

The Spirit of

Sabaki

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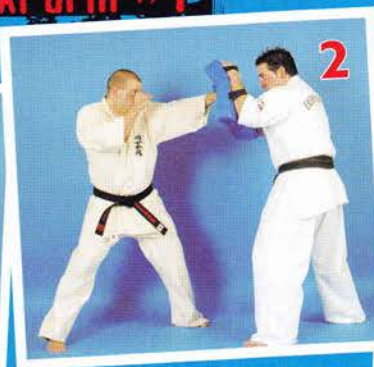
Enshin Karate techniques & training

When it comes to full-contact karate, there is one event in the world that is unique – Denver, USA's Sabaki Challenge, the brainchild of revered Enshin Karate founder Kancho Joko Ninomiya. Here, Sensei Dino Kardas explains how the event was developed, what makes it different and how Enshin's toughest fighters train for it.

Arm guard sabaki drill #1



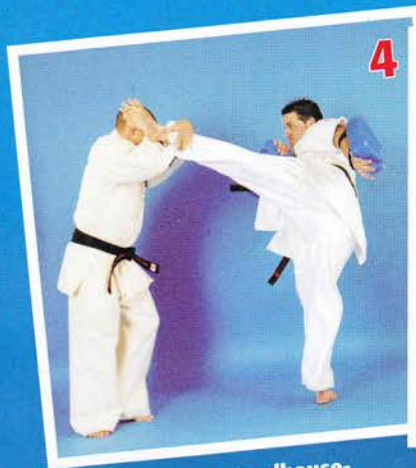
Starting from a standard fighting stance...



...Sensei Dino begins with a leading-hand punch...



...then follows with a right-cross.



Lucas throws a roundhouse-kick; Sensei retracts his lead leg (*kyushu*) and parries...



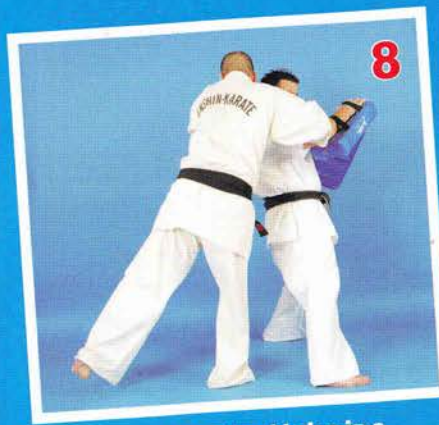
...continuing the motion of the parry to spin Lucas, and expose his back.



He grabs Lucas' shoulder with both hands as he steps out to his right...



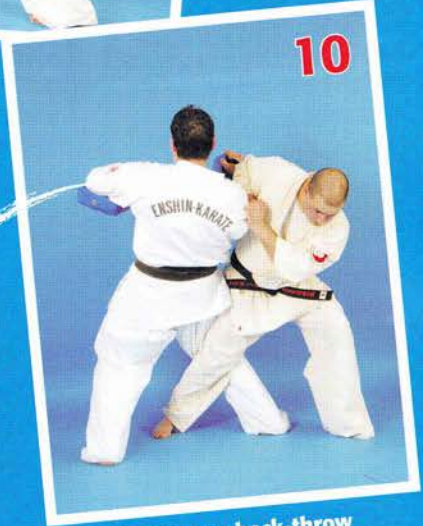
7 ...then executes a foot-sweep (*ashi-bara*)...



...retracting his leg in a circular motion as he pulls Lucas backwards.



Sensei adjusts the position of his right hand as he focuses on where he wants to throw Lucas...



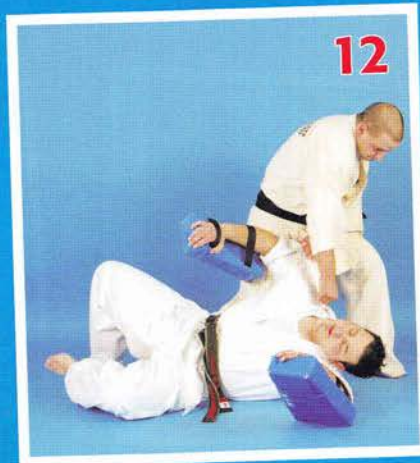
...then uses a back-throw (*ura-nage*) to take Lucas to the ground.



(The sweep in use at the Sabaki Challenge)



Controlling Lucas as he falls to the ground...



...Sensei then finishes with a (simulated) punch to the face.

Kancho Joko Ninomiya, founder of Enshin Karate, was always trying to better his skill in the martial arts and challenge his spirit. Mas Oyama's 'All-Japan full-contact karate tournament served as a tool for Kancho Ninomiya to gauge where improvement was needed and a way to measure his progress.

