

Midori Yama Budokai: *Hanshi's Corner*
Written by Ron Rogers *Hanshi Meiyo Kyoju*

August 2011

Ichi go, ichi e: One life, one meeting

“Judo” Gene LeBell

Billed as “the world’s toughest man”, Gene LeBell was literally born into the profession. His mother, Aileen Eaton was boxing and wrestling promoter for the Los Angeles Olympic Auditorium. She did not perceive her sex, size, or the fact she was widowed deter her. She was tiny and the only female promoter in the country in 1942. She was a shrewd businesswoman who made the Olympic Auditorium popular as a boxing arena. She also revolutionized professional wrestling. She persuaded George Wagner to dye his hair blond and hire a valet, thus giving birth to one of the first, and most flamboyant, villains of the ring – Gorgeous George.

In 1953 LeBell, was training for the 1954 AAU United States National Judo Championships. To work on his upper body strength for his throws, Lebell trained six hours a day for one year, using his own unique and unconventional training methods, one of which was the "tire toss." He lifted motorcycle tires straight up, with his elbows above his shoulders. He threw the tires for the entire length of a football field. When he reached the end zone, He tossed the tires over the goal post. Then he turned around and did the same thing until he reached the opposite goal post. This contributed to his winning back-to-back National Judo Heavyweight Championships in 1954 and 1955. It also gave proof to his legendary strength and extraordinary dedication. As an unknown 21-year-old, he pinned John Osako, in his first match of the tournament. Osako was considered the top *judo* player in the U.S. Although LeBell weighed only 160 pounds, he won the heavyweight division and the overall title. The following year he again won national champion, winning 18 matches in two days. He won 17 of those matches with standing throws, never being forced to grapple on the mat.

After LeBell won his second championship, he traveled to Japan with a group from the Air Force to train and compete with the world's best *judo* players as well as *karate* and *aikido* masters. He often practiced in Tokyo at the *Kodokan*, the headquarters of *judo*. It was here where he would work the "slaughter lines," fighting a series of opponents until he lost. LeBell typically ran through lines of twenty men. It was also in Japan that LeBell's uniform was accidentally laundered with other, brightly colored clothing and emerged from the washer a deep pink. A pair of red shorts were mixed into the laundry that contained his Gi. He was set to compete the following day, and being a Saturday evening, he had to compete in the pink uniform. The Japanese crowd considered it very insulting, but Gene would go on to win his division. The “pink gi” became LeBell’s trademark.

Except for one defeat as a teenager, LeBell was unbeaten in his *judo* career. He won more than 2,000 matches in eight years. In training, he has bested half a dozen Olympic gold medalists. Natural ability and dedication made him virtually untouchable even years after retiring from competition. He, has wrestled professionally and currently, at age 77, still teaches and is a stuntman in movies. Lebell first worked as a movie stuntman in 1955, and his movie work gradually replaced wrestling. Stunt coordinators hired him because he could take a punch better than anyone, and they knew actors would be safe with him.

He has appeared in so many movies and TV shows that he makes more than \$100,000 annually in residuals. When he applies an excruciating series of locks, cranks and stretches, they are punctuated by LeBell's question, "Now who's better looking, you or me?"

LeBell became a professional wrestler to make money, because *judo* was strictly amateur. His first match, in 1955, was at the Olympic Auditorium. Knowing that the highest-paid performers were the bad guys, LeBell sought to become the nastiest wrestler of all. He was so unpopular that in order not to embarrass his family he often wore a mask, fighting under the name of "The Hangman." In 1960 LeBell held the world wrestling championship for all of 12 seconds. LeBell defeated champion Pat O'Connor in what LeBell insists was a legitimate wrestling match. While posing for photographers, LeBell accidentally hit the commissioner in the face with the championship belt. The commissioner disqualified LeBell and stripped him of his title, believing he had been hit intentionally.

He was, and is, friends with a great many movie stars and martial artists. He was a friend of George Reeves (the original TV Superman), and toured with him as the villain Superman had to beat. He and Carlos "Chuck" Norris are very good friends. LeBell even gave Norris one of his black belts (with LeBell's name on it!), and Norris wears it as a sign of respect. LeBell also trained Bruce Lee in *judo* techniques! The first time Lee sparred with Gene, Gene picked him up and held him overhead. Bruce said, "When you put me down, I'm going to get you," so Gene just kept him up there a while.

LeBell's son, David, himself an accomplished *judo* player, recalls two-time Olympic gold medalist Willem Ruska visiting from the Netherlands to learn some grappling moves, which, by the way, could never be used in *judo* competition. "My father showed him a few new ways to tie a man's limbs in knots," says David. For those of you too young to remember, Ruska was the second non-Japanese to place first in the Olympics. Ruska's instructor, Anton Geesink, was the first.

