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THE CRASH COURSE IN SWORD TRAINING

It Works for the Stars, but How About Martial Artists?

by Loren Franck

The *katana*, perhaps the most popular Japanese long sword, usually takes years to master. Students of *iaido*, the way of drawing the sword, consider the katana their primary weapon. On the surface, it seems easy to learn, but when you examine katana techniques closely, it becomes evident the weapon is highly complicated and that the techniques take a lot of work to perfect.

So what happens when you're a producer who is making a film, such as *Conan the Barbarian* or *Red Sonja*, and your stars must demonstrate high-proficiency sword techniques? They can't spend five-to-ten years attending traditionally run katana classes, and there's really no need for the actors to master all of the sword's intricate moves. The stars just need a quick but thorough course in the basics—a crash course. And no matter what else, the techniques must *look* good on screen. They must look real to the film's thousands of viewers.

Teaching such a course in the katana requires an expert knowledge of the Japanese sword and an ability to quickly teach the basics of the weapon. Such attributes come naturally to 45-year-old Kiyoshi Yamazaki, a sixth-degree black belt in *ryo-bu-kai* karate and a veteran



katana instructor.

Yamazaki, a 30-year veteran of the martial arts who migrated to the United States from Tokyo in 1969, taught Arnold Schwarzenegger, Sandahl Bergman and Gerry Lopez the basics of the katana for their roles in *Conan the Barbarian*. Yamazaki's instruction was

Veteran Japanese sword instructor Kiyoshi Yamazaki has taught katana crash courses to a number of movie stars, enabling them to appear as sword experts on the silver screen. Yamazaki's course is in no way a substitute for dedicated katana training, but has proven successful for actors who need to learn sword skills quickly to play a particular role.

so good that all three *Conan* stars appeared to be authentic sword fighters on screen.

In *Conan the Destroyer*, Yamazaki again helped Schwarzenegger with the katana and taught the movie's co-star, Grace Jones, how to fight with the *bo* (staff). More recently, Yamazaki again worked with Schwarzenegger and Bergman on katana techniques for *Red Sonja*.

"Teaching the katana for movies isn't as simple as it looks," Yamazaki explains. "There are many aspects of training you have to consider. First you must keep within tradition, and you must remember that each country has its own culture. When you train students in the katana, determine how much time your students have. This is very important so you can adjust your schedule accordingly."

To begin training his crash-course students in the katana, Yamazaki emphasizes the philosophy of the weapon in one or more lecture-oriented sessions. Sometimes he will spend an entire week just discussing the basic philosophy of the katana, depending on the student's background and familiarity with the weapon.

After discussing philosophy, Yamazaki talks about discipline. "Often-times, big movie stars will

