

## **The History and the Future Direction of Female Kendo**

### **- The movement of post-war kendo and Setsuko Kobayashi**

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Students of Tobu-Suimeikan with the Yaginuma sisters. Right to left Sachiko 2<sup>nd</sup> from right, Setsuko, Emiko and Hisae

### **Female kendo - The beginning**

A history chart usually indicates events for example ‘such and such took’ place on XXday XXmonth XXyear. The event may have taken place that day according to the record however there could also be an augury, indicating something important was to come. There is no exception in the history of female kendo.

In 1952, 7 years after the WWII the All Japan Kendo Federation (AJKF) was founded, female school pupils started to practice kendo along with the development of school kendo for both sexes. What were the stories behind this?

Yoshimitsu Takeyasu, the president of AJKF stated in the ‘50 years of Kendo History’

“When school kendo resumed, together with the introduction of the new education system where male and female pupils began to study together, female kendo also became more popular.”

The new education system was one of the reasons why female kendo started but there must be something else.

Post-war Kendo was introduced with a new concept, which transformed kendo from what it had been known before into a new form so that females could also practice. (It

is stated in the ‘Sportsman Guide’ in details in the chapter ‘Transformation of kendo world after the war’). This concept was set as a foundation and kendo has become a sport in which its unique characteristics of Budo remained in place.

When a novice sees kendo performed between two persons it might seem just like a fight. However when the psychology is analysed between the practitioners, we will find that they enjoy the process of the activity itself and that they do not attempt to cause damage to each other in any way. They enjoy the formality of the kendo exercises and place importance in practising them. Therefore their purpose is the exercises themselves and to become technically better at them. So when this new form of kendo was introduced in school it was emphasised that it was different from what it was before the war. This way, the new concept of kendo was introduced to school kendo hence female students also started kendo.

In the following chapter I would like to introduce Setsuko Kobayashi, who passed 7<sup>th</sup> dan as the second female in the history of ladies Kendo and who was the winner of the first All Japan Ladies Kendo Championship, which was held while kendo was becoming increasingly popular amongst females.

### **The first All Japan Ladies Kendo Championship**

The first All Japan Ladies Kendo Championship took place after the formation of AJKF. Hatsue Takano passed 7<sup>th</sup> dan as the first female kendoka in its history. The second person is Setsuko Kobayashi, she passed 7<sup>th</sup> dan on the 8<sup>th</sup> of May 1991.



The first All Japan Ladies Kendo Championship Setsuko Yaginuma left and Tamae Nakamura right, 3<sup>rd</sup> May 1962

So what kind of person is she?

There is an outstanding event marked in the kendo history. It was on 3<sup>rd</sup> May 1962 when the first All Japan Ladies Kendo Championship took place as part of the 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the All Japan East vs West Kendo Competition. Eight female kendoka were nominated from across the country and came to the Osaka Central Gymnasium to take part in the championship. The winner was Setsuko Kobayashi (Yaginuma at that time) and the runner up was Tamae Fujino (Nakamura at that time) both from Tokyo.

Mayumi Otsuka stated in the publication ‘The Encyclopaedia of Kendo’ edited by the Japan Budo Academic School:

“ Female kendo became popular during 1960 – 70. Up until then females practiced ‘naginata’ mainly and those females who practiced kendo before that time were limited to people who had a special environment.”



Setsuko Kobayashi (left)  
and Yoko Takano (right)

Both Kobayashi and Fujino’s fathers were dojo owners as well as kendo teachers. On the 3<sup>rd</sup> May 1963 the second Ladies Championships took place and Kobayashi won again. Fujino took 3<sup>rd</sup> place together with Yoko Takano. Yoko Takano was the first daughter of Takeshi and Hatsue Takano.

#### **Four sisters of the Yaginuma clan**

The author visited Setsuko sensei to interview her directly and felt very much that her life itself reflected the history of female kendo, through the two distinct periods: before and after the war.

Tessui Yaginuma, Setsuko’s father taught kendo at Kodogikai in Sendagaya, Tokyo. He was responsible for junior kendo there before the war. After the war and around the same time the AJKF was formed he opened a dojo called ‘Tobu-suimeikan’ in Fukagawa and became known for teaching thousands of students there. He had four daughters: Setsuko born in 1938, Emiko in 1940, Sachiko in 1943 and Hisae in 1946, all practiced kendo under Tessui’s teaching. They all had excellent talents in kendo. The oldest of the four is Setsuko sensei. Therefore the history of the four sisters is the history of the Yaginuma family and moreover that of Tobu-suimeikan.

