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Interview with Master Maurice Msarsa

By Stephen Nuchols & Maurice Msarsa

Part 1

Master Msarsa holds the rank of Ku-Dan (9th) in Isshin-ryu Karate. He has over 56 years of martial arts experience. He is currently an honorary board member of the International Isshin-ryu Karate Association.

This interview was conducted on September 29, 2008 at the M.B.C. School of Karate just before Master Msarsa was to teach a class on self-defense.

Can you give a brief history of your martial arts training?

My first exposure to the martial arts was in 1952. I had just completed my freshman year at the University of Tennessee. I went to New York City for the summer to visit my uncle. I joined the YMCA, one of the many in Manhattan. I was in the weight room when I saw a Judo class in an



Msarsa in New York 1952

adjoining room. I was curious as to what they were doing. I watched for a while. The instructor saw me watching and he came over and asked me if I was interested in Judo?" I told him that I was. He said, "Do you

know anything about Judo?" I said no. He said, "Do you know anything about fighting?" I said, "I guess I do. My childhood was in the Middle East and in the Middle East you have to fight to survive. He said, "Show me some of the stuff you can do. Fight me like you want to hurt me. So I jumped on his neck, I got him in a headlock. I stuck my finger in his eyes and I started to bite him. He said "Whoa! Whoa! What the hell are you doing? This is not Judo" I said, "you wanted to see me fight". I was 18 at that time. He asked me if I wanted to join the class. I told him I did. I spent six weeks learning and practicing Judo. He was nice enough to accelerate my training.

I came back to UT at the end of the summer. I was anxious to start my sophomore year. I continued to take Phys-Ed classes. I took wrestling and Boxing. There was a young man of Japanese origin who used to work out in the gymnasium. I got to know him. He told me he was a black belt in Jujutsu. So we started working out together. I spent about a year and half working with him on the mats, on takedowns, and falls and things like that. My New York Judo and the workouts at UT sum up my first exposure to the martial arts.

When I graduated, I went to work in Louisiana. Then I was offered a job overseas for a year. I then came back to graduate school at UT. Shortly after that I got married and got a job working for an Engineering Consulting firm.

You had a question about when I started Isshin-ryu?

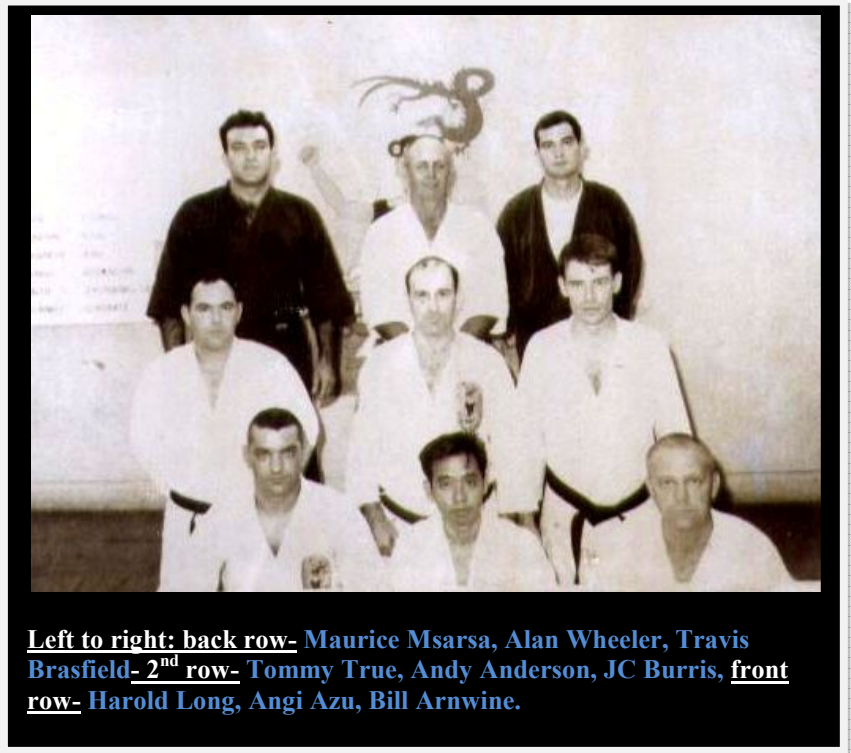
Yes, I was leading into that.

