

# BLACK BELT

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**ABOUT THE COVER:** Noted tournament competitor and tae kwon do stylist Simon Rhee, whose forthcoming martial arts video promises to be a hit, does some hitting of his own, delivering a side kick to the face of his airborne brother, Phillip. Marcia Mack photographed the action.

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There are several martial arts in the United States that utilize the *katana* (Japanese sword) or its unsharpened, non-steel substitute, the *iai-to*. (For the purpose of this article, *katana* will be used to include all Japanese swords and daggers.) The arts of *iai* (whether in *do* or *jutsu* form), *kenjutsu* and, to a lesser extent, *ninjutsu*, all employ these weapons. Even karate and *kenpo* exponents occasionally use the *katana* in demonstrations.

Unfortunately, few *sensei* (martial arts teachers) have had adequate instruction in the handling of these weapons. Where a slight error in judgment with a wooden weapon such as the *bo* (staff), *nunchaku* (rice flail), or *tonfa* (grindstone handle) often results in a superficial bruise, a slip with a *katana* usually requires a trip to the emergency room for stitches.

This article will not address the obvious, common-sense safeguards (no horseplay, drugs or alcohol; be sure of your target; only the owner handles the weapon, etc.) that apply equally to clubs, chains, firearms and related weapons. Rather, there are certain dangers inherent to the *katana* that must be addressed by all who choose to handle this weapon.

To the uninformed, a *katana* is a "samurai sword," an implement used like an axe to chop down cooperative actors in a movie. To some, a *katana* is more than a sword; it is a thing

of beauty, a piece of Japan's history to revere. To a sword practitioner, it may be all of these things, but foremost it must be structurally sound. The following parts of the *katana* must be inspected on a regular basis:

1. The *mekugi* (sword peg) must be made of tightly fitting new bamboo. If the peg gives way or falls out during practice, the blade may launch from the *tsuka* (handle) during a swing and injure a bystander. An excellent source of replacement *mekugi* are the bamboo (not pine) chopsticks used in Chinese restaurants. Simply cut off a proper-sized section of the chopstick and sandpaper it to the correct diameter.
2. The sword handle, constructed mainly of wood and string, is subject to cracking and slickness (due to an accumulation of sweat, body oil and dirt). If the wood becomes too brittle, shrinks, or develops cracks, replace it or retire the *katana*. Using a slick or weakened handle can lead to its disintegration, splinters in the user's hand, and possibly a launched blade. To clean the *tsuka-maki* (hilt wrapping), periodically brush it with a dry toothbrush.
3. Although nothing short of laboratory testing will reveal it before the fact, *iai-to* blades that receive extensive use may develop hairline fractures around the *mekugi-ana* (sword-peg hole) that will lead to the breaking of the *nakago* (tang) and an



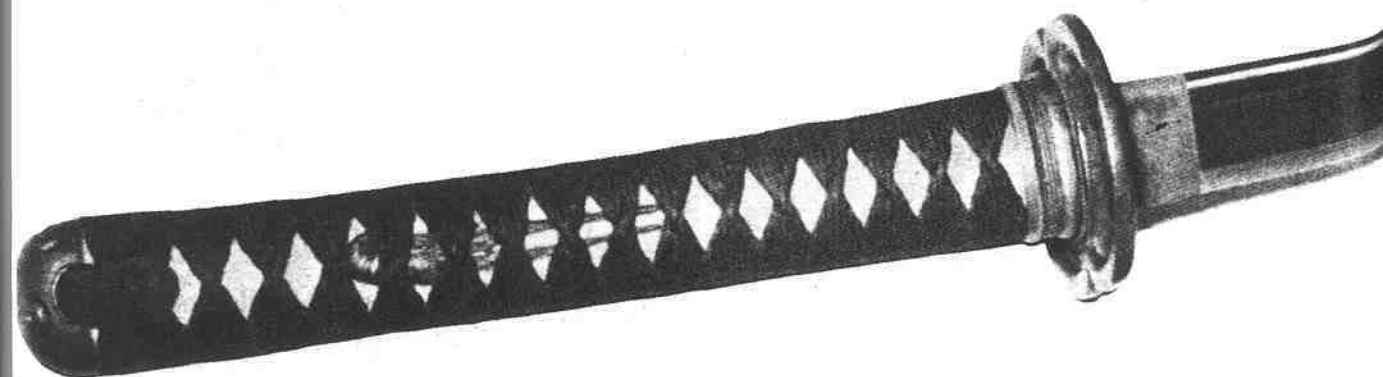
It is best to use a sword disassembly tool when removing the *mekugi* (the bamboo peg which holds the blade in the handle) for inspection.



The sword peg should be inspected regularly for cracks and wear. If the peg gives way or falls out during practice, the blade may fly off the handle and injure someone.



The blade should be wiped regularly with a thin coating of sword oil to prevent rust. A dry blade also has a tendency to catch during drawing and resheathing.



## Safety Tips to Avoid Losing a Limb



Photos courtesy of Terry B. Sanders



unexpected release of the blade. Consequently, the practice of using *iai-to* against *iai-to* in demonstrations of sword technique should be replaced with the use of *bokken* (wooden swords).

