



BEV: How did you get started in karate?

NORMA: What started me in Karate was the fact that I used to be a competitive swimmer and there came a point where I no longer beat the clock and got thrown out of the pool ground. Then I tried some other sports and I quite enjoyed them but none of them had the discipline of swimming which is actually quite boring when you think about it. And then I discovered a lot of men around me were actually doing karate and uh they would talk about it with a great deal of enthusiasm so I thought well, I'd kind of like to try that, and uh then they decided that they weren't going to let me. So the more they decided they didn't want to let me start, the more I wanted to do it.

BEV: How old were you when you first started?

NORMA: I was seventeen when I first started training in karate.

BEV: How did you overcome that first barrier of getting into the sport?

NORMA: One of the few ways I overcame the barriers were to say well what is it about being female that you don't like or you don't think I can do this, and they said well oh karate training's really hard. You have to do push-ups and and stuff like that, and I said well, I've been doing push-ups since I was seven so I don't think that's gonna be a barrier. Oh well, you might get hit. Well ya, I've been hit once or twice before and it wasn't nice but I could cope. And then well, you'd start crying and maybe you'll get a black eye. Well um let's try and find out and if I cry I'll quit and uh if I don't you'll let me continue. So it kind of went on like that for a while.

BEV: Where did you take up the sport?

NORMA: I started training in Aberdeen, Scotland in 1969 or so.

BEV: Do you recall what the first major goal was that you set for yourself?

NORMA: When I first started I had first of course, first of all the goal to be accepted. I had quite a few goals when I first started training in karate.



Proudly supported by





One was to be accepted by the instructor as a valid student and the first six months that I was training I was kind of condescended to and patronized quite a lot, whereas all the other men in the class were not, and of course I was the only girl in the class so I think he probably really didn't know how to treat me. And within that goal I thought well if I was to pass the first fight test, the first belt test maybe that would make them take me seriously. So I tried to work really hard and I missed the first rank test. I was late and the instructor told me it had passed and I'd missed it, so I said well I really want to do it.

I've been training really hard for six months and I really want to do this test and it was an instructor who had been invited to the city specifically for the test and he was leaving on that day. And I said well couldn't I just couldn't you just do the test really quickly cause it's only one person. I'm sure it wouldn't take long. And so for some reason they decided to do it and of course I did the test by myself and magically passed it. However that did not result in actually getting accepted as a serious student because after all I had only done the test by myself, not in front of all the other candidates who'd done the test so I thought right, well I'll go for the next one and I will definitely be on time for that one.

So the next test came and went, and around that time the club merged with another club and it was the only other karate club in Aberdeen at the time and that club also had no women training in it, and the instructor of that club had a reputation in the city for being a little bit hard and he said there's no women training in my club. So I went through the whole process again and said well I've been training for now 9 months and I have a I have rank in this sport and I want to continue, so I want to train here and he said it's not possible to train here. Why not, I said. Well, there's no changing rooms. So I said well, is there a toilet? Of course there's a toilet. Well I'll change in the toilet then. [Sighs]

So then it was like ok fine. So they let me, let me participate in the class. However I was still not accepted as a valid student because that instructor would come down the line of men, correct every single one of them and not bother saying a word to me and walk right back the line. So then my goal became I will make you correct me because I could see this man was a really good instructor. He just didn't have a clue about what to do with me in his club.

Proudly supported by





And then, magically I went for the next test and I passed it so now I was a yellow belt so I had the first colored belt in the series of ranks between white and black belt and that is when I was suddenly accepted as a valid student, so that goal was achieved but the next goal was he started correcting me. I achieved that one and the goal after that became I'm gonna stop you correcting me. And that's how it was in early days.

BEV: How did you get from Aberdeen to Japan?

NORMA: How I got from Aberdeen to Japan is quite a long and circuitous story, so we'll try and make it very short and succinct. I left Aberdeen in 1975 and went to live in Texas in the US, in Huston. I lived there for two years. I met some people from Japan while I lived in Texas and they said come and stay at our home, come as a homestay. So my first visit to Japan in 1977 was as a homestay and that's how I got to Japan in the first place. I had a really horrible time. I didn't speak any Japanese. I couldn't understand anything, any process, any system. I couldn't do the simplest things and I hated it.

