



RILEY HAWKINS KARATE MASTER

Harnessed Violence Creating Inner Peace and Strength

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The air in the large gym is heavy from the smell of sweat and the sounds of men under stress. About sixteen young Black males, all without shirts and with faces and torsos glistening like jewels under the perspiration and bright ceiling lights, engage in intense personal struggle.

"David, you have to come in deeper if you want to sweep that man. Angelo, that's not the right way to throw that kick; when a man is in that position, you use the other leg. Put more pressure on him, Chico."

The atmosphere vibrated with the sound of blows upon flesh as these men clashed with each other in the fury of combat. From the sideline, a stockily built man with emphatic eyes calls out instruction to them. Amazingly, he seems able to see the mistakes of each fighter though all of them were fighting at once.

Out on the gym floor, the ballet of destruction of which this man is the choreographer continues with renewed intensity. I am awed that this is a practice session for practitioners of the martial arts. It looks more like eight small, but violent wars.

After about 30 minutes, the stocky man in the plaid shirt and weatherbeaten hat calls a halt to the mayhem and the combatants clasp each other's arms smiling and congratulating one another. None of them looked angry at being hit with such concentrated viciousness and none of them showed the slightest sign of fatigue. The spectators applauded. So did I.

The combatants, most of whom are black belt karate men, turn to face the man in the unassuming attire and bow to him. The bow is a salute of respect. Another training session for Riley Hawkins' Avengers Karate Club has ended. It is a routine that is repeated five days a week every week.

After the session, Mr. Hawkins and I go to a small room at the back of the gym. He settles his 5'10", 215 pound frame into a wooden chair, which looks as if it may not hold his bulk, and watches me with eyes accustomed to measuring people. There is humor in those eyes and an ever present smile on his face.

His humility is so profound until as we talk, I have to remind myself that in the annals of the martial arts this man is a legend. He has fought and is friends with some of the top figures in American karate. He has also beaten most of these men.

He explains away this recognition of his stature among martial artists by stating that he does not feel he is that good. However, those who have observed him think he is a gifted *karateka*.

"I am still learning about karate everyday" he says without a trace of false modesty. Since it is difficult for him to talk about himself, he does not grant many interviews. This is his first in about nine years. While we talk, he gets up to call out some instructions to one of his students. His large form moves effortlessly across the floor. Every angle of his body is balanced as if prepared for some unannounced attack. I am reminded of a *samurai*, a Japanese warrior.

He settles once more into the chair and folds his hands upon the table which separates us. His ease with our conversation is obvious as he begins to talk about his favorite subjects: karate and youth.

"The most important thing about karate is that it gives me something to use to help get youngsters off the streets and give them a sense of self-worth; something of value they can use to help someone else. This is what we need in our neighborhoods."

As he talks, his hands become birds of prey darting back and forth to emphasize his comments. In the background, noises lessen as one by one his students leave. Finally there is only the sound of our conversation.

"The key to karate is fighting. Nothing is more important than fighting. To know how to do forms [routines practiced by karate men to strengthen their techniques] is not going to help a man in a fight. But knowing how to fight will." He is emphatic about this point.

"When I was taught the art of karate, my instructor, Hubert Hines, taught us the basics first, then the forms, then *ippon*

kumite (a sparring match used to improve a student's fighting techniques which utilizes minimal contact), and then the ultimate—fighting. Most traditional schools of karate teach this way. But even as a student, I thought this was the wrong approach. And so, I turned it around and taught the basics and fighting techniques at the same time. I taught forms and *kumite* later."

He began his study of the martial arts in 1958, as a fifteen-year-old, under the tutelage of Bob McPherson, a noted judo instructor that Riley idolized. He studied with McPherson for four years before switching to the study of karate.

In his heyday as a tournament fighter, Hawkins was a formidable competitor winning over 135 matches in his career. But his ascent to fame did not come without criticism and his unorthodox approach to instruction got him branded as a renegade by many of the traditional schools. However, no one can dispute his success. During the time his club was regularly attending tournaments, the ten year period between 1966 and 1975, they won more than 5,000 trophies and produced some of the finest martial artists in the country.

Hawkins attributes his success to preparedness.

"If you do more than everybody else, you can't help but be the best at what you do. My students train hard. There is no such thing as over training. We train to fight and we hit each other," his hands become a blur of motions as he demonstrates what he means. "We don't *pull* our punches unless it is punches to the face. If a fighter trains by pulling punches, he will pull them in a fight and that could mean the difference between life and death."

As he talks enthusiastically about his craft, my mind returned to the training session I had seen earlier. The body punches thrown by his students would have put a tree in the hospital, yet none of them were even fazed by the blows.

