

# Large Schools Can be Traditional



Old-school wisdom dictates that teaching a traditional martial art requires vows of martial arts purity and poverty. Husband-and-wife team and MAIA Elite members Todd and Kristen Keane are turning that old-fashioned thinking on its ear with their highly successful Wilmington, Massachusetts' dojo. Traditional schools can be large *and* profitable!

By Andrew Breen



## Todd & Kristen Keane

**T**raditional karate instruction and financial prosperity are mutual exclusive entities – at least that’s the unwritten rule that most people in our industry have grown to believe. Todd and Kristen Keane, the owners of the Academy of Traditional Karate, Inc. in Wilmington, Massachusetts, would disagree. For this husband-and-wife team, teaching the art of matsubayashi shorin-ryu karate much as they learned it – while making a decent living doing so – presents no dichotomy.

While YMCAs, community centers and church basements are generally considered the last haven for true seekers to find traditional training sans the Americanizing influence, the Keanes are committed to proving that running a traditional school and achieving financial success needn’t be an either/or proposition.

It would be disingenuous to suggest that modifications are not necessary. Obviously, times change. Whereas traditional schools historically relied on enthusiastic, though usually uncompensated, senior students to assist with the teaching load, that practice can earn a modern school owner the unwanted attention of the IRS or State labor-department agencies.

Similarly, enforcing discipline with a bamboo shinai or worse was fairly commonplace in hardcore dojos three decades ago, but such an approach today is legally reckless. That said, the Keanes are demonstrating that it just may be possible to reconcile the heart and soul of classical martial arts instruction with modern business principles.

When Todd Keane began teaching the martial arts out of a church basement 18 years ago, he had no aspirations of becoming a school owner. Keane was making a comfortable income as a software engineer for Hewlett Packard and, as a newly minted MBA, he was looking towards a conventional path up the corporate ladder.

However, in the interim, a dearth of traditionally focused martial arts prompted Keane to start a modest recreational program – as a hobby, yet also as a way to indulge his own passion for the traditional ethos and practice of the arts. But then, in 1989, Keane decided to take the plunge and open a commercial dojo. Kristen Keane joined the school soon thereafter, and 17 years later, the two now operate a state-of-the-art dojo with nearly 400 active students.

### Traditional Training in a Contemporary Market

What exactly constitutes a so-called traditional school? Is it the use of Asian etiquette and terminology? Is it the uniform students wear or the association the school belongs to? Or is it something more fundamental, more intangible than the trappings of tatami mats, straw-covered makiwara or kanji? Kristen Keane believes the main criteria for defining a traditional school is a maintenance of the history and core teachings of a given system, as transmitted by the grandmaster and disciples of that system.

“Our sense of tradition is that we try to retain the original teachings of Shoshin Nagamine, the founder of our style,” says Kristen Keane. “By that, I mean we are not Americanizing or changing things in order to be more commercially successful. For example, our style contains eighteen kata. We teach those kata as they were handed down and meant to be taught. Along with that, we encourage students to understand the history of our style and how the basics, self-defense and other aspects fit into our artform.”

According to Todd Keane, retaining the integrity of the kata is particularly important because there is considerable pressure to modify or make forms more interesting for students for the sake of variety and, presumably retention.

“A lot of schools feel that they have to do something different because people get bored with forms. We found that if you teach it in the classical sense, which

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incorporates the self-defense, grappling and pressure-point applications, as well as the obvious conditioning, people don’t get bored, but rather come to appreciate what they are learning. A lot of the emphasis with American styles is about learning dozens of forms. We prefer the traditional way, which is to learn a limited number of forms well. However, we do disguise repetition, particularly with the children.”

Another frequently misunderstood aspect of the training experience in a traditional Okinawan ryu-ha is body conditioning.

“We do have a makiwara, but since seventy-five percent of our students are children, we don’t have them hit it because their bones are still developing,” explains Todd. “The adults will use it and we do body-conditioning drills with some of the adults, but not abusively, not militaristically.”

