

# THE ESSENCE OF ENSHIN

For Enshin karate instructor Dino Kardas, it was a life-threatening injury that revealed the true value of *osu*. The instructor of the Kyokushin- and judo-based fighting system was charging through full-contact sessions and life in general, when suddenly a knee injury, and the serious complications in the routine surgery that followed, brought Kardas' karate lifestyle crashing down. Here, he gives an insight into what a true karate man does when his world starts to fall apart.

STORY BY BOON MARK SOUPHANH | STUDIO IMAGES BY CHARLIE SURIANO

Heading to the dojo after work or school every day, most martial artists are geared up to learn a new technique, refine their fighting skills or simply sweat out the day's troubles. While the benefits may not always be immediate, for the keen martial artist they are enough to keep their feet moving in the direction of the dojo when life tries its damndest to get in the way. For most, this discipline pays off in small ways as they venture through their lives; for some, like Enshin karate sensei Dino Kardas, it proves pivotal to life itself.

A 3rd Dan Black-belt under the legendary Kancho Joko Ninomiya, Sensei Kardas is the head instructor at his own Enshin Kaikan dojo in Montmorency, Victoria. With over 30 years' experience in karate, the honbu-trained kateka has established himself as the top Enshin instructor in Australia and runs classes

at his dojo five days a week.

Yet, despite his successes as a karate instructor, Kardas wasn't immune to that threat faced by any full-time martial artist or athlete: serious injury. In 2009, Sensei Kardas experienced the worst upset in his long karate journey when he suffered a debilitating knee injury that threatened not only his career but also his entire right leg.

"During a fighters' class that I hold at my dojo every Thursday night, I was engaging in fairly hard sparring with my brother, Sensei Lucas Kardas," Kardas explains. "Generally, in that class my students and I will do anywhere from 10 to 15 rounds of solid but controlled *sabaki* practice (sparring). During one of the later rounds, I was attempting a *tai otishi* when we heard a loud cracking sound and I fell to the mat. The pain I felt was like an intense heat in the core of my knee."

After 10 minutes of applying ice, the initial pain

had subsided and, in typical Enshin spirit, the sensei was keen to soldier on. After testing out the injured knee on a heavy bag, he felt ready to go again. Feeling no pain, he thought he had fortuitously dodged a bullet. "I thought I had gotten away with it and I was so lucky," Kardas recalls.

"At the end of the training session, my students and I were practising one of the Enshin kata together, and when I threw a left upper roundhouse-kick, my supporting leg collapsed. I guess I wasn't so lucky after all. The following day I visited my GP, and he referred me to an orthopaedic specialist."

The specialist confirmed the worst, with MRI scans revealing a ruptured anterior cruciate ligament in the sensei's right knee. In June that same year, Kardas went under the knife in order to reconstruct his knee and, with a bit of luck, return to his passion and livelihood of teaching karate.

Unfortunately, there would be more disheartening discoveries still to come for Kardas, his family and his students.

"The surgery went as planned and my orthopaedic surgeon was very happy," he says. The following day, Kardas was discharged from hospital, but that evening as he sat with his leg elevated and iced to reduce swelling, his body would tell him the trouble was far from over. "As I stood up to move to more comfortable seating, I felt this indescribable pressure, as though someone was inflating my knee with an air compressor," he recalls. "I remember thinking that my knee was going to burst. Not having gone through surgery of this nature before, I thought this was a normal thing to experience. I was advised to expect pain, swelling and some bruising. I was unaware that this was the first sign of an aggressive staph infection that I contracted while in surgery."

