

Every Problem Has a Solution

Featuring **Norma Foster**

Interview

How did you get started in karate?

NORMA: I used to be a competitive swimmer and there came a point where I no longer beat the clock and got thrown out of the pool ground. Then I tried some other sports and I quite enjoyed them, but none of them had the discipline of swimming, which is actually quite boring when you think about it. Then I discovered a lot of men around me were actually doing karate and they would talk about it with a great deal of enthusiasm. I thought well, I'd kind of like to try that, and then they decided that they weren't going to let me. The more they decided they didn't want to let me start, the more I wanted to do it.

How old were you when you first started?

NORMA: I was seventeen when I first started training in karate.

How did you overcome that first barrier of getting into the sport?

NORMA: One of the few ways I overcame the barriers was to ask what is it about being female that you don't like or you don't think I can do this? They said karate training's really hard. You have to do push-ups and and stuff like that. I said I've been doing push-ups since I was seven so I don't think that's gonna be a barrier. Well, you might get hit. Well yeah, I've been hit once or twice before and it wasn't nice but I could cope. And then they said well, you'd start crying and maybe you'll get a black eye. Well let's try and find out and if I cry I'll quit and if I don't you'll let me continue. It kind of went on like that for a while.

Where did you take up the sport?

NORMA: I started training in Aberdeen, Scotland in 1969 or so.

Do you recall what the first major goal was that you set for yourself?

NORMA: I had quite a few goals when I first started training in karate. One was to be accepted by the instructor as a valid student, and the first six months that I was training I was kind of condescended to and patronized quite a lot, whereas all the other men in the class were not. Of course I was the only girl in the class so I think he probably really didn't know how to treat me. Within that goal I thought if I were to pass the first belt test maybe that would make them take me seriously. I tried to work really hard and I missed the first rank test. I was late and the instructor told me it had passed and I'd missed it, but I said I really want to do it.

I'd been training really hard for six months and I really want to do this test. The instructor who had been invited to the city specifically for the test was leaving on that day. And I said well couldn't you just do the test really quickly cause it's only one person, I'm sure it wouldn't take long? For some reason they decided to do it and of course I did

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the test by myself and magically passed it. However, that did not result in actually getting accepted as a serious student because I had only done the test by myself, not in front of all the other candidates who'd done the test. I thought I'll go for the next one and I will definitely be on time.

The next test came and went, and around that time the club merged with another club. It was the only other karate club in Aberdeen at the time with no women training in it. The instructor of that club had a reputation in the city for being a little bit hard, and he said there's no women training in my club. I went through the whole process again, and said I've been training for now 9 months and I have a rank in this sport. I want to continue, so I want to train here. He said it's not possible to train here. Why not? I said. Well, there's no changing rooms. I asked, well, is there a toilet? He said of course there's a toilet. Well I'll change in the toilet then. [Sighs]

So then it was like OK, fine. They let me participate in the class. I was still not accepted as a valid student because that instructor would come down the line of men, correct every single one of them and not bother saying a word to me and walk right back the line. So then my goal became I will make you correct me because I could see this man was a really good instructor. He just didn't have a clue about what to do with me in his club.

And then, magically I went for the next test and I passed it so now I was a yellow belt. I had the first colored belt in the series of ranks between white and black belt and that is when I was suddenly accepted as a valid student, so that goal was achieved. The next goal was achieved because he started correcting me. The goal after that became I'm gonna stop you correcting me. And that's how it was in early days.

How did you get from Aberdeen to Japan?

NORMA: How I got from Aberdeen to Japan is quite a long and circuitous story, so we'll try and make it very short and succinct. I left Aberdeen in 1975 and went to live in Texas, Huston in the US. I lived there for two years. I met some people from Japan while I lived in Texas and they said come and stay at our home, come as a homestay. My first visit to Japan in 1977 and I had a really horrible time. I didn't speak any Japanese. I couldn't understand anything, any process, any system. I couldn't do the simplest things and I hated it.

In the last week my homestay mother who had been very kind throughout all of this took me up to Tokyo for the day. It was a beautiful sunny day on the 13th of January, 1978 and you could see Mt. Fuji from the 55th floor of the Nitsu building in downtown Tokyo, if there is such a thing. I thought I'm gonna come back here under my rules, no one else's. So I did, but that took ten years so I finally went back to Japan, working with a British biotechnology company that had an office in Tokyo. Then I stayed there for eight years.

