

Sword and Spirit

The Journal of Itten Dojo

June 2023



— 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.

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More Milestones

I'm halfway through my 68th year and pretty much the last thing I would have ever expected to be doing at this point in my life would be pursuing *shodan* (first-degree black-belt) in two new (for me) martial arts: Muso Jikiden Eishin-ryu iaido and Nihon Jujutsu. As a rank in martial arts, *shodan* translates to “first step,” and rather than designating an expert—as is often assumed by the general public—just marks the point at which the really serious training begins. In consequence of our trip to Ann Arbor for rank testing and celebration of the 17th anniversary of the founding of the Japanese Martial Arts Center (JMAC), Alan Starner and I reached that first, major milestone in iaido and, along with Charles Hudson and Sarah St. Angelo, took our initial steps on the ladder toward that rank in jujutsu, passing the examination for *gokyu* (green-belt). Additionally, Mr. Hudson was promoted to *ikkyu* in iaido—the final “ungraded” rank below black-belt.

Our trip west started the morning of Thursday, June 22nd. Three of us drove out, while Dr. St. Angelo flew thanks to attending a university conference in Chicago earlier in the week. From Mechanicsburg to Ann Arbor is a seven- to eight-hour drive, depending on circumstances. The trip this time was a bit quicker than usual, and we arrived at our accommodations early enough to unload and then head to JMAC to observe the karate testing sessions. We saw some of the kids' testing, which was simultaneously cute and intriguing, to witness the youngsters clearly being held to a standard and their enthusiastic response to the expectations of JMAC founder and director Nicklaus Suino Sensei.

The adult karate testing session was of special interest to Mr. Starner and me. With our background in Isshinryu karate we were curious to see more of the Goju-ryu practiced at JMAC, that style of karate being one of the component influences on Isshinryu (the other being Shorin-ryu). The test covered *kihon* (fundamentals), *kata* (forms), and *kumite* (sparring). Kata were demonstrated both in groups and individually, and it was fascinating to observe the differences between the Goju-ryu and adapted, Isshinryu versions of the same kata. Dan Holland Sensei and the other, senior-ranked men in the group were just as impressive as we've seen them the few times in the past





The promotions for children training in karate were conducted three at a time.

we've been able to observe karate training at JMAC. What was new this time was the opportunity to watch black-belts Pamela Suino and Beth Wiggert display very high-level kata. Their precision in movement and their very deliberate but subtle sourcing of power really caught our attention—their application of that power was anything but subtle.

Because Suino Sensei would be performing his usual duties later that evening as one of the hosts of the *Punch, Kick, Choqe, Chat* podcast, we helped round up some pizza and beverages for a quick meal. Happily, we were able after dinner to get some much-needed instruction on testing formats—a huge help, courtesy of Richard Monroe, Amber Cathey, and Mike Mancini.

On Friday the 23rd, we mostly rested and relaxed. For lunch, we met Suino Sensei at regular JMAC hangout Fraser's Pub to welcome Randy Dauphin Sensei, his wife Christine Henry-Hussey, and their daughter, Cheyenne Hussey. Dauphin Sensei is a senior student of Gary Legacy Hanshi (Legacy Shorin Ryu Karate Jutsu), chief instructor at the Kitchener, Ontario, branch of that organization, and one of the five most senior iaido students of Suino Sensei. I learned this weekend that the *PKCC* podcast was Dauphin Sensei's idea. Two of his students, Andrew Percival and Marrio Muso, would also be testing in iaido; the former for shodan and the latter for ikkyu.



The adults displayed an exceptional degree of skill, especially in their presentations of kata.

While Mr. Hudson had been prepping for some time to be ready for his iaido exam, Mr. Starner and I did not know we would be testing in iaido this time around; we were planning only on the jujutsu exam. We found out a week-and-a-half prior to the test that we would be joining Mr. Hudson on the mat and, for us, that meant we would be responsible for demonstrating selected material from as much as Suino Sensei's stepping drills, solo and paired bokken drills, the Big Five, waza from *Seiza no Bu* (Seated Set), *Batto Ho no Bu* (Drawing Methods Set), *Toho* (Sword Methods), *Tachiwaza no Bu* (Standing Techniques Set), the waza received to date from *Tatehiza no Bu* (Half-seated Set), the paired forms from *Tachiuchi no Kurai* (The State of Striking Swords), and all associated *reishiki* (ceremonial etiquette).

Part of testing in martial arts is being ready for the unexpected. Suino Sensei threw a second curve at us when, at the start of the iaido testing, he announced a change in format. Since he has limited time with those of us from Mechanicsburg and Kitchener, Sensei decided to run a combined mini-seminar/test. We were put through our paces as a group and individually, with a constant stream of corrections and new insights from Sensei. We were admonished to consider that any correction given to anyone applied to everyone. In addition to our promotions, we came out of the test with a wealth of



information that will also benefit immensely the more junior iaido students at our dojo.



Charles Hudson completing a vertical cut.



Alan Starner demonstrates nukitsuke (drawing and cutting).

After the formal announcement of results and promotions, we had a 10-minute break to change uniforms and get back onto the mat for the jujutsu exam. Although only Itten Dojo members would be testing, five of the JMAC jujutsu black-belts joined in to serve as our *uke*



For my individual demonstration, I chose the waza Shinobu (Loyal Retainer).

