

CHUCK SULLIVAN

Redefining Kenpo

By Rudy Corrales

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Chuck Sullivan is the Senior Grandmaster of the International Karate Connection Association (IKCA), which is based in Seal Beach, California. He is considered by many to be the longest active Ed Parker Kenpo Karate Black Belt in the world today, and at age 76, he may also be the oldest.

Sullivan was the fourth person promoted to the rank of Black Belt by Edmund K. Parker in 1962, and one of only three to have been promoted from White Belt to 7th Degree by Parker. Sullivan and Parker became business associates early on: developing 8mm training films illustrating Kenpo and as partners in a school in Southwest Los Angeles. Sullivan was responsible for developing the Staff Set that is used in the American Kenpo curriculum. Also noteworthy, Sullivan was the Tournament Director of the second Ed Parker's **International Karate Championships** held in Long Beach, California, and he also created all of Parker's demonstrations for the first six years.

In 1980, Vic LeRoux, a longtime student of Chuck's, opened a school in Hawthorne, California, which he named The Karate Connection, and asked Sullivan to take the position of Head Instructor. Born out of what he considered necessity, Sullivan began cutting down the number of techniques taught by the other Parker American Kenpo schools at the time because he felt that the system they originally been taught had been added to over the years to the point where it had become unattainable. The average man or woman didn't stand a chance of learning and perfecting the system it had evolved into.

They have not been without detractors who, in the beginning, criticized the notion of changing the system at all, but since that time have altered the system they learned under Parker in a similar manner. It just took them a lot longer to see the necessity and address it. When asked by one of his students, "Who respects our method of training?" Chuck Sullivan replied, "It's not who respects our method, but whose method do we respect?"

Mr. Sullivan, when did you start Kenpo Karate training?

I started training in February of 1959. I had been out of the Marine Corps for exactly five years and found myself in terrible physical condition. I was never into weights or bodybuilding, so going to a gym didn't enter my mind. One day, my brother-in-law came over to my house and told me there was a Judo school over on Tweedy Boulevard. We were living in South Gate, California, at the time. I went to the school and saw a big sign on the roof that said "Judo". The place was closed but there were two guys outside sitting on the fender of a car. One asked if I was interested in what went on in there. After some questioning, he informed me that they didn't teach Judo at all, but another form of Martial Art, something I had never heard of, something called Karate. I didn't feel badly because at that point in time no else had heard of it, except for the handful of students who had found the place. That's why they had a sign reading "Judo" on the building; at least it was familiar to the general population. If I had heard of Karate sooner, I would have been there sooner. He invited me inside and he gave me a brief demonstration. Now you've got to remember something; I wasn't some wide-eyed, impressionable sixteen-year-old kid. I had done a hitch in the United States Marine Corps and trained with some genuine get-down killers. That, plus having been raised on the mean streets of Chicago during the Great Depression, put me in a unique position to know bad when I saw it. But when this guy demonstrated a couple of techniques, I thought, "Wow, I need to get me some of this."

When did you meet Ed Parker?

The first time I met Ed Parker was on my second night of training. James labro, who was a brown belt at the time, taught the first class I attended and, although I was impressed with him and what he did, it was nothing like when I saw Mr. Parker move for the first time. When Ed Parker took the mats and moved, it seemed that the power emanating from the man transferred into the ground he walked upon and then into the walls of the building. I could swear I felt the whole thing shudder like the aftershock from an earthquake when he did something as simple as a reverse punch or snap kick.

What was the training like?

Hard, intense and grueling. Ed believed in working the basics and he drilled us mercilessly. He taught us techniques but there were only a handful at that time. The rest were to come later and I have always counted my blessings for being a member of the first group to come up under him because of that. At that time there was also the Finger Set, the Two Man Set, and Forms 1, 2 and 3. They weren't called Short Forms 1, 2 and 3 because Long Forms 1, 2 and 3 had not yet been conceived. We also trained on the makiwara and broke boards and bricks.

Do you advocate training on the makiwara and breaking?

No. I think Ed Parker said it best when he said, "I don't know why I break boards, they never did anything to me. I've never been attacked by a board yet." But break he did. We all did. The reason, mainly, was to show power at demonstrations. There was no mistaking it when you saw a stack of one-inch pine turned into kindling before your very eyes. At the time, that was a big deal. We were told that it would someday catch up with us, but like the macho idiots we were, we paid it no heed. We literally stood in line waiting for our turn to beat our knuckles into oblivion. These days, the middle knuckle on my right hand is so arthritic it won't even allow me to make a regular fist. I can only make a middle-finger fist or a half-fist. I use a lot of heel palm strikes these days, which is rather a high price to pay just to impress a bunch of strangers. But we were young and foolish; no one could convince us at the time.

If you don't use a makiwara, then what do you recommend for developing power?

