

Mike Foster and his Yoshukai Karate: the Early Years in America

The following information is from one of Mike Foster's earliest karate students, Les 'Bird' Wynne, in his own words, and provides insights into the way what is now known as Yoshukai Karate was taught. Bird is retired and lives with his wife in North Carolina. I, Chris Nelson, Kyoshi, 8th Dan, Yoshukai Karate, am responsible for any changes made to Bird's original writing that I thought would make for easier reading and getting his story across to the reader. I hope that this historical information enhances the understanding of the martial arts journey many of us have taken to understand Yoshukai Karate. Anyone wishes to add their recollections of their early years of karate and/or other martial arts training, please send to me and they will be added to our website. I, and my students, thank Bird very much for providing us with this glimpse into the past. (Note that this article is Copyright © 2020, All Rights Reserved)

Les & Gail Wynne
(sent via email April 9, 2020)

This is the way it was and the spelling of different words will have to be corrected, sorry Bird.

Yep, I was called "Bird ". Driver's license says Les Wynne .
I started studying GO JU RYU in 1962 and after 2 years I thought I was good enough to go visit some other Dojo's in the Tampa, Florida area. I had a chunk of my left leg taken out by the instructor due to his long toe nails and it evolved into personality differences that neither of us could reconcile. Such is life, but it was providence. I found this little hole in the wall dojo called Yoshukan Karate School. It was closed at the time I was there so I could look into the window and scope it out. It had a good wooden floor, some cool weapons on the walls and flags etc., it was not even 30 ft. X 30 ft, and there was a curtain separating the training portion and the place where the instructor lived with his wife. Very good idea to live and work in the same place.

I went down to the dojo, it was on Grand Central Blvd near Tampa U., the following Monday night. There were probably only 12 karate Ka (students) there and I noticed right away that they were all very disciplined.

Then this really tall guy, that was a 4th Dan, told everybody to sit down and then he told a brown belt named Wayne Zula to come out and then asked me to fight him. After having the wind blasted out of me several times and the pads literally ripped off me, I decided this is where I belonged.

At the end of the training and the dojo was shutting down for the night I approached the 4th Dan while he was sitting at his desk and said I'd like to begin studying under him. Without so much as raising his head he said "You start tomorrow ". His name was Sensei Michael G. Foster, Yondan from Japan.

The training sessions were a whole lot different from where I had been before. After stretching exercises Mike Sensei would form up the whole school outside and we would run, in formation, all over downtown Tampa, bare footed, with him up front and everybody else lined up according to ran. Great method of advertising and before long the Yoshukan Dojo filled up with karate ka. We needed a bigger place.

After a year Mike Sensei had found another location on the west side of the Hillsborough River on Platt Street. Its facility was twice as big as the first dojo, and had a area in the back that had a shower head with a curtain over a drain. There was also room to put up stud walls and make separate smaller rooms (8x12 ft. each). This became the home for 6 student Brown belts and one Shodan and Mike Sensei. My room was the first on the right after going through the office area.



Les Wynne was awarded his First Degree Black Belt on December 1, 1968 (Diploma # 68563) by Mike Foster, then a 4th Degree Black Belt, with the teaching title of Shihan. His first gi became ragged and lost over the years, so he put on his new gi from 2020 and sent this picture for this article.

Life as I we knew it was nothing but training and a lot of fun and a lot of pain nobody showed! Mike Sensei had planted two makiwara boards outside and we named them Sid and El Sid. They were tapered at the top with no padding accept a white belt wrapped around the top where we stepped through and punched them to develop the callouses on our knuckles. Sid was easier to punch than El Sid. The required daily number of attacks on them was at least 25 full contact punches per hand per makiwara board.

During our training sessions Mike Sensei carried a 47" bamboo Kendo Shinai (bamboo stick with leather bindings) and he would use it to correct our form and also to see how we reacted to being struck hard across our chest. If you blinked, well you knew it was coming again even harder than the first time. Once I "blinked" three times and blood was running down my chest and I was very embarrassed. After the training session I ran into my room and Mike Sensei was coming right behind me and I took off my brown belt and threw it at him, knowing I was dead and finished with my karate life. But Sensei said softly "Don't ever throw something back at me that I have given you; I'm putting you under my wing now". After the bloody deal with the Kendo stick we were fighting and he had slammed me up on the wall three times, and I was mad.

Usually, especially on Saturday's, after training he would tell me to go get the beer. Why me all the time, I know not. But one time I was later than usual and he bounced me all the over the world before handing me a beer. Sensei Lee Norris told me over lunch a few years ago that he didn't know why I was told to get the beer and after my "lesson" he would scrape me up off the floor and just smile. Poor Bird.

Some Saturday's we would go to the beach and work on our katas in the Gulf of Mexico, or go to a park on the river where there was a dam and fight on the dam, kinda like "king of the dam ". And, of course, run around the park or run on the beach.

Mike Sensei was always interested in finding old Japanese swords. Some times in the morning he would say "We're going sword hunting today" (no option, we were going sword hunting). We went to every lawn shop and military surplus store within 100 miles of the dojo. We were allowed into the back room of many just because of who we were,

In my small room I wanted to be as Japanese as I could. I started to burn incense and Sensei came in and put it out saying it would stick to the walls. Actually, we were trying to cover up the smell of pot we had recently began to enjoy. When Mike caught us let me just say that it was a miracle we were ever able to train again.