“There are two ways of running a traditional school,” Todd adds. “One is the Japanese, militaristic style; the other is the classic Okinawan style. We fall into the latter category. When I went to Okinawa to train, the environment was encouraging. They were having a good time. People were sweating profusely, but the teachers actually smiled. We’ve

designed our curriculum to be in line with what we observed in Okinawa.”

### Avoiding Traditional Traps

Todd Keane maintains that, in order to compete effectively with less demanding programs, one of the first tasks for a traditional school is to educate the consumer. In Keane’s opinion, people with erroneous ideas about the realities of karate training often fall victim to the quick and easy approach some studios offer.

“There is a lot of education involved in running a traditional school, if you want that school to be successful,” advises Todd. “Although people are looking for authentic martial arts and for the type of training that will provide their kids with the character and life-skills benefits they’ve heard about, most of the time, they really have no idea [what it is] until you tell them what it is. Sometimes, they get in their own way because of their expectations. So, in that regard, educating people is a necessity.”

“Staffing is another aspect that is key,” says Todd. “You have to have the right people working for you. I think a mistake a lot of traditional schools make is relying upon volunteers. You can get into a lot of trouble with volunteers because it takes knowledge on the business side to understand what needs to be done.”

Charging a fair price for services rendered is another key element for sustaining a successful traditional school. Moreover, Todd Keane admits that this is an area in which he was a little slow to catch on. Keane fell into a common conundrum among traditionalists (though certainly not exclusive to them) – namely, charging too little tuition in an effort to make training affordable.

While the laudable intention is to be able to spread the art to reach more people, the result is just the opposite. An owner actually reaches fewer individuals because he or she ends up with a marginal school in terms of



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student count and what they can afford to provide students.

“One of the things that allows you to have a balance in your life and a balance in your school is to charge a decent rate,” Todd states. “For years, I charged too little. When you don’t charge enough money for your services, you can’t hire the people you need and you work yourself to death.

“If I had it to do over again, I would have charged people what the instruction is worth. I always thought I was doing people a favor by keeping the rates down, but it actually hindered in hiring staff and bringing the school to the next level. Seventeen years ago, if someone had just said to me, ‘Why don’t you just charge twenty dollars more a month and go for it and believe in it?’ I feel it would have made it easier for me and allowed the school to grow even faster.”

### Controlling the Environment for Consistency

From a business as well as a quality standpoint, Todd and Kristen Keane feel it is vital to ensure a consistent culture within their dojo. While the Keanes certainly recognize the importance of additional revenue streams beyond tuition, events (and non-events such as tournament participation) that focus on retention occupy the lion’s share of their efforts.

“Our school has never gotten involved with chasing different fads,” asserts Todd. “We don’t make radical changes to capitalize on what’s hot at the moment. We make a lot of small, incremental changes, continually improving over time. Take our curriculum, for example. We may change how we implement it, what we highlight or what we emphasize at a given time, but the eighteen katas *are* the eighteen katas. I think a mistake people make is that they change too much, too drastically and confuse students.”

Kristen Keane adds that this attitude of consistency extends to how their facility is utilized during off-hours.

“This fall, we will be using our facility to run yoga classes – completely separate from our martial arts program. The reason we chose yoga is because it will complement what we do here,” says Kristen. “Yoga is a very mindful practice.

“We looked at a lot of things. We never jumped on the Tai Bo or any of the other cardio-kickboxing phases. We thought there would be a culture clash. When people walk into the dojo, you want them to have that same respectful sense. Like most schools, we only use our floor for a portion of the day. We have four or five off-peak hours, but we still didn’t want to have something that would take away from what we’re trying to build here.”

Competition, specifically open tournaments, is another point of departure for the school.

“We don’t send students out onto the competition circuit,” notes Todd Keane.



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“We did that before and it was basically a disaster. We do a little bit of kumite, but our focus is keeping it to more of a classical system of self-defense rather than competing in a game of tag. Our concern is that students have real self-defense skills and not get into that back-and-forth, bouncing up-and-down, backfist-type of mindset. We will do one or two very traditional competitions, an in-house tournament and one that our association sponsors.