Were you training during this time?

NORMA: My work took me to Japan. I worked for the same company in Canada and in Chicago and in Japan, and

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that kind of financed my interest in karate, if you will. As soon as I got there I had arranged to train in the style of karate that I had historically studied, and also arranged to study another style of karate with a viewpoint of becoming a referee.

Can you talk a little about the different styles?

NORMA: There are four major styles of karate recognized by the world karate federation based on what the Japan karate federation recognizes as major styles. Historically it goes back to 1938 when the government invited martial artists to register their what they were doing as formalized entities. At that time the Japan Karate Federation (JKF) was formed and four leaders of style groups came forward and established their activities as different and independent styles of karate. These are Wado-ryu, Goju-ryu, Shito-ryu, and Shotokan-ryu.

The differences in the styles are basically different interpretations of very similar movements. Styles are rarely centered around what you use these movements for, as opposed to some other styles, but they're fundamentally very very similar cause they're all Japanese. They're all upright. They all use the principals of movement to generate impact force, so you're trying to impact force. There's just varies between the style, among the style group. From those four style groups have mushroomed, but fundamentally related to those four.

What drew you to karate?

NORMA: Personally it's very hard to say when I first decided that I was passionate about karate. I just started to love it just around that time I obtained a green belt which, at that time, was after yellow belt. It was about just over a year and a half or something when I started to just feel a pure sort of enjoyment of doing the movements. I couldn't have cared what they were for; I just loved the doing of the movements and trying to perfect them and trying to get them right.

I think for other people the draw of something like karate, which is really a performance art and sport with a fighting element is multi-faceted cause there, karate has many aspects. Some people I think are are drawn to the the psychological aspects, others are drawn to social aspects, some to the art, and some to the fighting facets. I think karate as well as any other martial art for that matter offers people a range of things to hook onto depending on their personality.

Can you talk about karate and the Olympics?

NORMA: At this point it is 2006 and karate's not an Olympic sport. A lot of effort has been put into having Olympic acceptance for karate but the reason why it's not in the Olympics can be found in the book called Lords of the Ring. There's two books in that series and the second one explains very succinctly why karate is not in the Olympics and TaeKwonDo is. One of the things we're suffering from of course is that karate looks a lot like Tae-

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KwonDo, especially when you put people in the ring and they're fighting, so it looks very similar. It's hard to differentiate between the two.

There are several other things...the outcome of a match is referee dependant and the Olympics have suffered lately with that kind of outcome being affected by the judges. They're very weary of having a sport with subjectivity in it. So considering that a karate outcome is dependant on scoring a point. A point is called an "ippon" and it's defined in words very clearly, but in actual fact rests upon the notion that if that blow were real, would kill the person in front of you? It's kind of difficult to subjectively decide whether or not that person would be dead from this punch. The inherent subjectivity of the nature of the judging the sport I think runs against it.

Another is that the World Cup Federation (WKF) was asked to have 20% women on all its major functional committees by a certain time, and the WKF has now done that, so karate is poised to be an Olympic sport. It's a matter now of whether or not the IOC (International Olympic Committee) wishes it to be an Olympic sport. I think karate and squash were the last two sports for consideration for Olympic inclusion for 2012. Neither sport is will be included in 2012.

Can you talk about how more women have become involved in karate over the years?

NORMA: What has really interested me and flabbergasted me really is the fact that over 37 years, now it's almost 40 years that I've been practicing karate, and the barriers fundamentally have not changed. It's just disguised as something else. One example of that is when I decided I wanted to study in the art of science of karate refereeing, it shocked the karate world because no women had ever done that before. There was a belief at the time, and it was stated quite flatly to me, that it is not possible, women cannot referee men.

I was confused. I'm thinking, this is not Scotland in 1969, so why are people thinking like this? I'll decide whether I can referee men or not, not someone else, not this man. I was really quite shocked because I genuinely was just interested in refereeing and being involved in the sport. Suddenly I was being told someone was putting ceilings on what I could do and not do and I thought no, I'm going to show you something my friend.

I made a statement once here in Karate BC in front of an assembly of referees where I said it's very important for a referee to have balls . As everyone started sniggering and laughing I said I don't know why you're all sniggering and laughing because everybody's got them. They're right in front of your face and they're called eyeballs. we've all go them so there's no reason why anyone cannot choose to try to become a referee because all you need is eyesight.