And then, but in the last week my homestay mother who who had been very kind throughout all of this took me up to Tokyo for the day and it was a beautiful sunny day and the 13th of January, 1978 and you could see Mt. Fuji from the 55th floor of the Nitsu building in downtown Tokyo, if there is such a thing. And I thought I'm gonna come back here under my rules, no one else's. So I did, but that took ten years so I finally went back to Japan, working with a British biotechnology company that had an office in Tokyo and then I stayed there for eight years.

BEV: Were you training during this time?

NORMA: My work took me to Japan. I worked for the same company in Canada and in Chicago and in Japan, and that kind of financed my interest in karate, if you will. As soon as I got there I had arranged to train in the style of karate that I had historically studied and also arranged to study another style of karate with a viewpoint of becoming a referee.

BEV: Can you talk a little about the different styles?



Proudly supported by





NORMA: There are four major styles of karate recognized by the world karate federation. That's based on what the Japan karate federation recognizes as major styles. And that historically goes back to 1938 when the government invited martial artists to register their what they were doing as formalized entities. So at that time the Japan Karate Federation was formed and four leaders of style groups came forward and established their activities as different and independent styles of karate. These are Wado-ryu, Goju-ryu, Shito-ryu, and Shotokan-ryu.

The differences in the styles are basically different interpretations of very similar movements so styles are rarely centered around what do you use these movements for, as opposed to some other style, but they're fundamentally very very similar cause they're all Japanese. They're all upright. They all use the principals of movement to generate impact force, so you're trying to impact force. There's just varies between the style, among the style group. And from those four style groups have mushroomed, many many more style groups that they're all historically, funamentally related to those four.

BEV: What drew you to karate?

NORMA: For me personally it's very hard to say when I first decided that I was passionate about karate. I just started to love it just around that time of obtaining a green belt which was in at that time after yellow belt, so it was about a year, just over a year and a half or something training I started to just feel a pure sort of enjoyment of doing the movements. I couldn't have cared what they were for; I just loved the doing of the movements and trying to perfect them and trying to get them right.

I think for other people the draw of something like karate, which is really a performance art, a performance sport with a fighting element is multi-faceted cause there, karate has many aspects. Some people I think are are drawn to the uh the psychological aspects, others are drawn to social aspects, some to art aspects, and some to the fighting facets of it. So I think karate as well as any other martial art for that matter offers people a range of things to hook onto depending on their personality.

BEV: Can you talk about barriers?



Proudly supported by





NORMA: We're talking about barriers to karate through years, what has really interested me and flabbergasted me really is the fact that over 37 years, now it's almost 40 years, I've been practicing karate the barriers fundamentally have not changed. It's still a very similar barrier. It's just disguised as something else. One example of that is when I decided that I wanted to study in the art of science of karate refereeing it it shocked the the world, the karate world because it the no women had uh had ever done that before and there was a belief at the time and it was stated quite flatly to me that it is not possible, women cannot referee men.

And and I was like, confused. I'm thinking this is not Scotland in 1969, so why are people thinking like this? And I'll decide whether I can referee men or not, not someone else, not not this man. And I was really quite shocked because I genuinely was just interested in refereeing and being involved in the sport and suddenly I was being told someone was putting ceilings on what I could do and not do so I thought no, I'm going to show you something my friend. And I made a statement once here in Karate BC actually in the province in front of an assembly of referees where I said it's very important to have, for a referee to have balls and and as everyone started sniggering and laughing and I said I don't know why you're all sniggering and laughing because everybody's got them. They're right in front of your face and they're called eyeballs, and we've all go them so there's no reason why anyone cannot choose to try to become a referee cause all you need is eyesight.

BEV: Can you talk about your journey to becoming a referee?