“With every tournament, you can expect to lose a couple of students—for many reasons. This can happen even with traditional tournaments, but you can lose a lot more through open tournaments. With an in-house tournament, we have control over the environment. We try to make sure that they enjoy themselves and that the level of competition remains healthy. Students will do kata and sparring in a very controlled positive atmosphere and everyone gets a medal for their participation,” Todd says.

Some would argue that this type of competition is really no competition at all, but Todd Keane maintains that free sparring—and by extension, competitive free sparring—is an all-consuming creation that the originators of karate never envisioned and would have never countenanced had they witnessed its ultimate fruition.

According to Todd, “Later in life, Gichin Funakoshi stated that he wished he hadn’t sanctioned kumite. Even though our grandmaster, Shoshin Nagamine, was somewhat involved with competition in Okinawa, it wasn’t something he really encouraged.”

### In or Out of Step with the Industry

Perhaps the \$64,000 question is whether traditionalists can ever reconcile their belief systems and practices to



become part of (and share the fruits of) today’s expanding martial arts industry. We know that there are scores of basement sensei and sifus that possess incredible knowledge and exhibit extraordinary dedication in passing along their respective arts. Quite a few of these exceptional teachers have no desire to make a living from their knowledge.

There are, though, a number of equally dedicated, equally passionate, lifetime martial artists that want to expand and reach out to a broader student base. These instructors are looking to take that *leap of faith*, yet come up against the quality versus commercialism trade-off.

So, does the Academy of Traditional Karate, Inc. follow industry norms? Do you see five-year-olds walking around with a frayed black belt and more patches than a surplus hot-air balloon? Do Todd and Kristen Keane try to herd every student into a Black Belt Club program?

Yes, and no!

The Keanes *do* award junior black belts – but not to five-year-olds. They do have a Black Belt Club—but its purpose is to ensure a training rather than a revenue commitment. (Yes, I know, we’ve heard

become part of (and share the fruits of) today’s expanding martial arts industry. We know that there are scores of basement sensei and sifus that possess incredible knowledge and exhibit extraordinary dedication in passing along their respective arts. Quite a few of these exceptional teachers have no desire to make a living from their knowledge.

“Many schools try to sign a student up [to a Black Belt Club] from anywhere within the first day to a couple of months,” Todd states. “I understand securing a commitment early on makes sense from a business standpoint, but what if they say, ‘No, I don’t want to sign up for the Black Belt Club.’ What do you do then?”

“That’s really where one of the biggest conflicts arises. For our youngest students, after they get to their third belt level – and that could be towards the end of their first year – the next step would be to commit to training long-term; we have a five-month cycle.

“For our kyu levels, we primarily do three-month cycles – that’s a minimum time-in plus demonstrating proficiency,” Todd explains. “What we do is, when they get to the end of that period, we ask them [and their parents] where they want to go from there. We say, ‘Now you know what the martial arts are about. Do you want to proceed and earn your black belt? It’s your decision?’

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I believe that, from a business standpoint, being different from most of the other schools out there is an advantage for a traditional school rather than a disadvantage,” argues Todd Keane. “What we don’t want to do, though, is fall back on that militaristic mindset. That piece of traditional or classical martial arts isn’t appropriate for children or even most adults.”

“Most say yes, but if they say no, we shake hands and say, ‘We’ve enjoyed training with you; I guess this isn’t the school for you.’ A lot of owners say they do something along these lines, but the temptation to keep signing these students up means that they create a whole sub-class of students. Students are separated into different classifications. I understand that for business reasons, yet from a traditional standpoint, there’s a problem there.”

Todd Keane continues, “As far as pee-wee black belts, for us there isn’t any such thing. The youngest of our junior black belts have to be ten or eleven and that’s with six years minimum as a year-round thing. As far as proficiency, we expect our junior black belts to come in at around brown belt level with our adults.”

