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Interview

**In Memoriam
Norris Special**

David Stainko
Old School of Martial Arts



Interview by Sandra Maljavac
Photos: Photo studio Luigi (Opatija, Croatia)



David "Sensei"





Los mas mayores vivimos un mundo marcial distinto; luchamos por obtener un conocimiento escaso que hoy es fácilmente entregado y que en su abundancia, mezcla frecuentemente lo real con lo falso, sin haber dado a los que lo reciben condiciones y criterio para navegar en esta agua procelosas. La única manera de afrontar esta situación, es mirar a través de los ojos de los que, mas experimentados en el camino, pueden iluminar con la luz de su experiencia, los confusos, revueltos y sobresaturados tiempos que vivimos.

Sensei David Stainko durante muchos años con sus artículos, sobre diferentes ángulos y materias que conforman el mundo de las Artes Marciales, ha iluminado nuestras páginas, trayendo una necesaria visión ordenada y coherente sobre la materia en tiempos de ruido y confusión. Una voz sensata y experimentada sólo podía venir de alguien de "la vieja guardia", que habiendo vivido los grandes cambios de estas ultimas décadas en el sector, las ha acompañado sin levantar los pies del suelo, con el pragmatismo y la perspectiva de quien, habiendo vivido mucho, no ha perdido la curiosidad y el espíritu de aquella vieja frase, "¡A veces maestros, siempre estudiantes!".

Nunca ha buscado el protagonismo, brindando su experiencia con la generosidad que solo tienen los grandes; llega hoy pues su sobradamente merecida portada con esta entrevista, con el objeto de acercar a nuestros lectores el maestro que hay detrás de tantos excelentes artículos de fondo, artículos que sin duda, han puesto los puntos sobre las íes, informado, organizado, y aclarado muchas cosas, especialmente a los mas jóvenes lectores, que desconociendo el pasado, frecuentemente tienden a juzgar mal el presente.

Alfredo Tucci

**A leading Figure of the
Old School of Martial Arts**

Stainko





David “Sensei”





David "Sensei" Stainko – A leading Figure of the Old School of Martial Arts

We present to you Mr. David Stainko from Croatia, a respected instructor and internationally recognized expert in martial arts. David "Sensei" Stainko has dedicated 53 years of his life to learning, practicing, researching, and later teaching various martial arts. Within the martial arts community, Instructor David Stainko is known as someone whose knowledge stands out in particular. Discover who Instructor and Professor David "Sensei" Stainko is — a master of martial arts, an expert in martial science, and one of the leading figures of the old school of martial arts.

B.I: Your first encounter with martial arts happened in 1972?

David "Sensei" Stainko: Yes, that's right. That year I received a small but fascinating little book called Karate Made Easy by Moy Rone, in English. I started leafing through it, looking at the pictures, and trying to imitate the exercises as best as I could understand them. But that wasn't enough for me, so in October I enrolled in the Budokai Karate Club in Rijeka. I received my club membership card at the beginning of 1973, and that's when my "journey" into the world of martial arts officially began.

B.I: Tell us something about the Budokai style of karate — relatively little is known about it.

David "Sensei" Stainko: Budokai is a style of karate that originated in London, England. Its roots go back to 1918 and it was built on the foundations of the first judo club in Europe, called Budokwai, which was run by the Japanese master Gunji Koizumi. About twenty years later, several of his students off and began practicing what was then a new Japanese art to them — karate.

The name Budokai consists of two words: Budo, meaning "the way of martial arts," and kai, meaning "school." In the wider world, the Budokai karate style is also known under the names Budokwai, Budokwan, and Budokan, the latter having developed in Malaysia but also based on the foundations of the Budokai style. Budokai is a very effective style of karate, distinguished by its unique blend of traditional judo, jiu-jitsu, and karate techniques. Weapons training, as part of the broader ko budo discipline, began to be more intensively incorporated into the Budokai karate style in the mid-1960s.