He dreamed of one day starting his own full-contact tournament in the USA that would provide the

toughest test of karate spirit and techniques: no pads, no gloves, full-contact.

In 1978, Kancho Ninomiya won the All-Japan tournament. It was upon his return to his adopted home of Denver, Colorado, USA, that he started to develop his dream. Many people believed that he wouldn't be able to develop a full-contact karate tournament that fighters would want to compete and that



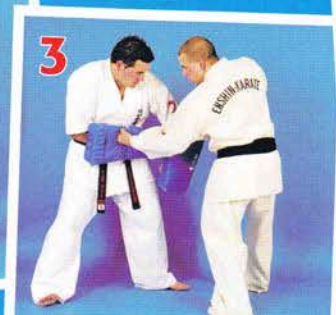
Arm guard sabaki drill #2



1 Sensei Dino takes up his fighting stance...



2 ...and creates an opening by pushing Lucas' lead arm to the outside.



3 He then follows with a left-hand under-punch...



4 ...and grabs Lucas' left arm with his right hand as he starts to step to the outside.



5 Dino then hooks Lucas' neck with his left hand (*hiki-mawashi*)...

spectators would want to watch in the USA. The general belief was that the tournament would be too rough.

Kancho Ninomiya persisted, however, and developed a tournament he believed captures the true spirit of Budo — he called it the World Sabaki Challenge. *Sabaki* is a Japanese word meaning 'to channel power efficiently'. In karate, it refers to the natural way to use an opponent's power and momentum against

them, regardless of their size.

The Sabaki Challenge is a fighter's tournament designed to embody the underlying purpose of karate training, whereby the repetition and refinement of one's technique, combined with constant effort, results in an inspired performance. The tournament is open to serious karate fighters from any style, as Kancho Ninomiya wanted to provide a forum for students to compete against other karate

styles in a safe and respectful tournament environment.

What makes the World Sabaki Challenge unique, and different from a Kyokushin karate full-contact tournament, is the rule that allows grabbing techniques, which can be used by fighters to pull their opponents off balance, take a side position and expose a weakness or create an opening. This adds another dimension to the fighting. The Sabaki Challenge also uses a circular fighting area instead of a

square, to encourage the fighters to be more circular in their movement and technique, instead of using straight-line power and footwork.

The first year the tournament was held, it entertained a crowd of a few hundred. Today, thousands attend Kancho Joko Ninomiya's World Sabaki Challenge and it has been televised nationally in the USA and internationally.

The full-contact format was chosen by Kancho Ninomiya for several reasons:

Bodyshield drill #1



1 From a standard fighting stance...



2 ...Lucas fires out a punch with his leading hand...



3 ...and follows immediately with an under-punch...



4 ...then steps out with his lead leg as he starts to throw a low round-kick of the rear.



5 Lucas drives the low-kick in, directing at the top of the thigh...



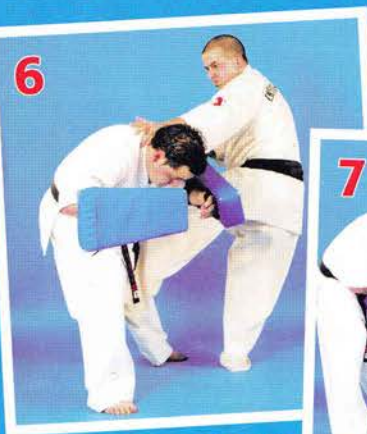
6 ...then swings his kicking leg back to a blind-side position as he hooks the top of the shield...



7 ...to finish with a high knee-strike off his rear leg.



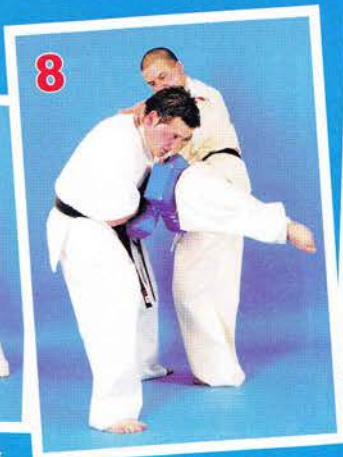
8 He then steps off with a shove to unbalance his opponent.



6 ...and fires an inside-thigh kick while pulling Lucas' upper body down towards the ground.



