

# THE BLOCKING & STRIKING ARSENAL OF OKINAWAN GOJU-RYU

by Scott Lenzi

Goju-ryu is somewhat unique in the world of martial arts because it combines both Fukien white crane kung fu and the Okinawan native fighting art known as *te* (hand). Kanryo Higashionna, after many years of studying the *kingai* version of Fukien white crane in China, returned to Okinawa and created the system known as *naha-te*. Chojun Miyagi, famed student of Higashionna, also ventured to China and further developed and systematized *naha-te* into goju-ryu (hard/soft style).

Goju-ryu is an internal system relying on circular motion and abdominal breathing. The circular pattern of stepping, evasion, and breathing is reflected in a vast number of goju techniques.

The name goju-ryu conveys many meanings other than the literal translation of "hard/soft." One important interpretation is that of utilizing a hard weapon (i.e., knuckle, elbow, etc.) to strike a soft or vital point, or a soft weapon (i.e., bottom of the fist) to strike a hard area (top of the head, for example). This axiom allows maximum energy expenditure with minimal damage to the practitioner.

Goju-ryu may also be likened to a willow tree—supple and resilient at the top, yet strong and firmly rooted in the ground. Another aspect of the art

involves simultaneous blocking and striking, or to put it even more basically, utilizing your opponent's force, momentum, aggression, etc., to your advantage.

To better understand goju-ryu, perhaps it's best to take a look at some of the striking and blocking techniques indigenous to the style. First, the striking techniques and, more precisely, closed-hand strikes:

- *Seiken*. This is the most basic and fundamental strike to almost all systems of karate. Goju-ryu punching utilizes a twisting motion continued after impact. Upon contact, due to the rotation, the index knuckle imparts 70 percent of the strike's energy, the middle knuckle the remaining 30 percent. The punch's force is a combination of linear momentum and the torque created by the twist.

- *Hiraken*. This strike originated in the classical *kata* (form) *saifa*. Its principal targets are the throat and just below the collarbone. A third, and somewhat more difficult technique, is an angular frontal strike to the rib cage.

- *Keiko*. Known as the "chicken beak" strike, this technique is devastating by its very nature. This strike is in essence a magnification of power, since the power is funneled through a relatively small surface area. This

strike is hidden in several kata, primarily the *shisochin* form. It is introduced and executed as a *nukite* (open-hand strike), which penetrates in and downward simultaneously. Toshio Tamano, protege of Seikichi Toghuchi who was a senior student of Chojun Miyagi, pointed out there are a variety of applications developed from this motion. However, the most efficient of these is *keiko*. Points of attack include the eyes, hollow of the throat, solar plexus and the lower intestinal area. Due to the extension of the index knuckle and its distance from the center of rotation (i.e., center of the wrist), and because of its vertical chamber, this strike is most effective when pivoting downward and is geared primarily to soft targets.

- *Cho ku ken*. This strike is executed with the middle knuckle extended, similar to the *seiken* strike. Inter-rib penetration is possible with this strike, and it is used effectively after an opponent has been swept to the ground. This strike and one of its applications is contained in *seipai kata*.

- *Nukite*. This is an open-hand strike with the fingertips. It should be noted that although a technique in goju-ryu may be viewed as open hand, its application, in many cases, may very well be a different hand configuration. The *nukite* strike can be launched ver-



*Iku kumi is the goju-ryu equivalent of free sparring. Facing his opponent (1) in the "crane head" stance, U.S. Shorei-Kan<sup>SM</sup> goju representative Scott Lenzi demonstrates some of the style's arsenal, first blocking (2) his foe's punch and delivering a kick to the inside of his knee. Moving inside the deflected punch, Lenzi grabs his opponent's chin and head (3) and twists him down to the ground (4). He finishes the session with a double punch to the ears (5).*



Photo by Charles Bentz



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tically to the eyes and solar plexus. In a horizontal position, it is aimed at the throat, eyes and lower intestinal area. When striking the lower abdominal area, the body will be in *shikodachi* (horse stance) so the technique is delivered in a straight line.

- *Ko uke position*. This is an advanced head block, as seen in the *tensho*, *sanseiru*, and *suparinpei* forms. A direct descendant of Fukien white crane, this position, when used offensively, is called the "crane head" strike. When employing this technique, the "wrist" area is extended toward the throat to crush the windpipe. After blocking upward, and maintaining the same position, the fingers are utilized to strike the eyes.

- *Palm heel*. This strike, as the name implies, uses the heel of the hand. It can be seen in several *koryu* (classical) kata such as *seisan* and *shiso-chin*. This strike has several different alignments, the most common with the fingers pointed upward and the strike delivered to the chin or the base of the nose. All of the alignments can also be viewed and explored in the *tensho* kata. When the fingers point out laterally, the striking areas include the ribs, spleen, kidneys and ears. With the fingers pointing downward, the strike is generally aimed at the lower intestinal area and is most effective when used in conjunction with a fast-dropping horse stance.