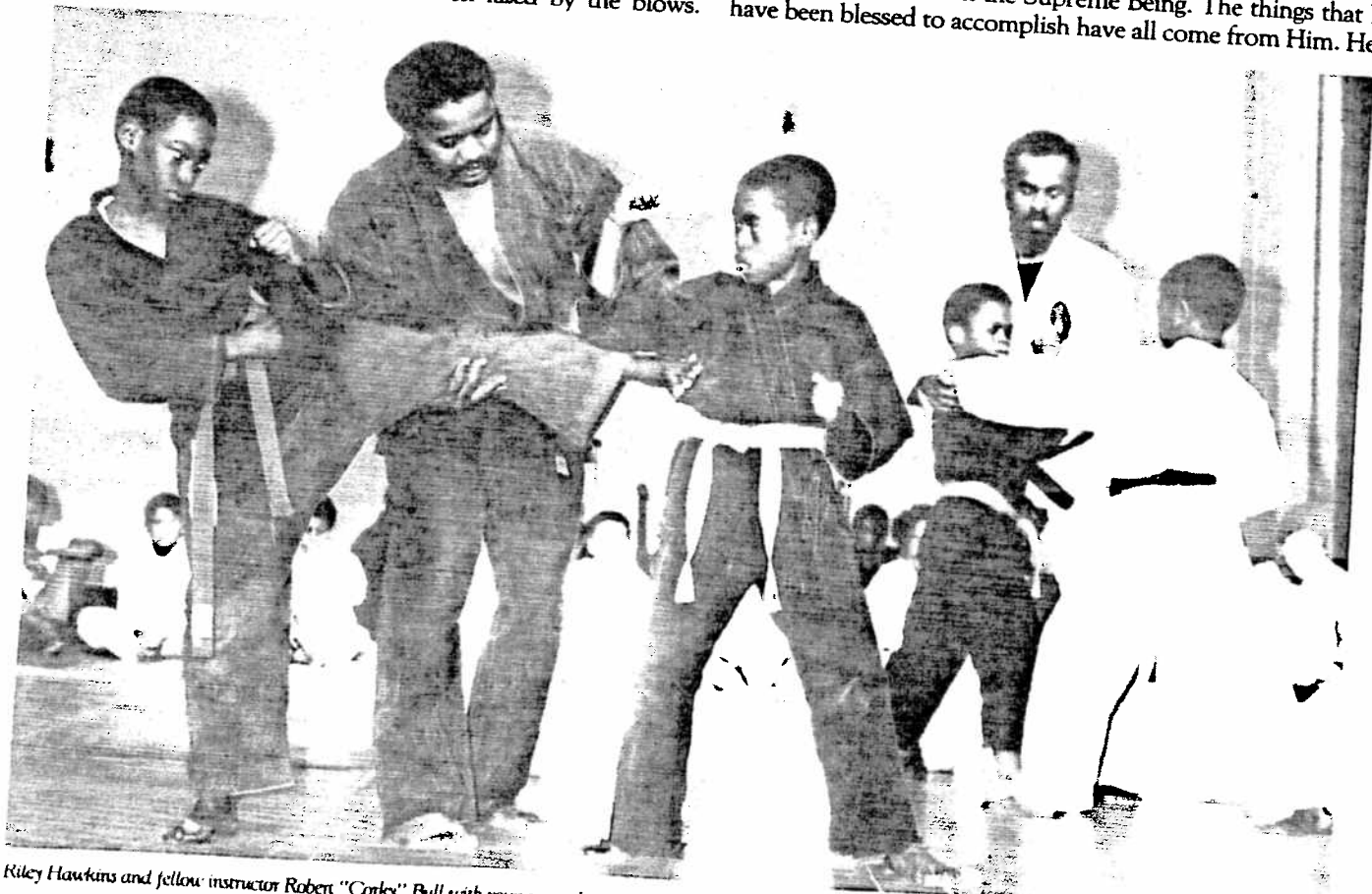
Everyone of those fighters were lean and muscled and it was obvious that they were at ease in a state of war; without exception, it satisfied them. Suddenly I remembered a former student of Mr. Hawkins, Arnold Mitchell, saying, "Riley raised us to be warriors; he taught us to never give up." Mitchell, now a businessman, public school teacher and karate instructor in his own right, credits Riley with straightening him out when he was younger.

Said Mitchell, "I was wild when I was a youngster, but he used to make us do right. We had to do homework; we had to do well in school, or he would deal with us."