Norma: Well, obviously I think it helps that if one wishes to become an official in this in sport karate it's important to have done karate, practiced it and had an experience of competition. It's not necessary to be a gold medallist in the world championships to become a good referee or to become a referee it's just important to have a feel for what it is we're trying to do. And then you have to read the rulebook and become conversant with the rules and then go through the process of examination and get the experience of doing the job and that comes or it will come in this province in through the structure of the zone structure.

So one would get a qualification within the zone and then one would get a provincial qualification, then that would allow you to go to the national and get a national qualification that would allow you to go to the Pan-American championships and get a Pan-Am qualification which

Proudly supported by





which then allows you to go to the world federation and get a WKF world federation referee license.

BEV: Can you talk about karate and the Olympics?

NORMA: At this point it is 2006 and karate's not an Olympic sport. A lot of effort has been put into having Olympic acceptance for karate but the reason why it's not in the Olympics can be found in the book called Lords of the Rings, and there's two books in that series and the second one explains very succinctly why karate is not in the Olympics and tae kwon do is. One of the things we're suffering from of course is that karate looks a lot like Taekwondo, especially when you put people in the ring and they're fighting, so it looks very similar. So it's hard to to differentiate A between the two, so it's easy to say well we've already got something that looks like karate.

And there are several other things; the sport is...the outcome of a match is referee dependant and the Olympics have suffered lately with that kind of outcome being affected by the judges and they're very weary of having a sport with subjectivity in it. So considering that a karate outcome is dependant on scoring a point, a point is called "ippon" and it's defined in words very clearly, but in actual fact rests upon the notion that that blow if it were real would kill the person in front of you, so it's kind of difficult to subjectively decide whether or not that person would be dead from this punch. So the inherent subjectivity of the nature of the judging the sport I think runs against it, however, but so that's one uh another reason we're not in.

Another is that we were asked, the world cup federation was asked to have 20% women on all its major functional committees by a certain time, and we have now, WKF has now done that, so we're poised, karate is poised to be an Olympic sport. It's a matter now of whether or not the IOC wishes it to be an Olympic sport and at the last point...I think karate and squash I believe were the last two sports for consideration for Olympic inclusion for 2012. Neither sport is will be included in 2012.

BEV: Can you talk about how more women have become involved in karate over the years?



Proudly supported by





NORMA: Well, I think over over time um things certain things have changed within the sport. When I first started training in karate in 1969 the demographic was almost entirely adult and it was all male, very few women and girls were actually involved worldwide and that was rather interesting because the founder of what could be considered modern karate said, was a school teacher and he said karate would be good for weak people like women and children. And and yet that wasn't happening in reality so the difference between 1969 and now is that, for example, karate BC is 35% women and if we looked at the demographic world wide 75% of the membership in the world karate federation is under 16.

And so that has completely turned karate upside-down because now you have to consider how to teach children, how to make it interesting for children, and women teaching children, women are teaching men, women are referees, locally, provincially, nationally, internationally, and since I started refereeing at the world level in 1990 there were no female referees and that was over a period of about 25 years. Suddenly in ten years we had 7 world qualified female referees. And it's completely changed the sport, the fact that all these children and women are now are fully recognized as being totally able to participate to the fullest extent has completely changed the sport.

It's changed the way it's taught. It's changed the way it's presented. It's far more educated now. Also, the realization that karate can be sport instead of some esoteric, philosophical activity has changed, has allowed things like the national coaching certification program of in Canada, which up until you know certain period was considered irrelevant, karate training, is now realized as a very good and integral and necessary part of karate training, so that's changed the face of karate as well.

BEV: What do you think your greatest achievement is?

NORMA: My greatest achievement in karate, I think, was overcoming the system here in BC in 1983. I kind of came from nowhere and at that time when you competed in "kata", which was forms, where you just get up and you perform a set routine and you were given a score, kind of like skating at the time. First of all you did the first round and if you scored the top eight or whatever it was into into the next round, the second round, and then you were given another score and then you got into the final round if you were in the top eight in the second round.