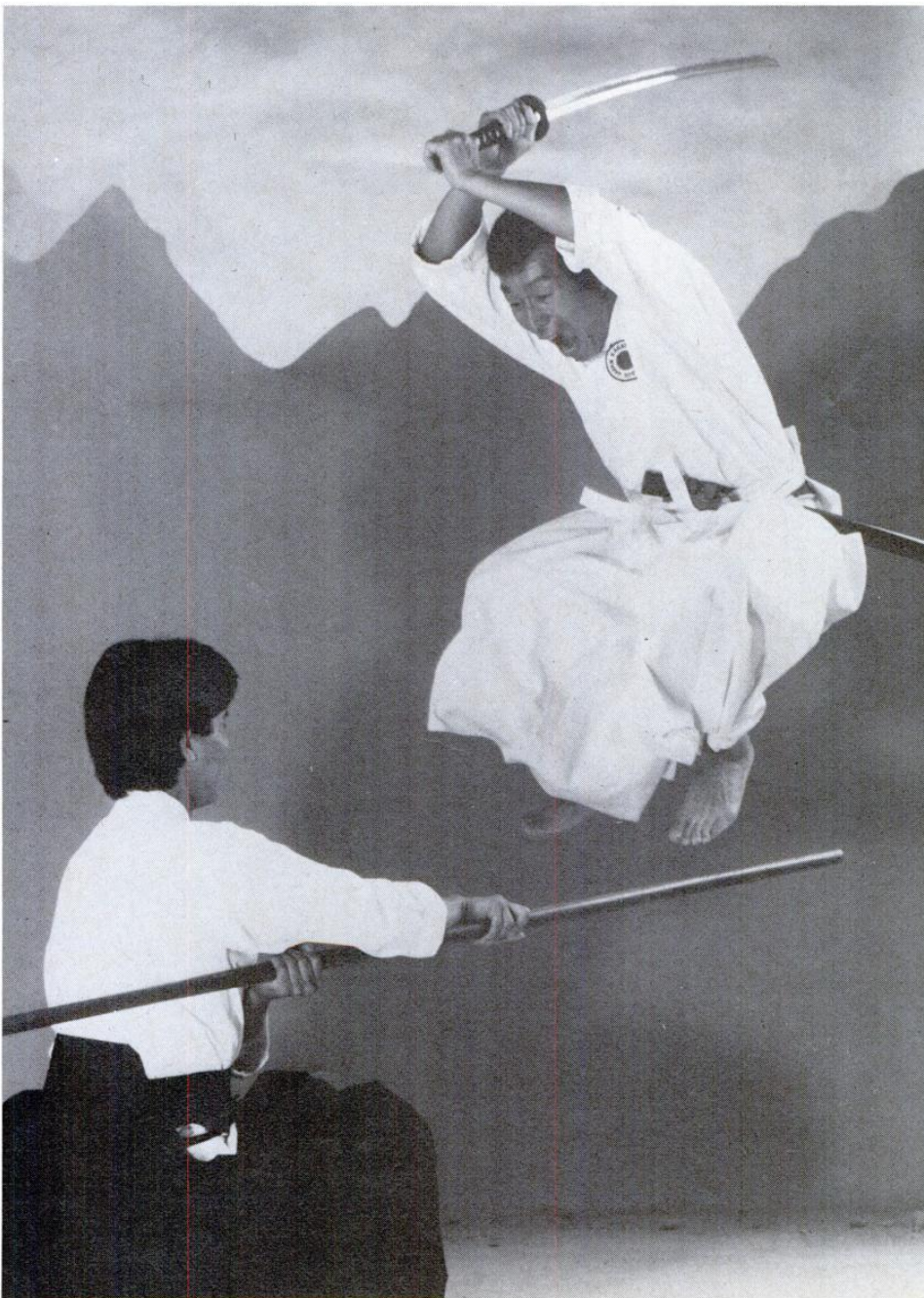
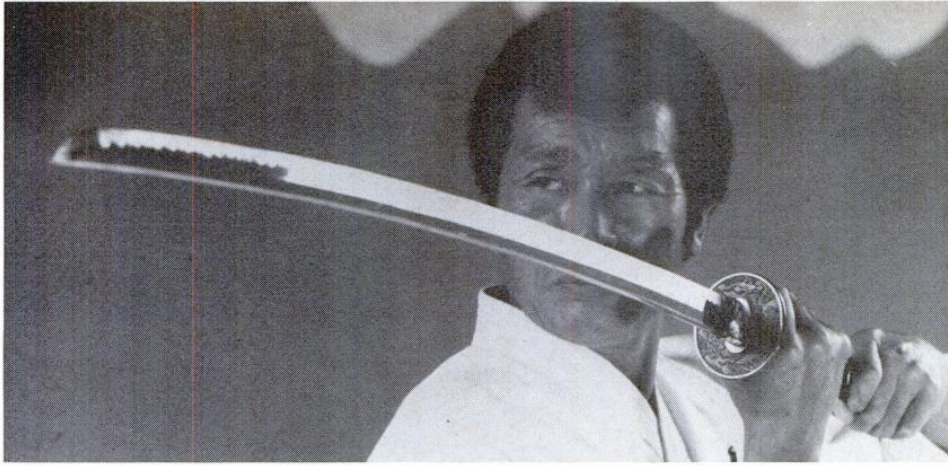


Photo courtesy of Universal City Studios, Inc.