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Stainko





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erlang atentie
beroff

WELT-SUPER-STAR

KARATE

David "Sensei"



B.I: You trained and studied other karate styles as well. Tell us something about those.

David "Sensei" Stainko: That's right. I had the opportunity as early as 1973 to attend a seminar led by the well-known Shotokan master Taiji Kase. Later, I learned from other Shotokan masters as well, among whom I would especially highlight Hirokazu Kanazawa, Hidetaka Nishiyama, Shiroshi Shirai, and Dr. Ilija Jorga. I studied the Budokai style under Dr. Emin Topić, the Uechi-ryu style under Mario Topolšek, and the Sankukai style under Yoshinao Nanbu.

Today, I hold the rank of 8th Dan in the Budokai karate-do style, and I am one of the rare original representatives of that style. I also hold a 3rd Dan in Shotokan, a 2nd Dan in Uechi-ryu, and a 2nd Dan in Kyokushinkai, a style I helped introduce in Croatia. I am also well-acquainted with the Goju-ryu and Wado-ryu styles, which I practiced as well, and later on I went on to study other karate styles, too.

B.I: Today you prefer not to join any karate organization. Why is that?

David "Sensei" Stainko: These days it has become common for any somewhat well-known master to establish his own karate organization. As a result, there are now more than 15 Shotokan organizations worldwide, and the situation is the same with the Kyokushinkai karate organizations. Other karate styles are in a slightly better position, but even there it's far from ideal. Among the many different karate organizations that exist today, almost all of them claim to be the authentic one. I cannot agree with those claims, because I see many changes that have been introduced into certain karate styles compared to the original forms I learned.

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Stainko





Besides, when you go to karate clubs today, most of them practice sport karate with gloves. That isn't karate — it's purely a sport. They aren't very interested in the traditional karate styles. Their instructors are karate coaches, not teachers — not sensei. Karate as an art of the “empty hand” doesn't really exist for them anymore, so for many people today, karate-do has essentially become just karate sport. The same is true for modern judo, and even taekwon-do. Martial arts are not sports; they are far more than that.

B.I: You are also an expert in the martial art of kung fu. Tell us something about that.

David “Sensei” Stainko: I first encountered the kung fu martial art in 1974 in Germany, at a seminar taught by Master Al Dacascos. Later I studied in Italy under Master Shin Dae Wong, an expert in Tan Lang styles, as well as a variation of the Shaolin style and the Pa Kwa style. I began studying the Tai Chi Chuan style in Croatia and Italy, and continued my training in Switzerland and England.

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David “Sensei”





Stainko





David "Sensei"





In 1982, I began learning Wing Chun from instructors who had been students of the now-famous teacher Ip Man. I first trained in Hungary under Master Leung Ting and a bit later in Serbia under Master William Cheung. Building on that foundation, and influenced by Bruce Lee's films, I later studied the Jeet Kune Do system.

B.I: You hold the title of kung fu instructor and the status of sifu master.

David "Sensei" Stainko: Yes, I have held that status in the kung fu art since 1985. I must say that kung fu today is different compared to the past and the way I learned it. In many styles it's evident that changes have taken place. Today, alongside Tai Chi, people around the world mainly talk about the Sanda and Wushu kung fu styles. Jeet Kune Do as a fighting system is particularly interesting to me, though many promote it today while actually knowing very little about it. Many modern Jeet Kune Do instructors simply imitate Bruce Lee's movements, and that is completely wrong. Bruce always said that in martial arts you need to express yourself, and that Jeet Kune Do as a fighting system must be adapted exclusively to yourself and your own abilities. Furthermore, many people do not understand that this system is not fully effective unless you are a master—that is, you must have knowledge, speed, and fighting experience. After all, the name tells you everything: 'intercepting fist,' meaning the ability to anticipate the opponent's attack and intercept it before it happens. Only a good, experienced, and skilled fighter can intercept an opponent's attack - for everyone else, it is mostly just an 'illusion.'