Todd explains that the Academy takes a similar approach to the omnipresent demand for multi-colored uniforms, patches, belts, headbands, *ad nauseum*.

“Right now, the only patch our students have on their uniform is our association patch. We do put things on their belts, which is a transient thing so that they are reminded what they’re working on

at that particular time. Everything is earned and I teach my instructors that the worst thing you can do is to pass someone along. The thing that drives me absolutely crazy is that consumers love all that stuff—but they also love what we do and it goes back to the education.

“If you don’t educate people, parents think that the school down the street which gives black belts to seven-year-olds, automatic promotions, red-white-and-blue uniforms and a million patches is actually doing something for their child.”

Todd offers that the challenge for traditional schools is to teach people that the bells and whistles do not constitute a better product.

“I don’t think a traditional school has to buy into offering all the bells and whistles to be successful, but you can use some of them when it’s appropriate and as long as it’s a gradual thing. The way you teach a toddler, teenager and an adult are different. But if you’re teaching something totally different to the kids, when they mature and continue on, you’re not going to be able to switch from Coke and candy to vegetables.”

### Selling Tradition

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“Beginning a martial arts program doesn’t mean that a person has signed on for boot camp. Respect is a two-way street and, if you expect to get respect from your students, you have to give it rather than being on a power trip. One of the things that struck me is that, when we went over to Okinawa to train with

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O'sensei Shoshin Nagamine, I expected him to be very strict. He was eighty-seven at the time and still training six days a week – and I thought he would be very harsh. But I can't count how many times he kept saying, 'Good, good job.' He kept on reinforcing. I'm not saying he didn't make a lot of corrections, but he encouraged rather than tore us down."

Todd Keane also feels that, when all is said and done, people will choose truth over extravagant promises.

"People are emotional in the respect that they want things and, in our culture, they want them fast. But they are also logical in that, if you convince them your way is a good way, you can get them to buy into your system and your way of doing things."

Todd uses an example of a table to illustrate his point.

"I use the example of a table to show that you need all four legs—otherwise it becomes unbalanced. One leg is kihon [basics], one leg is kata, one leg is character development and the final leg

is physical conditioning. A part of that physical element is self-defense, which is also a component of everything we do.

"As students progress through belt levels, the balance between basics, kata, character development and self-defense become more real. I can explain that to a five-year old, a ten-year old or a thirty-five-year old. I take that table and take away the character leg and ask students, 'So, what do you have left?'

"The table won't stand up. So you put the character leg back in and take out the self-defense. Okay, you've got great character, but you can't defend yourself. The same thing happens; the table collapses.

"To make a traditional school work today, you have to have balance, you have to have a clear vision and be able to communicate that vision."

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## Working Hard, Working Smart

Todd Keane speaks candidly about why many traditional schools don't give the same attention to profit as they do to performance.

"One of the things that has always confused me about many traditionalists is that they work so hard at perfecting their forms and different aspects of their training, yet don't treat the business side with that same degree of seriousness. They're near perfectionists about their art, but treat the financial end of it like a hobby.

"There are so many quality martial artists that get confused by all the hype, and marketing and sales stuff that's out there. They end up feeling they have to 'sell out' to be successful. If you sit back and analyze it, though, there's marketing material out there to show you how to get people to come through your doors.

"And once they come through your doors," Todd says, "there's also material out there — whether it's from the Martial Arts Industry Association (MAIA) or

any other business organization — that can help you to sign them and keep them in your school. What they *don't* do is tell you what to do on the floor. That's still your call. If traditionalists would realize that these organizations have no intention of telling them how to run their curriculum, then perhaps they might be more inclined to utilize some of the tools that are out there.

"If I had the choice of running a modern school, and I mean that in the negative sense of a school that did not have a solid grounding in the traditional martial arts, or running another business, I'd choose another business. I'm only interested in running a traditional school because that's what I believe in. I can sell it because I believe in it.

"I also believe that if you take the principles taught in any quality martial arts program and apply it to business — setting goals, working hard on one thing at a time, etc. — these same things can and will make a traditional martial school profitable."



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