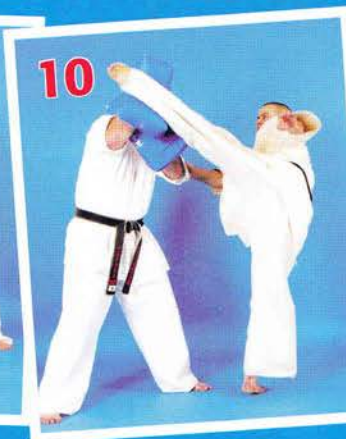
7 Sensei Dino then brings his left leg back in a circular motion...



8 ...and delivers a rear-leg knee-strike.



9 Sensei retracts his leg, releasing Lucas' neck but keeps his grip on the left arm (*hiki-kuzushi*)...



10 ...then finishes with a high roundhouse-kick, still maintaining his hold on Lucas' arm.

It was the format in which he had competed in since high school. Kancho believes that full-contact tournaments without pads or gloves, requires a blend of technique, power and spirit that is unmatched in non-contact, point-fighting competitions.

In 1999 Kancho Ninomiya opened the tournament to women, who compete in an open division. The women compete under exactly the same rules as the men and the women's division has provided

some of the most spirited fights of the tournament.

The Sabaki Challenge continues to draw top karate fighters from all styles from around the country and abroad. In a 1989 issue of *Black Belt* magazine, the Sabaki Challenge was referred to as being "the most popular single-day martial arts event in the country". Ten years later, the same magazine wrote that the Sabaki Challenge "has set the standard for bare-knuckled full-contact competition in the US"

SABAKI CHALLENGE: THE RULES

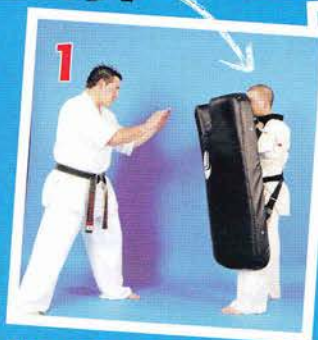
Over the years, Kancho Ninomiya has refined the rules for the Sabaki Challenge in order to emphasise the importance of technique, power and spirit.

Generally full-contact karate tournaments are spectacles whereby two fighters face each other and exchange numerous punches to the chest and kicks to the legs. The only way to score points was by knocking out your

opponent with a roundhouse-kick or a knee to the head. Most of the time, the results are decided by the judges and the fighter that displayed the most spirit would be awarded the match.

This type of competition fighting is more removed from the original self-defence intentions of karate, in that in a street situation you can't afford to absorb repeated blows, especially if the opponent is armed with a weapon. This is the reason Kancho Ninomiya decided to award

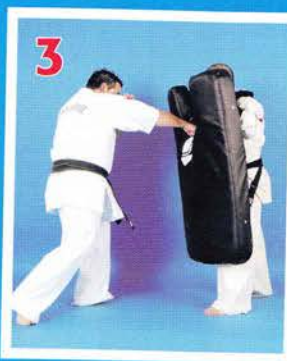
Bodyshield drill #2



1 Lucas takes up his fighting stance...



2 ...and begins by firing the leading-hand punch...



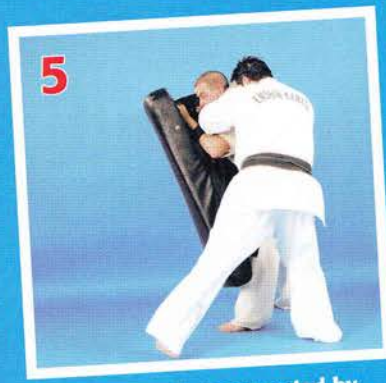
3 ...then follows with a reverse-punch to the upper body.



4 Sensei Dino rushes him, so Lucas steps off to the outside while grabbing Sensei's left arm...



5 ...then hooks the neck with his other hand (*hiki-mawashi*).



5 Using momentum generated by his footwork, Lucas pulls Sensei around, breaking his balance.



7 While in motion, Lucas releases his left hand from the neck...



8 ...finishing in a blind-side position while maintaining his right grip on Sensei's arm.



9 Lucas finishes with a kick, still maintaining his grip.

Sabaki technique #1



1 Starting from a standard fighting stance...



2 ...Lucas pulls his weight back and parries Sensei Dino's under-punch...



3 ...stepping to Sensei's blind side to apply the two handed grabbing technique (*hiki-mawashi*).



4 Sensei neutralises Lucas' technique by rotating his head to the centre and looping his left arm under and to the outside...



5 ...then straightens up, while grabbing to the outside. As Lucas sets to knee-strike, Sensei yanks Lucas' arm and moves in...