B.I: We know that you are also a boxing coach. Tell us something about that.

David "Sensei" Stainko: In Rijeka, my hometown, boxing as a martial art is especially respected. You can be a world champion in wrestling, fencing, judo, karate, or taekwondo, but if you haven't practiced boxing and if you haven't been to a boxing club to spar there, it's as if you never existed as a fighter or as someone who trains martial arts seriously. That's how I started, too—I fell in love with boxing and stayed with it. In 1987 I became a boxing coach. Around that time I also began studying savate—French boxing, and later earned the title of Silver Glove instructor.

B.I: You are also familiar with Korean martial arts, and you even led a Tang Soo Do club.

David "Sensei" Stainko: In 1974 in Germany I watched a demonstration by Master Jhoon Rhee and was introduced to TKD. As a martial arts enthusiast, my colleagues at the Faculty of Kinesiology rekindled my interest in taekwon-do, so I started training with them. In 1982 I began practicing TKD in the ITF system. The main instructor for Croatia at the time was the Korean TKD master Park Sun Yae, who then held the rank of 5th Dan. I also met General Choi Hong Hi, though the seminar that left the strongest impression on me was the one in England led by Hee Il Cho. In 1988 I was offered the opportunity to lead the first Tang Soo Do club in Croatia, and I accepted it as a kind of a challenge. They mostly asked me to base the training on the Tang Soo Do approach presented by Chuck Norris. I was a witness to the time when many TKD instructors switched from the ITF system to the then more 'profitable and popular' WTF system for political reasons.

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Stainko





David "Sensei"





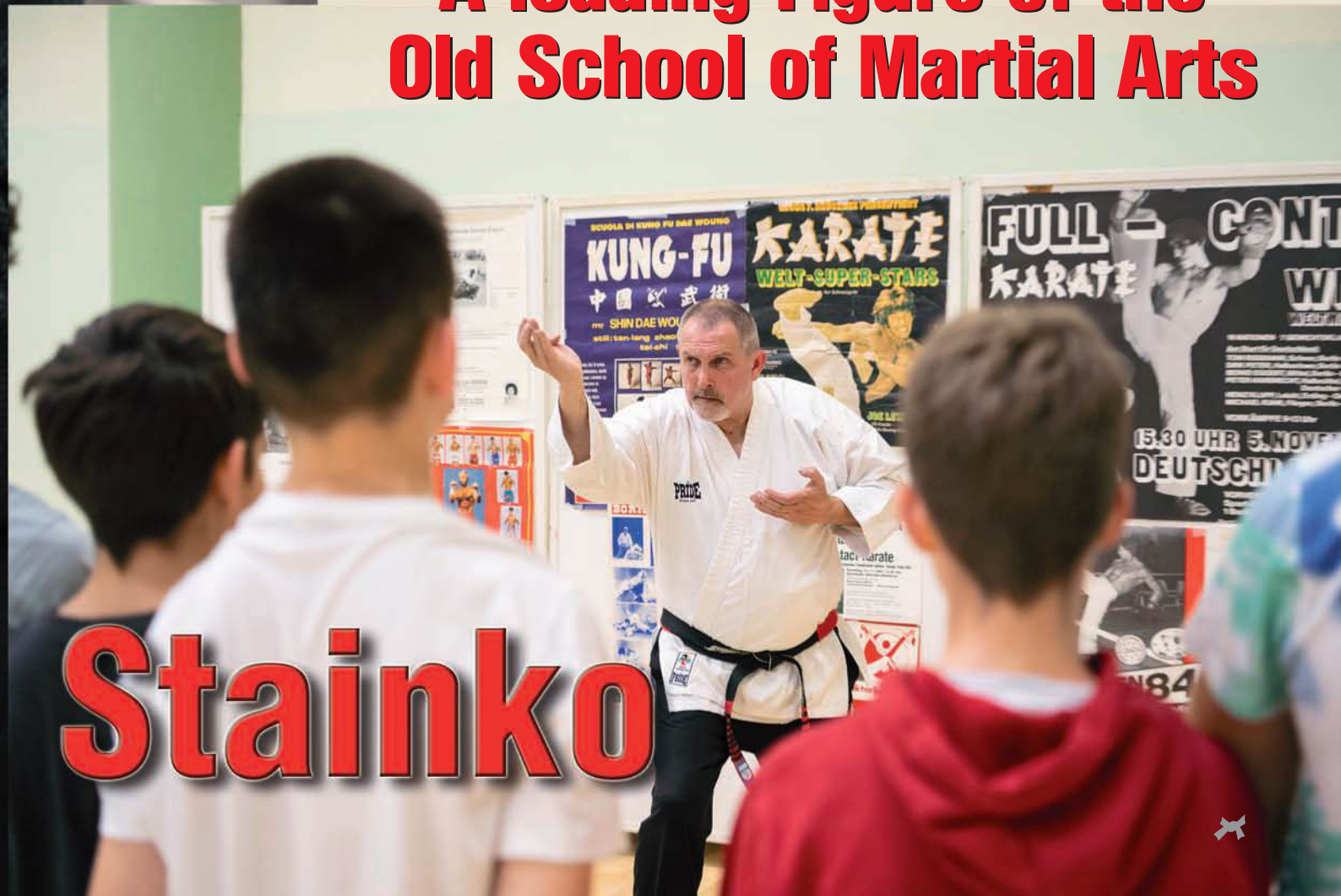
B.I: You were a successful competitor in several different martial arts. Can you tell us about your sports career?