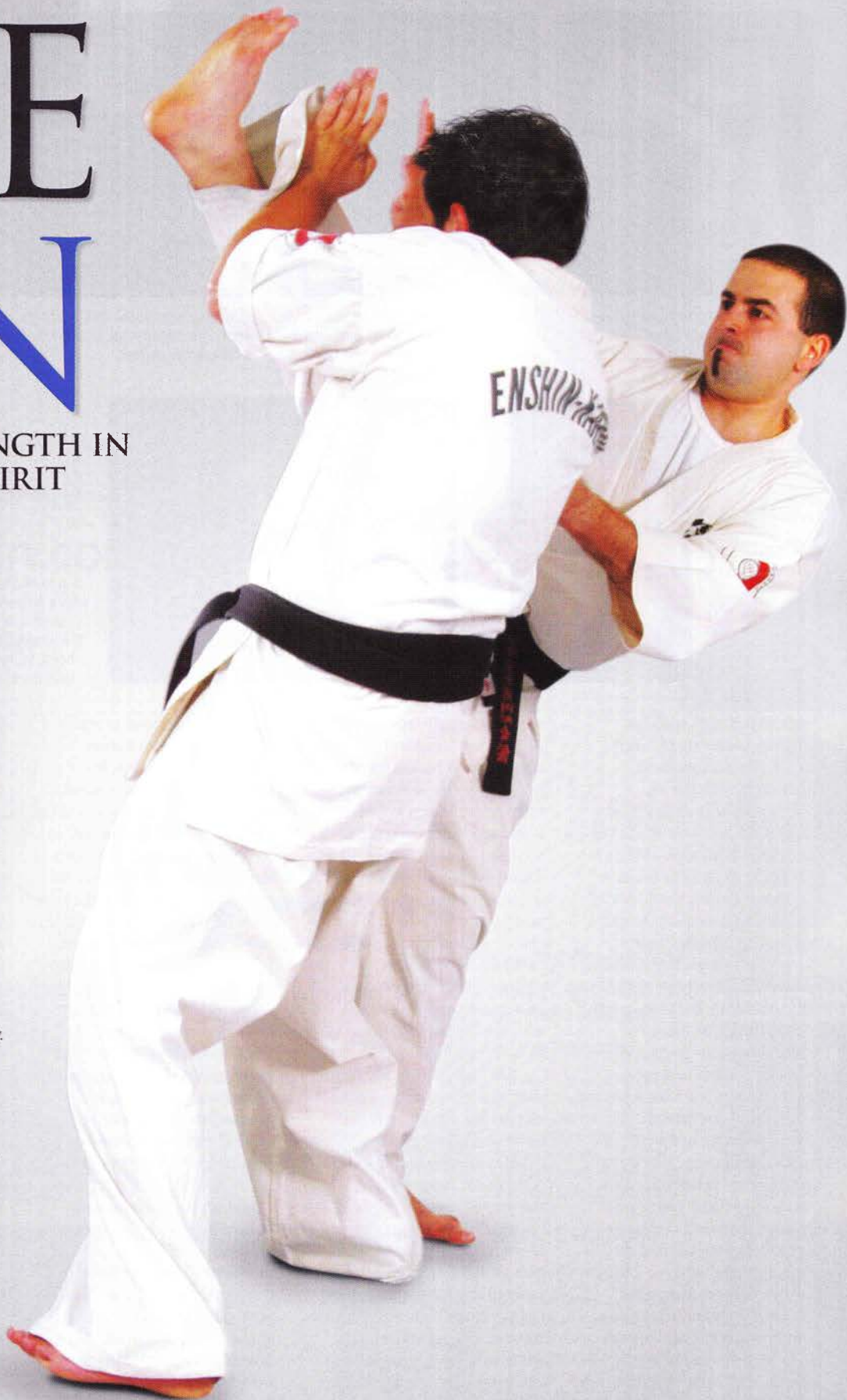
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FINDING STRENGTH IN  
THE KARATE SPIRIT

The serious form of staph had an increasingly detrimental impact on the karateka's body, resulting in fluctuations in body temperature, shaking and profuse sweating. In the months that followed, Kardas' toughness would be put to the test through endless painful, sleepless nights, as well as extended stays in hospital and countless courses of antibiotics, sometimes up to 13 tablets a day. So severe was the infection that amputation also became a real possibility — a heartbreaking prospect for a man who had dedicated his life to his art and dojo. However, the low point of the ordeal was still yet to come.

