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WHAT EVER HAPPENED TO
Ken Knudson

First of all...Who was Ken Knudson?

Ken Knudson was a fighting legend from Chicago, the "Windy City". He was a successful martial arts fighter, instructor, official, promoter and business-person. Ken dominated the Midwest sport karate scene from 1967 until 1973, when he chose to retire from competition to pursue his other passions, flying airplanes and business development.

During his career, Knudson had met and defeated some of the greatest fighters of that era: Skipper Mullins, Bill Wallace, Glenn Keeney, Victor Moore, Louis Delgado, Jeff Smith, Preston Baker and many, many more.

Altogether, he won over 100 championship titles in sport karate. These titles, as well as his other awards and accomplishments are too numerous to list in the limited space allotted for this article, therefore, we will just mention two: The Grand Championship of the 1971 and the 1972 TOP TEN Nationals in St. Louis, the toughest tournament of that era. This earned Knudson two gold cups, the most prestigious, trophy in the karate sport.

To give you an idea of the quality of competition at the TOP TEN Nationals, 19 of the top 20 fighters in the country, as listed in PROFESSIONAL KARATE magazine, competed every year. This was where the best Black Belt fighters in the country came to earn a reputation and get rated. The only fighter from the top 20 who did not compete was the tournament co-promoter, Fred Wren, who was too occupied with the promotion to compete. Furthermore, the TOP TEN was not a tournament for "wusses". It was difficult to get a point for a body shot unless you dropped your opponent to his knees. The matches were conducted with bare knuckles and a knockout to the head or face, more often than not, earned a point. "He ran into it", was usually the call. It was survival of the fittest...and baddest!

To draw Ken Knudson in a match was a real nightmare for his opponents. One was not going to survive a fight with Knudson without getting hurt. We take a quote from a 1973 issue of PROFESSIONAL KARATE magazine which probably explains it best: Ken Knudson - a human destroyer. When Knudson charges, he shows no mercy. He is one of America's roughest fighters and never throws a weak technique or gives one inch of ground. Knudson opponents cringe in pain when he devastatingly sweeps both their legs from under them. He does not sweep at the back of the legs. "He sweeps you directly into the shin bones and you fall right on your face."

Ken's instructors, the ones who taught him, were three of the top karate instructors in the business: James Jones, Jim Koncevic and Al Gene Caraulia, The latter, Caraulia, was the Grand Champion of the first open style World Karate Championship ever, in 1963. Ken Knudson was one of the top instructors of that era, as well. Several of his students made the PROFESSIONAL KARATE magazine top 20 list. As a promoter, Knudson promoted many events, including the AKA Grand Nationals, which he promoted three times. He owned 10 Karate schools in Chicago and Indianapolis, which he eventually sold to his Black Belts when he embarked upon a business career in entities other than those related to the martial arts. Some prominent instructors at Knudson's schools were: Flem Evans, Bill Jozaitis, Mike Cass, Mike McNamara, Ken Kolodziej, Herb Johnson, Bill Wallace, Rande Repke and Steve Kijewski. Repke is still working with Knudson in his various business enterprises to this day.

Again, Ken Knudson's accomplishments as a martial art business person are too many to list in this text. So, let's move on to what happened this fierce competitor after leaving the martial art industry.

In 1974, Ken realized that there was a need for married couples to have a romantic getaway close to their homes and often available on short notice. Such a place would be perfect for birthdays and anniversaries. It was then, that Ken designed and opened the first "Romantic Getaway for Couples". He called it "Sybaris". There are presently 5 Sybaris locations. Three in Chicago, IL., one in Milwaukee, WI., and the fifth in Indianapolis, IN. They can be accessed at www.sybaris.com. Sybaris was one of the most difficult undertakings he has done. Ken literally sold every one of his personal assets to breathe life into his new business venture. Concurrently, he built an import business and developed a restaurant. These were also a personal struggle to make viable business.

All of his ventures were built with strong commitments from strong individuals, each willing to create a working team. After selling his successful karate schools, each to his Black Belts, Rande Repke stayed with Ken to develop future businesses. Together, they built the team that would drive the growth of the Sybaris Clubs.

In August of 1978, Knudson added to his living legend image by catching two thieves just 8 hours after they had stolen his boat. They were bold enough to drive past his Sybaris romantic getaway location in Downers Grove, IL. Knudson chased them down and forced them off the road. As they tried to run him down with their car, Ken leaped into the air, crashing through their windshield with a side kick. It was right out of a Chuck Norris movie. The thieves were apprehended. Knudson was unscathed.

Knudson always saw other opportunities, just as he has seen them with the karate schools. He built the Sybaris Clubs and named

them after the ancient Greek City of Sybaris. This was a city that existed 700 years before Christ. It was the first civilization to cultivate roses for the purpose of romance. They actually made their beds of rose petals. The expression "bed of roses" originated from the city of Sybaris.

Knudson also found a real rose, sealed in 24 karat gold and started to import them. Now, he travels extensively each year to many places in the Orient. He is on a constant quest to find new products to import. All products are distributed through another of his companies, Gold Rose Gifts, also found in the internet at www.goldrose.com.

He and Wisconsin restaurateur, Tom Shepard, developed Brew City Bar-B-Q, a restaurant located next to the Mequon, Wisconsin Sybaris. It is one of the most beautiful restaurants in Wisconsin.

In 2000 Knudson secured a 20,000 sq. ft. building in Mount Prospect, IL This would become his corporate offices, so vitally needed for the new growth and business development phase that was taking place.

Today in 2002, his latest venture is creating and opening as all women's fitness center. It will feature 24 hour member availability allowing the women to train at their convenience. The new women's fitness center in Mount Prospect will be known as "Fit 'n' Figure".

Knudson goes all out finding the way to make "Fit 'n' Figure", the best possible environment in which to train. As you enter, there are massage chairs to relax in, beautiful carpeting, resistant to bacteria and fungi, a HEPA air purification system and a reverse osmosis filtering system. He will also implement an unusual program of self-defense, designed especially for women.

It took Ken twenty-three years to obtain his credibility in the financial world to acquire the bank financing he needed to move forward Ken says. "Most of the time in business, you are living on the edge. Stability is vital."

He says that his stability started in 1984, after he settled down in a permanent relationship with his wife, Charlene. Now, with their dog named bunny and his son working with him, Ken feels that his life is going in the direction that he wants. "I believe, if we can continue on a slow, solid growth pattern, we will be able to pass our knowledge and businesses to the younger generation. Our new team has over 200 people involved in the company," says Knudson.

Ken loves his highly modified, turbo-charged twin engine Skymaster airplane. He flies it around the Midwest, checking out his Sybaris Clubs. And you can bet that he's also checking for new opportunities. So, when you ask, "What ever happened to Ken Knudson?", just look around. Rest assured, there has always been something happening in the life of Ken Knudson and there always will be. *MAD*