I started Isshin-ryu in 1965. I had changed jobs from the engineering consulting firm to TVA in 1963. We bought a new house. I read the articles about Mr. Long in the newspaper. I was very interested in joining the classes but TVA sent me to school at the University of Illinois for a part of 1964-65 time period. I did not want to start training under Mr. Long, leave for several months, and then come back. So as soon as I returned to Knoxville from the University of Illinois I signed up. The dojo was the one that just opened on 5th avenue. That was 1965.

What was your first impression of Mr. Long when you met him?

When I first signed up at the dojo Mr. Long wasn't there. He was sick. Dick Harmon and another black belt were in charge. Mr. Long came back about two weeks later. My impression of him was that he was all military. He was talking like a Marine Sergeant..., which he was. He asked me, "Are you ready to work out with us? Can you handle it? Do you think you are tough enough to do it?" I told him "yes sir, time will tell". We got along very well. He found it interesting that my birthday was

September 1 since his was September 3. He seemed to like that very much. Every year after that we exchanged "Happy Birthday" around the first of September. He showed interest in my Greek Orthodox background and that I grew up in the Middle East as a child. He was interested in the fact that I had some Judo training. At that time I had re-started my Judo workouts at the local YMCA.

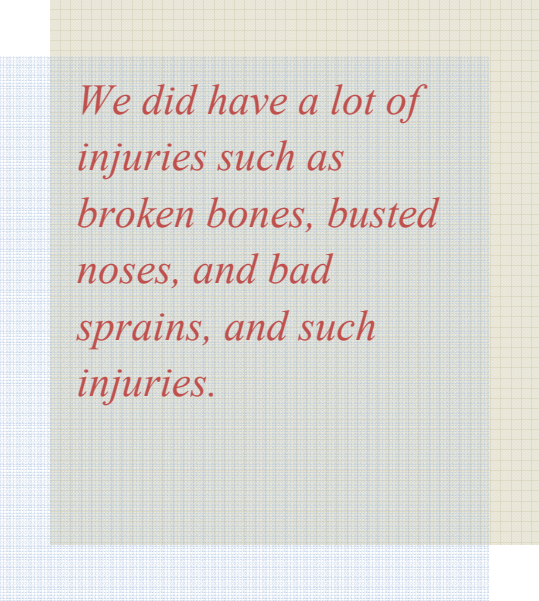


Left to right: back row- Maurice Msarsa, Alan Wheeler, Travis Brasfield- 2nd row- Tommy True, Andy Anderson, JC Burris, front row- Harold Long, Angi Azu, Bill Arnwine.

What was training under Mr. Long like in 1965?

I worked out all my life. I lifted weights. I wrestled and boxed. I was always physical. I liked physical activities. Mr. Long was very physical. He was tough. He was all discipline...no horsing around at the dojo. He expected everyone to do exactly what he told him/her to do. He expected us to learn all the techniques, all the kicks, blocks, and punches. He had Makiwaras set up at the dojo. There were no charts at that time.

After we warmed and loosened up, we worked on the makiwara. We punched the makiwara 100 times with each hand. Then shuto 100 times with both your right and left hands. Then we worked on the kicks; 100 straightforward kicks, forward on angle kicks, side thrust kicks, and back kicks. By the time we did all that we were worn out. Mr. Long liked to conduct organized classes.... He emphasized self-defense and street techniques. He was always in control. One thing, we never talked back to him!



We did have a lot of injuries such as broken bones, busted noses, and bad sprains, and such injuries.

I know!

The other thing, if he thought there was too much talking, he would look and say [fingers closed like a duck bill] “too much talky, talky”. This was what Master Shimabuku used to do. In other words shut-up! Everybody did shut up. When he was in the dojo he was 100% Sensei. Outside of the dojo he was more of a friend. He wanted us to call him Mr. Long in the dojo. He didn’t want to be called Sensei, Master, Grand Master or whatever; Just Mr. Long. Outside

the dojo, he wanted his friends to call him Harold.

On occasions after a workout he and a few close guys from the dojo would go out for a sandwich and a beer. Every once in a while someone would refer to him as Mr. Long. He would say, “Who is that Mr. Long?” then would burst out laughing. When we went back into the dojo, that friendship stayed on the other side of the door. We bowed when we entered the dojo. Then we followed all the rules and guidelines. When he barked an order or a disciplinary function we did it. He was the master! There were two ways to do things; his way and the wrong way. If we did not do it his way, then we were doing it the wrong way.

Learning the katas in the early days was a little complex at times. He, or another colored belt person, would show us part of the kata. The next day he would observe the person practicing the moves. He would interrupt them and ask, “Who taught you that?” The person would answer, “You taught me that, sir”. “No, you didn’t learn it from me! That is not the right way to do it!” He then would add or take out a move. The katas did not get formalized until 1966. That is when Master Shimabuku put them on film in Tacoma, Washington. That was when they became more formal.

