

# JOE CARBONARA

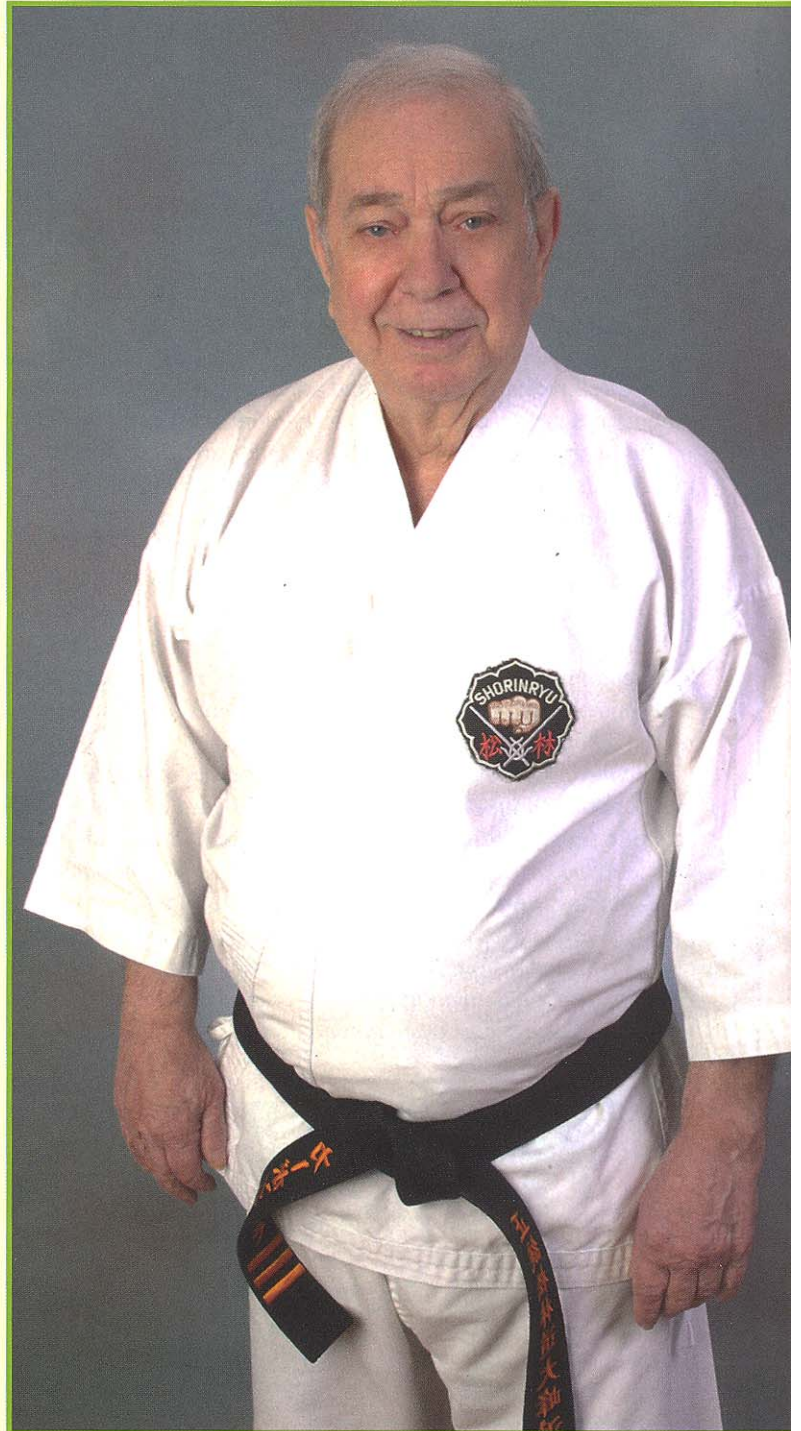
## “I Never Won a Trophy”

By Jerry Figgiani

Last summer, I had the opportunity to visit Okinawa for the second time. The first time was in 1991, for the celebration of Grandmaster Shoshin Nagamine's 85th birthday. On this past visit, I traveled with six of my students to visit Kensei Taba, 10th dan Shogen Ryu Karate. These events may not have happened without the influence of my Shorin Ryu instructor, Joseph Carbonara Sensei.

I first met Sensei back in the early 80s at a tournament in Kings Park, New York. At that time, I had only been studying for a short period of time. I was standing next to an older gentleman (not realizing who it was) watching an open kata division when I noticed him getting very upset. At that point he turned to me and said, “This is going to be the ruination of karate.” I didn't realize it at the time what he was so mad at; I kind of brushed it off. I soon found out who this man was and that he had a good reputation for teaching karate the old way.

