



Cedillos finds more to karate than black belt

By Mike Morrow
Staff writer

Ron Cedillos had been perfectly happy with his first degree black belt standing. But now he finds himself preparing to test for his second degree belt.

Says Cedillos, director of the Torrance Karate School:

"My students are catching up with me."

A day-long black belt testing session is scheduled July 9 at the school and Cedillos will undergo the strict program alongside several of his own pupils.

The situation, he admits, is a little embarrassing.

"To me, achieving the black belt was all I wanted to do in karate, other than competing and teaching," said Cedillos.

"There's not much separating the second or third degree black belt from the seventh or eighth degree.

"But now, I'm having to face up to the possibility of teaching people who may be just as qualified to teach me. And I can't have that."

A smile crosses the face of the 26-year-old Cedillos, a one-time skinny and unskilled football player at North Torrance High School.

He excuses himself to answer another phone call.

The school, formerly operated by Chuck Norris, is regarded as one of the finest in the world and a concerned parent has inquired about her bashful 10-year-old son.

Karate, Cedillos tells her, teaches balance, coordination, breath control, eye control, speed, power, discipline and improves self-image.

She's sold on the idea.

"There are very few black belt instructors anymore," said Cedillos. "Everyone opened a school during the karate boom, but most of them died out."

"The early martial arts movies had people coming in here expecting us to teach them to jump over buildings and take on whole neighborhoods of people."

"The students today are more serious. Forty per cent of them are women. We've got a five-year-old boy and a 56-year-old surgeon."

"We're getting the respect we didn't have at the beginning."

Cedillos took his first karate lesson 11 years ago. Almost immediately, it taught him to take that extra step, something he refused to do in high school, and he worked himself into a high proficiency level.

Staff photos by George Saenz

Torrance Karate School instructor Ron Cedillos, holder of a first-degree black belt, says he's just trying to stay ahead of his students.

He says he's given up the idea of being a competitor and is now settled into instruction and what looks like might become a flourishing future in movies and television.

"I was gung-ho at the start, like most kids, and I really made something of myself competitively," he said.

"It got to the point, though, where I was training for a tournament four to five hours a day, six days a week, and then coming home with a trophy that cost \$4.50."

"I had this studio and to me the rewards were greater here, seeing the change in a youngster over a period of two to four months."

Cedillos was ranked nationally before giving up the tournament routine. Several of his prized plaques and trophies decorate the main floor of his school.

"There aren't any Palookas in here," he said, removing his sandals and bowing to the side-by-side flags of the United States and Korea.

"At one time we had the nation's first, second and third-ranked people in this studio. Our team went six or seven years without a loss."

"We're not into competition anymore, although we did compete for fun a little while ago (winning 24 out of a possible 27 trophies)."

"We're into some more serious things."

Getting serious, Cedillos takes a stance on the mat, holding his arms over his head and bending from side to side.

After a couple of minutes, he stands rigid, his fists clenched in front of him, his eyes straight ahead, without expression.

He then starts a series of moves, bringing his hand to his side, whipping it in front of him... lifting one leg and then the other, slapping them to the floor with a loud cry...punching with the left hand, then the right...turning in the opposite direction with a slashing motion...

"This is a kata," Cedillos said, "a series of predetermined set of fighting moves. Of course, if you're ever involved in a fight, your moves won't be predetermined. It's very poetic."

There are 15 different katas, Cedillos said, each taking about a minute to complete.

"The black belt test is one of the most exacting things a person could go through," Cedillos said.

"If someone wants to become a black belt, he is going to have to commit himself. He's going to have to practice three to four hours a day, four or five days a week. It's just got to be that way, too."

"The rest itself is unreal—the pressure of being in front of 11 expert black belts, knowing that you've got to be right on with your punch or every move. If your punch is nine inches off, you fail the test."

"Twenty to 25 per cent of the people involved right now will continue on to achieve something. That's a terrible figure, but the majority just does not want to spend the time."

"Of course, it can be a fun thing, like tennis or golf, and there's nothing wrong with holding a green belt or a red belt."

Cedillos breaks into another of his routines.

He'll have to leave the mat in another half-hour or so when a beginning children's class checks in.

"Karate wasn't meant to be like boxing, with people jumping into a ring and going nine rounds," he said.

"There is a finality in karate that does not exist in boxing. You've got to be prepared to take out your opponent in three or four seconds. This is why our style emphasizes the quick striking techniques to the knee or the throat."

"I've been at it 11 years and I've only had to use it twice. It's strictly a self-protection device. I was amazed and a little scared at the results of my first fight."

Cedillos says he and his instructors have to emphasize this point to their younger students, many of whom tend to show off their technique at school.

