



Report by: Makiko Ara, 6 Dan, Renbu Dojo Canada

Note: Eric's report follows this one

I attended the 43rd AJKF Foreign Kendo Leaders' Summer Seminar held in Kitamoto, Saitama at the Gedatsu-kai Training Center from July 22nd to July 29th, 2016.

Number of participants: 58

Number of countries represented: 44

Participants by Dan: 3 Dan (32), 4 Dan (15), 5 Dan (8), 6 Dan (4)

Primary Instructors:

Kakehashi Masaharu Sensei Hanshi 8 Dan

Kasamura Koji Sensei Kyoshi 8 Dan

Nagao Susumu Sensei Kyoshi 8 Dan

Tanaka Hiroaki Sensei Kyoshi 8 Dan

Other Sensei in attendance as Instructors and/or Translators:

Hamasaki Mitsuru Sensei, Hayashi Tatsuo Sensei, Sato Yukio Sensei, Toda Tadao Sensei, Alex Bennett Sensei, Tsurunaga Ryowa Sensei, Kato Junichi Sensei, and several other senseis who attended for shorter periods of time.

The seminar takes place within the property of the Gedatsukai organization. All formal kendo and kata sessions take place at the dojo of the Renshinkan, which is situated right next to the Gedatsukai Training Center. The training center is where all participants and Senseis stay throughout the seminar, and includes a cafeteria, bathing facilities, laundry facilities, and large hall for lectures and parties. The facility is operated by volunteers and some employees of the Gedatsukai.

Daily training consists of 4 broad sessions:

1. Kata (Nippon Kendo Kata and Bokuto Ni Yoru Kihon Kendo Waza)
2. Shinpan Training (technique, theory and practice)
3. Waza and Fundamentals (etiquette, suburi, kihon uchi, shikake waza, oji waza)
4. Keiko (kirikaeshi, uchikomi, kakari keiko, mawari jigeiko, shidou keiko with Senseis)

Additional special sessions included:

1. Bus outing to watch the All Japan Children's Budo Rensei Taikai at the Budokan
2. Anti-doping lecture by Dr. Masayuki Miyasaka, Anti-Doping Officer of the AJKF
3. Shinpan practice with children from local dojos in team matches for shiai
4. Shinpan practice with each room competing as teams in a tournament style

Kata was led by Kakehashi Sensei, with Hamasaki Sensei as tachi partner. Waza and fundamentals were led most often by Nagao Sensei and sometimes by Kasamura Sensei. Shinpan training was led by Kasamura Sensei with Nagao Sensei. Keiko was led by Kakehashi Sensei for the most part.

Observations

The AJKF Foreign Kendo Leaders' Summer Seminar provided me with an opportunity to focus single-mindedly on kendo for an entire week, and I learned so much from the very generous Senseis of the seminar. But there were two specific concepts I'd like to share. The first thing is that the kendo community and practicing of kendo as a discipline, comes down to an emotional connection. It doesn't matter who you are or where you're from, once you are in the dojo, if you have heart, you will have the respect and friendship of those around you.

Practicing kendo just in Canada, we are sort of in a bubble; everyone knows who everyone is and we take things for granted. Going into this new environment and being totally stripped of titles and background, I was absolutely honoured and humbled by the connections I made with not only the participants, but with the AJKF staff, Gedatsukai staff, and the Senseis of the seminar. I realize that I was lucky, as I could speak both English and Japanese, but I will treasure these connections for the rest of my life.

Through many examples of the amazing participants there, I was reminded of how kendo cultivates the human spirit outside the dojo, and it made me reconnect with the idea that the value of kendo is not only what happens in the dojo, but how it develops our human nature in our daily lives.

The second concept I discovered is that in Canada, we are very privileged in kendo, compared to other countries. I asked many of the participants about how they started kendo and about their journey. Aside from myself and a handful of other participants, the vast majority of participants were only introduced to kendo in their adulthood. And even today, there are very few federations in the world with any significant youth kendo population. This seemed to be a common theme throughout the world (aside from Korea, USA, Brazil and Canada). I realized that in Canada we have an opportunity to cultivate kendo amongst young people, and we must do a better job in developing these treasures we have.

Other participants told me that there are no instructors in their country to even teach about the finer points of kendo and etiquette. We are lucky in Canada, that we have first generation Japanese-Canadian instructors who have experienced kendo training first-hand in Japan, and continue to pass that knowledge onto the next generation. We must continue to ensure that the culture of kendo is not lost.

And finally, there were participants from developing countries of the world, where even purchasing basic kendo equipment is a challenge. So making the trip to Japan was a major financial expenditure. Most federations do not subsidize any part of the travel costs, and this very much surprised the instructors of the seminar.