(the person “receiving” the technique). In shooting for gokyu, we were responsible for a range of *taisabaki* (body skills: stepping drills, hand sets, kicking sets, twisting sets, and striking), *ukemi* (rolls and breakfalls), the paired forms *Goshin Ho I* and *Kihon Kata I*, *jiyu-waza* (semi-freestyle applications of techniques from those kata), and six judo-waza (*Seoi Nage*, *Osoto Gari*, *Ogoshi*, *Ukigoshi*, *Hiza Garuma*, and *Sasaetsurikomi Ashi*). Although this examination followed the standard testing format, there were nonetheless a huge number of corrections and new insights gained. I was incredibly lucky to be paired with Dan Holland, Mike Mancini, and Amber Cathey at different points in the process, and from each of them received major additions to our corporate knowledge base that will dramatically enhance training at our dojo.





All told, our exams lasted just shy of three hours, after which everyone headed to another regular JMAC hangout for a very late, Mexican dinner.

Saturday we pretty much crashed. Prior to getting ready for the anniversary banquet that evening, our agenda included sleeping-in, breakfast at a local diner, and an expedition to the biggest Total Wine and More I've ever seen. Mr. Hudson made a solo run to explore downtown Ann Arbor.



In previous years, JMAC observed its anniversary with demonstrations and awards at the dojo—this was the first year that a banquet was held. The site was the Kensington Hotel, a high-end hotel in Ann Arbor. In handling the more than 125 banquet attendees, everything was done right, and the food was great. Over appetizers, we had the chance to visit a bit with John Gage Sensei and provide him an update on our progress in Nihon Jujutsu (Gage Sensei being the head of that art). He was very pleased with our commitment to bring Nihon Jujutsu into central Pennsylvania and made clear his personal support of our efforts (for which we're very grateful).

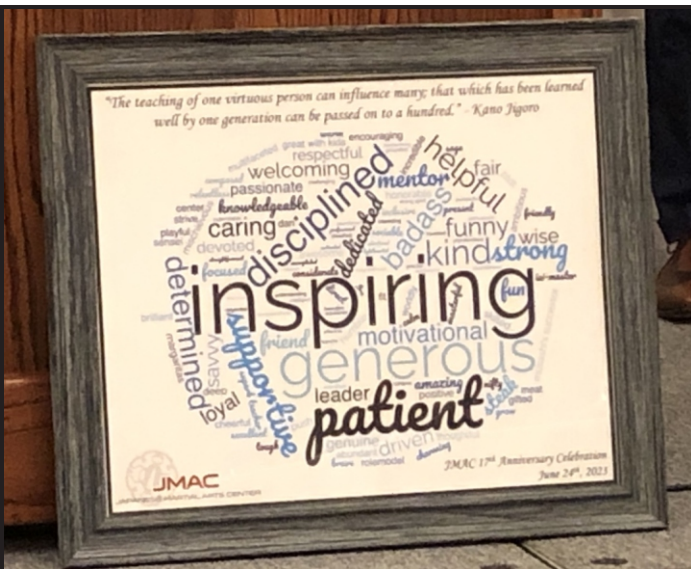
The evening included a keynote address by Dauphin Sensei, during which he reflected on the real meaning of ranks in the martial arts, especially high ranks. This speech was quite informative for the non-martial-artists attending, and was certainly thought-provoking for junior and senior practitioners alike.

A primary focus of the evening was a series of awards. For each of the JMAC programs for children and adults, an award for top-leader and top-student for 2023 was announced. Staff members were not eligible for the leader award; this honor was reserved for individuals that had stepped up to assist the assigned instructor(s) with their duties.

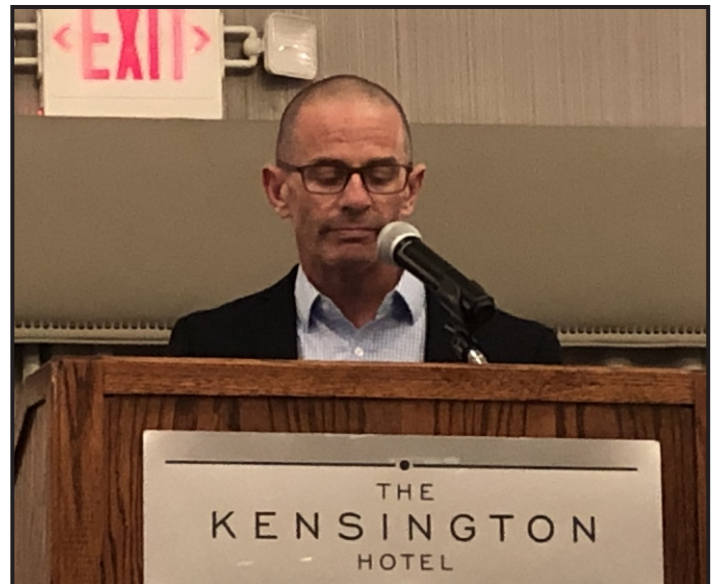




The final presentation was made to Suino Sensei by the members of his staff. Amber Cathey had canvassed the members of the dojo for single words that define Suino Sensei, and from those created a word-cloud that was printed and framed. I wasn't familiar with the concept of a word-cloud, but the result in this case is something I expect Sensei will treasure.



The “word-cloud,” with descriptions of Suino Sensei, as submitted by the members of JMAC.



Randy Dauphin Sensei presenting his keynote address on the meaning of rank.

I'm writing this while we're on the road east, still about three-hours from home. This week included another significant anniversary for Itten Dojo that has been the impetus for a lot of recent, personal reflection on our history and our future. It's amazing to me the degree to which Suino Sensei and JMAC have already become part



of our history and are a significant influence in shaping our future. I can't express adequately the gratitude I have for everything Suino Sensei and JMAC have done for us, but

I want to offer our congratulations on the milestone JMAC celebrated this week and our profound thanks for the personal milestones we were enabled to achieve. 🌸



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 with his senior student Alan Starner founded Itten Dojo in 1992. His articles on martial arts have been featured in numerous publications, including the *Journal of Asian Martial Arts* and *Bugeisha*.