My father had a boat and Mike and a few of us loved to go shark fishing. One day, way out off Egmont Key, we had some jack fish on a huge hook with a chain leader and rope as our line. We were out there for over 3 hours and we decided to head in and Mike started to pull in the rope, which was everywhere in the boat, and when the chain leader got up, a huge teeth-ridden mouth rushed up and grabbed to whole number of Jacks and flipped around and splashed water all over everybody and proceeded to pull the boat out to sea. After 20 minutes of enjoying the ride we cut the rope.

Now the Yoshukan Dojo and the Chito Ryu style we studied was getting larger in number of karate ka was also increasing. So Mike Sensei decided we were going to move to another location, this time on the same street, Platt Street, but on the east side of the Hillsboro River and more downtown. It was a two story building and our living quarters and the dojo were on the second floor. Mike had started a school at St. Leo college by then Now the Yoshukan Dojo and the Chito Ryu style we studied was getting larger in number of karate ka was also increasing. So Mike Sensei decided we were going to move to another location, this time on the same street, Platt Street, but on the east side of the Hillsboro River and more downtown. It was a two story building and our living quarters and the dojo were on the second floor. Mike had started a school at St. Leo college by then and was also training at the University of South Florida. This school was primarily taught by Sensei Bob Bunning. Mike Sensei was looking into starting a school in Lakeland Florida at the recreation center.

Mike Sensei had brought over from Japan Master Yamamoto several times since the first dojo on Grand Central. He was amazing and we all enjoyed his teachings in patience and excellence.

Sensei Bob Bunning and Sensei Lee Norris, myself, Wayne Zula, Mike Sensei and one or two more guys would pile into Mike's jet black Camero and run 100 miles an hour up to St. Leo and teach and train, and then 100 miles an hour back, just for the rush.

It was shortly after moving into the 2 story dojo that our school named change from Yoshukan to Yoshukai . I wasn't involved with the politics of the association, but I do still have a certificate of stock in the newly founded Yoshukai. I recently made a copy of it and gave it to Sensei Lee Norris.

Sensei Foster wrote me an introduction letter to Masami Tsuruoka Sensei in Toronto, Canada and sent me up there. This gentleman was amazing and his dojo was huge. I must have duck walked 10 miles the first day. His wife, sorry I forget her name, was a most gracious lady as I remember, and their son David was at the dinner table with us also. There wasn't much conversation because not everybody spoke English. With shoes off in the house, like at a dojo, I felt like I was in Japan. Very tough training and disciplined focus was the order of the day, everyday.

I finally got accepted to Florida State University and I was helping instruct a class up there. And Sensei Hiroyuki Koda tested me for my Shodan black belt. He passed away in 1997 from cancer. Yoshukai literally means "Training Hall of Continued improvement "; the English transition is "Striving for Excellence " .

After flunking out of Florida State, I returned to the 2 story dojo and had to fight to get my room back, literally, and somehow I did get it. The first time Mike Sensei saw me wearing my black belt he came up to me, picked me up off the floor by the knot on my belt, and said in my face, "Remember, once a Yudansha, always a Yudansha!" Meaning, never forget the path you walked on to get here to Black Belt. This has been sinking into me ever since he said it.

Well by this time (1968) the Yoshukai dojo was seemingly everywhere, but there was one school Mike seemed to really liked to go to and that was Lakeland, Florida. That's where he and Libby met, and for awhile his focus was not fighting but finding the love of his life. I very distinctly remember late one night I was coming home and had had a little too much liquid fun, and yes, I was loudly going up the stars, and at the top Mike hit me square in the chest with a perfectly executed round house kick and knocked me all the way back down the stairs, stepped around the corner and said in a soft voice "Libby San is sleeping ".

Several times a year there were Japanese freighters coming into the port of Tampa and Mike went to visit some of them and most of the time they knew of him. One ship's captain invited us to come on board and party and bathe. We all got naked and jumped into this huge wooden hot tub, everybody at once and drank sake and Japanese beer. Really fun.

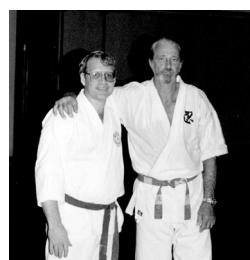
There were many training nights that our whole school would load up and go to another dojo in Tampa, like the one run by Ron Slinker Sensei, and we would just walk in and challenge the school to a Kunitz (Kumite?), which was a full contact sparring. There were many bruised ribs and heads on both sides.

I particularly enjoyed Kobudo training with the Bo and Sai. The Bo was a natural hard wood shaft and the Sai was a metal, horned, jabbing weapon that had many defensive techniques also.

Well these are some of my memories of the way it was when I started "The Way of the Empty Hand. " Enjoy, add to, and bless you all. Mike Sensei told me a year ago that "you never stop training ".

Bird (Les Wynne)

Sent from my iPad



Chris Nelson, Yoshukai Karate Hachidan and the Legendary Mike Foser, awarded 10th Dan in 2020