Over the years, I have come to understand the philosophy of this gentleman and his opinions of what make a good martial artist. His belief is that karate is not a sport, but a way to self-realization. It was not about playing games but something that should be approached with the spirit of the utmost seriousness to develop both mind and body. He would always say he never won a trophy but that his only competition was himself. His way was practiced as a do – a path to both physical and spiritual development and the human endeavor of the highest order, not as an ego-boosting game. This interview is a look into a man, right or wrong, who has helped shape a path for many martial artists on the East Coast, a man who later would become *my sensei*.



*Sensei, this year you celebrated your 75th birthday and the 40th anniversary of the Budokan Dojo. When did you first start your study of the Martial Arts?*

I started in the early '60s with Joe Johnson and Joe Avella, who were partners in the Patchogue, New York, dojo. They were two black belts under Ansei Ueshiro, who was the first Okinawan sent here by Grandmaster Shoshin Nagamine [in 1962].

*When did you first make black belt and by whom?*

I first made black belt in February 1969 and was promoted to shodan by Shoshin Nagamine at Zenko Heshiki's Dojo on 72nd Street in Manhattan. It was in the middle of a blizzard. I was recommended by Ansei Ueshiro, who was also at the promotion.

*What was your first impression of Ansei Ueshiro?*

My first impression of him was that he was an outstanding martial artist and very strong. He had outstanding ability.

*What was your memory of the training at that time?*

We mostly trained in basic exercises. The group was always lined up in a circle as we had no lineup at that time. The basics consisted mostly of techniques from kumite [freestyle sparring]. Kumite was almost every night, and it was no pads and bare knuckles. There were a lot of injuries at that time and many people decided it wasn't for them. You had to be in the right mindset for these classes.

*Do you have any other recollections of that time?*

In 1969, the Grandmaster came over from Okinawa, and I was among the group of people who went to the airport and to greet him. As I was still a brown belt at that point, I was not allowed to stay for certain meetings and workouts going on at that time to promote Matsubayashi in the United States. There was a very strict code. It was all about etiquette.

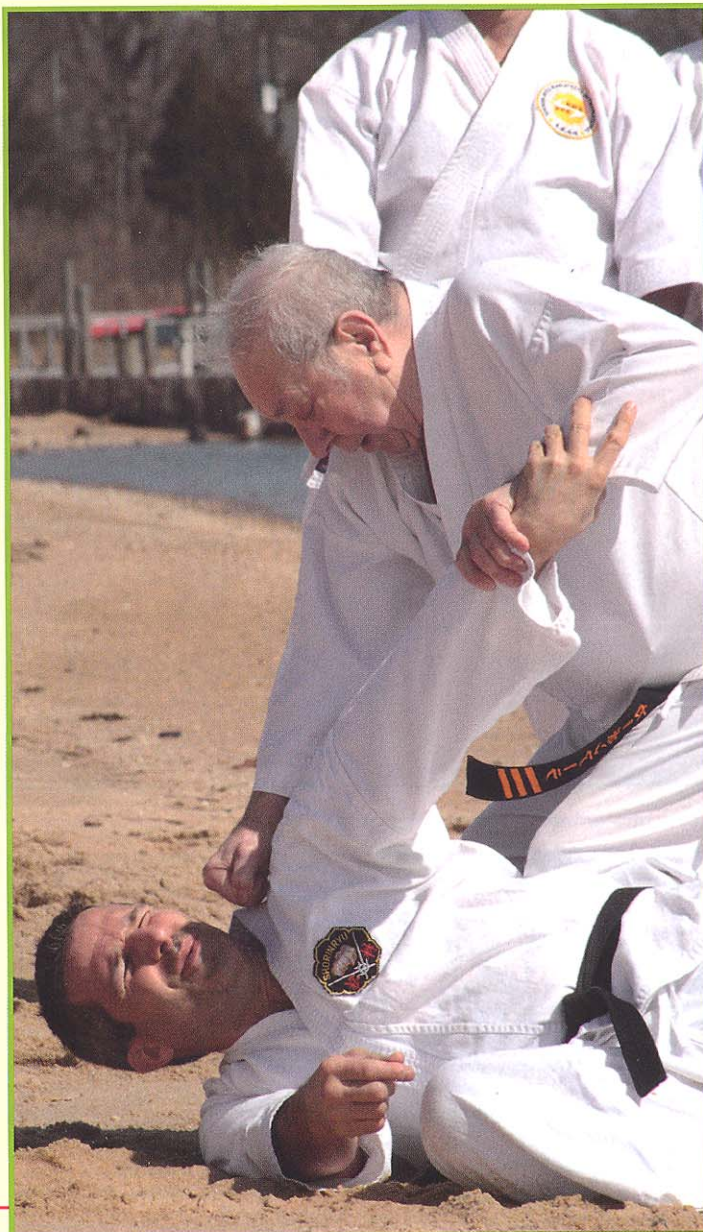
*How did you come to meet Chotoku Omine Sensei?*

When Master Nagamine came over at the time of my promotion to black belt, he brought Omine Sensei with him to become director of Matsubayashi Ryu in America. It was 1969 and already in the Lynbrook, New York, dojo there was a split taking place between the Grandmaster and Ansei Ueshiro. I decided to stay with the Grandmaster and Omine Sensei. Ansei Ueshiro advised me at that time to use my own mind to make my decision. Omine Sensei became the instructor in Lynbrook. I would leave my job cutting slipcovers in the New York City area and travel way out to the dojo. My training there under Omine Sensei was mostly kata, and a heavy emphasis was put on the basics to lay the foundation for our training.