4. The job of the *saya* (scabbard) is to retain the sword. When first made, the *habaki* (sword collar) fits snugly into the *koiguchi* (literally, the "carp's mouth"—actually, the mouth of the scabbard). Repeated draws, however, eventually cause the sword to fit loosely and fall out when not held in place manually. The accepted remedy for a loose katana in Japan is to glue a small, thin strip of leather shim inside the section of the scabbard mouth that the *mune* (back) or non-blade side of the sword collar has worn away. Because the scabbard is made of wood, regular white glue works well for this task.

5. Tradition dictates that the katana be wiped with a thin coating of sword oil to prevent rust. There are other, more prosaic reasons for this practice. A dry blade has a tendency to bind or "hang up" during the processes of drawing and sheathing the blade. This can lead to loss of control of the

*Drawing the sword from the scabbard should be done lightly and smoothly (above left). Too tense a draw (above) and the sword will bind or catch on the scabbard.*

# TRAINING WITH THE JAPANESE SWORD

by Terry B. Sanders



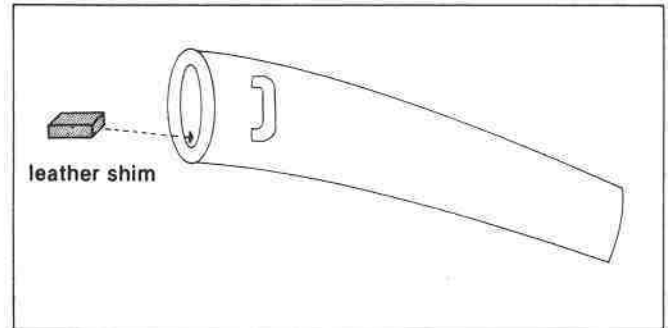


When wearing a Japanese sword in a belt on one's left side, the proper position for the left hand is encircling the scabbard with the thumb up over the sword guard at approximately one o'clock (1), not 12 o'clock (2). Stopping a runaway blade with reflexive thumb pressure (3) will severely slice the finger.

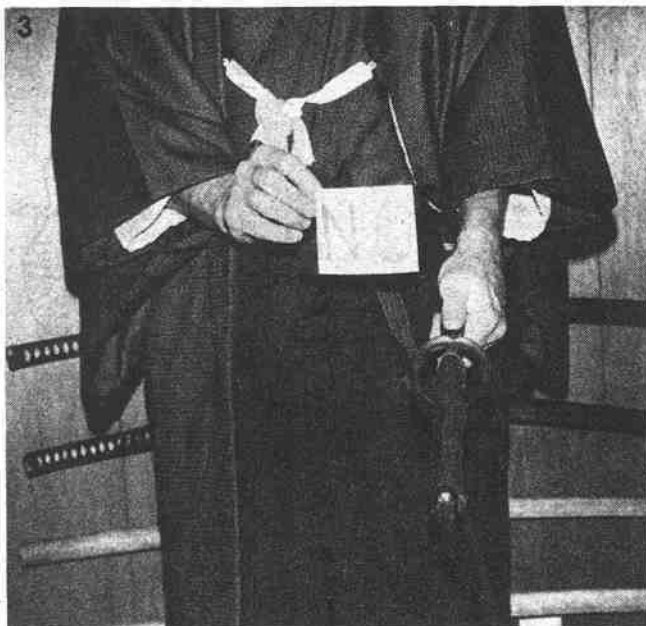
weapon. Additionally, when conducting *tameshigiri* (practice cutting), a well-lubricated blade cuts more efficiently and resists scratching.

While there are many schools of katana usage, most of them would subscribe to the following safeguards against human error:

- **Sword carrying.** When wearing a katana in a sword belt at one's left side, the proper position for the left hand is encircling the scabbard mouth with the left thumb reaching up over the *tsuba* (sword guard) at approximately one o'clock. The thumb then exerts a constant backward pull that keeps the katana securely in the scabbard. If the thumb is kept at the 12 o'clock position and the katana slips out of the scabbard (or is pulled out by an enemy), the sword holder's reflex



To tighten the blade's hold in the scabbard, glue a small shim of leather inside the scabbard mouth. This will cause the sword to fit more snugly in its sheath and alleviate the need to hold it in place manually.



action will be to stop the fugitive blade with downward thumb pressure. This reflexive attempt of braking a sword almost guarantees the practitioner a trip to the emergency room.

- **Sword drawing.** The katana should leave the scabbard quietly and smoothly. If one grabs the handle ham-fistedly and jerks it out with great strength, there is a good chance the sword will bind against the sides of the scabbard. There is also a good chance of the katana cutting its way out of the scabbard and severing portions of the left hand in the process.

A final word regarding old Japanese swords: At the end of World War II, thousands of katana were brought into the U.S. as war souvenirs. Their quality varied from stamped-out pieces of Manchurian railroad rails to authentic national treasures dating from nearly 1,000 years ago. Sword owners should have their blades examined by experts before using them for martial arts training. Regardless of the sword's "pedigree" or lack thereof, the chances are good that the handle, peg, hilt wrapping and scabbard have deteriorated to the point where their use could be dangerous. Consequently, all swords should be carefully inspected before using them while training alone or around others.

About the Author: Terry B. Sanders is a freelance writer and black belt in iaido who teaches the Japanese weapons arts in Tucson, Arizona.