

# Sword and Spirit

The eJournal of Itten Dojo

April 2022



## — Why Budo? —

**Regardless of the times in which you live, or the circumstances of your life, success largely depends on things you can control:**

- **Building a foundation of strong relationships in a community of mutual support and achievement.**
- **Forging a disciplined and positive mindset.**
- **Enhancing your physical health and capabilities.**

*These are exactly the benefits membership in an authentic dojo provides.*

Copyright 2022 Itten Dojo, Inc.  
701 W Simpson Street, Suite C  
Mechanicsburg, PA 17055-3716  
[www.ittendojo.org](http://www.ittendojo.org)

## JMAC Pilgrimage

Earlier this month, on the first through third of April, six members of our iaido-kai made the trek to Ann Arbor, Michigan, for another in-person session of training with Nicklaus Suino Sensei and our sempai at the Japanese Martial Arts Center. As is always the case, the instruction we received was illuminating, with lots of tweaks, corrections, and new insights provided. What was different this time was inclusion of an intense, combined judo / Nihon Jujutsu practice focused on building into Suino Sensei's "real time" applications for self-defense, a paradigm we're exploring for utilization in our reengineered aikijutsu-kai.

We planned our trip out in order to arrive in time to observe the "Friday Night Fights," a regular judo class that includes both throwing and ground-fighting *randori* (free-sparring). There were more than 30 people on the mat for this class—a larger number than usual, we were told, but not by much. Talk about energy. The dojo was buzzing with enthusiasm and camaraderie, not to mention a very high level of effort and spirit. Anyone that has trained to any degree in judo knows that *randori* is exceptionally challenging, and that scoring with a proper throw is really difficult. What impressed me most that evening was the number of clean throws that were achieved. The group ranged in experience from beginners to senior black-belts, and I saw more good technique, across all ranks, than I've ever witnessed in a similar circumstance.

Something else that really caught our attention: Prior to starting the *randori*, Suino Sensei lined everyone up and demanded answers to two questions. "If your training partner is injured, who's responsible?" and, "If you're injured, who's responsible?" The shouted responses left no doubt every person on the mat recognized and embraced their own, personal responsibility for safe training.

Following the judo practice, a sizable group headed out for margaritas and Mexican food. Evidently, this is a regular thing for the JMAC judo-kai on Friday evenings. Not sure how this tradition started, but it's definitely delightful. And it made me realize that we need to start doing more frequent *après dojo* social get togethers, ourselves.





### **Observing the “Friday Night Fights” judo randori.**

We reported back to JMAC early Saturday morning for our first session of Muso Jikiden Eishin-ryu iaido. JMAC is in the process of expanding its facility to an adjacent, hardwood floor space that was previously a Pilates studio that failed during the pandemic lockdowns. Taking advantage of the hardwood floor and large mirrors comprising almost an entire wall, we focused on standing exercises and *waza* (literally “techniques;” the term used in Eishin-ryu for forms, rather than *kata*). The tweaks and corrections began immediately.

Several of us have extensive experience in other forms of Japanese swordsmanship, and a consistent danger is mistaking a technique or element of an exercise that is merely analogous rather than identical to a previous practice. I’ve been caught multiple times already allowing a legacy habit to continue when I didn’t notice a distinct divergence in Eishin-ryu from our old ways. Worse, I’ve in some instances taught the legacy element—but at least in those cases everyone in our iaido-kai is making the same, “trained mistake,” and correcting me carries through to everyone else.

In the Saturday morning session, Suino Sensei and Dan Holland Sensei cleared up an error in our execution of the pivoting drill (stepping and bokken versions), reinforced an important distinction in the mid-step alignment of the feet for *ayumi-ashi* (normal, alternating steps) and *tsugi-ashi* (sliding, or “shuffle” steps), dived deeply into the critical components of a proper *o-chiburi* (the symbolic shedding of blood from the katana), and reviewed posture and breathing. We then received a thorough review of the first seven *waza* in *Batto-ho no Bu*,

the “Drawing Methods Set,” forms that are considered fundamental-level in our line of Eishin-ryu.

We had about an hour to relax, take notes, and change uniforms prior to the combined judo / Nihon Jujutsu practice. This was a 90-minute class, and both the judo-kai and the jujutsu-kai had been alerted to the special session, so the turn-out was again about 30 people. Suino Sensei started with a short lecture on the martial traditions and instructors informing his approach to self-defense training. Elements of jujutsu, judo, and aikido technique and footwork were synthesized to address engagements at three ranges: close contact, punching-distance, and just outside striking distance. The initial techniques employed were *seoi-nage* (shoulder throw) and *osoto-gari* (large outside reap), later augmented by a hybrid technique incorporating *irimi-nage* (entering throw) and a version of what we would call *sumi-otoshi* (corner drop—I didn’t catch what term JMAC uses).