David "Sensei" Stainko: Yes, I had around 200 fights in total, with about 17 defeats, though I'm not familiar with the complete and precise statistics. Back then, they didn't keep as accurate records as they do today, and I competed in various martial arts. I started competing in kung fu, where I was the junior champion of Yugoslavia for two consecutive years. Later, I competed in traditional karate, as well as in budokai karate, where I was the team leader of the team that won the Yugoslav national championship in 1982 and 1983. After that, I competed in semi-contact and full-contact karate, then transitioned to kickboxing, where I participated in 4 European and 4 World Championships. I was the youngest competitor at the first WAKO World Championship in 1978 in Berlin. I represented Yugoslavia, and later Croatia, but also Italy and Germany, and I even competed in England for a kung fu club from Oxford. I fought in kung fu, karate, semi-contact and full-contact karate, kickboxing, boxing, wrestling, judo, taekwondo, and even had fights in savate, kyokushin karate, and a few matches in the Yugoslav army. I won various competitions in former Yugoslavia, but also elsewhere, such as the Open Italian and German Championships. I was a European champion and a member of the European team in kickboxing, as well as the World runner-up in 1988. In 1991, when I was 29, the Croatian War of Independence began, and there was no more time for sports.

B.I: You were also a military instructor in martial arts in the Yugoslav Army?

David "Sensei" Stainko: Yes, in 1981, while serving my mandatory military service in the Yugoslav Army, they proposed that I become one of the martial arts instructors. I was tested along with five other instructors, and then I was selected as the lead instructor. I had about 400 soldiers under my command, along with 5 instructors and 3 officers, and I received orders directly from the major who was the commanding officer. It was he who was responsible for me undergoing special military training in knife combat, combat with a military entrenching tool, as well as knife throwing and survival training in nature. The training was primarily based on the Russian system.

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Stainko





B.I: Today you have the status of a veteran of the Homeland War.

David "Sensei" Stainko: Yes, in 1991, I was called into the Croatian Army due to the war that broke out in the former Yugoslavia, when Croatia was fighting for its independence. I was on the front lines with only a few short breaks from 1991 to 1994. I first served in the infantry, then as a tank commander and gunner, and later, at my own request, I was transferred from the tank unit to the military police. I left the army with the rank of military police officer and marksman.

