

Martial Art Passion Becomes Life Journey

RICHARD WILLIAM
HESELTON

Heselton's special talent is the upper roundhouse kick. He has won many matches using this kick.

Richard William Heselton has been practicing karate in Japan for more than twenty years.

TOSHIO MATSUBARA

IN 1995, immediately after graduating from secondary school at the age of 18, Richard William Heselton came to Japan from Great Britain by himself to continue his study of karate. He had practiced judo, boxing and kickboxing since the age of 8, but at 12, when Heselton encountered karate for the first time, he was shocked by the speed and technical ability of the top fighters and thereon became a karate enthusiast.

The catalyst for his move to Japan was a combination of a passion to travel and the experience of watching a karate world championship held in Great Britain when he was a secondary school student. At that time, his karate skills were already at the level necessary to join the junior national team, but Heselton found the movement of the Japanese karate practitioners to be at a level he'd never seen before. The Japanese style of karate was significantly different not only in terms of speed and power, but also technical accuracy. Wishing to train with these top Japanese instructors, Heselton decided to go to Japan before starting university. Initially planning only to stay in Japan for three months, he became

fascinated by the profundity of karate. To this day, he continues to pursue karate at the highest level in Japan, even at the age of 40.

“The first thing that struck me after I came to Japan was that karate training was not only limited to the *dojo* floor, but was intricately linked culturally to Japanese society, especially with how you are expected to interact with your *sensei* (instructor), *senpai* (seniors) and *kohai* (juniors),” says Heselton. “Of course, at first I found this quite confusing, but once I came to realize the emphasis on the senior-junior relationships was based heavily on an understanding of mutual respect, it became easy to accept and adapt. I’ve been very fortunate to have had some truly amazing instructors, seniors and juniors who have guided and pushed me to my best, for which I’m very grateful.”

Heselton continued to practice karate at the Taishijuku school of karate with the Japan Karate Association under the auspicious guidance of instructors Tatsuya Naka and Koichiro Ookuma while teaching English at a foreign language school in Tokyo. He entered the International Faculty of Takushoku University in 2000, a Japanese university with a famous karate club with over a 100-year history that has produced some of the world’s finest karate practitioners. In his third year of university, Heselton became not only the first foreign captain of the Takushoku team, but also the first westerner to ever captain a top tier Japanese university karate club, a role he held consecutively for two years.

“At that time, I gave all I could to my karate training while attending my university classes,” says Heselton. “It was intense and challenging both on a physical and mental level. There were of course ups and downs, and times when I had to really dig deep, but looking back I realize that I would not be where I am now without that invaluable experience. When I graduated from university, I was admittedly tempted to take a break from karate, but karate had already become a necessary part of my life, like brushing my teeth or taking a shower and, although the intensity level and style of my training changed, I had to keep practicing.”

All photos: Yoshifusa Hashizume



Heselton scored some brilliant achievements when he was a university student, including winning the All Japan Karate Championship in the team category and placing third as an individual, meanwhile pursuing a Master’s degree in Teaching English as a Second Language (TESOL) at a British University.

Four years ago he began working as a lecturer in the Faculty of International Studies at Takushoku University. Since then Heselton has also worked as a coach at the karate club under the chief instructor Katsunori Tsuyama and the head coach Takuya Taniyama while teaching at the university.

Karate has been added to the list of official sporting events for the Tokyo Olympic Games to be held in 2020.

“The Olympics are the pinnacle of the sporting world and I, of course, would relish the opportunity for one of the Takushoku university karate club students to be able to perform at such an auspicious event. Of the estimated global population of 100 million people practicing karate, only approximately 10% of them practice so-called sports karate, so this is a huge step in the right direction for them,” says Heselton. “However, for the remaining 90% of practitioners karate is not only about performing well in competition, it’s a martial art and thus a lifetime journey, but I do hope the Tokyo Olympics will be the catalyst for more people to start practicing karate either as a sport or a martial art.”