

# An Introduction to Kendo



Kendo, is the art of Japanese fencing. "**Ken**" or tsurugi is from the character meaning sword. The character for "**Do**" or michi includes the meaning way or path which translates as "**The way of the sword**". A path in life which is followed through the training of kendo.

## Origin of Kendo

Modern Kendo bears but faint resemblance to Kenjutsu and to its feudal origins of sword wielding samurai warriors which are today depicted in movies and television. Kendo, literally translated, the way of the sword, cannot be traced to a single founder or given an exact founding date. The story of the rise of modern Kendo begins with the samurai and extends over the culture of several centuries.

By the end of the 12th century, the authority of the Japanese central government had declined. Bands of warriors grouped together for protection forming local aristocracies. Feudalism had come of age, and was to dominate Japan for several centuries. With the establishment of the Shogun in Kamakura and military rule controlling Japan, a new military class and their lifestyle called Bushido, the way of the warrior, gained prominence. Bushido stressed the virtues of bravery, loyalty, honor, self discipline and stoical acceptance of death. Certainly, the influence of Bushido extended to modern Japanese society and Kendo was also to be greatly influenced by this thinking.

The Japanese warrior had no contempt for learning or the arts. Although Kenjutsu, the art of swordsmanship, had been recorded since the 8th century, it gained new prominence and took on religious and cultural aspects as well. Sword making became a revered art. Zen and other sects of Buddhism developed and the samurai often devoted time to fine calligraphy or poetry.

The next great advance in the martial arts occurred during the late Muromachi period (1336-1568) often call the iage of Warring Provinces because of the many internal conflicts. This period brought an increased demand and respect for men trained in the martial arts. Consequently, many schools of Kenjutsu arose, eventually numbering about 200. Each was taught by a famous swordsman whose techniques earned him honor in battle. Real blades or hardwood swords without protective equipment were used in training resulting in many injuries. These schools continued to flourish through the Tokugawa period (1600-1868), with the Ittoryu or Ione sword school, having the greatest influence on modern Kendo.

Kendo began to take its modern appearance during the late 18th century with the introduction of protective equipment: the men, kote and do and the use of the bamboo sword, the shinai. The use of the shinai and protective armor made possible the full delivery of blows without injury. This forced the establishment of new regulations and practice formats which set the foundation of modern Kendo.

With the Meiji Restoration (1868) and Japan's entry into the modern world, Kendo suffered a great decline. The Samurai class was abolished and the wearing of swords in public outlawed. This decline was only temporary, however, interest in Kendo was revived first in 1887 when uprisings against the government showed the need for the training of police officers. Later the Sino-Japanese War (1894-95) and the Russo-Japanese War (1904-05) again encouraged an awareness of the martial spirit.

Consequently in 1895, the Butokukai, an organization devoted to the martial arts was established. In 1911, Kendo was officially introduced into the physical education curriculum of middle schools and in 1912, the Nihon Kendo Kata, a set of regulations for Kendo, was published. In 1939 as Japan prepared for war, Kendo became a required course for all boys.

After the war, because of its nationalistic and militaristic associations, Kendo was outlawed and the Butokukai was disbanded. However by 1952, supporters of Kendo successfully reintroduced a ipure sport form of Kendo, called Shinai Kyogi which excluded the militaristic attitudes and some of the rougher aspects of practice characteristic of prewar Kendo, into the public schools. Today, Kendo continues to grow under the auspices of the All Japan Kendo Federation, the International Kendo Federation, and federations all over the world.

Although the outward appearance and some of the ideals have changed with the changing needs of the people, Kendo continues to build character, self-discipline and respect. Despite a sportlike atmosphere, Kendo remains steeped in tradition which must never be forgotten. For here lies the strength of Kendo which has carried it throughout history and will carry it far into the future.

## Kendo Philosophy

No attempt will be made here to present the philosophy of Kendo. Each Dojo will have similar but slightly different ideas of what Kendo should be. The student must discover through their Dojo and themselves what this is.

## Kendo Equipment

Kendo equipment consists of the swords, uniform and armor.

There are two types of wooden swords used. First, the bokken or bokuto, a solid wood sword made of oak or another suitable hardwood. The bokken is used for basics and forms practice (*kata*). Second, the shinai, is made up of four bamboo staves and leather. The shinai is used for full contact sparring practice.

The uniform or dogi consists of woven cotton top called a keikogi and pleated skirt-like trousers called a hakama.

The armor or bogu consists of four pieces: the helmet (*men*), the body protector (*do*), the gloves (*kote*), and the hip and groin protector (*tare*). Modern Kendo armor design is fashioned after the Oyoroi of the Samurai.



Kendo bogu



Samurai armor

## Kendo Practice

A Kendo practice is composed of many types of training. Each type has a different purpose for developing the Kendo student.

Kendo, like other martial arts requires discipline and a dedication to training. A new student begins with learning the basics such as: etiquette (*rei*), different postures and footwork, and how to properly swing a sword. The student progresses through a series of skills preparing them to begin training with armor (*bogu*).

Once a student begins to practice in armor, a practice may be composed of any or all of the following types of practice and this will depend upon what the instructor's focus is at a particular time:

1. *Kiri-Kaeshi*: successively striking the left and right men, practice centering, distance, and proper cutting while building spirit and stamina.
2. *Waza-Geiko*: technique practice in which the student learns to use the many techniques of Kendo with a receiving partner.
3. *Kakari-Geiko*: short, intense, attack practice which teaches continuous alertness, the ability to attack no matter what has come before, as well as building spirit and stamina.
4. *Ji-Geiko*: sparring practice where the kendoist has a chance to try all that he or she has learned with a resisting partner.
5. *Gokaku-Geiko*: sparring practice between two kendoist of similar skill level.
6. *Hikitate-Geiko*: sparring practice where a senior kendoist guides a junior kendoist through practice.
7. *Shiai-Geiko*: competition matches which are judged on the basis of a person scoring valid cuts against an opponent.