When you sparred during that time was it full contact?

We practiced some control, but it was bare knuckle. There were no pads. We tried not to hurt each other. We were all working and had to go to work the next day.

Bare knuckle?

Yes, bare knuckles. Mr. Long liked the Kumite part of training. When I got

promoted to Shodan, he lined up all the colored belts on one side. There were over twenty men... black belts, brown belts, and green belts in line. I stood on the other side. He said, "I'll tell you when to attack, I'll say next, and whoever is in line will go into the ring next." When we first started there was some control with the first seven or eight. By the tenth, eleventh or twelfth there was less control. After that there was less and less control. It was hard punching and hard kicking. There were bleeding noses, cuts on faces, and limping competitors. Some of us were losing our cool. We were mixing it up, and Mr. Long did not stop it. He continued yelling "next" every time he wanted a new person in. I broke one person's collarbone with a shuto. One of his buddies jumped in next. He charged at me in a very furious manner. I punched him in the face and blood splattered out of his nose.

Mr. Long was just smiling and shaking his head in approval. By the time we got through he said "Anyone disagree that Mr. Msarsa is ready for his ShoDan?" Nobody said a word. He then took off my belt and put a black belt on me. If someone had said "no he is not ready" they would have had to spar with me again. Some of the guys told me jokingly later that they were about to say That, but they "Sure as hell" weren't about to get back in the ring with me.



Maurice Msarsa and Harold Long

That's what would have happened. It was bare knuckle. Mr. Long made a statement one time that he regretted agreeing to the use of pads. He was one of guys that liked karate

*I punched him in the face
and blood splattered out of
his nose.*

the way he learned it In Okinawa. He wanted to teach it the way he learned it from Master Shimabuku. He emphasizes that thought in his last book. That is how he wanted people in his lineage to do... to teach it the way he taught it to them. That is how he wants to be remembered. I believe that Mr. Long wanted to be remembered as a guy that did honor Master Shimabuku's memory, and that he did not change Isshin-ryu to suit himself like some people are doing these days.

The training in the 60's compared to the training today. What do you think has changed for the better and what has changed for the worst.

When Mr. Long first started teaching Isshin-ryu in Knoxville there were no other karate dojos around. Mr. Long taught Karate the way he learned in Okinawa. We learned it from him the way he taught it. He taught us a technique and we perfected it by many repetitions. A hundred times was a common number. We had nothing to compare it to. As we went to open tournaments and other dojos opened up, we had the opportunity to see other styles and other approaches to teaching martial arts. While Mr. Long taught, people in his lineage taught it the way they learned it from him. Mr. Long told

us that Master Shimabuku would not tell you to block. He felt that you had to learn it from experience. If someone repeatedly hit you in the face, you will eventually learn to block it.

As people got interested in cross training, some people started injecting what they learned from cross training into their Isshin-ryu teachings. That probably is the biggest change from the old ways of training. Keep in mind; throughout history the martial arts experienced change. From generation to generation, and from country to country the martial arts changed. It is going to change more in the future.

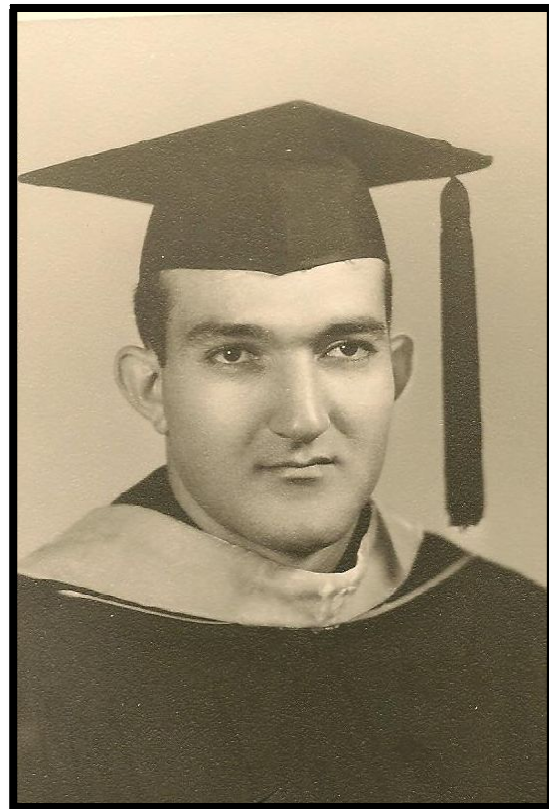
Some “pure Isshin-ryu” practitioners think that it is a “sin” to inject “new” martial arts techniques or interpretations into Isshin-ryu.

