

Kung Fu Instructor of the Year

by Steve Neklia and Robert W. Young

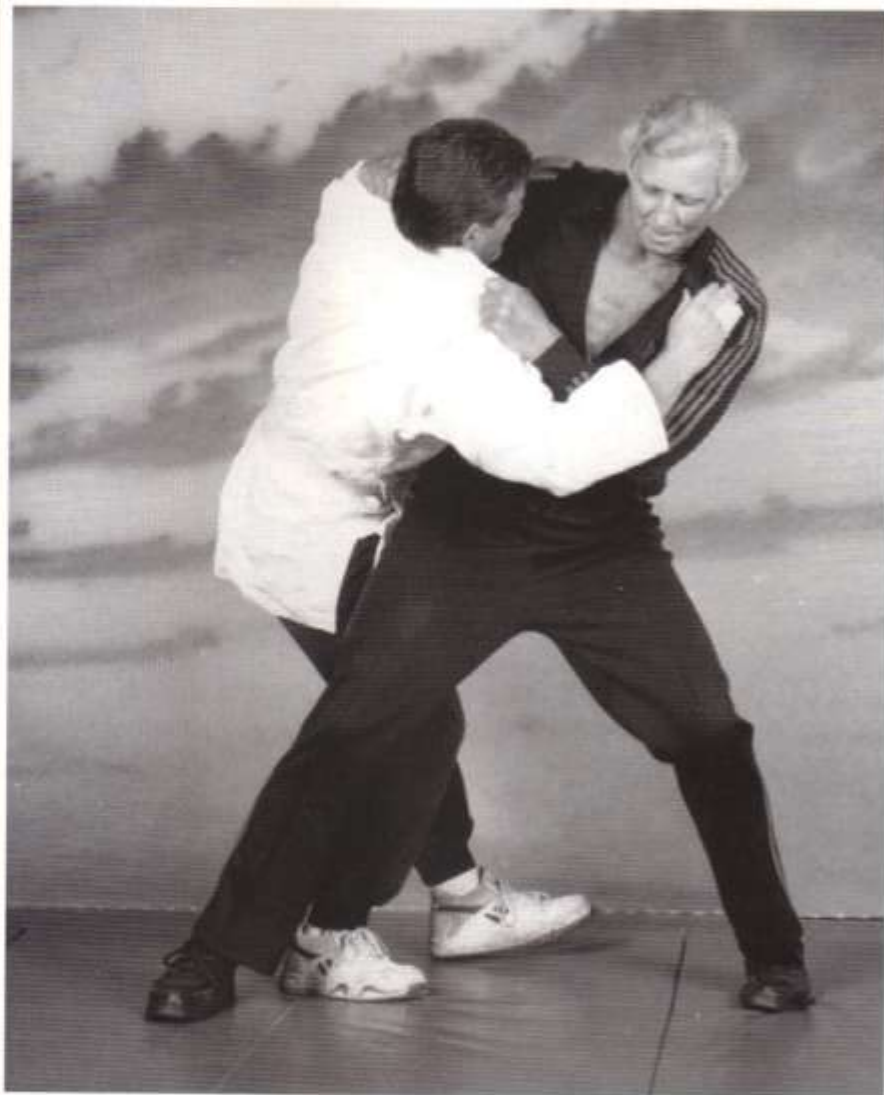
A frequent criticism of kung fu involves the art's highly stylized techniques and their usefulness—or uselessness—in a real fight. Some detractors have even gone as far as claiming that kung fu is *the* art that is furthest removed from reality.

If you're smart, you will avoid mentioning such nonsense around Gene Chicoine. As head of the International Shuai Chiao Association, an organization that boasts more than 39,000 members, Chicoine obviously knows his art, and that art just happens to be the Chinese style that is perhaps best-known for fighting.

