

The Interview: Hanshi Andy Barber

Nelson's world-renowned
Seido karate master tells
how he changed his own
and others' lives through
martial arts.

By Craig Sisterson.

Photography by Daniel Rose



In 1974, 26-year-old Andy Barber looked around the old Parere Street factory and former church he'd just bought, and saw a place where he could share his love of a then little-known Japanese martial art – a place where he could teach, continue to learn and try to positively affect his own and others' lives. A place where he could make a difference.

Over the next 35 years, many thousands of locals and visitors passed through Barber's dojo, improving their physical health and wider wellbeing – kick by kick, kata by kata. Several have gone on to teach Seido karate themselves, including at dojos as far afield as Melbourne, San Francisco and London.

Barber himself has risen to the rank of Hanshi (8th dan black belt); one of only three such 'master of masters' in the world. Only Seido karate founder Kaicho Tadashi Nakamura is ranked higher. The achievements and influence of Barber, and those he's taught, have led to the Nelson dojo becoming a shining light both in our local community and the worldwide Seido karate family (an organisation of 20,000+ students at 100 dojos in 17 countries).

Barber says he's proud of what those involved with the Nelson dojo have achieved over the years, but doesn't want to rest on his laurels. "It's an ongoing practice, and I've got a lot to learn yet."

Barber's own karate learning began when he was a teenager growing up in 1960s Wellington. An active and "fairly athletic" youngster, he played field hockey at Ngaio School and Onslow College, as well as exploring the nearby hills with his four brothers. "As kids, we rode our bikes and went camping and things like that. We were always up there and out there."

Few New Zealanders of the time had any exposure to or knowledge of the martial arts. "Most people, if you mentioned karate, thought it was a Chinese restaurant down the road or something," says Barber with a chuckle. He himself picked up on it due to mentions in the TV programme *The Avengers*, where Emma Peel and John Steed did "a sort of pseudo-karate thing", and

a Judo-practising Wellingtonian who returned from studying in Japan and started a karate class in Petone.

"I'd done some wrestling before starting karate, and I was always fairly interested in the fighting arts," says Barber. "Cassius Clay (Muhammad Ali) was one of my big heroes back then."

More than 45 years on, Barber can still remember his first teenage impression of that Petone karate class. "I was awestruck at these people making funny noises and going through a lot of sparring. In retrospect, it was pretty rough karate compared to the stuff we do now – pretty scary, but I enjoyed it."

He regularly attended the Petone classes while at high school, before joining some colleagues at a new Victoria University club (rising to the rank of green belt) after starting work at a publishing company. His next dojo, however, was a world away from what he'd done thus far – in more ways than one.

At a time when the traditional big OE hadn't yet become a tradition, and beyond-Australia overseas adventures were still a rarity for young Kiwis, Barber decided to follow Wellington karateka (karate practitioner) John Jarvis halfway around the world for several months' intensive training at Kyokushinkai Honbu Dojo in Tokyo.

He admits he knew little about the 'home of karate' before he arrived, other than the fact that "Japan was in the last war" – leading to a fair bit of culture shock for the young Kiwi.

"I'd been brought up on meat and three veg, so I was really hungry all the time; living on rice. Also, the heat and the humidity, and the training... yeah, it was really difficult because a lot of the time I was the only foreigner in the dojo, and I didn't really understand what was going on."

Barber lived in a midtown Tokyo flat with Jarvis, within walking distance of the dojo. "I didn't really know what else to do except go to the dojo. I knew my way



The pupil becomes the master



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Already enamoured by karate as an extracurricular pursuit, Barber was then inspired to dedicate more of his life to its practice following a visit to New Zealand by Tadashi Nakamura (then the worldwide chief instructor for Kyokushin karate).

“I was so impressed with him – his karate and also his demeanour and attitude,” says Barber. “Obviously he was a very tough guy, but he was also nice. All the other Japanese masters that I met were tough and good at what they did, but they also had a certain amount of arrogance. This guy Nakamura spun my head around about what the practice of karate was all about, so I decided I wanted to devote myself to more training and to teaching.”

While Christchurch had a few small karate schools in the late 1960s and early 1970s, Barber noticed that Nelson, which he regularly visited as part of his role with the publishing company, did not. “One of the reasons I liked Nelson, apart from the climate and that it’s a wonderful place to bring up a family, was that it really had no strong, established karate school – it was a bit of an opportunity.”

So in 1974, Barber took a big leap of faith; leaving his publishing job, moving to Nelson and buying the Parere Street factory building that over the years would be transformed into a magnificent dojo, positively affecting the lives of thousands.

In hindsight, Barber’s choice of Nelson proved rewarding. He and his wife, Jane – now Kyoshi Jane, the highest-ranked female Seido karateka outside of the USA – whom he met here through a combination of her hairdressing and his karate, raised four great kids (three of whom have been involved in Seido). The family has enjoyed the great Top of The South climate, and his dojo has grown into a very positive part of the wider community.

But things were tough, and the future less certain, in the early days of his life-changing move to Nelson. At the time, Nelson was a far smaller and less diverse place; more of a quaint town than the vibrant regional centre it is now.