***During the judo / Nihon Jujutsu combined class, I receive help from Amber Cathey in executing seoi-nage; in the background Freddy Lebron gets some tips from Richard Monroe.***





***Charles Hudson hits a rep of the hybrid, irimi-nage/osoto-gari technique.***

The pace was intense and time flew by. Training partners rotated every couple of minutes, so we had the opportunity to practice with a wide variety of people of different ranks. None of Itten Dojo contingent are graded in judo or jujutsu, so we all wore white-belts...and then sometimes had to explain quickly to a new training partner, “Yes, you can go ahead and throw me.” That was primarily with junior students; the senior people mostly knew us or knew of us. And so far as those senior people are concerned, the JMAC brown-belts and black-belts—men and women—are each and every one spectacular. Absolutely top-shelf technicians and exemplary individuals; a pleasure to know and train with.

At the conclusion of the class, Suino Sensei asked Dan Holland and Richard Monroe to present a short demonstration of very high-level judo. The presentation was semi-freestyle; Dan and Richard alternated execution of techniques, but nothing was choreographed. They simply executed on the opening that was created. The execution was jaw-dropping. Scary, actually. JMAC boasts a very sophisticated, floating floor underneath the tatami mat, a structure that allows full-power throws. Witnessing the degree of impact forces Dan and Richard

are capable of inflicting made it abundantly clear that any number of the throws demonstrated, if executed on a normal surface—say, concrete—would be lethal. Even with the floating floor, the impacts were astonishing.



***Dan Holland and Richard Monroe in an astonishing demonstration of judo.***

A quick break to freshen up a bit and change uniforms, and we were back to iaido. This final practice of the day was also a special, extended session of 90-minutes, open to all members of the JMAC iaido-kai. Aside from the length of the practice, the class followed the normal routine with stepping and bokken drills and then on to waza with iaito. Initially working collectively, as the entire group, we later split out by levels of experience and received individualized instruction. Being able to participate in essentially “normal” classes at JMAC is especially valuable for us, as we endeavor to replicate the JMAC training paradigm in iaido practices at our dojo.

Since the weather was cold and uncooperative the hoped-for Saturday evening around the fire pit at Suino Sensei’s home had to be replaced with a group dinner out. The destination was Zingerman’s Roadhouse, an Ann Arbor landmark known for Southern cuisine.







*Suino Sensei leads Alan Starnner in the waza, “Shinobu” (Loyal Retainer), from Tachi-waza no Bu.*

After the excellent dinner we transferred to Fraser’s Pub, another JMAC après dojo haunt that is becoming a go-to spot for our trips as well.

Sunday morning, we were up and back early to JMAC for a private iaido session with Suino Sensei and Holland Sensei. This was our opportunity to deep-dive on some of the questions we brought with us, accomplish a final fine-tuning (for this trip) of waza we had already received, and be led through some new waza to take back. Everyone received something new, often multiple new waza. Given the stages of the Eishin-ryu curriculum the members of our group were working on, depending on experience the new waza were from the Batto-ho no Bu, *Toho* (Sword Methods—a set of standardized forms selected by the All Japan Iaido Federation as “compulsories” for iaido competitions), or *Tachiwaza no Bu* (Standing Techniques) sets.

Although our monthly, online sessions with Sensei and the JMAC iaido-kai are immensely helpful, and often yield critically important corrections or insights, nothing compares to in-person training.

By noontime we had collected ourselves, said our goodbyes, and were on our way east. The trip home was thankfully quick and uneventful. As of this writing, we’re in the process of scheduling our next in-person sessions: one JMAC-to-Itten visit and two more Itten-to-JMAC visits yet this year.

• • • • •

Our association with Suino Sensei and JMAC has proven to be one of the most influential elements in the transformation of our dojo over the past two years. I will never forget the effect of a short talk Suino Sensei gave the members of our iaido-kai at the conclusion of the seminar visit here in September 2020 that launched our formal training with him. Sensei spoke of his personal mission in life and how sharing training in budo is a critical part of his efforts. Those present and listening were transfixed—in a way I’d never witnessed previously in our dojo. Or pretty much anywhere else. During subsequent discussions in the dojo it became overwhelmingly apparent that those



present had been inspired. Not simply to undertake serious training in iaido with Suino Sensei, but to aspire toward playing an active, supportive role in his mission. And that commitment triggered a transformation here, one that has cascaded through the aikijutsu-kai as well. Independent as of recently, our aikijutsu-kai is poised to ride this wave.

If I had to describe in one word the environment at JMAC, I would say, “exuberant.” From the kids in children’s classes to the most senior black-belts, the enthusiasm, energy, mutual support, and the love for each other and what they’re doing together just bursts out.

It’s an example we will model. 



***Richard Monroe and Amber Cathey are a power couple, on and off the mat!***

Special thanks to iaido-kai member Laura Robbins for many of the excellent photos in this issue.



***Jake Sterner is the youngest but one of the most enthusiastic members of our iaido-kai. With no previous, formal training in ukemi (the skills of landing safely when thrown), Jake got what you might call a “crash course” during the judo / Nihon Jujutsu class.***

**Robert Wolfe, chief instructor of Itten Dojo, began martial arts training in 1975 while attending Bucknell University, where he earned a degree in Japanese Studies. Mr. Wolfe has taught since 1985, and founded Itten Dojo in 1992. His articles on martial arts have been featured in publications such as *The Bujin*, *Budo Shinbun*, the *Journal of Asian Martial Arts*, *Bugeisha*, *Aikido Today Magazine*, *Inside Karate*, *Martial Arts Training*, and *Martial Arts Professional*.**