Since goju-ryu is an infighting system, many of the strikes contained in kata are directly related to certain locks, holds, or defensive postures. Many of the goju techniques are not geared for tournament fighting due to the locking, holding, and vital striking areas emphasized. Goju-ryu utilizes the hands for blocking, locking and for the majority of striking. The legs and feet play a dual role: they are used for locomotion, which allows the practitioner to avoid a strike with his body while blocking, and secondly, for balance and countering. The kicks are targeted to the opponent's groin, knees, and instep. They are meant to cripple or incapacitate, and



Photos by Jeff Thompson

do not rely on the rotation of the upper body for execution.

One of the most fundamental kicks to all martial arts is the front snap kick (*maegeri*). In goju-ryu front kicks, the heel is projected and is the primary surface of contact. It is a defensive kick, relying on the advance of the opponent. The most common and

**Lenzi demonstrates the ura uke block (1), originally designed for use against a thrusting sword. He controls the sword (2) and counters with a windpipe grab.**



obvious target is the groin. The advanced goju practitioner, however, will target the kick more specifically to the point midway between the anus and genitals, striking with the toes or ball of the foot without changing the alignment of the kick. The trajectory determines its target. As one might imagine, it requires a great deal of technique and timing to connect with this particularly dangerous target. This kick is first introduced in the *saifa* kata.

Other fundamental goju kicks include: down side kick, front-down side kick and inside-down side kick. To achieve maximum power, all of these utilize the sinking of the body as the kick is executed. The general target areas are the front, outside and inside of the knees, as well as the shins and instep. The type of kick and choice of target are dictated by the attack.

The other side of the goju-ryu fight-

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The striking techniques of goju-ryu include: *keiko*, or "chicken beak" strikes (1); fingerjabs to the eyes (2) from the *ko uke* position; palm heels (3) to the lower intestinal area; *nukite* (4), open-hand strikes using the fingertips; *hiraken* strikes (5), primarily aimed at the throat and area just below the collarbone; and *cho ku ken* (6), punches delivered with the middle knuckle extended, often after an opponent has been swept to the ground.

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ing arsenal is that of blocking. Blocking involves three areas: hand technique, body positioning or stance, and correct footwork. Regardless of the type of blocks, it is most effective when these three criteria work in conjunction.

The footwork is generally angular, moving both away from and toward the opponent. Body positioning or stance is determined by the type of attack, the intended target, and the size of the opponent. Following are some of the more common blocking techniques of goju-ryu:

- *Ko uke*. As previously mentioned, in the "crane head" alignment, this technique generally blocks the head and chest areas of the body. This is as much a strike as a block and does not rely greatly on circular motion. Due to the arm's alignment, however, the block becomes implicitly soft because a strike will produce a down-



ward force which is deflected along the line of the arm.

- *Hike uke*. There are two major "middle" or chest blocks: *hike uke* and *ura uke*. *Hike uke* is a circular block used extensively in goju-ryu. It mimics the wing of a bird and culminates most often in a grab. In addition to a block, this hand position also lends itself to a countering eye jab. *Hike uke* is demonstrated in the *seisan*, *seipai*, *shiso-chin*, *sansieru* and *suparinpei* kata.

- *Ura uke*. The second middle block, *ura uke* is designed to block a sword. Due to its alignment, the block makes contact with the top of the thrusting sword, allowing for safe control of the weapon. Other applications of the block are dealt with in other koryu kata such as *saifa* and *kururunfa*.

- *Hirai uke*. The final blocking area, the lower abdomen, is addressed by two major blocking configurations when dealing with both kicks and punches. *Hirai uke* is an open-hand block which circles at a 45-degree angle. This allows for deflection of an oncoming strike, rather than applying perpendicular force. It is executed with the hand open or, for more advanced students, with the hand in the "crane head" position.

Acquiring the ability to block and strike with goju-ryu techniques requires correct, safe practice. Chojun Miyagi developed *bunkai* to allow for this practice. *Bunkai*, quite simply, is a kata applied with an opponent.

*Iku kumi* is the goju equivalent of free sparring, but with one decided difference—all attacks are geared for the targets they were designed for. In essence, the opponent may attack full force to any point of the body with any technique during *iku kumi* (normally begun at advanced brown belt level). In the beginning, the areas and types of attack are generally restricted for practice of technique. Once sufficient technique is acquired, the attacker may continue his assault if the de-

**Lenzi demonstrates goju's "crane head" stance (1) and one of its basic applications (2)—a simultaneous grab and counterstrike to the throat.**



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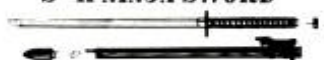
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**The ko uke block (top) covers the head and chest areas. The harai uke block (above) is executed at a 45-degree angle to draw foes into countering range.**

fender has not dealt a decisive counter-attack. The defender, normally the senior student, will counter just short of a vital point. This is as close to actual fighting as can be synthesized. There is no need for point scoring in iku kumi, just efficient, calm defensive motions and an incapacitating counterattack. Trading kicks and punches in normal point sparring does not allow for the utilization of a majority of koryu kata techniques.

A calm response to an oncoming attack allows you a better chance to control and evaluate the situation, while keeping your technique hidden. As Miyagi student Seikichi Toguchi points out, "A wise falcon hides its claws."

**About the Author: Scott Lenzi is a freelance writer and martial artist who was recently appointed United States Shorei-Kan,sm goju-ryu representative by Seikichi Toguchi.**

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