I advocate using a life-size, realistically proportioned dummy, which does the same thing for us that a heavy bag does for a boxer; it gives us resistance and that builds power. The major difference is that a heavy bag absorbs your energy differently than a life-size dummy; it bucks and spins, whereas a dummy doesn't, and a heavy bag has no targets. When our students kick the groin, they don't need to imagine it in the heavy bag, they really kick the groin, full out, and the dummy doesn't even wince. Where else are you going to find that? And if the student misses the target, the instructor can see it easily and have him or her do it again until he's satisfied that it would have the intended effect.

When I learned the art, everything was done in the air because we simply can't be striking one another in the class. So, we never really got the feeling of making serious contact until the idea for a life-size dummy came about. I felt I needed it, and knew that if I needed it, so would my students. My students had progressed to the point where they had proper form, balance, and all the principles, plus accuracy, speed and power. They had gained a rhythm and had become smooth and sophisticated with their techniques. It was the way the art always had been taught, but I felt that somewhere along the line you've got to hit something with resistance, something that stops the blow, something that disrupts your flow of motion, and something that challenges your balance. In other words, something that changes just about everything all at once. This is where the dummy comes in. First of all, it gives you lifelike targets to strike, and do it with full power. It lets you know if you really hit the target or missed, and if you missed, by how much.

When you first begin striking the dummy, everyone misses a lot and their flow of motion is horrible, compared to doing the moves in the air. But, in time, you begin striking the targets with accuracy and your flow of motion returns. Before you know it, you are striking with pinpoint focus and with the fluidity of a well-oiled machine. The one place you don't want to find out how disruptive making serious contact can be is on the street. You also will find out which of your blows have natural power and which ones need to be worked on. Last, but not least, is the exhilaration of the sight, sound, and physical sensation you get when your knuckles penetrate, your kicks jolt, your forearms slam, your chops fracture, your heel palms smash, your fingers pierce, and your knees wallop – when you've done a perfect series of techniques on your ever-willing life-size dummy. Kind of makes you want to salivate, doesn't it? And when you combine that with the spontaneity of freestyle, you've got a Martial Artist.

When did you and Ed Parker become business associates?

Ed and I became associates when the the first three men that he had taken to Black Belt, and all of the brown belts at the time, with the exception of myself, walked out on him and went with another instructor teaching another Martial Art. Things were happening very quickly in those days. He was working extensively in the entertainment community because of the rapid rise of the popularity of karate in movies and on TV. He was in the process of opening a second school in West Los Angeles to be nearer to his growing Hollywood clientele, and at the same time, he was working on his next book, "The Secrets of Chinese Karate." Plus, he was trying to run his Pasadena school and perform in the many demonstrations asked of him. Because of all of his commitments, he took in a collaborator on the book, a man he had met only a short time before in San Francisco, a man to whom he eventually turned over his advanced class to teach whenever he couldn't be there, which became more and more often as time went by. I could sense that there was something going on and I started to distance myself from the group because I didn't like what I felt.

When they left, I called Ed the next day and asked him, "Where do we go from here?" He asked me if I had the time to take over some of the basic classes, and that was the beginning. Until then, I only had the privilege of warming up a class or taking over when the instructor was called to the phone or needed to speak to someone off the mats. It was the opportunity of a lifetime and is probably why I'm still doing what I'm doing today. The close association that developed between Ed Parker and myself was one of those defining events that come along only once in a lifetime. For the next couple of years, I believe it would be safe to say that we were each other's best friend. We spent innumerable hours together outside of the school planning, developing and producing our training films and other aspects of the business. I personally gained more in those two years than I could have in ten years under normal circumstances.

How did those Training Films come about?

The idea for a film series came to me sometime late in 1961 or early in 1962. Ed Parker had written two terrific books, and while they imparted a great deal of information, accompanied by a wonderful array of photographs, the books didn't have the one thing that I felt was the most important single element of all. They couldn't show Ed Parker move. If the old saying is correct, that a picture is worth a thousand words; then a motion picture has to be worth millions. You can talk about Kenpo all you want and read everything you can find about it, but until you see Kenpo, and more specifically Ed Parker move, you ain't seen nothing yet! The kinetic dynamics of Kenpo are something that the written word and still photos never will be able to capture. Hat's why I felt it was so important to **make** these films. At the time, only a handful of people had ever seen Ed Parker in motion and I thought it was about time the rest of them could. These films are truly historic because they show in actual movement the beginnings of Kenpo In America. You will see the roots of modern Kenpo.

Tell me about the development of the Karate Connection Interactive Video Training Program.