Yamazaki's most noted sword students were Arnold Schwarzenegger and Sandahl Bergman, whom he instructed in katana basics for their roles in Conan the Barbarian. He gave Schwarzenegger a refresher course for his part in Conan the Destroyer, and taught both he and Bergman again for their roles in the film Red Sonja.

combine training time with private time when we do katana training," Yamazaki explains. "However, I don't like to mix the two. When we train, we always bow and then start. There's no talking. I explain this before we begin.

"Arnold Schwarzenegger is such a highly disciplined athlete, which helped him win the Mr. Olympia (the world's most prestigious bodybuilding contest) seven times," Yamazaki continues. "He is considered by many sports authorities to be the greatest bodybuilder in history, and it was his tremendous self-discipline that made him that way. He knew what it meant to separate training time from

private time. Arnold had such discipline that when he had to be on the movie set at 4:00 a.m., he was *always* there, ready to go.

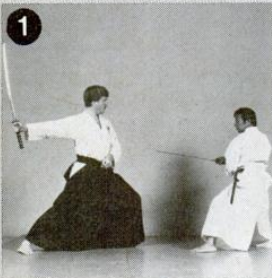
"The first time I met him, I thought he wouldn't concentrate and train hard—two extremely important elements of good katana training. Fortunately, Arnold worked and concentrated very hard. And this made his katana fighting techniques in all of his movies look very good.

"Concentration and discipline helped Sandahl very much, too," Yamazaki adds. "Her concentration was excellent. She did a lot of jazz dance earlier in her career, and through it, she learned self-discipline, concentration and hard work,



In the Conan films, Arnold Schwarzenegger is frequently seen holding the katana in the "eight-edge defense," as Yamazaki illustrates at left. This defensive posture helps prepare the sword practitioner for counterattacks from any direction. He can go from this position to any of eight sides to face the enemy, with very little effort.

Katana Training:



by Loren Franck

Say what you will about Kiyoshi Yamazaki's crash course in the *katana* (Japanese long sword), it all boils down to technique. Even the most basic katana moves take weeks—sometimes months—to learn even moderately well. Nevertheless, it's all worth the effort, say Yamazaki's students.

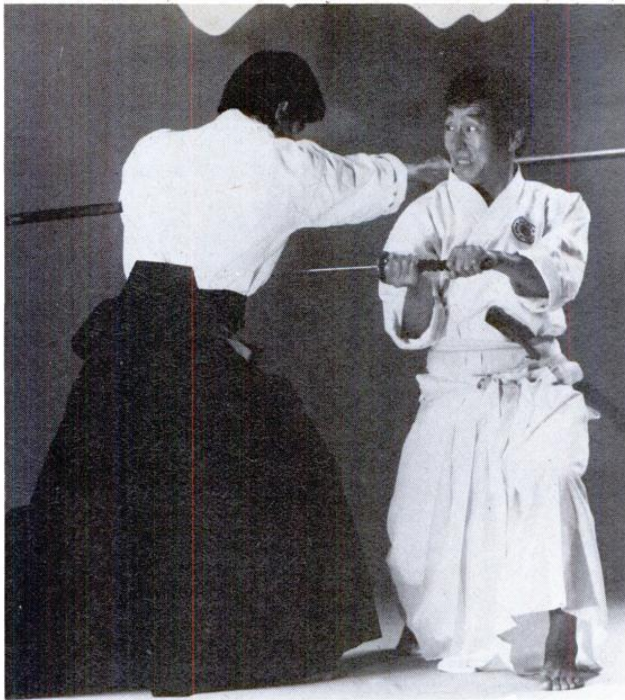
There are two general categories of katana training, Yamazaki asserts. The first is *iaido* (way of sword drawing), the more formal of the two. *Iaido* has ten basic techniques, which resemble forms in karate, although many are only comprised of about six moves. Each of the ten techniques differs in the type of movements used. For example, when choreographing Arnold Schwarzenegger's katana moves in *Conan the Barbarian*, Yamazaki chose one of the ten *iaido* techniques that was deliberate and powerful, which suited Schwarzenegger's personality and physique. Yet, he selected a sharper and quicker set of moves from the ten *iaido* techniques for San-

dahl Bergman, the movie's female co-star. "Because of Schwarzenegger's rugged, powerful physique, Yamazaki taught him strength-oriented katana techniques for his role in *Conan the Barbarian*. Yamazaki demonstrates one of these techniques here. As his opponent attacks (1), Yamazaki blocks (2), and delivers (3) a backhand cut to his opponent's face. To finish him off, Yamazaki executes (4&5) a forehand cut to his opponent's face, follows through (6), and ends the confrontation with a point strike (7) to the throat.