Can you talk about your journey to becoming a referee?

Norma: If one wishes to become an official in this in sport karate it's important to have done karate, practiced it and



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had an experience of competition. It's not necessary to be a gold medallist in the world championships to become a good referee or to become a referee, it's just important to have a feel for what it is we're trying to do. You have to read the rule book and become conversant with the rules and then go through the process of examination and get the experience of doing the job. That comes in this province through the zone structure. One would get a qualification within the zone and then get a provincial qualification which would allow you to go get a national qualification. Then, that would allow you to go to the Pan-American championships and get a Pan-Am qualification which then allows you to go to the world federation and get a WKF world federation referee license.

What are some of the changes you have noticed in karate over the years?

NORMA: Well, I think over time certain things have changed within the sport. When I first started training in karate in 1969 the demographic was almost entirely adult and it was all male. Very few women and girls were actually involved worldwide, and that was rather interesting because the founder of what could be considered modern karate was a school teacher and he said karate would be good for weak people like women and children. And yet that wasn't happening in reality! So the difference between 1969 and now is that, for example, karate BC is 35% women and if we looked at the demographic world wide 75% of the membership in the world karate federation is under 16.

That has completely turned karate upside-down, because now you have to consider how to teach children, and how to make it interesting for children. Women are teaching children, women are teaching men, women are referees, locally, provincially, nationally, internationally. Since I started refereeing at the world level in 1990 there were no female referees and that was over a period of about 25 years. Suddenly, in ten years, we had 7 world qualified female referees. The fact that all these children and women are now are fully recognized as being totally able to participate to the fullest extent has completely changed the sport.

It's changed the way it's taught. It's changed the way it's presented. It's far more educated now. Also, the realization that karate can be sport instead of some esoteric, philosophical activity has changed, and has allowed things like the national coaching certification program of in Canada, which up until a certain period was considered irrelevant. Karate training is now realized as a very good and integral and necessary part of karate.

What do you think your greatest achievement is?

NORMA: My greatest achievement in karate, I think, was overcoming the system here in BC in 1983. I kind of came from nowhere and at that time when you competed in "kata", which was forms, where you just get up and you perform a set routine and were given a score, kind of like skating at the time. You did the first round and if you scored in the top eight you went to the next round. You got into the final round if you were in the top eight in the second round. Now, the thing was at the time that we added the scores from the second round onto the scores of the first round in an effort of objectivity I guess, and so I came into the round with the lowest score going into the final. Historically what happened was that you would go up first, perform your kata first if you had the lowest score

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(which always ran against you) and what would happen was that if you went in there with the lowest score you came out with the lowest score. I got up, did my kata, finished it and I got the score. I didn't even look to see what the scores were.

There was no great emotion from anywhere. There wasn't any reaction so I thought oh well, I felt good and I really felt that was a good kata. I really enjoyed doing it. I was right in the performance and I thought well, never mind, I'm over it, now I'll watch my other competitors. The other seven people get up and do their kata and I can relax and enjoy their performance, because I was quite convinced I would come out last. My girlfriend who was taking pictures at the other side of the ring gave me the thumbs up signal, like that, and I thought yeah thanks, somebody supports me, that's nice.

Then the second person got up and did her kata and she got her scores. There was no great standing ovation and so on. We were down to the top three who did their performances, and the same thing happened: after each one my friend was sitting at the other side of the ring going like this (doing the thumbs up). I didn't have a clue what she was going on about. I thought she just really liked the performances. The girl who was at the top at the time was everyone thought she was unbeatable. She had a real style that was definitely winning. She was German junior national champion. She had emigrated and we were all competing against her. It wasn't possible to beat her, that was the feeling at the time.

You can imagine my surprise when my name was called for bronze medal. What I had done was received such a high score in that final round that I had beaten all the other seven competitors. I had the lowest score then the highest score, and when they were averaged together, they became the bronze medal. I have won a few medals and lost a few medals and this and that in my lifetime, but that bronze medal was worth more to me than anything I had ever won or put in a drawer or hung up on the wall. The reason was because that medal proved to everyone that you could overcome any system if you wanted to badly enough - if you believed that you could, and you believed in yourself you could overcome a negative system that was established against you or your winning. That high kept me going for two years. It was amazing. I never felt anything like that before because I had done something no one else had done in the sport, and it was something in this province and this country that was a moment worth remembering.