B.I: You also worked as a bouncer in nightclubs and in security companies.

David "Sensei" Stainko: Yes, during my first year of college, when there was a freshman dance, they offered me to stand at the entrance and keep order and discipline. Later, I was invited to work at the student nightclub. In 1984, I was invited to work at the nightclub Tropicana, where I was well paid. After that, I worked as a bouncer in Italy and in various security companies as the head of security teams. I provided security for many well-known and famous individuals, and I was even part of the security team for Pope John Paul II.

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David "Sensei"





Stainko





B.I: It's less well known that you founded the first officially registered MMA club.

David "Sensei" Stainko: Yes, in 1978, we re-registered the former Youth Budokai Club Viktorija, but under a new name: Viktorija Martial Arts Club. In the former Yugoslavia, we faced many difficulties with the registration process. At that time in Europe, all clubs had names like boxing, wrestling, judo, kung fu, karate, taekwondo—each specialized in one martial art. There wasn't a single club that combined all martial arts in its name. This was certainly the first club of its kind in Europe, and perhaps even in the world. I had the idea that if you practice one martial art, it's hard to avoid contact, in one way or another, with other martial arts. I simply didn't want to limit myself. At that time, at 16 years old, I became the youngest verified WAKO chief instructor of any martial arts center in Europe.

B.I: You are one of the few instructors today of the almost forgotten martial arts system Bartitsu, which is also called the martial art of Sherlock Holmes.

David "Sensei" Stainko: Bartitsu is a martial arts system that originated in London, England, and was developed by the Englishman Edward William Barton-Wright. He taught this combat system from 1901 until early 1904. He was the first to devise a circular training system, where groups of practitioners rotated between different instructors. Today, it's a forgotten combat system. Bartitsu, as a self-defense system, is extremely effective and has advantages over many of the more well-known and popular systems or styles practiced today. The problem with this system, however, is that to truly master it, it takes about 7 years of training. Bartitsu is a blend of different martial arts, including boxing, savate (French boxing), wrestling, judo, jiu-jitsu, cane fighting (La Canne), and the old art of sword fighting with a sword in one hand and a knife in the other.