Setsuko started kendo in 1943 at Kodogikai when she was five years old, as she was taken to the dojo by her father. At that time many girls practiced naginata but Setsuko practiced kendo mainly and practiced naginata only a little. I



Tessui Yaginuma

asked why but she couldn't remember as she was too small. Tessui taught kendo, physical education and Chinese literature at the Tokyo 3rd Commercial School. So Setsuko practiced with students there at the school.



Setsuko (5 years old) practice with the Junior High School Students

Tessui taught both at the school and the dojo Kodogikai but in May 1945 American dropped an incendiary bomb and the dojo was damaged by fire resulting it being closed. Three months later the war ended and kendo was forbidden by the GHQ. Like many other kendoka Setsuko also had to stop kendo.

After the war Tessui resumed teaching at the same school where he taught before the war. Next to the school stood a military school and the family lived in a building within the military school complex. The military school had quite a large field and he started to teach kendo there. This was the foundation of his new dojo 'Tobu-suimeikan'.

The below picture was taken around 1955. In it I find polite and well-mannered Japanese people visually presented through the respect of the daughters of the Yaginuma clan towards their father, whose strong views were that they should study and discipline themselves strictly through the study of kendo as Japanese citizens. The picture was chosen as the author was most impressed by the scene, over many other pictures. The idea of 'I struck - I was struck, I won - lost, stronger and weaker, more powerful etc' have been taken away instead the depth of the Japanese culture and history is found in the picture as it depicts the specific kind of strength of the Japanese people.

In 2012 Budo will become a compulsory curriculum at all junior high schools in Japan and I have no doubt in speculating that many would share my view in the belief that school pupils who will practice Budo will learn both discipline and how to cultivate themselves as well-mannered Japanese people.



Tessui and his four daughters

## Sestuko Kobayashi's kendo career and teaching

On 13<sup>th</sup> October 1956, to commemorate the 5<sup>th</sup> Centenary of the City of Tokyo, a High School Kendo Championships were organised by the Tokyo 3<sup>rd</sup> Commercial School where Tessui Yaginuma was teaching. It was on the 14<sup>th</sup> October 1952 when the All Japan Kendo Federation was founded so this was only four years after its formation. This demonstrates clearly how determined and proactive Tessui was behind the scenes.



Chuo-Ku Kendo Championships were held on the roof top of Mitsukoshi Department Store on 3<sup>rd</sup> November 1955. Tessui's second daughter Emiko and third daughter Sachiko took part and received awards. It was a rare occasion that the kendo championships were held on the roof. Only 2 of his daughters took part at that time.

There were only two female students who took part in the championships and they were: Setsuko 18 years old and her younger sister Emiko 16 years old. Mixed in with the boys Emiko lost in the second round in the year 1 category but Setsuko progressed to the fourth round in the year 3 category and the pair proudly demonstrated Kata at the opening ceremony.

From time to time they demonstrated Kata together, for example at a ceremony as part of the Budo demonstration at Tomioka

Hachimangu Shrine performing Kata with the real swords. During the

Kodachi Kata No2 people saw sparks from the swords. Setsuko sensei laughed and told me that shortly after that event they made the edges blunt and made them Habiki swords. It requires quite some courage to use the real swords in the Kata demonstration even being rather young, it would have been quite an experience. During Showa 30s (1955 - 64) Setsuko performed Hokushin-Itto-Ryu with Tessui at the same venue. Tessui used a pair of Onigote he had made himself. At present Hokushin-Itto-Ryu is not practiced by many people in Tokyo and Setsuko is one of the very few people who does.



Programme of the Commemorative High School Kendo Championships for the 5<sup>th</sup> Centenary of the City of Tokyo



Tessui and his daughter Setsuko performing Hokushin-Itto-Ryu Kata

The Yaginuma family's second daughter Emiko was awarded Jodo 3<sup>rd</sup> dan by Hakudo Nakayama. She also practiced at Shuseikan owned by Tamojiro Shimizu of the Shudo Gakuin after the special winter training at Tobu-suimeikan which happened every year. There she met Magojiro Takano who gave her practice as he would call her out every time. According to Emiko his wrist snap was so good that the strikes were quite hard.