The entire week at Kitamoto was truly a life-changing experience for me. Until now, I had only really tasted a small bite of what kendo was. In my 27 years of doing kendo, I thought I pretty much knew the "why" of kendo, and that all I really needed to do was to continue to polish the "how" of kendo. Of course, I need to continue to hone my skills, but seeing the way the Senseis of the seminar interacted and carried themselves throughout the week showed me the gravity of being a true kendo leader. And realizing that we are actually in a very privileged kendo environment in Canada, has made me want to do more to make the most of what we have.

Thank you to the CKF and its Directors for giving me this very valuable opportunity. It has truly given me a fresh perspective on my goals as a kendo leader in Canada.

Recommendations:

1. I was in touch with 2 past participants of the seminars in advance of departing, but I did not know anyone else who had attended in the past. For future participants, I would recommend either presenting these reports, or introducing them to past participants who can act as mentors. I would be happy to speak to any future participants in advance of their trip.

Important things not specified in orientation package:

- a. Bring one or two business casual outfits for the welcome party, ending party and the outing to the Budokan. Shorts are not acceptable.
- b. Strong emphasis was made that there should be no visible tattoos for the Budokan outing.
- c. Bring both kodachi and tachi bokken for kata (many people did not have a kodachi).
- d. Bring lots of gifts to exchange with participants, and to give to the Sensei. Gift giving is a large part of Japanese culture and I wasn't prepared with enough gifts to go around.

2. Kendo reiho (etiquette) and reigi (courtesy) were presented right at the beginning of the seminar, and seemed to be an annoyance to the Senseis throughout the week. In Canada, I think we have maintained a good standard so far, but we can be better. Some of the more functional matters like how to seiza correctly, bow correctly, walk in the dojo correctly, wear our kendogi and kendogu correctly, maintain a neat and tidy dojo environment, are concepts that we should ensure are upheld across Canada.

We have an opportunity through the seminars that are run across the country to improve reiho and reigi across Canada. Perhaps it can be standardized and be a mandate of the CKF to ensure that all Instructors and Directors who conduct seminars, include this as a part of a CKF mandate.

3. The week-long seminar is physically and mentally taxing. With jetlag, morning keiko, and constant stimulation, most nights I was only able to get 3 or 4 hours of sleep. This was common amongst the participants. Leading up to the seminar, I had increased my keiko days and did strength and conditioning training at the gym, but even then some of the keiko were tough. Some participants had bad blistering on their feet and hands, and some could not make it through all the practices. Considering how valuable this opportunity is, future Canadian participants must be pre-warned of how strenuous this seminar is, and ensure that all candidates are prepared.

4. The seminar is organized by administrators of the International Division of the AJKF. The seminar is highly organized, with all sessions running on a very tight schedule. It is critical that all participants adhere closely to the schedule and arrive 10-15 minutes before all set meeting times. This was a recurring issue for the Senseis and organizers.

5. In addition to the formal training schedule, which begins at 6:30 AM everyday with kata, there is an optional morning practice which begins between 5:15 and 5:30 AM.

Kato Sensei and the AJKF Administrative staff take part in this morning keiko, and I would highly encourage future participants to also take part in the asa keiko.

The asa keiko consisted of self-run kihon uchi, followed by open keiko. In the later half of the week, the Senseis came to observe the asa keiko and as it is a smaller group, they often provided advice and instruction. In addition, it is the only time that one can practice freely, as all other keiko sessions were mawari geiko format.

6. The style in which the Senseis teach is very much in the Japanese style where sometimes the instruction is nuanced and very valuable knowledge is presented in very subtle ways. As a cultural observations, Senseis are hesitant to be brutally honest with their critique of individuals, so it is paramount that individuals self-reflect on all instruction given. Even when the English translation was well presented, deep concepts were often misunderstood due to a lack of understanding of kendo teaching and study.

I would recommend that future Canadian participants preference be given to 5 Dan or 6 Dan kenshi with first-hand experience teaching in their respective dojos. These higher level instructors will have much more to gain from the Kitamoto Seminar, and be able to give back as well.

7. There is a very strong focus on Kata throughout the seminar, with an emphasis on correct form and etiquette. There were many participants who did not know all their Nippon Kendo Kata forms or the Bokuto Kihon Waza. The CKF should ensure that all future Canadian participants are well-versed in both Kata sets. Kakehashi Sensei noted several times that people have learned Kata incorrectly and it is critical to correct those mistakes and follow the Kendo Kata precisely and understand the reasoning, as a matter of fundamental kendo knowledge.

8. We had the opportunity to watch the elementary school and junior high school age children compete in the reisei taikai at the Budokan, and also judge matches for young children for our shimpan practice. I was also given the opportunity to watch keiko conducted for a small group of children at the Renshinkan Dojo between our own sessions. Seeing the sheer number of children engaged wholeheartedly in kendo really moved me.