On December 2, 1963, Lebell participated in the first "Martial Artist vs. Boxer" event when he took on Milo Savage. Savage was a high-ranking middleweight, who had been fighting professionally since 1945. He had beaten Holly Mims, Moses Ward, and Bobby Boyd, but lost two close decisions to former champion Gene Fullmer. He had won his last eight fights, six by knockouts and was negotiating to meet champion Dick Tiger. Following are the specific rules: "the fight is scheduled for five rounds, three minutes per round. The boxer will wear a judo-gi top (Judo robe) and a belt. He can also wear boxing trunks, boxing shoes, and to his great advantage, he could use speed bag gloves, which completely cover his hands. He can apply any legitimate punch and hit in any circumstance. He will not be curtailed by NBA rules. Gene, the judoka, will wear his judo-gi, no shoes, and no gloves. He can apply any recognized judo or karate technique except the karate kick. A winner will be declared under the following conditions: when his opponent is disabled or is counted out for ten seconds. A referee will be the sole judge." On the night of the fight, Savage wore a short, tight *karate-gi* given to him by Beck who said that he did not know the difference between a *judo-gi* and a *karate-gi*. Savage also wore a pair of unusual, speed bag gloves, with a metal or plastic plate under the leather running from the knuckles to the wrist and to the tip of the thumb. His fingers were not covered. It was potentially a lethal weapon. Beck and Savage's manager insisted on the gloves and the *karate-gi*. In addition, Savage was greased from head to toe. Gene

consented to fight him under those conditions. After four action-filled rounds, LeBell finally got hold of the slippery Savage and applied one of his famous chokeholds and choked out the boxer. We are reminded of Joe Louis who sagely said: "The sport of judo and boxing should never be compared because they are so different. If I were to meet a judo man and hit him first, I'll bury him. But if I don't and he grabs me, he'll bury me." A few years later, Gene was the referee in the ring of the most famous Martial Artist vs. Boxer battle – Muhammad Ali's fight with Antonio Inoki, a *jujutsuka*. LeBell was also the "referee" when "Granny" from *The Beverly Hillbillies* took on the wrestling villain who hurt Jethro.

He has trained six national judo champions, including a current U. S. title-holder, and a former Soviet named Gokor Chivichyan, 31. Chivichyan said there were a lot of great *judo* players in the Soviet Union, but no one like LeBell. Chivichyan went on to say, "I hope I have half his strength when I'm his age."

In 2000, LeBell was promoted to 9th Dan in US Ju-Jitsu and US Taiho-Jutsu by the United States Ju-Jitsu Federation (USJJF). In February 2005, he was promoted to 9th Dan in Traditional Kodokan Judo by the USJJF.

Ri-Ji

Ri is the principle from which *kata* is created. It is the inspired movements of a Master, and the insightful feeling into the true nature of *shushinhō budo*. *Ri* relates to the space-time relationship of opponents and to the moral situation, relating to *shobuhō*. *Ri* leads to *ryōchi*, or intuitive knowledge. *Muri* are forced results using unnatural, wasteful and tiring means.

Ji are the techniques created by Masters, and are based on *kufu*, or the naturalness of physical movement. These are techniques beyond the physical, based on the principle of harmony or *cho-wa*. The concept of harmony is based *kyushindō*, the Way in which fundamental principles of motion are done, avoiding stiff postures. *Kyushindō* is a precept of *budo*, with its three maxims: all things in the universe undergo a succession of changes (*banbutsu-ruten*), rhythmic and flowing movements; the rhythm of a *kata* (*ritsuddō*) and all things working and flowing in perfect harmony (*cho-wa*). This precept was postulated by the *judo* master, Abe Kenshiro. This rhythmic flow is how techniques should be done. This requires moving with or out of the direction of an attack, while being in tune with yourself and your situation during a confrontation. This is achieved by concentrated energy of the one point (*haragei*) and breathing (*kyoku*).