To some the thought that a man as skilled at his profession as Riley Hawkins, is teaching an art as violent as karate in the Black community, a community which at times is troubled by violence gives cause for concern. This concern was voiced recently, at a demonstration held at the prestigious Maryland Institute of Art, by a student who wanted to know what would happen to a person who misused Mr. Hawkins' teachings. "I would happen to him," was the reply.

Scrutiny of the man reveals his response to be more than a not too veiled threat. Because as our conversation continued, I realized that Master Riley Hawkins (the title Master was bestowed upon him by his students, along with a specially designed belt) was not the simple karate fighter and teacher he at first appears to be. The man is a curious mixture of contradictions. In the same breath, he talks about love as a universal principle and fighting techniques designed to maim or kill an opponent.

"I teach my students that love is the first priority and that sharing is important, not material things. I am not a man who goes to church or anything," he says as he settles back in his chair. "But I believe in the Supreme Being. The things that I have been blessed to accomplish have all come from Him. He



Riley Hawkins and fellow instructor Robert "Corky" Bull with younger students.

gives me the thoughts upon which my teachings are based. What I have been able to do has always been a wonder to me. A higher power teaches me these things. I see visions of how to do them. It's frightening sometimes."

The higher power of which he speaks, this Supreme Being that governs him, has given him enough visions in his 36 years to prompt world-renown karate master, author and movie actor, Ed Parker, to recently refer to Riley as an innovator and pioneer in the martial arts. And an innovator he has been.

In many ways, he is a genius at what he does. Despite his youth, in a few short years he has modified an entire system of karate known as Okinawan *Shorin-Ryu* adding, as he puts it, "the science of speed." It was his contention that certain techniques involved in the old system, required too much time to execute. He has developed or modified a number of other techniques, also. Among them are the spinning back kick, the horse kick, the boxer stance, the dancing boxer style made famous by Bruce Lee, and the ridgehand punch. He got the idea for the spinning back kick from observing the movements of ballet dancers at Morgan State University.

His modification in many instances were not welcomed or accepted willingly. He had to prove their worth.

"When I first started using the ridgehand punch in tournaments, the referees wouldn't call it for a point because they thought it didn't have the power to hurt an opponent when thrown to the body. They were used to seeing it thrown as a punch to the head. To prove them wrong, I started knocking some people down with it. They started calling it after that. I won a lot of tournaments using that and a chop to the back of the neck when my opponents tried to block it."

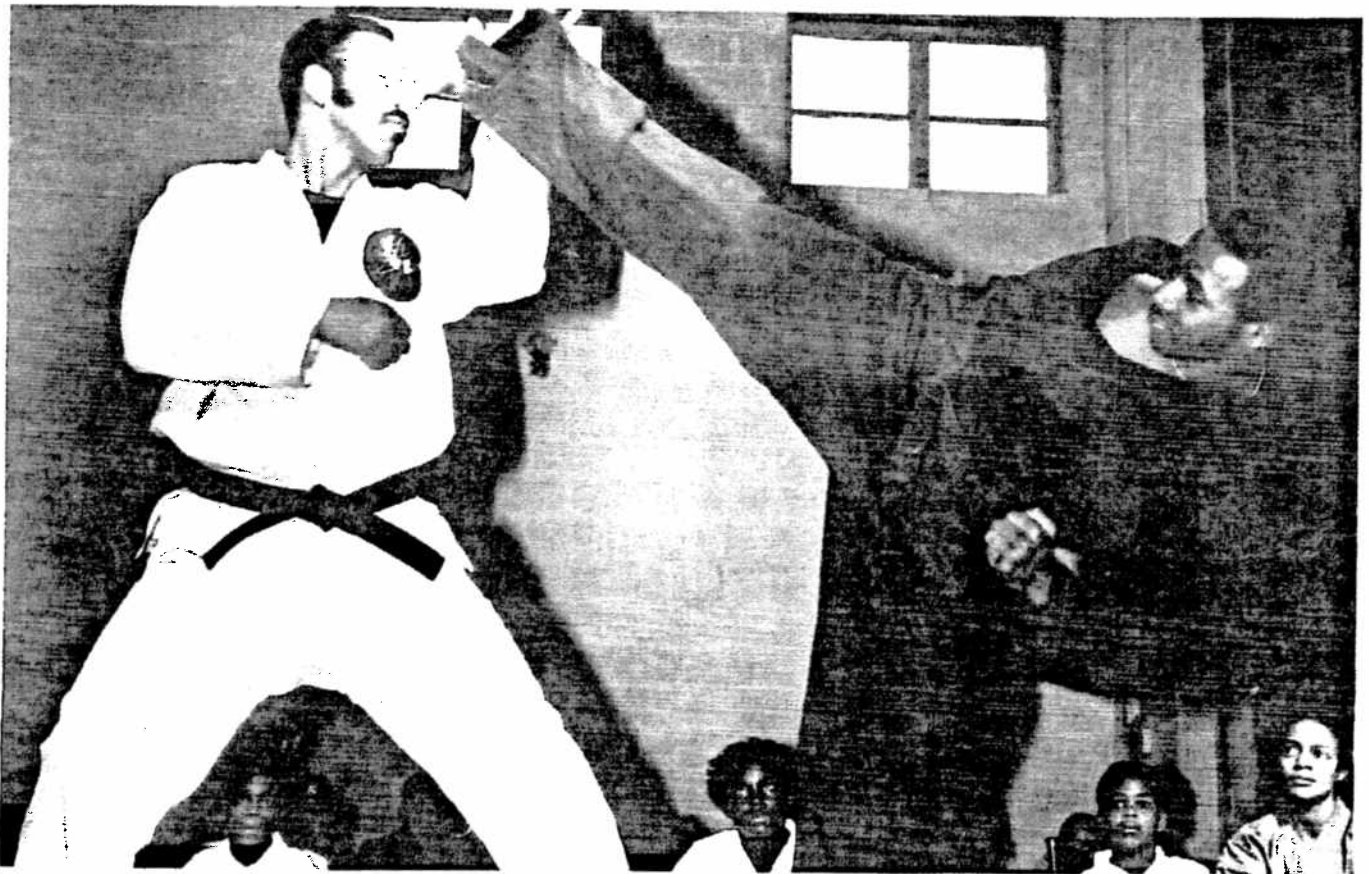
He is laughing now. His head is thrown back remembering his days as a gladiator and his rich baritone laughter mingles with mine and fills the small room with its reverberations. The