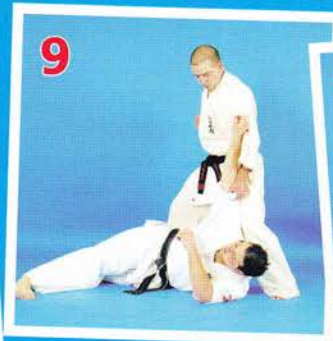
6 ... (shown from reverse angle) applying a push to Lucas' shoulder as he drives his opposite foot into Lucas' ankle...



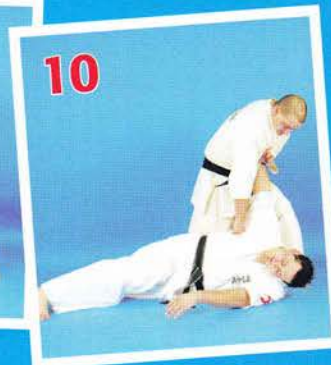
7 ...to throw him with *tsuri-komi nagi*.



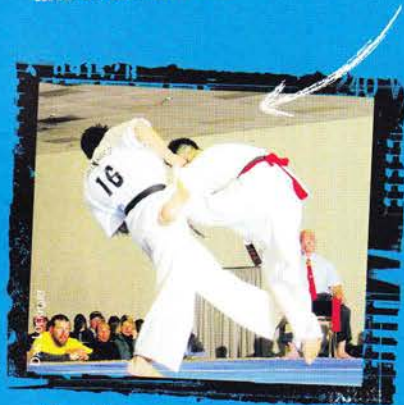
8 The throw in motion (camera angle reversed).



9 Sensei Dino maintains control of Lucas as he hits the ground...



10 ...and finishes by driving a punch into his ribs.



(*Tsuri-komi nagi* in action at the Sabaki Challenge)

for sweeps and throws, and if an opponent is doubled over by a punch or momentarily stunned by a kick, these techniques would also earn points.

This concept encourages fighters to be evasive and use good technique to avoid attacks. Throughout his many years of tournament experience, Kancho Ninomiya has witnessed and experienced first-hand situations where champions have been swept or thrown to the mat without their opponents being awarded points.

Kancho Ninomiya saw this as unfair; if you take an opponent down with good technique then you should be awarded points. The Sabaki Challenge rules award points for sweeps and throws, regardless of whether the takedown is followed by a controlled finishing technique or not. The Sabaki Challenge rules also allow a fighter to grab an opponent and strike, as long as the grab is not applied for longer than three seconds.

TRAINING FOR A SABAKI CHALLENGE

The Sabaki Challenge is only for those few competitors who are willing to make the commitment. For them, it means months of extra training to acquire the necessary conditioning and strength.

The techniques are no different from those learned in a normal training session in the dojo, but the fighters' training is more intense.

Most Enshin dojos will have incorporated in the class schedule, times for fighters training. These hard sessions can consist of:

Timed drills on the heavy bag, which can consist of a fighter practising various Sabaki techniques on the bag, visualising oncoming attacks and countering, etc. Drills are also conducted where two fighters work simultaneously on the same heavy bag from opposite sides, in a continuous rhythm with each other, or alternating their strikes, as is best when training kicking.

Body conditioning:

Various partner-drills are used to condition the legs and upper body to withstand the impact experienced when fighting for real. For example, two fighters face each other and take turns in delivering strong but controlled kicks to each other's legs or strong punches to the midsection. This also conditions fighters mentally to accept the contact and trains them to brace at the right moments.

Physical conditioning:

This is very important in a fighter's preparation and will generally consist of a combination of weight-training and plyometrics (principle of training muscles to

contract quickly and explosively from a stretched position), as well as general stamina and endurance training such as skipping, sprints and long runs.

Arm-guard training:

Drills with a partner wearing Enshin's arm-guards (similar to the forearm pads used in Muay Thai training) allow the fighter to execute Sabaki techniques at full power in a realistic fighting situation. The ability to use full power against a mobile partner holding arm-guards greatly improves timing, rhythm and footwork. For the fighter who is holding the arm-guards, this type of training develops a feel for contact and improves blocking technique.

Makiwara & sandbag drills:

This type of training gives the fighter a strong grip and an ironclad fist. Sandbag training will toughen the skin, knuckles and the muscles of the hand. The sandbag is also used to condition the shins. When using the sandbag, the fighter will practise from a full fighting stance and apply the full motion of the technique. The fighter will set their stance and move the hips

Sabaki technique #2



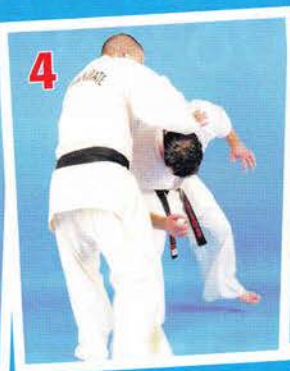
1 As Sensei Dino (right) and Lucas circle each other...