dahl Bergman, the movie's female co-star.

"*Iaido* is divided into three different kinds of categories," Yamazaki explains. "These are *chudan*, *jodan* and *gidan*. *Chudan* mostly involves blocking techniques, while *jodan* emphasizes back attacks and cutting situations. *Gidan* mostly stresses back-stance moves."

The second category of katana training is called *tate-do*, which is more application-oriented than *iaido*. "*Tate-do* en-



which of course all paid off when we filmed *Conan the Barbarian* and *Red Sonja*.”

When Yamazaki feels his crash-course students understand the mental aspects of katana training—concentration, culture, philosophy, and self-discipline—he takes his students out on the mat to begin hands-on training. For the first few sessions, students train with a wooden sword just to get a feel for the weapon. During these first lessons, Yamazaki teaches the most basic fundamentals, including stance, grip and very rudimentary strikes. Unlike some instructors, Yamazaki explains why each movement is performed the way it is. His experience has

shown that in-class explanations make the training more meaningful for students.

“When I taught Arnold, Sandahl and Gerry for their parts in *Conan the Barbarian*, I immediately stressed proper terminology,” Yamazaki recalls. “I didn’t let them call the katana ‘the sword’ or ‘the samurai sword.’ It is the katana. Terminology is very important, because when students use proper terminology, they think about Japanese culture and better understand the weapon.”

Proper dress is important when Yamazaki trains students in his katana crash course. He doesn’t allow sweat clothes, shorts or jeans. No matter who

It’s Technique That Counts



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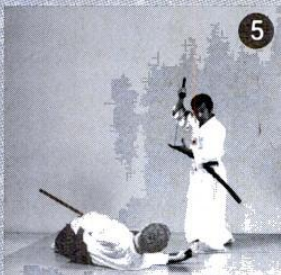
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Sandahl Bergman, Schwarzenegger’s katana-wielding co-star in *Conan the Barbarian*, learned quick, less-powerful techniques because of her slender body type. Yamazaki demonstrates the sword technique she knew best. As his attacker attempts an overhead cut (1), Yamazaki blocks (2), and counters (3&4) with a cut to the ribs. To finish his opponent off, Yamazaki chambers (5) a downward point strike, and thrusts it down (6) toward his opponent’s throat.

compasses the combat moves of katana training,” Yamazaki claims. “In tate-do, we train to defend against two or three attackers. We use combat moves and, in general, apply the katana differently than we do in iaido. When I worked with Arnold, Sandahl and Gerry Lopez (also in *Conan the Barbarian*), I taught them iaido techniques and tate-do movements.”

Many iaido and tate-do movements resemble basic karate techniques. Each method of fighting has upward blocks,

downward blocks, side blocks, and parries. Furthermore, many of the stances are similar in karate and iaido/tate-do.

Attacks with the tip of the katana are called point strikes, which are classified as low, high, downward, upward, etc., depending on the direction in which they travel.

The katana’s most spectacular moves by far are the cuts—the swinging blows performed with the weapon’s long, sharp edge. “Cuts can be applied straight down, downward at several angles, at upward angles, and to either side,” Yamazaki points out. “As a result, cuts can be applied to almost any target.”

“Sometimes defensive moves are used to prepare for counterattacks,” explains Brian Stokes, one of Yamazaki’s veteran katana students. “For instance, there’s a katana move called the ‘eight-edge defense.’ It’s one where you frequently see pictures of Arnold holding the katana straight up near his right shoulder, much like a baseball player holds a bat. You can go from this position to eight sides with very little effort compared to other defensive moves.”