For the first few years, Barber taught karate in and around ‘seagulling’ at the wharf, and other manual jobs, to make ends meet. “It was hard work. My family and I really struggled, and we had very little money. I remember closing the dojo over Christmas and wanting to go and visit my family in Wellington; my mother. I didn’t have the money to do that; even to drive over to Picton and catch the ferry!”

There were some early karate highlights, however, such as when Barber was asked to captain the New Zealand karate team to the 1975 World Championships. During the all-expenses-paid trip to Tokyo, Barber got to meet Nakamura again. The Japanese master was very encouraging and supportive of his Nelson dojo efforts.

Another key event occurred the following year, when Nakamura decided to respectfully withdraw from Kyokushin karate to set up his own school, named Seido (the “sincere way”), which returned karate to its traditional values and better reflected his own beliefs as to its true meaning – cultivating the entire character of a person, rather than just focusing on their physical prowess.

Nakamura, like the ancient masters, believed everybody – men, women and children from all walks of life – should be able to safely practice karate and develop themselves.

Barber followed Nakamura, immediately switching the Nelson dojo

between the dojo and the wee apartment we had, so I just went there every day. Consequentially, I had the best attendance. Later, I always told my students I went there every day because I didn’t know my way back to the airport.”

Under the guiding hand of the legendary Mas Oyama, 10th dan black belt and founder of the Kyokushin school of karate, Barber quickly impressed and progressed. He recalls some tough times, especially as several of the local karateka were keen to prove themselves by sparring against the bigger, but less experienced, gaijin (foreigner).

“I was cannon fodder really,” he recalls with a laugh. “There was a hell of a lot of emphasis on sparring and free fighting; I was a prime target really. They used to give me a few bashings.”

But he persisted, making an impression. “Master Oyama used to talk about how hard this gaijin – Andre he used to call me – would train, and when I was about to leave Japan he presented me with shodan, which is a first dan black belt.” Barber was also taken to a local home for a meal, “which was a great honour; to be invited to a Japanese house as a gaijin.”

After four months, hard-earned black belt in hand, Barber returned to New Zealand and work at publishing company AH & AW Reed. He also toured the country with Jarvis, spreading the word about “this then little known mysterious oriental art” via demonstrations, and newspaper and TV interviews.

When transferred to the publisher’s new Christchurch office, Barber continued his karate training alongside Renzie Hanman (then a fellow Kyokushin practitioner, and now one of the other two Seido karate Hanshi



The enjoyment of passing on his art

from Kyokushinkai to Seido karate in 1976. A few years later, Barber was struggling to balance various jobs with teaching karate, so he turned to the grandmaster for advice.

“I remember when I was seagulling down at the wharf, and I had to rush home, grab something to eat and have a quick shower to get the smell of fish off me before teaching karate. I wrote to Kaicho saying how hard it was to maintain this lifestyle, and Kaicho wrote back and said: ‘Why don’t you be a poor karate teacher for a while? You have to trust yourself, and I’m sure it will come right.’ So I gave up all the jobs and just concentrated on karate. I could devote more time, and started children’s classes and extra classes in the evenings. Gradually, it just sort of crawled its way forward.”

Barber’s Nelson dojo may have crawled along at the beginning, but for the past few decades it has been well and truly up and running. With several classes each day, it has 300 current students, aged 5 to 75, and is held in high esteem throughout the world.

Barber says a particular highlight was being asked to mind his Holiness the Dalai Lama on his two visits to Nelson, helping with crowd control and his personal security. “It was amazing, and a great honour. In India, they wait for days by a dusty road just to see him go past. So to be introduced to him and hold his hand, and help him up a hill, was very special.”

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Over the years, thousands have walked through the Nelson dojo’s doors and had their lives changed for the better – whether in ways great or small.

“I remember things changed when we started doing Access courses,” says Barber, recalling the government-funded courses for unemployed people. “We applied as a motivational course to help people get back on track that had a history of failure and needed an injection of confidence and a way of gaining self esteem. We had a lot of success helping people – and not just young people – get some direction in their life.”

Barber agrees that such work fits very well with the Seido karate values espoused by Nakamura. “It’s always been said that karate can bring out the best in people, and we saw that with the Access courses,” says Barber, who also serves the community as a Justice of the Peace.

“Some people would come along with an attitude, but the practice of Seido is about the teaching coming from within. Gradually, students dropped their baggage, saw who they really were and realised: ‘Hold on, I’m not a bad person after all’. The whole core of karate is self defence – and the basis of self defence is feeling good enough about yourself that you want to defend yourself.”

Barber has seen a lot of changes in some of his students’ lives, including things like breaking addictions and restoring relationships – and he is proud that Seido karate has played a part, just as it does in the wider community.

“As an organisation, we feel very much part of the Nelson community,” he says. Last Labour Weekend, the Nelson dojo held a large national tournament that, combined with other fundraising efforts, enabled them to donate almost \$20,000 to the Fifeshire Foundation. “Knowing that all this money goes back into areas that help people, we feel very proud to be part of this community; a strong, nice community.”

More than 35 years after he first stood outside that vacant Parere Street factory, dreaming of making a difference to his own and others’ lives, Hanshi Andy Barber is certainly doing that. And more.