"I seemed to be making progress; I was starting to feel better and I was progressing with my physio," he says, "but unfortunately, on the weekend of the AFL grand final, within the space of 30 minutes I went from being fine to extreme pain again."

Kardas was suddenly





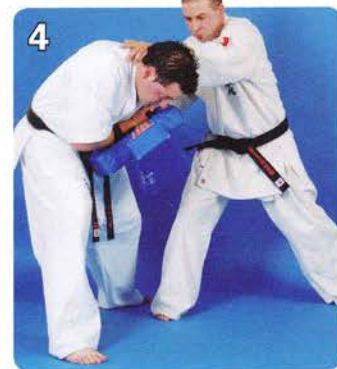
1 Delivering a rising body-rip to the stomach from close range...



2 ...Sensei Kardas then seizes the opponent's gi and turns his hips sharply, unbalancing his opponent and loading up his own left leg...



3 ...to bury a powerful kick inside his opponent's near thigh, pulling him into it for greater impact.



4 Controlling his opponent's neck, Kardas then reloads his left leg...



5 ...and drives a knee-strike into the head or midsection of his opponent, again pulling him into the strike.



6 Kardas keeps his grip on the opponent's near arm as he retracts his leg...



7 ...and finishes with a powerful round-kick to the opponent's head, striking with the shin.

back in hospital, with his surgeon preparing to reverse the reconstruction in an attempt to save the leg.

"I remember saying to my wife, 'That is it — I will never be able to train again. What I am going to do with the dojo?'"

Sensei Kardas would spend another two weeks in hospital recovering from his fourth surgery and being administered powerful intravenous antibiotics. His time alone in the hospital ward resulted in plenty of reflection on his goals and what he needed to do to get his life back on track.

"I could not give up something that was a part of me for most of my life. It was a part of my personality. How can you just stop being who you are? I made a decision to challenge myself and do what I needed to do to get back to full training again."

The rehabilitation process would understandably prove to be a challenge. However, Kardas attributes his experiences in Enshin with giving him the

tools to mentally and physically prepare for the ordeal. As Kancho Joko Ninomiya puts it, "The challenge is never finished, although we are always working towards making it so. The unfinished state is a source of motivation and it reminds all Enshin karateka that perfection is to be aimed for even if it cannot be achieved."

Sensei Kardas is in no doubt as to the importance of his martial arts training and its continuing role in his rehabilitation.

"Through the discipline of daily practice, training in the martial arts strengthens your mind and body," he says. "The experience of pushing your body to exceed itself gives the martial artist strength of character and determination to overcome any obstacle. A person that has trained many years in the martial arts learns how to better deal with setbacks, whether they are physical or emotional. It is through these challenges that we face in life that our spirit is strengthened."

In his endeavour to return to training, Sensei Kardas undertook rehab with his physio, assisted by a hinged brace. Rehabilitation focused on upper-body strength as well as strengthening the leg muscles in order to compensate for the lack of an ACL in his right knee. Soon he was conducting classes as normal every day with the help of his brother and senior students, Scott Thompson, Omar Videl-Moscoco and Pat Le Gall. A return to training, albeit modified, understandably went against doctor's orders — he had been advised to cease karate training in order to prevent a possible recurrence of the injury.

"Any surgeon or doctor would advise a person who has gone through the amount of surgeries that I have, to think about slowing down or completely stopping such a physically demanding discipline as karate," says Kardas. "My surgeon didn't order me to stop, but he did say to me that he would prefer if I retired

from my karate training. He thought my body had gone through enough and was it worth the risk of sustaining another injury in the future?"

The sensei is quick to point out the importance of smart, modified training when recovering from injury but says that martial artists can indeed return to the dojo as long as precautions and common sense are applied. Listening to one's body is key, he advises.

"During the period while I was recovering from the infection, my training was definitely modified. I was very cautious, as my knee was not stable. My progression was one of small steps and as I felt improvement in strength and stability, I would push a little more. If I wasn't confident or was sore on any particular day, I would back off. I listened to my body.

"I just wanted to get back to full training again, and I think it gets back to the core of why we train: to challenge ourselves, to overcome adversity,

