

July 2016 Newsletter
Goju-Ryu Karate-Do Kyokai

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Gasshuku

By Ed Myers

Gasshuku originally meant something like “meeting at the inn”. It was (and is) a chance for like-minded individuals to gather and share experiences, develop and/or strengthen friendships, enjoy good company, and practice together. It is as much about camaraderie as about karate.

Yamakura Shihan has agreed to hold a Gasshuku in the Toledo Ohio area in 2016. This event will be held during the month of September and will be open to the brown (with instructor’s approval) and black belt members of the GKK. Training will be

Monday through Friday for 3 hours each day.

The final dates and location is yet to be determined. Please contact Mr. Ed Myers if interested.

Israel Children Olympic Games Traditional Karate competition – May 2016

By Nimrod Astel

On May 26th our dojo, the “Aum-Dojo”, represented our Home town, Givat Shmuel in the Children Olympic Games held in Israel.

Over 6500 children from over 100 cities from all around the country assembled in Israel’s main sports center the “Wingate Institute”, and competed in over 25 different sport games.

The event included some VIP, Israel’s Sports Minister, delegates from foreign embassies, sports officials and the media.

The kids and youth delegation from our dojo included 17 members, out of which 6 medalists who won first, second and third places in personal Kata.

We are very proud of our kids who worked very hard and were even interviewed by the TV sports channel and looked really great!



Teaching Karate to Special Needs Students

Introduction

At the Ambler GKK Dojo, we have been discussing our methods and overall philosophy for teaching and advancing special needs students. Over the years we have had a number of students with special needs issues, such as:

- Down syndrome (adults)
- ADHD/short attention span (kids)
- Autism spectrum (kids)
- Other non-identified learning issues

Teaching special needs students can be a difficult task, as well as present other teaching issues to the overall class, which in our case is made up of a mixed population of so-called ‘normal’ kids and adults at various age and intellectual levels.

For this discussion, we have decided to focus on Down Syndrome, because we currently have two students with this condition. ‘R’ is a 50-something year old man with a mental capacity of a young child; and ‘J’ is a 40-something year old man with a somewhat more developed mental capacity. Both are devoted and eager karate-ka, but learn slowly.

The questions we will explore in this article include:

- Should we continue to teach Down students?
- Should we mainstream them?
- What are the effects of teaching Down students on the overall class?
- What are personal experiences teaching them?
- What lessons can we learn about teaching Down students?”

The two camps

Our tradition at the Ambler Dojo is to serve Down students, and to mainstream them in general, but also to provide individualized, one to one instruction, when it is appropriate and when the extra instructors are available. Several years ago, we had a kyu-testing ceremony, and J, who was a 7th kyu, was not promoted. He was hugely disappointed, which precipitated a vigorous discussion among our black belts, who divided essentially into two camps:

1. We should keep our promotion standards as they are, not "water down" the requirements.
2. We should make allowances for people with special needs.

There were experienced black belts in each camp.

More recently, J received a promotion to 5th kyu. We, the black belt judges, were almost unanimous in acknowledging that J fully deserved the promotion. Even though he could not literally perform the required katas at a “5th kyu level”, we observed that he had made major improvement in recent months, through diligent effort. When his promotion was announced with others at the end of class, the entire room – students and spectators – erupted in applause. So we in fact do make allowances for a student’s baseline abilities. It became clear that there is merit in each “camp”, and we need to use our judgment.

Effects on overall class

Teaching special needs students can be a double-edge sword, with both upside and downside. The major negative seems to be the dedicated instructor time needed to properly train such students, which can take time away from the other students. This problem has been manageable at Ambler with a very limited number of special needs students and typically 4-8 instructors. It’s unclear how many more Down students it would take to create a problem in terms of limited instructor time.

On the other hand, our Dojo has benefitted significantly from teaching Down students:

- Such students create an opportunity for all in the dojo to better understand and appreciate what Down syndrome is and is not; combat ignorance and prejudice.
- Teaching R and J enables the teacher to learn more about and enhance their own karate practice, perhaps even more than with “normal” students. When you work with someone whose attention span and learning ability are small, you need to shrink your own “units of instruction” to theirs. Meet the student where they are. In doing this, you need to break down your own well-rehearsed techniques into much smaller steps, to find a level that they can learn. R and J are significantly different in their learning abilities which require some adjustment in the content presentation.
- We have noticed that in class no one ever teases them or laughs at them or disparages them in any way. This is a strong policy of our Dojo, originating from Sensei Kane. What a powerful message this is to the kids we teach, that EVERYONE deserves respect. We’ve discussed this message with several parents of our young students, and they agree. They learn from our actions, more so than from our words. This is a strong policy of our Dojo, originating from the senior instructors and passed along to the other instructors. Other students are quite often seen helping them tie their belts and lining up, as well as, assistance in partnered kihon-ido exercises.