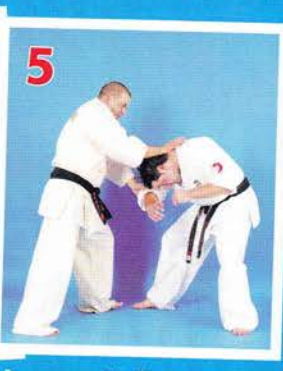
2 ...Lucas attacks with an under-punch, but Dino parries with a lower block (*gedan-bara*)...



3 ...and applies a two-handed grabbing technique...



4 ...as he moves in a circular motion around to the outside.



5 Lucas neutralises Sensei Dino's grab and blind-side position by stepping with his motion and rotating his head to the centre.



6 Feeling the loss of resistance, Sensei follows Lucas' head-motion and pushes into his chin, forcing him over backwards...



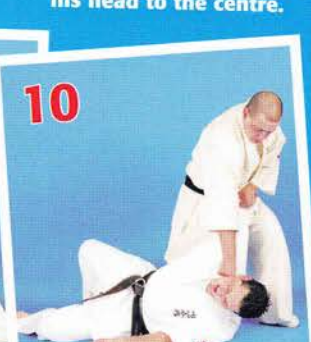
7 ...then uses a hooking action with his left leg to buckle Lucas' knee for a takedown.



8 Sensei Dino applies the leg-sweep (note: camera angle reversed)...



9 ...and controls Lucas as he hits the ground...



10 ...setting him up to finish with a punch.

and shoulders as though kicking or punching with the whole body. Sometimes a blocking technique is added to create a combination and simulate a fighting situation.

Mixed Sabaki (sparring):

In the lead up to a tournament, a fighter will perform many rounds of sparring. These sparring sessions might consist of two fighter's working specific strategies or techniques in a controlled way but at the pace of a real fight. The fighters might chose to conduct more open sparring that simulates the pace and contact of the tournament. Fighters will generally train wearing Shin/Instep protectors to lessen the risk of injury during mixed Sabaki.

Body-shield sparring:

The body-shield is an excellent training tool, enabling the fighter to impact a moving target. The person holding the shield has the ability to crowd the fighter, pressuring him to reposition his body using sabaki and deliver powerful counter-attacks, or simulate someone retreating, enabling the fighter to

practise powerful offensive combinations.

Three-person drills are also practised with the body-shield. These consist of a person wearing the shield, the fighter, and a third person providing resistance from behind using a belt, which is threaded through the fighter's belt. The fighter will perform straight-line driving attacks, generally the full length of the dojo, while strong resistance is being applied from the person pulling on their belt from behind.

REFERENCES

My Journey in Karate: The Sabaki Way, Kancho Joko Ninomiya with Ed Zorensky, Frog LTD, 1998.

Sabaki Method: Karate in the Inner Circle, Kancho Joko Ninomiya with Ed Zorensky, Frog LTD, 2000.

Sensei Dino Kardas, 3rd Dan, is the Australian Head Instructor for Enshin Karate. **BLITZ**

World Sabaki Challenge:

THE RULES

1. Matches will consist of two two-minute rounds of fighting. If the score at the end of the match is tied, the fighter with fewer penalties will be declared the winner. If both fighters have the same number of points and penalties, the match will go to a judges' decision. In the event that the judge's decision is tied and the referee calls a draw, there will be a one-minute overtime to decide the match.
 2. One point will be awarded to a fighter who causes his opponent to turn away after a stunning kick to the head. One point will be scored for a fighter who executes a successful sweep or throwing technique, remains on his feet, but does not follow immediately with a controlled punch or kick. The sweep must be a clean technique. If a fighter executes a successful sweep or throwing technique and follows with an uncontrolled punch or kick
- once his opponent is down, the sweep is negated and he neither scores nor receives a penalty. It's up to the referee and/or judges to decide whether the follow-up technique was controlled.
3. Three points will be awarded to a fighter who executes a sweep or throwing technique, but only if he remains on his feet and follows with a controlled punch or kick. Any legal strike that causes the opponent to double over will score three points. Any thrust, kick, strike or other legal technique that connects and instantly downs the opponent so that his hands, hands and knees or hands and hip touch the mat, will score three points.
 4. Six points will be awarded to a fighter who legally downs his opponent who then cannot rise and continue after five seconds. This is declared a knockout