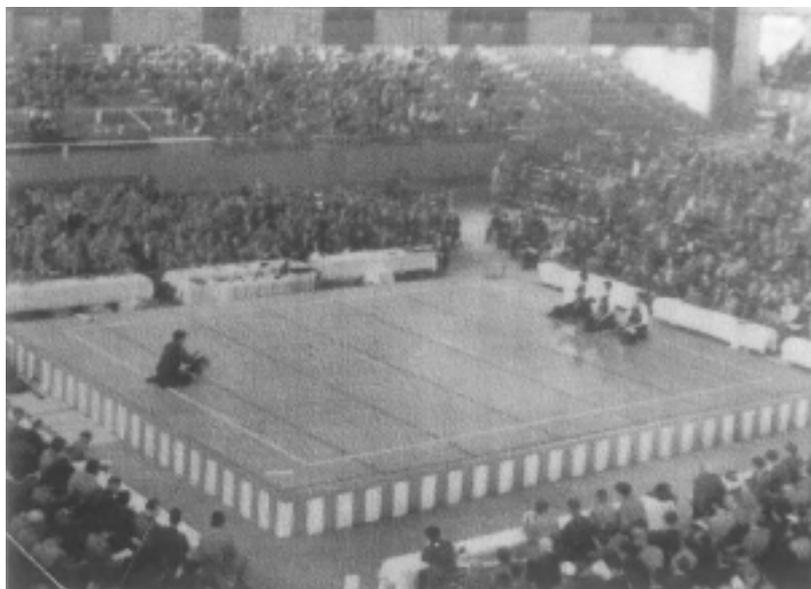


Left Tessui and his second daughter Emiko (Jodo 3<sup>rd</sup> dan) performing Jodo at Tomioka Hanchimangu Shrine. Above his third daughter Sachiko performing Iaido.

The third daughter Sachiko was good at Iaido. The picture was taken when she was a high school student. I asked Setsuko sensei about the length of the sword as it 'seemed too long for her', she said that she used Tessui's sword so it was a bit too long but apparently she would draw it quite nicely.

By the way in my youth the prizes for demonstrations at shrines and championships were quite often household goods such as a washbasin, a metal basin and hangers and there was a time I was awarded a national flag. It was the same for the prizes at Tomioka Hachimangu Shrine demonstrations and Setsuko sensei would be pulling a bicycle-drawn cart at the frontline in the town, collecting the prizes donated by shops.

Four Female  
Kendoka performed  
Shido-geiko at The  
All Japan 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup>  
dan Championship  
held at the Tokyo  
Gymnasium in 1960.  
Motodachi Hatsue  
Takano, Senpo her  
first daughter Yoko,  
Jiho Tessui's second  
daughter Emiko and  
Taisho Setsuko.



On 23<sup>rd</sup> February 1960, for the celebration of the Crown Prince Naruhito's birth, 'the All Japan 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> dan Championships' were held on the 29<sup>th</sup> April of that year. A demonstration was performed by a group of female kendoka in the form of Shido-geiko, as we call it today. The Motodachi was Hatsue Takano and her first student [or Senpo] was her oldest daughter Yoko age 16, second student [Chuken] Emiko age 20 and third and the last student [Taisho] Setsuko age 22.

Prior to the demonstration day they practiced uchikomi-geiko and kakari-geiko at Koraku-En Gymnasium, but this was the first time for Setsuko practicing with a female kendoka other than her own sisters for the first time in nearly 20 years of her kendo career. Setsuko sensei also told me that she has memories of mixed championships as well as demonstrations.

We talked about the old days and when I told her that I was from Hanyu she said that she had been there. 'If my memory is correct, kendo shiai was held in the kitchen area' she said. During the Showa 30s (1955-64), there was a kendo championships held at Bishamonten in Hanyu, Saitama Prefecture. Setsuko sensei took part as she was invited by my father Takashi Ozawa.

There was the National Kendo Tournament where the representatives from each prefecture competed. At the Tokyo Regional Tournament being the preliminary of this event, she was the only female taking part. During this tournament she was beaten by one point by Yasuhiro Nishiyama from Tokyo Metropolitan Police. Also at the first All Japan Ladies Kendo Championships she performed Kendo Kata as suggested by Hiroyuki Konuma who insisted that the Kata at the opening ceremony should be performed by female as it was kendo Championships for females. It would have been the first time in the history when a female performed Kata at a national event. She paired with Eiko Nakata (7<sup>th</sup> dan kyoshi) both of them practiced at the Tokyo

Metropolitan Police Budokan in preparation for this demonstration, where they were instructed by Takeshi Nakamura and Tadanori Ota.

### **Challenge for 6<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> dan**

Setsuko had a 10 year break from kendo, commencing in 1965. She started again in 1975 when she was 37 years old. This was when her sister Emiko asked her for help in assisting teaching junior kendo. She then started her own practice as she thought that teachers should be at a good level. Around that time she met Eizo Akao (8<sup>th</sup> dan Hanshi) she looked back and said that it was a wonderful thing to meet such a person. Setsuko had a son who started kendo when he was an elementary school student, so she practised with him. While been taught and guided by Akao sensei she became a visiting kendo teacher at the junior high school when her son became a junior high school student. When she was in her mid-40s she started to challenge for her 7<sup>th</sup> dan grading. She passed at the 5<sup>th</sup> attempt. At her 4<sup>th</sup> attempt Akao sensei told her;

“It’s no good to merely demonstrate good kendo. You need to be able to move the panel of judges.”

