

## From Karate Club to Medal Machine

(K. Kiyimba)

The weekend of 19/20 February the 2004/5 BUSA Karate Championships drew over 240 athletes from 49 Universities of the UK to the University of Wolverhampton Walsall Campus. London sent in a squad of 20 students to participate in 20 of the 25 categories of team and individual events. Winning Formula This was the culmination of weeks of arduous labour in constant practice, fitness and self-discipline. On the international scene, karate is about to win the bid to become an Olympic sport. The BUSA event is run on the rules of the World Karate Federation (WKF). For the karatekas, that means switching more to the mode of competition, ever increasing standards and rapidly changing, if at times capricious rules. Our squad rose to the occasion. We fielded a male kata team, a male and a female fighting teams, as well as individuals competing in their respective levels and weights. The goal was set, as singular as it was lofty: Gold. We slid into action. The results would speak for themselves. A visit to a training session of the London School of Economics Karate Club (LSEKC) on any Tuesday or Friday evening, would give one a hint of the purpose with which we set about set goals. Forget the mustiness of the Old Gym in the basement of the Old Building. The atmosphere is electric. The white khaki outfits are soaked in sweat. Bandages cover the occasional blister on the feet. Orders are shouted out and executed to a Japanese count. Kata is meticulously corrected. New fighting strategies are developed and tried out with opponents of all sizes and talents. We benefit fully from our instructors, Sensei Dario Ghazi, 3<sup>rd</sup> Dan, and his assistant, Sensei Joseph Gasparakis, 2<sup>nd</sup> Dan. They have brought their colourful international achievements to bear on this club. Our numbers grow by the week to make LSEKC easily the fastest growing karate club in London. Walsall got a taste of this action. On Saturday, our senior kata team sailed through the preliminaries showing superb synchronization, to reach the quarter finals. But our most minor slips and delays in the team event did not escape the watchful gaze of the referees. Still, the message to our opponents was loud and clear: "We 'll be back!" Let the Medals flow Paul Barnes opened the medals flood gates with a bronze of the intermediate level individual men ' s kata: an astounding performance for a man nursing an injured ankle. With Dario Ghazi ' s bronze in the black-belt individual kata event, the gush was in full spate. And our performance continued to impress on all levels of kata, with most of our competitors pressing deep into the tournament, mostly to the quarter finals. Sarah Wilcox and Kazuyo Enomoto presented beautiful kata in their highly competitive intermediate and black belt women ' s categories. Their performances were matched by our athletes at the lower level individual kata.

Showdown with Cambridge Thrill grew with time. Kata was followed by team kumite (fighting). After dashing the hopes of a couple of university teams, the London squad boxed and kicked its way into a repechage, to decide the winner of the bronze medal. Our select five were up against the University of Cambridge ' s five most seasoned in a battle reaching wider than just the sport. So much was at stake. The stakes set the pace. All present were on trial: fighters, referees, supporters, spectators, indeed even the sport. No

technique was left in the book as the pairs went at each other. The fighting mat was regularly dried of slippery spots from the sweat off floored opponents (mainly Cambridge). Tension and suspense reigned into the final 21 seconds of the face-off. It was still a draw. Dario was in as the last fighter. The fight was interrupted due to an uncontrolled punch from his Cambridge opponent. After the doctor's intervention and the referees' regulation, battle was once again enjoined with the same high levels of adrenalin. With five seconds to go, Dario delivered a clinical reverse punch and withdrew before the opponent could realize what had hit him, let alone counter. And soon the final whistle blew to give London her well earned bronze medal for the team kumite event. Fists of fury Sunday saw the individual moments of glory in the individual fights in all categories. London stole centre stage, when two of her ladies in the light weight met in the finals. The two, Jasmine Bhatia and Emily Clarke, had been as graceful as they were efficient in putting paid to the hopes of their opponents. Their final was no less entertaining. Jasmine settled for the gold, Emily gave us our second silver. On another mat, Alice Grimaud imposed her reputation as the *femme souriante mais tout de meme cassante* in her middle-weight category when she fetched London yet another bronze. Chris Yeoh, Syzmon Ordys, Olivier Hensby and Kizito Kiyimba put on high quality fights. With them the catalogue of scoring techniques in currency seemed to expand as they kept surprising their opponents with uraken attacks, double punches and destabilizing leg sweeps. There was a surprising decision with the quarter finals fight of Kizito, who till then had made his 75-kilos pool a roost and he the only cock that crowed around. *En sportif*, he accepted the decision taken. Some victories are only known between the fighters. Graeme O'Connor saved us from the jinx of bronzes, when even as a debutant, he clinched a silver medal in a memorable final against a seasoned fighter. He was surprised at his own talent. David McCormack, last year's team kumite gold medallist, could not participate due to a last-minute injury. He spurred the fighters on both as coach and as supporter. Rob King coordinated the fighters with the announcements of their fight venues. The women's camp was no less victorious. Raveena Ravikumar, Naomi Hussey and Anna Hyyrylainen fought splendidly, spreading panic all around. In a spectacular fight, Raveena turned the tables on her opponent, when she recovered from behind to win a straight win of three quick and consecutive points of her lethal reverse punch. Keep your

distance or stay in line. Jennifer Carlisle gave the tender loving care, organized refreshments and gathered tactics for her own near future intervention. Poetic Karate Yunis Abasov was true to character, when he swept low and kicked high, subduing his opponents till he wrenched the bronze of the under 80 kilos. Yunis was last year's novice heavy weight champion. His brown belt this year launched him into the seniors, fresh and pink cheeked. Twice his newness played against him when his older opponents lost control (quite understandably) and hit him too hard. Lying on the mat at one point, he waxed lyrical, reciting some Azerbaijani poetry. At the end, in the one hand he held fast to the bronze of his category and with the other he warned future opponents of greater things to come. Dario was another one who fought against all odds to yank a bronze medal of his individual under-80kg category. He had been severely injured by a knee to his

quadriceps early in the championship, and was also nursing an earlier injury in the other knee. Dario ' s opponents will not believe it if they are told that he was so injured as he took them on a forced tour of the fighting mat. Adil Khan is about to release a best-seller from his video coverage of the championship. The Final Catch London left Wolverhampton Walsall Campus with a gold, two silvers, and 10 bronzes, and a happy and fulfilled team. The chief instructor, Dario, comments: “ Congratulations once more to LSEKC for so many medals won. Our target remains to make a distinctive mark at regional and national levels. The ladies have been impressive as expected. Our potential remains abundant at all levels. Such performance will draw quality athletes to us and we look at ever better performance and more medals. ”