It was clear that from the young kenshi's movements that these children put in a considerable amount of hours to get to where they are. For the future of kendo in Canada, I would like to propose doing more as a federation to develop youth kendo. I think the Canadian Nationals would be a great time to combine with a National Youth Kendo Camp. This is something that I had been thinking about in the past, but feel more passionately than ever. I would be happy to be an organizer of the event and will move forward to present the idea to one of the Directors in the near future.

9. I had many opportunities to speak individually with all the Senseis of the seminar. Many of them told me that they see and know that there were participants who could not make it through keiko, or those who were not taking their teachings immediately into practice. They were frustrated about people who were told to fix something, but continued with their bad habits.

The Senseis of the seminar are the top instructors of the world and yet many participants did not have the discipline or the self-realization to put those teachings into action. I felt

that this was a huge detriment to those individuals, their country, as well as the seminar as a whole.

I respect that Canada strives to give more opportunities for these kinds of experiences to lower Dan individuals who are underserved in kendo, but not sending the best kenshi of Canada is a detriment to the reputation of Canadian kendo, and also to the experience of the Kitamoto Seminar. I will encourage those 5 Dan and 6 Dan around me who have not considered attending the Seminar in the past, to really consider the seminar as a step in their kendo development, as I believe our best kenshi have the most to give back to the Canadian kendo community, as well as the world kendo community.

- August 19, 2016

Report from Eric Charleschiu

Kitamoto July 22-29, 2016

43rd Foreign Kendo Leaders Summer Seminar
@ Gedatsukai Renshin-kan Dojo & training center

Chief Instructors

Masaharu KAKEHASHI. Hanshi 8dan

Koji KASAMURA. Kyoshi 8dan

Susumu NAGAO. Kyoshi 8dan

Hiroaki TANAKA. Kyoshi 8dan

Assisting Instructors

Kokaze Sensei

Kikkawa Sensei

Hayashi Sensei (translator)

Hamasaki Sensei

Sato Sensei

Kato Sensei

Toda Sensei

Alex Bennett Sensei (translator)

+ many other sensei

59 participants from 45 countries

The schedule consisted of four practices a day. Kata practice before breakfast, after breakfast was more kata and then kihon/suburi practice with theories of teaching kendo. Afternoon practices started with Shimpan/referee details/theory followed by kihon keiko & mawari-geiko. Practicing in the heat & humidity of Japan was tough and challenging. They say it was not as hot as usual this year but I think for most of us, it was still the hottest conditions we have every practiced in. This was certainly eye opening for me. I would think that conditioning training would be beneficial for anyone planning to train in Japan.

Being awake early on the first full day of the seminar, I was doing some suburi and heard some sounds from the Gedatsukai dojo, so I walked over to find the junior members gathering before leaving for the All Japan Junior Taikai at the Nippon Budokan! It was amazing to see the children with their Sensei/coach. They were inspiring to watch as they behaved like a true team, lining up correctly, sitting in seiza, reciting their dojo kun, all together at such a young age. Watching all the children at the Nippon Budokan was even more inspiring to see. Their reigi/etiquette was impressive and to see how serious they were really showed the strength of Japanese kendo spirit.

The seminar was seven days, and the first practice was Friday afternoon with ji-geiko. It was a nice way to start and meet the other participants through practice. The ranks of the participants from 45 countries was as follows.

32 sandan
15 yondan
8 godan
4 rokudan

There was a lot of time dedicated to both bokuto ni yoru kendo kihon waza keiko-ho and kendo-no-kata. This was understandable seeing that the majority of the participants were sandan and did not appear to have a detailed knowledge of either sets of kata. I think that we are very fortunate in Canada to have kata taught in such detail with all the talented Sensei/instructors we have. There were some details that were different from what I was taught so I will try to remember them and pass them along. The keiko practices were difficult given the heat & humidity, but I made it through all the practices and surprised myself!

The time spent outside of practice was as much about learning kendo as the practices themselves. I believe that practicing kendo is in part to learn Japanese culture. Much of the Reigi in kendo stems from basic Japanese culture which most non Japanese kendoka do not get a chance to see or experience. The meals were fantastic and so well balanced. It was great to eat with my roommates and to build such a great team spirit. The time spent talking with the other participants was also great. I think more time speaking with other participants would have been beneficial but many people took the time outside of practice to rest/sleep. Speaking with the Sensei after practices was a bit more difficult. They were very generous with their time but since I do not speak Japanese it made it difficult to communicate with them. The translators were fantastic and also very generous with their time and efforts during and after practice as well.

I am so thankful and honoured to have been given this opportunity to represent Canada at this International Seminar. This was a once in a life-time chance for me and I am grateful to have participated and visited Japan.

Eric CharlesChiu