laughter settles quietly around us and his eyes start to deepen, to quake slightly before the ghosts of old disappointments as he begins talking about the tournaments—the caldrons of simulated violence where he honed his craft into a science.

"The tournaments used to be nice to go to; you got a chance to meet other fighters from different styles, exchange some techniques, and try out new techniques.

They were like family gatherings. Then things changed. It got to be too commercial. Winning became too important and



Karate form showing spinning back kick.

a lot of cheating started," he says. His voice fails to conceal his emotion and for a moment it is as if he were speaking of an unfaithful lover caught shamelessly in the act. "Referees started dishonoring their black belt by playing favorites. Some of them didn't, but many did. It stopped being fun. Some clubs were taking films of my boys to study how to beat us. There was no integrity left so I stopped going to them."

Integrity is a watchword with this man; it is as much a part of him as his arms or legs and is equally essential.

I had heard from one of his students that in his fighting days he was Grand Champion of the renown Reading Karate Tournament three years in succession. It is the Grand Champion's privilege to fight only the winner of the overall competition, but he refused to follow this tradition.

"I thought it would be wrong for me to fight only one fight, the overall winner, when everybody else had to fight many times to get to fight me. So each year I fought just like everybody else and I won it three years in a row. I would have dishonored myself to have done it any other way."

When he retired from tournament competition because of deep sorrow over the lack of fair play in judging and the constant harrassment of his students by officials, he was still the undefeated Grand Champion of the Reading Tournament.

To emphasize the point that "old traditions die hard," the Reading Tournament was won this year by one of Master

Hawkins' students, Michael Stinson, a junior executive with Black & Decker. After being declared the winner on a technicality (he was hit in the face), Mr. Stinson refused to accept the championship unless he earned it fighting.

Sitting there in the room across the table from this man whose sensitivity and enthusiasm is infectious, I am fascinated by the ease at which he slips from one guise to another with mind boggling swiftness. At once, he is a fighter, a teacher, an innovator, a counselor for his students in the ways of life; a guru for the martial arts, a priest, a philosopher whose conceptions of life embraces the cosmology of Jung and Hesse, whom he has never heard of. But of all these guises, the most prevalent is that of mystic. The mystic permeates every level of his capricornic personality. And there exists very real evidence of his mysticism. He anticipated the coming of full contact karate by at least a decade and prepared his students for that eventuality. In another instance, a cousin of the great martial artist, Ed Parker, a sixth degree black belt named Daniel K. Pai, came to Riley Hawkins in the sixties, after seeing him at a tournament, and asked him which of the oriental masters Riley had studied with. Mr. Pai refused to believe him when Hawkins stated he was self-taught for Pai had traveled throughout the world studying the martial arts and had only seen the techniques demonstrated by Mr. Hawkins in the orient. No one in America was using them at the time.