Accordingly, we have considered how to work with each Down student most efficiently. We recognize how well each responds to working in groups, what kinds of groups are best, and to what extent they require individualized teaching. We have had success with integrating all levels of students for warm-ups and kihon, but beyond a certain point of complexity, more disabled students need extra attention. We can and do utilize more experienced kyu-level students to teach R and/or J. As above, this can be a valuable experience for the student who teaches.

Personal experiences with working with R and J

Jill - Learning by teaching

At the end of class, we all say *domo arigato gozai mashita* (thank you for teaching us). I feel that I always learn something when I teach anybody, whether it's how to break things into small steps, how to say things different ways, and how to show things different ways. Some of the things I have learned working with R and J is that contrary to my previous experience where I lumped all Down syndrome people in the same category, I have gotten to know them as individuals: R is very self-involved and easily put off. He doesn't like working in groups with young children, particularly rambunctious ones; he doesn't retain much from class to class and really shows no interest in advancement or promotion – he just seems to enjoy coming to class, particularly if his favorites are there. J, on the other hand, has a noticeably higher mental capacity, enjoys making conversation by asking how I am doing or telling me about a trip he went on, or that he was bored at work. He is more ambitious and really wants to work on improving his katas, learning new things, and getting promoted. I have been working with him on counting in Japanese, which is going slowly, but in the interim, ask him to count in English when it is his turn to count sit-ups. He says things are hard for him, and I remind him that nothing is easy when you are first learning. I find that if you hold him to a high standard, he rises to the challenge.

Gerry's take

Of our two Down students, I have known R the longest. Prior to meeting R in our dojo, I had not worked with or personally known someone with Downs, and before I could try to teach R, I would need to learn how to interact with him first. While R's physical functionality is challenged, his mental capabilities and thus his ability to communicate, comprehend and learn are even more limited. He struggles to communicate his thoughts, but always makes it clear when he has something to say at which point I have learned to be a patient listener. One of the highlights for me of working with R are his ultra-enthusiastic "kiai's" in taikyoku jodan kata, which have caught many a student (and instructor) by surprise. No doubt the greatest joy for R is at the end of class when he asks me and other instructors to tell his favorite student of the day how he did in class, and then to take him to his sister waiting in the lobby and tell her how he did, which I have had the pleasure to do many times. No matter how well the class went for R, whether he is having a good day, is disconnected and unhappy or frustrated that one of his favorite students hasn't been in class for weeks, I can say with certainty that the answer is always that he had a great class. For R the scale on which I have learned to measure his success or achievement is based as much on his never-stop-trying attitude as much as it is his ability to perform a kata or even just kihon.

In contrast, our 2nd Down student J is at the other end of the spectrum from R in terms of his physical abilities, communication skills, and mental capacity and is able to participate and learn in a group setting. I have not known J as long as I have known R but find that J enjoys the relationships he has developed in class, is often curious and talkative and is almost always upbeat and eager. I have had more than a few discussions with J in the middle of class which he likes to initiate right in the middle of whatever we happen to be working on - hopefully less a reflection on my teaching ability than his interest in chatting. J's ability to execute the finer details of stances, strikes, blocks etc. is compromised, and he is aware of his limitations. However, what J lacks in motor skills he makes up for with enthusiasm and a great, beaming smile when he completes a drill, kata one-step etc.

A personal story — Zak's relationship with R.

I met R at the Ambler YMCA more than 20 years ago. At the time, he was not yet a karate student, he was maybe 30 years old, and every week Matt Davis, one of our black belts, would engage R in a mock-serious arm-wrestling match. R would always win of course. When Matt left the dojo for college, he asked me if I would continue the arm-wrestling matches. "Yes, absolutely!" I agreed. R and I did these matches for years, in the locker room after the Saturday morning karate class. I don't remember why we stopped, but I think R began as a karate student and that ended the arm-wrestling.

When he first came to the dojo, I was his primary teacher, even though I knew nothing about working with Down students. I had just got my shodan and begun as Sensei Kane's assistant. R liked me, and that seemed to be enough. I learned soon enough that R learned very slowly; you had to repeat a movement over and over in class, with lots of encouragement, and then the following week he would forget most of what we worked on, and we started anew.