Finally, how you grip the katana is important, Yamazaki says. Because he’s right-handed, Yamazaki grasps the handle with his right hand against the *tsuba* (hilt) and places his left hand about two inches below his right. “Before you can become proficient at the katana, you must start with the most basic movements,” Yamazaki stresses. “Before anything else in actual katana training, you must know how to hold on to your weapon.”



they are, students wear traditional iaido uniforms when training. "The uniform makes students feel completely different when they train," Yamazaki says. "They more easily internalize the philosophy, culture and traditions of the katana."

Martial artists and Hollywood moguls alike have wondered what makes Yamazaki's crash course in the katana so successful. A big part of his success is repetition. As with any martial art, the more you correctly practice good techniques, the better you will become. Yamazaki's students start with the most basic techniques, practice them thoroughly, learn slightly more advanced moves, and repeat them until they're well-learned.

"The students I teach are on the screen to put on an action-packed show," Yamazaki notes. "To en-

sure believable action, we move from the general basics to fighting basics. After two-to-three weeks of training in fighting basics, we practice techniques with three or four attackers. We practice how to cut and do other katana fighting techniques.

"By the time we're ready to go on location or to the studio," Yamazaki continues, "students are ready to start choreographing scenes with me. But the training is just as intense as ever. We practice on the set and train at the hotel after shooting. Again, it's basics and more basics.

"Then, before a fight scene, we practice it over and over," Yamazaki adds. "In rehearsal before actual shooting, we practice it again, so by the time we shoot the scene, we have practiced the moves well over 15 times. Throughout practice, rehearsal and the

“ The katana’s flexibility is one of its strong points. Many of the weapon’s techniques can be taught in a few weeks to virtual novices. ”

actual scene, I stress power, posture and appearance.”

Even though Schwarzenegger learned many katana techniques while training for *Conan the Barbarian*, Yamazaki continued to perfect the basics the actor already knew. For *Conan the Destroyer*, Schwarzenegger played a major role in choreographing the katana fight scenes. For *Red Sonja*, the most recent film in which Yamazaki taught the katana to Hollywood stars, the sword instructor continued to drill Schwarzenegger in the basics.

Through his experience of teaching a crash course in the katana, Yamazaki is able to offer several tips to sword students. While some instructors insist on breaking students' old hab-

its and replacing them with new ones, Yamazaki believes differently. He builds on existing habits.

For instance, when Yamazaki trained Bergman for *Conan the Barbarian*, he knew she had developed certain habits of movement during her career as a jazz dancer. "When she moved to the side, she almost instinctively moved like a jazz dancer," Yamazaki remembers. "She didn't move like someone trained in the katana would, and I didn't try to change that. I knew I could teach her a lot about the weapon, but she had certain habits of movement that would have been impossible to break. So I worked *with* the habit, not against it, and it actually improved her performance.

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THE CRASH COURSE IN SWORD TRAINING

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"You have to teach everyone according to their personality and habits," Yamazaki emphasizes. "This must be considered when you choreograph katana movements. For example, Arnold is a very powerful man and naturally uses very powerful, solid techniques. But Sandahl isn't as powerful, so she needs to use techniques that reflect her sharpness and speed. And Gerry Lopez is short. He therefore looks best doing techniques that are quick and deceptive. We're not talking about the best techniques for these people in a katana fight, but rather, what looks best on screen."

The katana's flexibility is one of its strong points, Yamazaki asserts. Many of

the weapon's techniques can be taught in a few weeks to virtual novices of the martial arts. Yamazaki's experience with teaching Schwarzenegger, Bergman and Lopez proves that. Yet, Yamazaki's crash course in the katana isn't for mere show. The philosophy and techniques he teaches come straight from iaido, the Japanese art of sword fighting.

In a limited sense, Yamazaki makes martial artists out of the Hollywood stars who study the katana with him. They may not be ready to take on legendary Japanese swordsman Musashi Miyamoto, but they're more than a match for any Hollywood villain they might encounter.

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