Did you experience the same elation when you became the first female official on the international stage?

NORMA: I did not experience anything like a similar feeling to that 1984 event because I was beginning to understand that every time you climb one mountain you can always see the next one. There is no end to this mountain range so anytime I overcame a barrier it was like good, that's another one done, now what? You knew there would be another one and of course there always was.

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Do you like the challenge of that?

NORMA: You know, I prefer if there wasn't such a challenge in these activities because why should there be? Why is this so difficult for me to achieve what I decided was going to be my personal goal, as opposed to some guy who might have the same goal? I don't like that and it's not that I like the challenge so much, it's that I will fight when I see something that does not make sense to me or just seems blatantly wrong, especially when it affects me.

If it's gonna affect me you know it's gonna affect other women and other practitioners behind me, I will fight but I don't want to, I don't ask for these barriers to be put there. I didn't ask for these people to have these kinds of attitudes, but when they come and they are put in front of me like that I will fight them because why not, you know someone has to do it. Might as well be me, and I seem to have the stamina for it.

Can you talk about size and stature?

NORMA: Size and stature is really not an advantage or a disadvantage depending what one wants to do with one's karate. For example, if one wanted to compete in kata, it's very helpful to be fairly small and have a low center of gravity, have a fairly long body with respect to your height and very short legs because somehow it makes the kata look great. It's notable that still to this day the top female kata competitors in the world are Japanese and I don't think any one of them are over 5'2".

Having said that, some of the male competitors at the world level are they're fairly tall and they're very strong. If one wishes to compete say in the lightweight division of sparring, it behooves one to be fairly tall and have a long reach, and long legs and be at the top of the weight class. When one is small and has a lot of fast twitch muscles, good explosive power and a lot of speed, being small can be an advantage in so far as you can get under things because it's harder to punch down than it is to punch up. I think it depends on one's personal goals how one's body structure really is an advantage or a disadvantage.

During my competitive career I certainly never even thought about my height, weight, or whatever vis-à-vis anyone else's. I just wanted to do it, so I did it. Sometimes I got beaten up and sometimes I didn't.

What makes a good coach?

NORMA: In my experience of being coached in karate I found that what makes a good coach differs for different people. For me, personally, it was important that a coach could bring out of me things I never knew were there and the way to understanding me, and what would push me right to that edge. For me to want to go to that edge, for a coach to be able to do that I think takes a special kind of person. Now, a coach doesn't have to be able to physically perform all the stuff that's required of karate, but they have to understand it in a very deep way, so that they can

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help me overcome my limitations to bring out that technique or its best advantage. Which is to say my winning a medal. I've known a few people like that in my life who really I'd have died if somebody said you know we need a slave to go over there clean up their, you know, their house or something. I would have gladly done it just for the sheer love of their knowledge, of their understanding and their ability to push all of the right buttons and bring out qualities in me I never knew I had. Just to bring out that mental push to go further than you ever thought you could go to overcome that moment of total "I can't do it anymore. I'm going to die". "No you're not. You can take that one more step".

I think these are really important, and if the coach does not have the right distance between you and them and the right closeness and the right space between you, I think that can lead to difficulties. The distance that the coach keeps as well, mentally and psychologically from all of their athletes, is very important. It's not just enough to know your subject and know what it is you're coaching. It's very important to know how to put it across and why that athlete differs from that athlete and what is that athlete's strengths and weaknesses and how can you minimize those weaknesses and really bring out the strengths.

Can you mention your coaches?

NORMA: Two of the people who have influenced my karate and where I wanted to go with it over the past two decades are Mr. Arakawa, who is eight or ninth, perhaps ninth degree now in the Japan karate federation, and Dr. K. Dr. K is also eighth degree black belt in Japan Karate Federation model card. I was introduced to these gentlemen, one in 1989, one in 1990 and they both built on the 20 years that I already had in karate and took it to considerably further than I ever imagined it would it would go. I don't know people quite like them.

In Vancouver, I lived here for eight, nine years and then I went to Japan. During that time I made a lot of friends and had many happy times and memories - I still have very close relationships with those friends. In any of the nine years in Japan, you don't end up with the same kind of network of friends. It's a very different society. Dr. K ended up being not only a karate coach but the person I would go to in Japan if I had a serious emergency. If I had a problem I would go to him. If I needed advice I would ask him, because he wasn't only a great karate instructor, and he still is, but also a great human being. He's a lovely person and I don't know anyone quite like him. He's not close emotionally to his students but he has such an amazing understanding of what he's doing and the ability to put it across that's just outstanding. I just happen to like his dry kind of way of putting things across, so I really enjoyed what he had to teach and how he did it. Those two have been very influential in my career since 1990.