Vic LeRoux was aware that I had studied filmmaking at Los Angeles City College, and had written, directed and produced the Ed Parker training films, as well as TV commercials for Mr. Parker. Because of that, he came to me with the idea of putting a compilation of our techniques on video for students of his who were in the military and had been transferred out of the area. I was against it because I didn't think anyone really could learn Kenpo from video. However, Vic is very persistent and he kept asking, but I would always say no. Then one day, a student of mine told me about Chuck Norris sending an 8mm film of himself to instructors in Korea for a degree promotion. Now, I don't know if the story is true, but an idea hit me like thunder: His instructors know him, and they would know by watching an 8mm movie if he was performing his moves correctly. Video was just coming into its own at the time and I reasoned that if a person was serious enough, he would somehow acquire a video camera and recorder in order to video a test and send it to us so we could not only evaluate it, but send him a return a video of us correcting him and guiding him to further his studies. Then I realized that we could even promote him if his performance met with our standards. What would be the difference between having him standing in front of us in person, or seeing him on video? If we chose what we wanted to see, even down to the angle we wanted to see it from, there would be no difference at all.

You and Vic LeRoux have been accused by other Kenpo practitioners of teaching a "watered-down" version of Ed Parker's Kenpo. How do you respond to that?

First of all, It would help if they knew the definition of "watered down". Watering something down simply means adding the most plentiful of all elements (water) to stretch something out without adding more substance, thus making it appear to be much more than it actually is. This is a term that was used a lot during the Great Depression, usually in regard to making more soup to feed more people. It doesn't really fool anybody when it comes to food. You can tell very quickly if something's been watered down. Unfortunately, when it comes to a Martial Art, it can be deceptive. The appearance that more is better usually lasts until you get your first taste of having to lug all that water into combat. The argument I use goes back to what Mr. Parker said in the early days, "I'd rather have ten techniques I can fight with than a hundred techniques that fight me." Karate Connection Kenpo definitely is not watered down; it's really just the opposite. It's American Kenpo that got watered down. Our Kenpo actually is condensed. We removed the fill and left the substance, kept the best, and dumped the rest.

Why do you say that having too many techniques is not a good idea?

Back in the days when Mr. Parker learned Kenpo from Professor Chow, if he needed to defend himself, he would have relied upon his basic blocks, maneuvers, hand and foot weapons, and knowledge of anatomy to do the damage needed to extricate himself from the situation. Back in 1959, when I started, the techniques Mr. Parker was teaching were very brief, and there were very few. Most consisted of a block and just a couple or a few strikes, or the breaking of a hold and few strikes. Those techniques were intended to give the student a practical defense for most attacks, as well as a flow of motion when striking vulnerable targets. In time, Mr. Parker, for one reason or another, developed the theory that an opponent should be completely controlled as you pummel him into oblivion, so he developed techniques that seemingly would accomplish that extraordinary feat. Experience has proven that in the heat of combat, the practitioner seldom will get to fully execute even on of the more basic techniques, let alone on of the more complex, extended ones. The Karate Connection's base techniques never were intended to absolutely annihilate an opponent each every time, nor were Mr. Parker's original techniques. Our techniques are intended to do maximum damage, as quickly as possible. Then, as far as finishing it is concerned, you'll have to rely on the rest of your arsenal to do the job. And it is the sum total of our fifty-five techniques that give you that arsenal and the practice of striking the targets. All our techniques were designed to do is give you targets, weapons, and a flow of motion, in order to navigate your way to victory, regardless of what your opponent does. We have been asked many times, "why fifty-five techniques?" To which we answer "Because any less would be too few, and any more too many."

What was your motivation in creating the International Karate Connection Association?

Someone once said: "A Dojo is not a democracy" and no truer words were ever spoken. Martial Arts training of any discipline generally is run by and overseen by an individual. One person chooses what will be taught and how it will be taught. He chooses how to test for rank and how to bestow it. He answers to no one and is under no obligation to divulge how or why he does what he does. He is the Lord and Master of his domain. He is a benevolent dictator, or in some cases not so benevolent.

We decided to change all of that with the creation of the Karate Connection. When we were students coming up under that kind of regime, we often asked ourselves why it had to be that way. The answer is that it doesn't have to be that way at all, so we set about writing a set of by-laws by which an organization could be governed with fairness and equality for all. The IKCA by-laws detail everything about rank and its attainment. They regulate the subject matter and time between tests, as well as the tests themselves. The by-laws let everyone know where they stand and exactly how they will get to where they wish to go, from beginner to Black Belt, to Certified Instructor, to School Owner. And everyone is subject to them, including the founders. Our intention was to create something similar to the Constitution of the United States, in that the by-laws can be changed by a vote of the membership. To our knowledge this is the first, and still the only, Martial Arts organization to be structured in this manner and we are proud to be able to offer it.

Mr. Sullivan, in closing, is there anything that you would like to add?

Yes...have fun! For the past almost half century, I have been having the time of my life with the Martial Arts. Almost all of my friends are martial artists, or were at the time I met them, and I wouldn't have it any other way. I have been asked innumerable times how long I'll keep on doing this and the answer has always been the same: "Until it isn't fun anymore."

This is not something I have to do; it's something I love doing and will until I'm physically unable, or until the times quit rolling', or until I go to the great dojo in the sky, where I'll once again be able to work out with my mentor and friend, Ed Parker. Who knows, Elvis might even be there.