Dhyana > Chan > Zen

Zen is derived from the Chinese Chan, which in turn is derived from the Sanskrit, dhyana. It was brought from India to China in 520 AD. There are three major sects: *Rinzai*, which stresses abrupt awakening and makes use of the *koan*; *Soto*, which emphasizes sitting meditation (*zazen*) and the submergence of self in his own personal, unique *koan*; *Obaku*, which teaches gradual means to enlightenment. Enlightenment is the spiritual (not religious) mastery of the self, and is considered the ultimate in any *bugei*. In those sects, who use the *koan*, there is also the use of *mondo*, or question and answer between Master and disciple. However, it is not question and answer, as we know it; i.e. a logical thought process. The answer may be a sound, a seemingly nonsensical statement, or even a blow. *Zen* is based on true, profound silence, and the original, pure human spirit. In its essence,

Zen is the art of seeing into one's own being to point the way from bondage of the mind to freedom of self. It is a philosophy, not a religion, that centers around the turning of one's mind back to its original position, the time in childhood where all could be grasped because there was no relation to the logical intellect. One sits comfortably and meditates in a prescribed manner to free the mind from illusion. The manner of sitting is immaterial, as long as the exponent is comfortable. Traditionally, one sits in *zazen* (kneeling meditation), *anza*, or the cross-legged sitting, lotus (yoga: *sukhasana*) or half-lotus. The last three methods of sitting use a *zafu*, or *zabuton*. This is a special cushion or semi-stool to raise the buttocks and keep the back straight. The periods of meditation are interspersed with *kinhin*, a special way of walking. All methods aim at *satori*, a spiritual enlightenment or mastery, or an awakening to the truth of the cosmos. It is Japanese for the enlightenment experience or intuitive knowledge. It is comprehension or momentary enlightenment. This may only be experienced through Samadhi, a true concentration or perfect, total concentration. It is the state of highest concentration in meditation. It is a state of joy and peace. This is the eighth limb of yoga in which one becomes conscious of itself, of God and of the whole universe. There is no separation of itself, God and the universe. There are many methods of meditation. One is the "counting of breaths." One inhales to a specified count, holds the breath for a certain length of time, but for a shorter period than the inhale, and exhales out for the same count as the inhale. This is one cycle, or a count of "one." If at any point, thoughts of any kind enter the mind, the count begins anew. The idea being to attain ten full breaths (inhale, hold, exhale) without extraneous thoughts. Eventually, one should simply do the breathing without counting and without thought (*mushin*). A second method is the use of a mantra. This is the repetition of a phrase, resulting in *mushin*. One repeats the phrase until there is no thought and the phrase becomes a meaningless monotone. A third method, and the one first learned by your *hanshi meiyō kyoju*, is concentrating on any object with the mind. Think of a flower (a rose). What color is the rose? Red. Is the rose a bud or is it opened? Bud. Is it a long-stemmed rose or short stem? Long. How many leaves does it have? Three. Does it have thorns? Yes. How many? Four. Is the rose laying down or standing? Standing. Is it free standing, or is it in a vase? As each question is answered, the person must visualize what s/he sees, as though in real life. One does not move on to the next question until the answer is actually seen. This is much the same as how *kata* is supposed to be performed; i.e. one literally, in the mind's eye, sees the opponents.

Martial Arts Celebrities

Many actors study martial arts. Listed below are some well-known and not so well known. I have not included the very well known: Chuck Norris, Jet Li, Steven Seagall, etc. Being quite older than most of my readers, some of those listed below, may not be so well known to the present generation. If you younger practitioners know of any of this generation who practice martial arts, send them to me, and I will include them in a future "Hanshi's Corner." They are not in any particular order!

Wesley Snipes, 5th Degree Black Belt in Capoeira; 20 + years.

James Cagney, 1st Degree Black Belt in Judo; also boxed. The Tracy family then moved to Kansas City, where Spencer was enrolled at Ste. Mary's College, Kansas, a boarding school in Ste. Mary's, Kansas 30 miles west of Topeka, Kansas, then transferred to Rockhurst, a Jesuit academy in Kansas City, MO.

Emmanuel Lewis, 1st Degree Black Belt in American Karate and Tae Kwon Do; 10 + years.

Tom Laughlin, brown belt, Hapkido; known primarily for introducing us to this Korean art.

Jesse Jackson, Jr., 1st Degree Black Belt in Taekwondo; “off and on” for over 4 years.

Frank Sinatra, Black Belt from Ed Parker of American Kenpo.

Michael Jai White, 2nd Black Belt or higher in seven arts: Shotokan, Tae Kwon Do, Kobudo, Goju Ryu, Tang Soo Do, Wu Shu and Kyokushinkai; 20 + years.

James Coburn, Steve McQueen, Kareem Abdul Jabbar and James Garner all studied Jeet Kune Do with Bruce Lee.

Bob Barker, 2nd (I believe) Degree Black Belt in Tang Soo Do; Chuck Norris was his instructor.

William Shatner, 2nd Degree Black Belt in Tae Kwon Do.