

The Karate Nerd Experience 2014 - Jon Arild Karlsen's Journal

Back in Spring, when Jesse first announced the KNX14, my first reaction was an intense urge to get in on it. My second reaction was a panic, when I recalled I don't actually train in karate (I practice taekwondo)! But asking nicely, I got the go-ahead and booked my place. Sweet!

Fast-forward to very early morning August 1st, and as I'm walking to catch my bus to the airport I'm excited, but I don't really know what to expect. What will the training be like? What will people think about a taekwondo man sneaking his way in to this karate event?

Arriving at Frankfurt airport I met up with two lovely lady attendees, headed to the venue to drop off our bags and then went into town to find some of the other guys attending. After floundering around for a while, our group - now numbering seven Karate Nerds - set off to grab a bite and something to drink in the *noticeable* Frankfurt heat, before heading to the KNX venue.

It very quickly became apparent that I needn't have worried about my reception - everyone were really kind, interesting and interested people. My oft-stated assertion that taekwondo could well be included in a list of karate styles met many nods.

As the clock neared check-in we all headed to the venue to do just that, in the process meeting a great many more awesome people. After a couple of tries too many I entered my (very nice!) room and was faced with momentary panic and confusion upon finding a pink belt in a goodie bag on the bed. Any concern quickly disappeared when I realised everyone had received the same kind of belt, giving some hint as to their purpose...

This was quickly confirmed during introduction - they are our Karate Nerd belts! According to Jesse, we were to wear them exclusively for the weekend, and this stroke of genius played out excellently as it put everyone on the same terms and enabled us to very naturally forego the usual fixation on rank.

After some socialising in the bar of the official KNX sport hotel complex, I headed back to my room for an early night, excited about next morning's training.

First session was with Jesse sensei, and focused on four different old-school Okinawan fighting principles. This was very enlightening and I benefited greatly from his instruction, as I had previously come across some of this in my research. In short, this first session had me sold and eagerly anticipating the next session with Dr. Lucio Maurino.

I was not disappointed. You would be hard pressed to find a man better prepared, and sensei's

skill in both executing his art and explaining it to others is nothing short of virtuosic. I came away from the day with many refinements to plug straight into my taekwondo, as well as quite a few variations of our everyday execution of techniques. I do love variations!

At the end of the final session we were introduced to our first secret sensei - Mr. Shai Hai of the Okinawan Uechi-ryū style. While I regret to admit I didn't know of him beforehand, I well knew the school's impressive reputation, and I was filled with both excitement and trepidation. The unique combination of teachers from different fields of karate was truly amazing!

After a well-deserved dinner, we were faced with a secret activity. It was Japanese calligraphy, "shodō"! I admit my nerd heart soared. It was a great time with a great Japanese calligraphy sensei, who graciously took on my difficult request for a writing of the Chinese characters of taekwondo, not all of which are commonly used in Japanese. The result is beautiful, and I treasure it dearly.

Sunday morning had us checking out, and then another session with Jesse sensei. We were taught the kata Pachu, of the Okinawan Ryūei-ryū family style. It is quite difficult, but this is offset as it is equally as interesting as it is different from anything contained in my own style. I will keep practising it as well as possible.

After a quick break it was time for training with Shai Hai sensei, and I think I speak for all of the participants when I say this was an especially eye-opening experience. The training was characterised equally by its practicality and directness, and sensei's great disposition and manners put us all at ease. We finished with conditioning exercises - in sensei's own words, "hopefully the most painful 20 minutes of our lives." He wasn't far off!

Following this session we had another "secret activity" with sensei Anastasia Dirksen, a very skilled ballerina from Russia! She conducted our last session, quite possibly the most difficult session of all. Her physical prowess greatly humbled me, often leaving me with a blank stare as she executed splits and lifts out of this world. Wow!

This was the last fixture of our schedule, and after being given certificates of participation, we finished with picture-taking, guestbook-writing, showering and goodbyes before drifting off to our various further journeys. How quickly a weekend passes!

Thank you so much for all the great fun and learning. Even for me, not even strictly a karateka and very much not the most social person around, I felt right at home. That's not something you'll find just anywhere. Looking forward to KNX15!

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