Sometimes called Chinese wrestling, *shuai chiao* is claimed by many to be the oldest known form of kung fu. "Everything came from shuai chiao," Chicoine says. "The other styles evolved to a point where you could see a tremendous difference. They got away from the throwing part of it—where they could use *chin-na* (joint manipulation) to block and grab—and went into strictly punching and kicking." That is a shortcoming Chicoine refuses to let happen to those modern martial artists who belong to his association and follow its curriculum.

To the untrained eye, modern shuai chiao students sometimes appear to be performing an art that resembles judo because both styles include very effective throwing techniques. But shuai chiao goes beyond simply throwing an opponent to the mat. Its practitioners take their opponent down quickly and aggressively. Their throwing techniques are designed to be final. If done correctly, they will end a confrontation.

"Judo has only a portion of [shuai chiao's throws]," Chicoine says. "Take *osoto gari*, which is a judo sweep. To us, that is called diagonal striking. The guy reaches or throws a blow, and we block and come in. If we're just going to throw, we do the same thing [as the



As head of the International Shuai Chiao Association, Gene Chicoine (right) is helping preserve and spread the traditional Chinese martial arts.

judo stylist]. But the way we do it isn't their way. We can block, strike and break the collarbone, bring the knee up into the pelvic area, grab the back of the head and slam him face-down into the floor or the ground. We're not just going to take him back, as in the sport

part of it."

Those shuai chiao combinations Chicoine loves to describe in bone-breaking detail can include severely damaging hand and foot strikes, along with powerful joint locks. "The style was never just for throwing," he insists. "I was commissioned to make everybody realize this, and it's taken me 10 years to get to the point where I've got people who can teach it.

Gene Chicoine

"Sure, we throw—at the end, if we haven't already knocked you down," he continues. "But you are injured long before you get flipped through the air. We like to stun first, then throw. There are some vicious techniques in shuai chiao, and they are very effective."

Even though the comprehensive system also includes strikes, kicks and blocks, make no mistake about it: The throw is most important. Chicoine explains why: "Until you put a guy down on the ground, you haven't won. A lot of what's done in fighting—especially in this country, where they come up to you and try to tackle, grab or wrestle you—[does not address this issue]. If you can throw, the guy is gone."

Chicoine then explains how, decades ago in China, officials wouldn't let shuai chiao practitioners compete against practitioners of other styles because the shuai chiao people always took first place with their debilitating strikes and match-ending throws.

Most modern-day practitioners of the ancient art belong to the Interna-

tional Shuai Chiao Association, Chicoine says. The majority live in Asia, but more than 1,200 reside in the United States. He regularly leads groups of eager practitioners to Taiwan to compete against the Chinese, and his guys do very well.

Chicoine assumed the presidency of the ISCA in 1986 after the death of his teacher and the art's best-known grandmaster, Chang Dung-sheng. Chicoine, who started his martial arts training in 1946 as a member of the U.S. occupation forces in Japan, currently holds a shuai chiao rank of ninth-degree black belt. He was able to rise to that level because he lived as an adopted son of Chang right up until Chang's death. The fact that Chang chose an American to succeed him, and not a Chinese master, speaks volumes for Chicoine's fighting ability and leadership.

Chicoine likes to use his advanced rank and position to preserve the art exactly as he—and generations of fighters before him—learned it. "The

original concept of all martial arts was not a sport," he explains. "They were designed to fight—to defend yourself or to attack. Exercise and the mental aspects came in later. The original concept was strictly for fighting, and to take that away destroys the art."



Chang Dung-sheng (standing) had so much confidence in Gene Chicoine's martial arts skills and leadership abilities that he selected him to take over the reigns of the International Shuai Chiao Association.

Gene Chicoine (back row, fifth from the right) stands next to shuai chiao's best-known grandmaster, the late Chang Dung-sheng (to the left of Chicoine).



Apparently, nothing whatsoever had been taken away from shuai chiao, at least as Chicoine is teaching it. The system has retained every bit of its combat effectiveness. For this reason, *Black Belt* is proud to make Gene Chicoine its 1997 Kung Fu Instructor of the Year. ✕

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