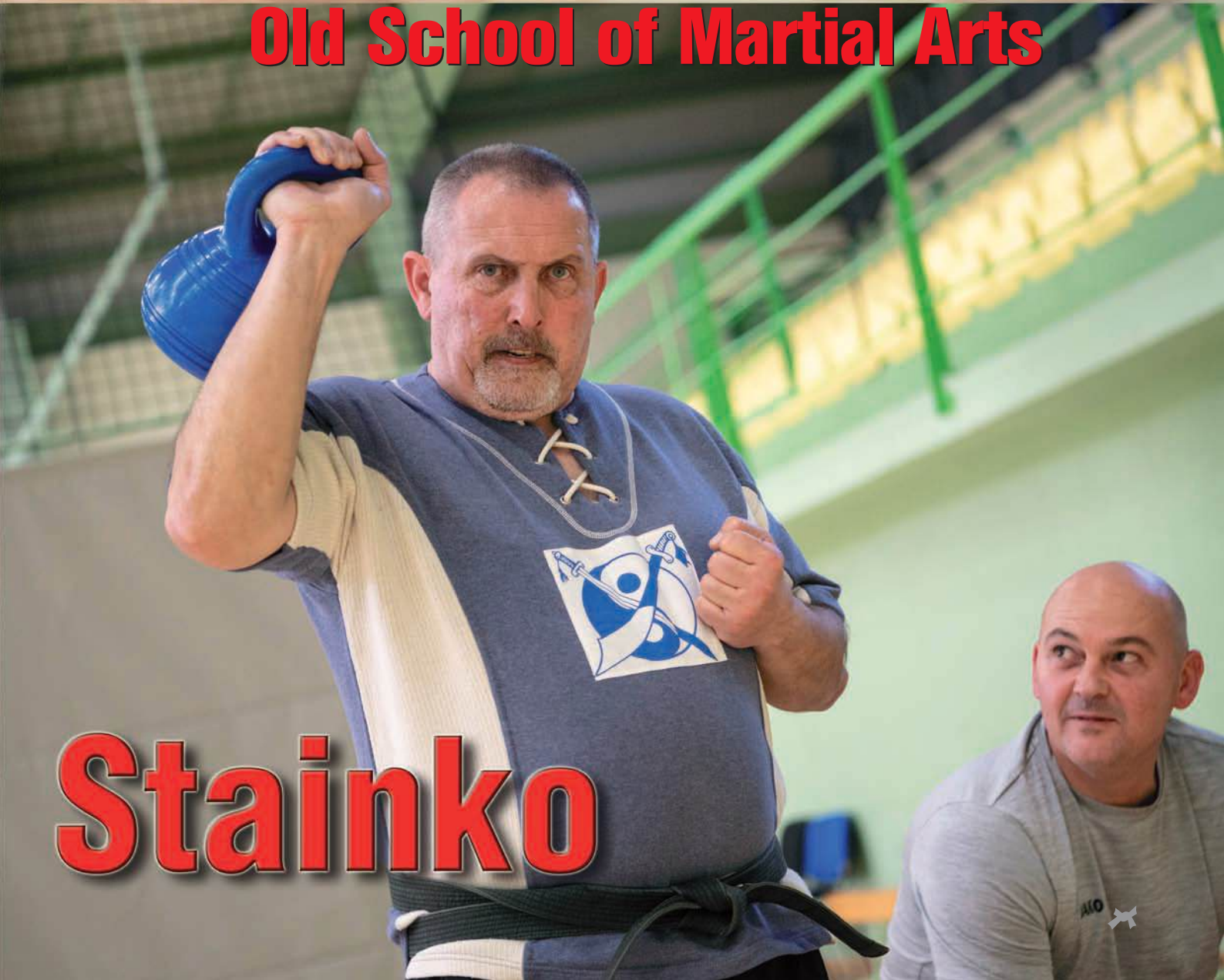


David "Sensei"





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Stainko



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**A leading Figure of the
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David "Sensei"





B.I: Today, you have the status of an expert in martial arts sciences, although many simplify it and call you an expert in martial arts.

David "Sensei" Stainko: Yes, I have a master's degree in kinesiology and am a senior organizer of kinesiology recreation, and I graduated from the University of Zagreb. I've been continuously involved in martial arts since 1972. In 1995, I began writing professional articles, which were very well received. In 2004, I finished writing my book "The History of Martial Arts". I published the book as an e-edition in Croatia, and it has been very successful and widely read. I say I'm an expert in martial arts sciences, but often instructors simplify it and say I'm an expert in martial arts. Some instructors are often surprised by this. They don't understand how someone can be an expert coming from Europe, specifically from Croatia. For those people, you can't be an expert unless you come from Japan, China, Korea, or at least from America. Well, let those so-called experts teach about martial arts originating in Europe, such as folk wrestling styles, Greek or Roman combat, boxing and savate, various forms of stick fighting, self-defense, knife combat, and sword fighting with a sword or a dagger. As for martial arts from China, Japan, Korea, America, or the rest of the world, all the best instructors were in Europe as far back as 1900. So, we've had 125 years to learn something, for those who actually wanted to.

B.I: You recently stated that you are not satisfied with the way martial arts are developing. Do you think the development is going in the wrong direction, and what exactly do you criticize?