Proudly supported by





In the second round I had the lowest score, so I came into the final round with the lowest score in the group. Now the thing was at the time we added the scores from the second round onto the scores of the first round in an effort of objectivity I guess, and so I came into the round with the lowest score going into the final. And historically what happened was you would go up first, you would perform your kata first if you had the lowest score, which always ran against you, and so historically what had happened was if you went in there with the lowest score you came out with the lowest score. But that time I got up and I did my kata and I finished it and I got scores and I didn't even look to see what the scores were.

There was no great emotion from anywhere. There wasn't any reaction so I thought oh well, I felt good and I really felt that was a good kata. I really enjoyed doing it. I was right in the performance and I thought well, never mind. I'm over now. Now I'll watch my other competitors, the other seven people get up and do their kata and I can relax and enjoy their performance, cause I was quite convinced I would come out last. And so my girlfriend who was taking pictures at the other side of the ring gave me the thumbs up signal, like that, and I went what ya thanks, somebody supports me, that's nice.

And then the second person got up and did her kata and she got her scores. There was no great standing ovation and so on. And we were top three that had never performed their performances and the same things happened and they each and every one my friend was sitting at the other side of the ring going like this. I didn't have a clue what she was going on about. I thought she just really liked the performances. And the girl who was at the top at the time was everyone thought she was unbeatable. She had a real style that was definitely winning. She was German junior national champion. She came over here. She emigrated and here she was the national junior champion and we were all competing against her. It wasn't possible to beat her, that was the feeling at the time.

You can imagine my surprise when my name was called for bronze medal. What I had done was received such a high score in that final round that I had beaten all the other seven competitors. And I had taken, had the lowest score then what became the highest score, and then they were averaged together, they became the bronze medal. And I have won a few medals and lost a few medals and this and that in my lifetime, but that bronze medal was worth more to me than anything I had ever won or put in a drawer or hung up on the wall, and the reason was that medal

Proudly supported by





proved to everyone that you could overcome any system if if you wanted to really badly enough, if you believed that you could, and you believed in yourself you could overcome a negative system that was established against you or your winning, and that to me was just like that high kept me, that high kept me going for two years. It was amazing. I never felt anything like that before since because I had done something no one else had done in the sport and it was something in this province and this country and that to me was a moment worth worth remembering.

BEV: Did you experience the same elation when you became the first female official on the international stage?

NORMA: I did not experience anything like a similar feeling to that 1984 event because I was beginning to understand that every time you kind of climb one mountain you remember you can always see the next one, and there was just no end to this mountain range so anytime I overcame a barrier it was like good, that's another one done, now what, because you knew there would be another one and of course there always was.

BEV: Do you like the challenge of that?

NORMA: You know I prefer if there wasn't such a challenge in these activities because why should there be? Why is this so difficult for me to achieve what I decided was going to be my personal goal as opposed to some guy who might have the same goal. Why is it so difficult for me? I don't like that and it's not that I like the challenge so much, is that I will fight when I see something that does not make sense to me or it just seems blatantly wrong and especially when it affects me.

If it's gonna affect me you know it's gonna affect other women and other practitioners behind me so I will fight but I don't want to, I don't ask for these barriers to be put there. I didn't ask for these people to to have these kinds of attitudes, but when they come and they are are put in front of me like that I will fight them because why not, you know someone has to do it. Might as well be me, and I seem to have the stamina for it.

BEV: Can you talk about size and stature?



Proudly supported by



who inspires you?



Long Interview
Norma Foster



NORMA: Size and stature is really not an advantage or a disadvantage or is an advantage or disadvantage depending what wants to do with one's karate. For example if one wanted to compete in kata, it's very helpful to be fairly small and have a low center of gravity and have a fairly long body with respect to your height and very short legs cause somehow it makes the kata look great, and it's notable that still to this day the top female kata competitors in the world are Japanese and I don't think any one of them is over 5'2".

Having said that some of the male competitors at the world level are of that proportion that they're fairly tall and they're very strong. If one wishes to compete say in the lightweight division of sparring it behooves one to be fairly tall and have a long reach, and long legs and be at the top of the weight weight class, but when one is small and has a lot of fast twitch muscle and has good explosive power then if you have a lot of speed then being small can be an advantage in so far as you can get under things cause it's harder to punch down than it is to punch up, so I think it depends on one's personal goals how one's body structure really is an advantage or a disadvantage.