Mr. A also helped me a lot in terms of refereeing and judging. He really gave me a very good foundation with respect to that aspect of karate and sensei gave me a very deeper understanding of the principles of movement and how to recognize in other people too what a problem is is and what the unique cause of it is and how to address that problem that's something that nobody had ever really done for me until 1990.



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What do you say to young women to become involved in athletics?

NORMA: What's interesting in terms of saying something that may inspire them or whatever, I'm not sure that I can actually do that because I think lots of young women I talk to these days are really not aware of how fortunate they are to be in this situation that they are in. They're perfectly happy with where it's at and of course can't see anything about the struggle it was to get there so that they are where they are now. If someone asks me I will try to give them something that will inspire them from their viewpoint...I don't have any set formula for seeing, inspiring things to individuals but I suppose the message would be, if I had to really compact it into a single sentence is to believe in yourself.

What do you think people will remember Norma Foster for?

NORMA: I think they would probably remember me for stirring up an awful lot of trouble. I've done some really stupid things in the past and I know people still talk about them and all I can do is laugh. But hopefully I would like to imagine that when I go to my grave I will be remembered for making a significant contribution to the growth and development of karate, particularly for women and girls worldwide. I was recently thrilled to receive an award from the national karate association of Canada, called the Ross Rumble Award. Ross Rumble was the first president of the national karate association of Canada and the award is given for outstanding contribution to karate in Canada and I really appreciated that. I thought it was really nice to receive that and that's the sort of thing I would like to be remembered for, but if you ask me what I am remembered for right now, I don't think it's that.

Can you run through the order of karate belts?

NORMA: Toughly speaking and regardless of the style group or group of karate they go from white to black and then actually go back to white again. And the logic behind this was that in the olden days you had to hold the jacket closed with something so you tied a bit of white cotton around your waist. Because people didn't have access to washing machines these things got rather dirty and they turned black, eventually over time. Well, more of a dark gray. Then as the material frayed and fell apart it would turn white again because that was what was inside whatever they tied round the waist. That was the fundamental principal of of the belt. When karate became disseminated out of Japan to foreign countries and particularly Western people wanted a show of learning, so they wanted milestones, so milestones went with colours. The colors go white, yellow, orange, green, blue, purple, brown, and black. Each group or style has variations on that theme, but that's the fundamental color system.

What's the highest degree of black belt?

NORMA: The highest degree of black belt in theory is a tenth "dan", and that was usually awarded posthumously. In fact in some style groups ninth-dan is awarded posthumously and a tenth-dan or tenth degree is the founder of

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a style. The rest are awards for time if you keep submitting yourself to examination and the older you get the more decrepit your body gets but hopefully the deeper the understanding of karate. There's a balance and so on you go up the dan links. With each dan link or degree of black belt rank there are certain conditions such as age and time since the previous dan examination so there's are standard I think across all styles.

Can you talk about the benefits of karate for women specifically?

NORMA: Karate has several benefits as all martial arts and I think all sports do, to be fair. The benefits of karate are of course total body, because you are using all parts of the body to do karate, using the arms, the legs, the torso, the feet, you know the hands. You're also of course using the brain and then learning the physical skills of coordination, balance, telling right from left. You're also developing the art of impact force from minimal movement, so you're looking at developing maximum force from minimal movement, so that physically could make one far more powerful than one in fact appears to be. Also with that physical knowledge and that physical advantage hiding inside you, I think that also helps develop a little better self-esteem.

The fact that karate is also very postural, you have to walk with your back straight. You have to do all your movements with good posture and things like that. When people are walking down the street with good posture I think that sends a non-verbal message to those around. If you do a lot of training in martial arts you're generally not afraid to look somebody in the eye.

Karate requires a lot of coordination: your right hand is doing something while your left hand is doing something completely different, and your legs are doing something else. It's good for children and adults too who have poor coordination ability. Since there is no race to win they can take their whole lifetime to improve those skills. I like those martial arts. I think karate offers a range of benefits to those who wish to practice it and I think that's physical health, mental health, and street smarts. And generally a good balance in your life, I think.