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## I Never Won a Trophy

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### *How did you come to open your own dojo?*

After Omine Sensei came over with Shoshin Nagamine and I became a black belt, I was given permission to open my own school. I attempted to buy the Patchogue dojo and was advised not to by Ansei Ueshiro. I found a location in East Northport and was able to open my own dojo in September 1969. The Lynbrook school was closing and the fate of Sensei Omine was decided at a meeting with major black belts from Matsubayashi, such as Frank Grant, Zenko Heshiki, and Steve Corriess. I volunteered to take Omine Sensei with me. I also provided him with money and a job helping me cut slipcovers, which I did for a living, and housed him in the back of my dojo, which was over a Big Apple supermarket.

### *What do you feel was a turning point in your studies?*

The turning point was when I finally made the decision to stay with Sensei Omine and to start training in the basics and kata of the Matsubayashi system as handed down by Grandmaster Shoshin Nagamine.



1) 1969 Karate men with Master Nagamine

2) Budokan Dojo East Northport, NY.

**How was it having Shoshin Nagamine's representative, Omine Sensei, living with you?**

It was fantastic. I had the opportunity to train every day and really got personalized attention. The downside came in 1971, I received a call to go to the dojo because a fire had broken out, and firemen had to pull Sensei Omine from the flames after stopping me from doing so. That's when my wife and I decided to take him into our home and nurse him back to health. He suffered third degree burns from that fire, and as he recovered he helped my children with their homework.

**What happened after this all took place?**

In January 1973, I sold my home in Commack and had a new house built in East Northport with a traditional dojo underneath, including a back room made especially for Omine Sensei. In 1975, the Huntington Town Board decided that karate was not a business that could be conducted in a home and I was ordered to stop. Like days of old, we continued to train secretly until we found a location in East Northport for a new dojo. After his recovery, sensei went back to Okinawa. Eventually, he decided to move to California and to bring his family to the states in 1973.

**What happened when Omine Sensei left you?**

When he left, I continued to structure my classes after him beginning with warm-ups, basics, katas, yakusoku kumite, and heavy arm training.

**What was Omine's favorite kata? Which ones did he teach?**

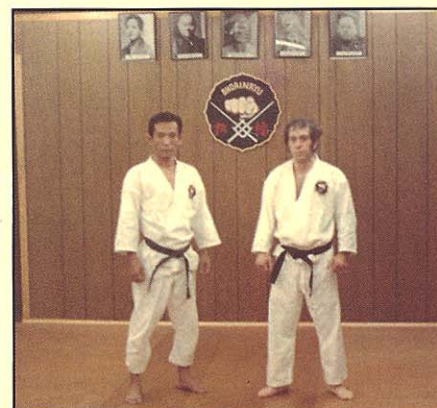
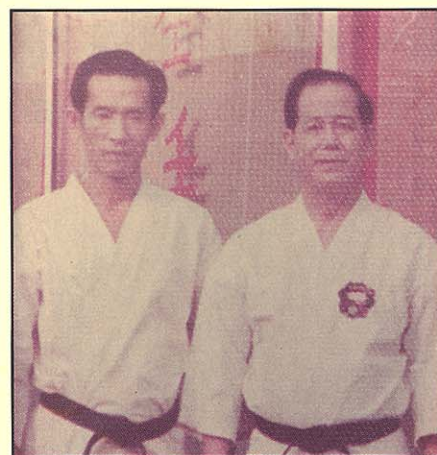
Naihanchi was Omine's strongest kata and one he heavily influenced me with. Omine taught me all the katas except Kusanku, which I learned at age 52 from the Grandmaster's son, Takayoshi Nagamine.

**How long did you have a relationship with your sensei?**

Up till 1975 when he passed away from a brain aneurysm. He was living in California with his family and teaching at his dojo in San Bruno. I had previously taken students out there to train with him. I flew out there and said the eulogy at his funeral. Ueshiro Sensei also attended and was very kind to me at that time. He understood what Sensei Omine had meant to me.

**Did you go back training with Ansei after the loss of your instructor?**

No. After his death, I was directly associated with Grandmaster Nagamine. I went to visit the Grandmaster for the first time in 1980, which I would follow up with four more visits to Okinawa.



**(Top) Omine Sensei and Grandmaster Nagamine.**

**(Center) Sensei Omine and Sensei Carbonara.**

**(Bottom) Sensei's Omine and Ueshiro with Grandmaster Shoshin Nagamine.**



**Sensei Carbonara teaching class at Budokan Dojo East Northport, NY.**