Soon, as I progressed, other black belts became R's teacher. I refer to it as the "food chain". These included Howard, Andy, and Gerry, Jill, Bonnie. At the end of a class, when his teacher would perform kata, R was happily yell, "hooray for Howard!" or "hooray for Gerry!" etc. When Andy was R's main man, he prepared a lesson plan, (which we copy later in

this document). But even though others replaced me at the head of the food chain, R always wanted to show me what he had just learned. So I was “kept in the loop”.

During all this time, we have kept in close and frequent contact with Roberta, R’s sister and caretaker. She told me recently that as he has reached 50 years old, he has started to deteriorate, both mentally and physically. We have seen this in the dojo.

In the past couple of years, R has found new “favorites”, two young girls who have achieved brown belt. Rachel K is number 1 and Jenny A is number 2. If R misses a class, he will say, “I feel very bad today”. And when we ask him why, he will say “Achel isn’t here”. We try to reassure him, reframe the loss, etc, but he is adamant. But no matter how far down the food chain I get, there is always a special relationship between us. At the end of every class, no matter who is his “friend” – Rachel or Jenny or someone else, he will bring her to me and ask her to tell me, “How did I do?” and they will say, “you did great!”. And he will perform his latest kata for me.

George – long-time teacher of J

J has been a student for a long time. He has a different and higher mental functioning - knowledge and memory than that of R. I did not work very much with R, however the few times that I did he always was willing to be a part of class. J on the other hand had previous experience with karate and definitely remembered his training when he first showed up at class. The way I approached teaching J was to not single him out as having a disability. I wanted to see what he could do, how he interacted with the class, and how the class would interact with him. The adults did not have a problem; however the kids in the class were curious as kids will be when someone seems different. After a while J just became one of the students in the class and became comfortable participating in class. And now, after the years which he has been a part of the class, he is accepted and students work with him comfortably. I think that J felt the challenge to perform and learn, because he has a higher awareness of his handicap, which is mainly physical.

He also understands the progress of promotional testing and becomes upset when he does not get promoted. I make sure to tell him that he needs to work on the physical more as he moves up in rank. J asked me recently about testing for brown belt – the next rank. I told him that there is a big difference between brown and green and he needs to continue working and getting better, which is what I tell any student from kids to adult.

I remember when we were over in the senior center after J first showed up; J said to me "by the way do you know I have Down Syndrome". I said, “J, I do know that but I don't want to treat you like you have it because you can learn karate and hopefully it will help you. I do not know if he fully understood what I meant but he still shows up ready for class each time and continues to make friends and learn, which is part of the philosophy of karate. The other students do not act like he has a disability. I hope J’s classmates, especially the kids, learn about being different and enhance their own growth.

Howard’s reflection

In working with the profoundly disabled karate students, I have found that my own personal disability of poor eyesight has influenced my way of teaching and interacting with students. Over the years, I have compensated for poor eyesight by looking at things in my world at a 'macro level'. This means my focus is on larger objects that I can see and less on the smaller details that I can't see. When I drive a car, my eyes and head are in constant motion, to compensate for peripheral blind spots. Such compensating activity was probably a conscious effort at one time, but it's become an unconscious habit. I generally have a great sense of direction, not because I see street signs (I don't), but because I capture the shape of buildings and landmarks, while always running a map in my head. GPS also helps nowadays.

I have learned karate from such macro cues, which sometimes presents a problem - I miss things obvious to others. As an example from the past, when a sensei was showing me how to make a fist and punch, I would make a fist and punch the way I thought I saw it was done, however I missed seeing the actual shape of the fist or the part of the fist that is doing the striking. In Goju, I didn't learn how to create a so-called Goju fist, until someone took my fist and physically formed it into the correct position. Sometime later I learned that the same Goju fist is also used when chambered in hikite (something that I had missed for years).

I have applied this notion of learning at a macro level in teaching students with profound disabilities. For example, students with certain mental disabilities as well as those with Down syndrome, often do not know the difference between their left and right, or for that matter remembering which way to turn during a kata (too much detail to think about). Rather than worrying about telling them to punch with the right fist or block with their left, I will simply say to punch or block tapping the particular shoulder that is doing the action. It's a lot easier to understand to block or to punch at the macro-level rather than worrying about micro-level words like left and right. Therefore using macro commands and some 'haptic' or touch cues are often more effective in creating a learning environment for those with certain disabilities such as Down syndrome.