Sheila Dixon and opponent.



Riley Hawkins and Larry Thome

Mr. Pai, overwhelmed by the quality of fighter produced by Master Hawkins, asked to study fighting techniques with him and commuted from Richmond, Virginia, twice a week to attend classes.

Though he has not gone far beyond this region, Master Hawkins is known throughout the United States. His fighters have brought honor to his name by winning tournaments in the West Indies, Japan, Guam, Okinawa, the Philippines, and South America. His name is so revered that soldiers spoke of him on the battle fields of Vietnam and he has been sent invitations to come to the orient to appear in martial arts events. Yet despite fame which led one Canadian karateka to ask for his picture to hang on his wall, he remains unspoiled by it all.

"I have learned what is important for me. Honors are not important; money is not important—I only accumulate money to help others; I can never accumulate it for me. What is important, however, is seeing my students become outstanding at what they do. Watching them gain knowledge and have the right attitude."

The right attitude is a high prerequisite for students who stay in his club. The right attitude means training hard, being serious about acquiring knowledge, helping others, having self discipline and self respect.

"Some clubs get students who pay for lessons and expect to make progress and get promoted to a black belt. I promote my students when they have acquired the proper knowledge and attitude. I have white belts in my school who can beat most brown and black belts. I don't charge my students to study with me because I want to be able to tell them when they are doing poorly without worrying about whether I will lose some income should they decide to quit. Any student who asks me about a belt can be sure he is not going to get one because he is not demonstrating the right attitude to receive one from me."

His students come to him from all walks of life. One of them, Sheila Dixon, is a twenty-five year old alternative education teacher at a local Manpower program who has studied with Riley for about four years. When asked why she chose to study with him, she replied, "Because he is serious about karate and shows concern for his students. He strives for perfection in his training and it is hard training. I feel that if I can do what he asks of me, I can do anything. He gives his whole self to you; you can trust him. In addition, he is one of the few Black men I have met who realizes that any change for Black people must begin with the little children."

As numerous as the tales of his daringness are, the stories of his kindness and concern for his fellow human beings, exceed them. Many have been the occasions when he has taken money from his pockets, money he needed himself, and given it to people in need, regardless of hue. Or people he has offered lodging to when they had none. Or the meals he has bought for strangers. Or the clothes he has given people, sometimes from off his back. These deeds have also grown to be legend. And like the seed a farmer places in the ground, this example by him has also taken root in his students. One of them, thirty-year-old Robert Bull, a steelworker who instructs karate at the Coldstream Recreation Center free of charge, took \$1,600 of his own money and bought Christmas gifts for his students—many of whom would have received nothing if not for his generosity. Corky, as he is called by his friends, attributes Riley Hawkins with influencing him to become the kind of person he is today.

"He was my idol when I was growing up. I felt like an out-



cast and he took me under his wing and made me feel important. I was drinking, smoking, doing just about everything. If it hadn't been for him, I would probably be on drugs or in prison by now."

Congressman Parren J. Mitchell recently wrote about a twenty-three-year old cerebral palsy victim, from whom he had drawn inspiration and an example of courage. What the congressman did not know was that Larry Thorne, the person of whom he wrote, holds a black belt and is a student of Riley Hawkins.

The stories are as endless as the people who come forth to tell them. And what emerges from this saga, is that Mr. Hawkins is an extraordinary personality. His contributions to the martial arts can be witnessed in just about any karate film. His realization that karate should be flexible enough to include techniques from other disciplines, pre-dates *Jeet Kune Do*, the legendary Bruce Lee's expression of this same belief. He has always taught his students this view of karate. "Karate should not be one way of doing something," he says adamantly. "It should be flexible, not fixed or rigid. There is no special way to beat an opponent. Whatever is successful is acceptable."

It has grown late. We have been at it for four hours. As we prepare to leave the dark gym, now silent, minus the sounds of combat; the odors of sweat long gone, have been replaced by the smell of cold air which does not stir, but rests damply against the face. He tells me about a long awaited book on training and fighting techniques he is planning to do and I find myself wondering why a man who does not think money is important would be writing a book sure to make large sums of it? I asked him, not sure of what the response will be.

"I see things that need to be done which I won't be able to do unless I am in control. I am getting too old to let others limit my vision and with money, I will be able to build something decent for our youth. They are our future."

He locks the gym door and extends his goodbye. I watch him walk toward his van and the sights and sounds of the "Ghetto" seem to be the perfect backdrop, the ultimate battleground from which his zeal should express itself. Here most of all, his philosophy needs to take root. □