

The Art of the “Pure Warrior” Sport Tonfa

By: Danny Zaino

The art of the tonfa is a forgotten art. My name is Grandmaster Danny Zaino and this is the story of how I took a traditional martial arts weapon and redesigned it for karate competition.

It all started 28 years ago when I was in the Army. I left Korea and was sent to my new station in Ft. Bliss Texas. At the time I was studying close to 7 years. I decided to attend a local tournament on base and after my competition I noticed a table where a vender was selling martial arts equipment. The first thing I noticed he was selling were these two wooden sticks that were shaped very unusual and where about a foot a half long with another piece of wood sticking out of it about four inches down which was the handle. What I am describing to you here was a very crude pair of Tonfas, an ancient Okinawan weapon whose handles were sometimes used as a portable rice grinder. The Tonfa also came from medical crutches that were shortened and then used as weapons. Back in ancient times the Tonfas were used in pairs and were made out of very heavy wood. They were mainly held in your hand with the stick part covering your forearm and elbow enabling you to block weapons, spin, and then strike the enemy. After many years of study I would learn that there were all different ways you could operate this weapon. When I picked the Tonfas up for the first time in Texas this was the very first time I had ever picked up a martial arts weapon. At this time I could only operate them with what little knowledge I had and I began competing with them at martial arts events to get more experience. When I did not do well in the competitions I began seeking out training and better methods of using the Tonfa.

When I became a Florida police officer they had just come out with the PR 24 side handle baton which all officers had to carry on them during their shift. Basically the PR 24 was a metal Tonfa with a swivel attached to the handle for better maneuvering. I began all types of training with the PR 24 which my department enforced which taught me to see the self-defense aspect of the Tonfa from the law enforcement side but I still wanted to learn the ancient art of the Tonfa. Because of my desire to learn this I started training with Grandmaster Johnny Pachivas from the USKA organization and some of his other instructors who were famous for their skill in weaponry and this enabled me to achieve what I really wanted to learn about the Tonfa which was the tradition and skill of this weapon used in organized Okinawan and Japanese form known as Kata for competition. As an experiment I then began to purchase all different kinds of Tonfas for practice purposes. Yet even with all my hard work and the use of different brands of Tonfas I was still doing poorly in competition and this continued for at least ten years. Then one day I got the idea to make the Tonfas shorter and started sanding the grooves of the Tonfas to make it easier to

manipulate during my form routines. At the time most store bought Tonfas came with an oil based shellac which covered the entire weapon and some even had wood oils to rub into them. This gave me the idea to start sanding the finishes off of the handles of the Tonfas which made them slicker and spin faster. This seemed to work quite well so I began teaching my students the art of the Tonfa. In competition they did well and won a lot at tournaments which gave me the fever to start competing again. I started winning but never taking first so I decided to make my own Tonfas and come up with a design all my own. The first thing I did was to seek out a master wood carver who carved the Tonfas form in a way made specifically for sports martial arts. I then started to get more in-depth with the design and had razor type points attached to the ends of the Tonfas to make them also worthy for the street. I discovered that oak was the best wood to use and that is how the **“Pure Warrior”** Sports Tonfa for tournament competition was created. I realized early on that I had to



remove the razor tips off the ends of the Tonfas being used for practice purposes and competitions when I accidentally cut one of my students during a practice session. I decided to keep some Tonfas with the razor tips but only for the street and combat use like the masters before me did. I soon began to develop my own techniques with the Tonfa and my own forms for Karate competitions. I also began teaching hand releases, throws, and tricks with the Tonfas. It wasn't long before I figured out to add a small tube like piece of metal to the Tonfa handle which helps the Tonfa to spin faster when your hands get sweaty. I then discovered that if you reverse your grip on the Tonfas and hold your hand by the swivel you can operate the Tonfas just as fast as the Knunchucks by actually holding them backwards. I even figured out a way to take care of them by using certain wood oils which preserves the wood and makes the Tonfas last longer. Two other tricks I discovered is that you can train for hours with the Tonfas by using a pair of competition weight lifting gloves and if you sand the handles right before competition it allows you to move the Tonfas much easier so they don't stick to your hands enabling you to perfect your martial arts form. I found that most martial artists do not really know how to operate the Tonfas correctly and that is why I mentioned at the beginning of this article that the Tonfa is the forgotten art. Everybody loves to pick up a pair of Knunchucks, spin them around and feel cool. They and many other martial arts weapons like the Bo Staff are much easier to operate. But

the art of the Tonfa takes many years of practice and should only be taught by a Master in the art of weaponry.

Today my son Tony Zaino competes on a national level with the Sport Tonfas I have designed and is probably one of the best karate competitors with the Tonfas in the world. He has been practicing and competing with the Tonfas since the age of 3. When you decide to learn the art of Kubudo (weaponry) it is important that you learn the correct way to operate your weapon and by doing that your learning of the weapon will become fun and enjoyable. It is also important to learn the history of the weapon you are studying. Once you have done all that you can then test your skills in a martial arts competition. In making the decision to study a weapon and if your choice is the Tonfa, I hope you have as much fun and enjoyment as I have had studying this amazing and unique weapon. I wish you good luck in your adventures and in your studies of martial arts weapons and remember to never stop learning.

About the author: **Grandmaster Danny Zaino** is an eighth degree black belt in American / Japanese & Okinawan Goju-Ryu & Kubudo. Please contact him in regards to doing a "Pure Warrior" Sports Tonfa Seminar in your area and instruction on how you can make your own "Pure Warrior" Sports Tonfa for your school or organization.

Contact number: [561-575-5425](tel:561-575-5425)

E-mail address: dzkarate@comcast.net

Visit: www.battleofthearts.com/zaino.html