Teaching at the macro-level seems to work especially well for kata or one-steps. However, the use of Japanese descriptive terms and names is an entirely different story. For example, I have found that saying "taikyoku chudan" to a student with Down syndrome is generally not easy to remember. However these students do have a sense of numerical

order, e.g. 1, 2, 3, etc. Therefore saying "taikyoku chudan, number 2" and sometimes showing my two fingers provides a better understanding.

These same students also seem to enjoy repetition. Repeating the same movements is of course a great learning tool. Instructors need to practice patience working with the disabled - it can get a bit trying at times. When I feel my patience withering, I will think back to my own disability and quickly get a 'reality check'.

I'm still trying to figure out how to teach some of our disabled students to tie their own belts. Generally, they can tie a belt using a granny-knot or some other strange looking loopy thing. We will show them how to re-tie the belt correctly, but the lesson is generally forgotten. I think my next try will be to have the student use the mirror to see how the knot is formed.

Although we use various techniques to teach disabled students, my bottom line in teaching the disabled is to respect who they are, try to understand what is practical for them (what they can reasonably do) and just have fun - treat them as equals to everyone else in the class.

Lessons Learned

From Flixercise Adaptive Physical Education and Effective Teaching Strategies for Down Syndrome students (<http://www.flixercise.com/system/files/adaptedPE.pdf>)

Elementary

- Allow students to make choices with some activities to help their decision-making skills.
- Keep the same routine for class structure.
- Keep directions specific and brief.
- Use visual and auditory aids.
- Demonstrate skills.
- Use lighter weight equipment.
- Breakdown the task into simple, small steps.
- Use peer partners.
- Use positive behavior management strategies.

Secondary

- Allow students to make choices with some activities to help their decision-making skills.
- Keep the same routine for class structure.
- Use visual and auditory aids.
- Demonstrate skills.
- Breakdown the task into simple, small steps.
- Use peer partners.
- Use positive behavior management strategies.

A lesson plan

As a conclusion, we would like to present an example lesson plan, created by one of our black belts Andy McCauley, who has experience in working with special needs kids:

Lesson Plan for R

- Month of September Initial skill gaze
- Month of October Reinforce initial skill: gaze /Add new skill: San chin stance
- Month of November Reinforce skills: gaze / San chin stance / Add new skill: Zenkutsu dachi stance
- Month of December Reinforce skills: gaze / San chin stance Zenkutsu dachi stance / Add new skill: chamber hand
- Month of January Reinforce skills: gaze / San chin stance Zenkutsu dachi stance chamber hand /Add new skill: striking hand target

You can easily see how lessons are "chunked" into much smaller pieces, much repetition is used, and each lesson is built on the previous one.

While significant patience is often required, working with special needs students can be one of the most rewarding experiences of a skilled instructor. It may be that because of the extent of the challenge, the reward is proportionally great. The unbridled exuberance of these students, having accomplished a new skill has had a noticeable impact on the rest of the students of our dojo and they are embraced as part of our dojo community.

Myers Kyoshi

By Rich Stamper

We are pleased to announce that our CEO, Mr. Ed Myers, has been awarded Kyoshi Certification. Congratulations to Mr. Myers on this well-deserved recognition.

USA Karate Federation 42nd Consecutive National Championships

Saturday November 12, 2016

Information at USA Karate Federation National Championships . Registration is now open!

2017 Maccabiah Games

As you know, applications for the 2017 20th World Maccabiah Games Karate Team are now being accepted. Although, we have received several athlete as well as coaching applications, I wish to remind you that the application deadline of August 1 is approaching. Please have any and all your Jewish athletes boys and girls born 2002 and before send in applications.

To qualify as an athlete or coach one needs to have at least one parent of the Jewish faith. To go as a referee, however, one need NOT BE JEWISH only a valid referee license covering the WKF rules issued by USANKF, AAU, KRA, etc. Exciting news: We have just added "MASTER'S KARATE" Men 35yrs+ older for the first time!!!

Please forward this information to any and all qualified athletes in your dojo or organization and direct them to Shihan Alex Sternberg.

2018 WUKF World Championships

Tentative Date is May 2018 in Aberdeen, Scotland

We are looking for athletes, coaches and officials interested in being part of a world championships team to this event. To register for information on this event as it develops go to 2018 WORLD CHAMPIONSHIP INTEREST REGISTRATION.

Thank you.

USA Karate Federation

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