate is often referred to as a sport. Do you agree with this definition?*

A: I think the direction karate has taken has made it into a sport. It is no longer necessary to finish off your opponent or inflict any type of injury. And, as mentioned earlier, one must be an athlete to be good in karate. I still think students should learn bunkai. Just as we learn history in school, it is important to know why you do what you do in karate. It is all a result of the art's evolution.

Q: *When teaching the art of karate, what is the most important element: self-defense, health, or tradition?*

A: All three are important. Without respect, you are not really doing or understanding karate.

Q: *Some people think going to Japan to train is highly necessary to improve their technical skills. Do you share this point of view?*

A: No, I do not think this is necessary. I have never gone to Japan for training. However, I believe a strong foundation is necessary for one's development in karate. This is why the Japanese have so many strong practitioners. Kihon is an integral part of their training, and because of this, their movements are fluid, strong and focused. This also goes for kata and kumite. Rather than travel to Japan, one can focus on basic training at an early stage of his or her karate career to develop a strong foundation.

Q: *Who would you like to have trained with but never got the opportunity?*

A: Bruce Lee, for sure! I wouldn't even know how to do Jeet Kune Do, but it would be thrilling just to see him move and to learn some tips from him.

Q: *What would you say to people interested in beginning to learn karate?*

A: I would urge them to look for a class that has a competent instructor who runs a safe class. Karate is generally a safe sport if proper precautions are taken and students and teachers practice with control. Karate is great for exercise, concentration, and



Elisa's Titles

- ◆ Three-time WKF World champion
- ◆ 2002 Women's World Cup Kumite Champion
- ◆ 2002 Pan American Championships
- ◆ Two-time AAU Women's Kumite Grand Champion
- ◆ Five-time USA National Champion
- ◆ Seven-time AAU National Champion
- ◆ Two-time WKC World champion
- ◆ Two-time WKO World champion
- ◆ Three-time All Hawaii Women's Black Belt Kumite Champion
- ◆ Two-time Junior World champion
- ◆ Two-time Junior Pan American Champion

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coordination. Many children I have taught have gone on to play many other sports with ease because of the fundamentals learned in karate. The art is also a great way for adults to stay in shape because classes are interesting and challenging.

My advice to those who want to compete is to first practice the fundamentals of karate. Also, add quality conditioning to make your body stronger, and find the technique that is unique to you. Make it your signature technique. My signature technique is my timing, the way I read my opponents' movements and know exactly when to attack. For you, it may be an excellent kick or a fast punch combination. Whatever it may be, it needs to be your own.

Q: What you believe are the most important qualities of successful karate practitioners?

A: I believe successful karate practitioners have learned something from the art that has made them better people. For example, I owe my physical and mental strength to my karate training. I also think karate has taught me respect and humility.

I believe the quality of training is far more important than the quantity. I practice every day and give my best effort. If I cannot do this, I take a break because my body probably needs rest. Then, it's back to work the next day.

I think students with open minds will learn and grow the most. In the seminars I teach, students come from very different karate backgrounds (different styles, teachers, etc.); yet, many are willing to try my methods of training. If a student can take just one thing I've demonstrated and use it, my goal as an instructor has been accomplished.





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Q: What advice would you give to students on the question of supplementary training (running, weight training, etc.)?

A: Supplementary training is very important to me, as it is with most elite karate athletes. I do a lot of speed and explosive power training because it helps me with the type of fighting I do. All students must find the regimen that works best for them. But as in all sports, cross-training is an important aspect of athletic development.

Q: In your opinion, why do many students start falling away after two or three years of training?

A: The answer has at least two parts. First, in the United States, we live in a culture in which people's attention spans are getting shorter and shorter. People are less likely to stick to something if the task starts to become difficult. Karate is difficult, so people lose interest.

Second, our sport competes against other sports, such as basketball, football, and soccer, all of which have professional leagues in the United States. Children look up to these professional athletes and naturally follow their paths, so they might become successful and famous athletes. Unfortunately, karate does not have this luxury. I hope to be a role model for American children so that they will remain interested in the sport and see the wonderful aspects that are unique to karate.

I am convinced that karate has the worldwide support to keep it alive for many years. We must accept the changes that will occur as time passes and learn to change with this unique activity that is both martial art and sport.

Q: Have you ever felt fear during your karate training?

A: I was fearful of losing at the competitions immediately following my first world championship title. I did not want people to think that my win was a fluke, so I was very nervous about staying on top. Soon afterward, I had to stop and think carefully about my intentions for competing. I realized that I should never be afraid of losing because what I am engaging in is a sport between two people. There will always be one winner and one loser, and anyone can be that winner on a given day. What sets champions apart from the rest is that they learn from their faults and correct their problems to become better competitors in the future.

Q: What has kept you motivated after all these years?

A: I used to be completely driven by my desire to be the best at what I do. In a way, I am somewhat of a perfectionist. Nowadays, though, I find fulfillment in what I do when I see that children (my students and those who come to me for autographs and photos) are inspired by my performances. If I can be a role model in that sense, it makes competing worthwhile.

Q: Where do you see yourself 10 years from now?

A: In 10 years, I will still be doing karate, since it is already part of who I am. Of course, the competition phase will have passed, but perhaps I will still be teaching aspiring students everything I know. I also would like to use my martial arts skills for endeavors not directly related to karate. This would be great for me and for the under-represented world of traditional karate. Somehow, I will make an impact, and after I see every corner of the world, I'd love to find Mr. Right and start a happy family. ➔