During my career, competitive career, I certainly never even thought about my height, weight, or whatever vis-à-vis anyone else's. I just wanted to do it so I did it and sometimes I got beaten up and sometimes I didn't.

BEV: What makes a good coach?

NORMA: In my experience of of being coached in karate I found that what makes a good coach differs for different people. For me, personally, it was important that a coach could bring out of me things I never knew were there and the way to that is to to understand me, what what would push me right to that edge. And for me to want to go to that edge, for a coach to be able to do that I think takes a special kind of person. Now, a coach for me doesn't have to be able to physically perform all the stuff that's required of karate, but they have to understand it in in a very deep way, so that they can help me overcome my limitations to bring out that technique to it's best advantage to to make that technique work for its best advantage.

Which is to say my winning a medal. I've known a few people like that in my life who really I'd have died if somebody said you know we need a slave to go over there clean up their, you know,

Proudly supported by





their house or something, I would have gladly done it just for the sheer love of their knowledge, of their understanding and their ability to push all of the right buttons and need to again bring out qualities in me I never knew I had and that can be just the the the mental push to go further than you ever thought you could go to overcome that moment of total "I can't do it anymore. I'm going to die". "No you're not. You can take that one more step".

I think these are really important and if the coach does not have the right distance between you and them and the right closeness and the right space between you I think that that leads, that can lead to difficulties so the distance that the coach keeps as well, mentally and psychologically from all of their athletes I think is very very important. So it's not just enough to know your subject and know what it is you're coaching. It's very important to know how to put it across and why that athlete differs from that athlete and what is that athlete's strengths and weaknesses and what is that athlete's strengths and weaknesses and how can you minimize those weaknesses and and really bring out the strengths.

BEV: Can you mention your coaches?

NORMA: Two of the people who have influenced my karate and where I wanted to go with it over the past probably two decades are Mr. Arakawa, who is eight or ninth, perhaps ninth degree now in the Japan karate federation, and Dr. K, Dr. K is also eighth degree black belt in Japan karate federation and in the Japan karate federation model card. I was introduced to these gentlemen, one in 1989, one in 1990 and they both of them built on the base of 20 years that I already had in karate and took it to considerably further than I ever imagined it would it would go. I don't know people quite like them.

In Vancouver, I lived here for eight years; nine years and then I went to Japan. During that time here I made a lot of friends and had many many happy times and memories and so on and I still have very close relationships with those friends. In any of the nine years in Japan, in Japan you don't end up with the same kind of network of friends. It's a very different society. But Dr. K ended up being not only a karate coach but the person I would go to in Japan if I had a serious emergency. If I had a problem I would go to him. If I needed advice I would ask him, because he wasn't only a a great karate instructor, and he still is, he's a great human being. He's a he's a lovely lovely person and I don't know anyone quite like him.



Proudly supported by





He's not he's not very close emotionally to his students but he has such an amazing understanding of what he's doing and the ability to put it across that it's just outstanding and I just happen to like his dry kind of way of putting things across so I really enjoyed what he had to teach and how he did it. So those two have been very very influential in my future since 1990, in my career since 1990. And Mr. A also helped me a lot in terms of refereeing and judging. He really gave me a very good foundation with respect to to that aspect of karate and sensei gave me a very deeper understanding of the principles of movement and how to recognize in other people too what a problem is is and what the unique cause of it is and how to address that problem that's something that nobody had ever really done for me until 1990.

BEV: What do you say to young women to become involved in athletics?

NORMA: Well I just think that lots of various women and girls of many ages. What's interesting in terms of for me to say something that may inspire them or whatever, I'm not sure that I can actually do that because I think lots of young women I'm talking to these days are really not aware of how fortunate they are to be in this situation that they are in. And they're perfectly happy with where it's at and of course can't see anything about the struggle to get there so that they are where they are now, so if someone asks me I will try to give them something that that will inspire them from their viewpoint...I don't have any set formula for seeing, inspiring things to individuals but I suppose the message would be, if I had to really compact it into a single sentence would be believe in yourself.

