

One of the best memories I have from when I began teaching on my own was the first time we ever traveled to a tournament. The first tournament we attended was held in Pierceton, Indiana and was hosted by Ken Gillenwater of Lion's Karate Academy. It was a PKC Regional Karate Event so it was relatively around 125 competitors. I can still remember that day in April of 2003.

Students attending included Kristi Rodocker, Ton Somkit, Troy Snyder, Don Shull and Matt Bishop. They were all white belts except for Kristi and Ton who were yellow belts. Each student was to perform Kata and then do sparring (which they had all just bought gear about a week before the tournament). The weather was cold for April and it was rainy out as we pulled into the school parking lot. I can remember their faces...all of the looked like a deer does right before you hit with a car - eyes wide open and mouth gaping.

The students went in, registered, changed (a couple got sick from their nerves) and came up to prepare for the event. It was a long day and I spent most of it judging. I had the chance to watch all of them do their kata and only a couple of them spar. When the event was over we did not get a single trophy...not one at all, but we gained so much more.

For all of the students they began training harder because they liked the competition and wanted to go again. They began working out on Saturdays to prepare for the next event coming up in November at Pierceton again. It was great to see such dedication...dedication which I have never seen since in any of my students. They worked until they hurt and then worked some more. They wanted more and more knowledge and continued to ask questions. This was great and they all became so close they truly were like a family.

For me it was a real eye opener. I was so used to going to tournaments with green belt or above students I trained at Duhamell's school. We always came back with trophies galore and I had never been in this situation. It struck my confidence and made me begin to look inside as to what I could be doing wrong in teaching my students...and I found the answer. As a sensei I was used to teaching students who were green belt or above and rarely taught any beginners. I had completely skipped the basics and began teaching concepts that a new student could not possibly grasp. It was, and still is my fault that my students performed so badly that day. I immediately set out to retrain my mind and look at everything from a white belt's point of view. I began with the basics, stance, footwork, proper technique and then focused on application instead of teaching application before teaching them proper technique. My confidence was shot and I thought I was a terrible instructor until we went to the tournament in November of that year. My students could see it in my face, they could hear it in my words and they could tell that I had a battle to go through...one that I had to win.

The battle changed the way I teach beginners now. Our white and yellow belt classes are all about technique and stances. We focus on drilling the basics before we ever get to application. I do not focus on application until the student earns their green belt anymore and I am very happy that I modified my training this way. It has become a the strong foundation that has produced the Aiki Te Ryu black belts everyone feared at events because they were so good. It was a battle that I won, but only because my students were dedicated to learning and did what I instructed them to do...they listened and did what was asked of them...and it paid off.

The next event in Pierceton was basically the same crowd. We had two new students attend who were children. It was amazing the difference in their kata and sparring. I remember Kristi, Troy, Ton and Matt all got 2nd place in sparring and Kristi got a 1st in Kata and Ton got a 3rd. The two new kids both got 2nd in sparring. Everyone that went won a place and so many people commented on their performances and etiquette that I once again felt proud and confident. If I had never went to that first event I would have never established the basis for the foundation in Aiki Te Ryu, which is technical training, stances and repetition of basics. It is amazing what one can learn when one truly opens their eyes and returns to their roots.