One other thing that seems to have changed is the length of training and effort it takes to earn a rank. In the early years, when we saw someone wearing a colored belt we knew that they earned it. However, in the latter part of my martial arts lifetime I have seen some changes. Some people wearing colored belts seem to be very ill prepared. Some dojo operators may promote on the strength of paying dues.

If Mr. Long were alive today, how would he view his lineage? What was your relationship with him?

I do believe that he would be very pleased with what he would have seen. His lineage continues to grow. He probably would be happy with the leadership and accomplishments provided by some and probably disappointed in some of the others. I believe that there are a few individuals whose butts he would kick.

There were many people that were close to Mr. Long for many years. I was one of the guys that was close to him most of the time. Mr. Long had two close friends. One was Dr. Reed. The other was Col. Daniels. The rest of us fluctuated on his scale of friendship from very close to lower levels of closeness. Mostly depending on what we did or did not do. I served as instructor at his different dojos and the UT Karate Club, directed the many tournaments that he sponsored, and did many demonstrations that helped recruit students and introduce karate to the community. He recognized and expected loyalty and commitment. When he wanted something done, he expected it to be done...no excuses



Maurice Msarsa graduation from University of Tennessee 1959

Is there anything in today's training that has gone for the better compared to the 1960s?

I touched up on this a little earlier. Some people may say that today's training is better. Some may say that it is not. When we first started training all we had was Isshin-ryu. I had some Judo and a touch of Jujitsu. All the Korean and Japanese styles were not available at that time. Mr. Long's black belts opened dojos and taught Isshin-ryu as they learned it from Mr. Long. As other styles opened their dojos, and Isshin-ryu practitioners were exposed to them, some of the "different" things they learned were then introduced into their training at the dojo. That is called cross training. We in the United States are eager to learn. When we saw the other styles, we immediately wanted to know more about them. That is not betraying Isshin-ryu. We are simply expanding our base of knowledge. I believe that Mr. Long would object to us signing up at a different style dojo to earn rank in that style. I do not believe he would object to us continuing to train at something we did before Isshin-ryu, or by injecting a "new different" approach to what we were taught.

This concludes Part 1 of the Interview with Master Maurice Msarsa. The interview will be concluded in the following issue of The Foothills Budo Forum.

Stephen Nuchols holds the rank of San-Dan in Isshin-ryu Karate and is an assistant instructor at the M.B.C. School of Karate. He is also currently studying Daito-ryu Aikijujutstu.

Important Dates

1951- Graduated high school in Ramallah Jordan

1951- Started University of Tennessee

1955- B Sc College of Engineering

1956- 1 year Louisiana Department of Hwy.

1957- 1 year Point Four Program in Jordan

1959- M Sc College of Engineering U.T.

1959-1963 Mid South Engineering Co. Knoxville Tn.

1963-1993- Worked for TVA

1965- Started Isshin-ryu Karate

1966- Promoted to Sho-Dan

1968- Promoted to Ni-Dan

1968-1974- Ran University of Tennessee Isshin-ryu Karate Club

1969- Promoted to San-Dan

1971- Promoted to Yo-Dan certificate signed by Master Shimabuku

1975-1983- Transferred to Chattanooga TN. Drove to Dojo in Knoxville TN twice a week.

1977- Promoted to Go-Dan

1985- Promoted to Shishi-Dan

1993- Retired from TVA

1995- Inducted into Isshin-ryu Hall of Fame-Nominated by Harold Long

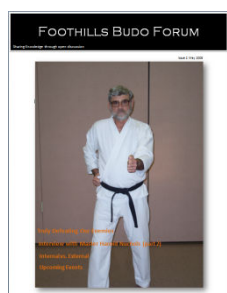
1997- Promoted to Hachi-Dan

1999- Promoted to Ku-Dan by the IKA Board

Past Issues:



Issue 1- Introduction to the Foothills Budo Forum.
Interview with Master Harold Nuchols.
Does the style Make the Martial Artist?



Issue 2 – Part 2 of the Interview with Master Harold Nuchols.
Truly defeating Our enemies.



Issue 3 – Ippon-Dori: The first technique in Daito-ryu Aikijujutsu.
Mindset: East vs. West.



Issue 4 – Self-Defense Against Dogs part 1.
Loss of a Tai Chi Chu'an Master.
Isshin-ryu Karate's Charts: Basic Technique and Sample Application.

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