BEV: What do you think people will remember Norma Foster for?

NORMA: If I was to imagine what people might remember me for, I think they would probably remember me for stirring up an awful lot of trouble. I've done some really stupid things in the past and I know people still talk about them and all I can do is laugh. But hopefully I would like to imagine that when I go to my grave that I will be remembered for making a significant contribution to the growth and development of karate, particularly for women and girls, worldwide.

Proudly supported by





I was recently thrilled to receive an award from the national karate association of Canada, called the Ross Rumble Award. Ross Rumble was the first president of the national karate association of Canada and the award is given for outstanding contribution to karate in Canada and I really appreciated that. I thought it was really it was really nice to receive that and that's the sort of thing I would like to be remembered for but if you ask me what I am remembered for right now, I don't think it's that.

BEV: Can you run through the order of karate belts?

NORMA: I'm gonna run through the order in which belts are given out, but roughly speaking and regardless of the style group or group of karate, they go from white to black and then actually go back to white again. And the logic behind uh this was that in the olden days you had to hold the jacket closed with something so you tied a bit of white cotton around your waist to keep the jacket closed. Because people didn't have access to washing machines these things got rather dirty and they turned black, eventually over time. Well, more of a dark gray.

And then as the material frayed and and fell apart it would turn to white again because that was what was inside whatever they tied round the waist so that was the fundamental principal of of the belt. Then what happened when karate became disseminated out of Japan to foreign countries and particularly Western people wanted a show of learning, so they wanted milestones and so good milestones were "I know let's have some colors so the colors roughly speaking go white, yellow, orange, green, blue, purple, brown, and black". And in each style group or group has variations on that theme, but that's the fundamental base of the color system.

BEV: What's the highest degree of black belt?

NORMA: The highest degree of black belt in theory is a tenth "dan", and what that was usually awarded posthumously and in fact in some style groups ninth dan is awarded posthumously and the other way we could look at it was a tenth dan or tenth degree is the founder of a style historically. So the rest of really kind of awards for time if you keep submitting yourself to examination and the older you get the more decrepit your body gets but hopefully the more, the deeper the understanding [of karate you] get, and there's a balance and so on you go up the dan links.



Proudly supported by





So with each dan link, degree of black belt rank there are certain conditions such as age and time in since the previous dan examination so there's are standard I think across all styles.

BEV: Can you talk about the benefits of karate for women specifically?

NORMA: Karate has several benefits as all do, all martial arts and I think all sports do to to be fair. The benefits of karate are of course total body, because you are using all parts of the body to to do karate, using the arms, the legs, the torso, the feet, you know the hands. You're also of course using the brain and then learning the physical skills of coordination, balance, telling right from left, you're also developing the art of impact force from minimal movement, so you're looking at developing maximum force from minimal movement, so that physically could make one far more powerful than one in fact appears to be so then with that physical knowledge and that physical advantage hiding inside you I think that also helps one to develop a little better self-esteem.

The fact that karate is also very postural, you have to walk with your back straight. You have to do all your movements with good posture and things like that. When people are walking down the street with good posture I think that too sends a message, a non-verbal message, to those around the fact that if you do a lot of training in martial arts you're generally not afraid to look somebody in the eye and sometimes is also sending a message, just the fact that you're willing to look someone straight in the eye.

Karate is a lot of requirement of coordination, your right hand is doing something while your left hand is doing something completely different, and your legs are doing something else, it's good for children and and adults too who have poor coordination ability and since there is no race to win they can take their whole lifetime to improve those those skills. I like those martial arts. I think karate offers a range of benefits to those who wish to practice it and I think that's physical health, mental health, and street smarts. And generally a good balance in your life, I think.

DISCUSSION ABOUT OTHER ATHLETES

NORMA: Lori Fung. I do remember watching her compete and for me when I'm watching these kinds of, that caliber of person it's just unimaginable that you'd ever actually meet them. And I was fortunate enough to meet her uh at an event in the not too distant past, so that was really quite a thrill.

Proudly supported by