David "Sensei" Stainko: There's a lot to mention, it's hard to cover it all. For example, karate is a discipline of the empty hand, but today, in various karate competitions, gloves are frequently used. In today's karate, they have become inevitable. Many styles of karate are now marginalized and neglected, and the very essence of karate has almost been forgotten. Many karate techniques are now neglected and rarely applied, such as certain hand strikes and many throws. In judo, many techniques have been eliminated simply to make it a sport. In taekwondo, as well as in some forms of jiu-jitsu, competitors no longer wear the traditional gi or dobok, but instead wear uniforms. In some competitions, they perform so-called creative katas, which are a mix of dance and acrobatic gymnastics exercises that have nothing to do with martial arts. There are also strange sports rules. For example, the Olympic gold medal in karate was awarded to someone who didn't know how to properly protect themselves and ended up getting a clean kick to the head. Furthermore, in American kenpo karate, there are more instructors holding a 10th Dan black belt than in all other karate styles combined. Today, there are many titles and ranks in martial arts, but the real knowledge in reality is much less.

B.I: You rarely hold seminars. Why is that?

David "Sensei" Stainko: Today, times are different, and there are certain things about seminars that I really don't like. In seminars, you always have to start with the basics because you're not sure of the participants' level of knowledge. And then, before you even get started, today's instructors immediately jump in with things like, "Oh, we already know this, we're familiar with that." They simply lack the patience to let you progress to more advanced techniques. Sometimes, you also come across individuals who can't control their egos. These people can be so unpleasant that you have to "take them down" to put them in their place. There's also the issue of money. I don't charge for my seminars, I just ask to be reimbursed for travel expenses. And that's when the problem arises, because many instructors think that only what they've paid a lot of money for is valuable. These people don't realize that no amount of money can pay for the lessons and knowledge I've gained over the years. Furthermore, some individuals think that if they've paid for something, they automatically deserve a title or status in return. Some even go as far as to push different diplomas at me for a signature. These diplomas and titles are essentially bought, not earned through hard work.

Stainko





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David "Sensei"





B.I: What do you mean by the term "Old School"?

David "Sensei" Stainko: It refers to the old way of training. Back then, strikes were delivered with more force, and there were a lot more bruises. It wasn't rare for someone to be knocked out by choking. There were bloody noses, split lips, and other injuries. Training was approached with greater seriousness and complete dedication. Each individual martial art was treated with respect. For us, boxing was still the "noble art," fencing was the "highest skill," karate was the "art of the empty hand," wrestling was the "self-defense for gentlemen," judo and jiu-jitsu were the "art of gentleness," and so on. Today, when I go to karate clubs to hold a training session, their kimonos tear as if they were made of paper, and in taekwondo centers, a third of the students leave limping after class with broken toes. In some martial arts schools, they don't even use mouthguards, and some practitioners can't even do ten push-ups. Today, everything is reduced to sport. Sport has its own set of rules, but sometimes these lack the proper codes of honor and the ways of conduct that have existed in martial arts for centuries. Just look at today's UFC competitions. The foundation of martial arts is respect. You cannot practice certain martial arts without a partner. The better your partner, the more likely you are to improve as well. That's why you must respect your training partner as well as your opponent in competition.

B.I: You have the nickname "Sensei." Can you tell us something about that?

David "Sensei" Stainko: That's what my students started calling me back in early 1988, as a form of respect for my dedicated work in martial arts. At the time, they found it interesting, and I didn't mind it. So, the nickname has stuck with me to this day. Nowadays, some individuals also call me Hanshi, Sifu, Master, or Grand Master. The title by which someone addresses me isn't important as long as they have a genuine desire to learn. Whenever I teach others, I also learn something from them. The more knowledge you gain, the more you realize how much you still don't know. In martial arts, if you have knowledge and skill, diplomas and titles aren't necessary. On the other hand, if you boast about your titles or diplomas without possessing true knowledge and skill, they are worthless.

B.I: Mr. Stainko, thank you for the conversation and for so many great articles you have submitted to Budo during all these years.

A leading Figure of the Old School of Martial Arts

Stainko