This advice remains with her still today. Asked about her 6<sup>th</sup> dan grading I felt that the story tells much about the reality of the ‘history of female kendo’. During the second half of Showa 50s (1980-84) there was a kendo grading examination at Toyosaka Police but there was no female changing room available. She wondered what to do for a while then decided to change in a corner of a café inside the police building. A male kendo teacher appeared and told her off asking, “what are you doing?” But when she explained the situation he helped her finding a suitable room. At other times she used toilet and it seems that female changing areas had always been a problem.

Around this time during Showa 50s the population of female kendoka was increasing however such facilities for them were not yet available. In 1985 she passed 6<sup>th</sup> dan when she was 47 years old. She then found a female kendo class at Renshinkan taught by Hiyoshi Sekine (8<sup>th</sup> dan Hanshi) so she joined the dojo. Continuing to study kendo under him until when he became ill which forced the dojo to close. This period spans some 18 years.

Sekine sensei paid much respect to Akao sensei – that’s what Setsuko felt under his teaching. They were both Setsuko’s real teachers after she restarted kendo. Sekine taught her kendo of the spirit. He had never let her strike nor showed playful moments for a long time until they knew each other very well. Akao taught her to use the right muscles during regular training that were useful to improve her kendo. He often said that the fundamental was very important in kendo. “Without a good foundation we cannot even strike correctly. Therefore the basic is important.”

He was also strict about Kamae, the stance. In 1991 Setsuko passed 7<sup>th</sup> dan. She was 53 years old. Akao sensei celebrated saying to her;

“Work hard for the development of female kendo from now on.”

Setsuko sensei has pursued ‘kendo for females’ ever since that time, from her own experience and what she learnt from Akao and Sekine sensei.

## When a female teacher teaches female students

For female kendoka it is difficult to practice kendo with muscle power and force, in the same manner that male kendoka can do, as they lack muscle power so cannot strike with power. Setsuko sensei describes that there are expressions of kendo special to female kendoka. During her teaching sessions, she takes into consideration the use of language and a specific approach. There seems to be that when a female student is taught by a female teacher, they notice a distinct difference and the realisation seems more evident where the female student had been taught by a male teacher previously. This comes as from a special difference in their relationships, for example it is felt that the teaching is coming from the same side and it could be said that they can be mentally a little closer, therefore the teaching can be with more attention to detail in a specific female way.



Setsuko sensei (centre) and her female students

The picture was taken when the author visited a kendo session at Itsukaichi Fine-Plaza in Akiruno City, Tokyo. Every Thursday from 11-13:00 the session is run only for females. The age groups of the students spanned from 30s to 70s. Setsuko sensei explores in her teaching the idea of how kendo can be practised for a maximum length of time. The programme of the session was exactly the same for all age groups. Suburi at warm up was with bokken and they did quite a good number. I expected that some would drop out and rest but no one did. Setsuko sensei said that it was such an honour to be looked up to by younger people even though she is now quite old and she smiled. During the session on that day while I watched at one point they swapped hands so the left hand was held in front of right hand. I wondered what would happen. Then they started men strike exercise from the mirror-positioned Kamae. What was more surprising was that there was no difference in their movements in the reverse position. The standard men strikes were seen very clearly.

Setsuko sensei also insisted that the Sonkyo position is very important, in order to maintain and improve lower part of body muscles it is important that we keep the position of Sonkyo without being wobbly. Leg muscles need to be maintained well in order to do this. The author agrees to this idea in principle, except for people with knee injuries the Sonkyo position should be made correctly. Also Setsuko sensei remembers Sekine sensei's teaching "when you age the body will be weakened. Therefore you should never practice kendo just for the sake of it. At the regular practice you should always remember to repeat the step forward and strike movement". She still follows this teaching.

Setsuko sensei also takes part in the Tokyo Kendo Festival and the Kyoto Taikai. It is to test the year's progress in her kendo, she says. This is also to test if she could actually do what she teaches her students to do. When what she teaches and what she does in her own kendo becomes a mismatch then that is time to retire, she says.



Kendo session at Itsukaichi Fine-Plaza

### **The future direction of female kendo**

Lastly I asked Setsuko sensei the future direction of female kendo.

“Kendo has become popular amongst male and female and speed kendo has also become popular in both groups. However I think there is something more in kendo than only speed. Speed kendo will not last long when one gets older. Also the practice time will be reduced consequently one’s body strength will also decline. But if one sticks to the kendo that is true to the fundamental there will be variety of kendo, which we should deeply explore and find suitable for the ages. Setsuko sensei’s teaching is based on the idea that:

“When you get older your body power will become weaker. So you should never practice kendo for the sake of mere exercise. You should continuously practice ‘step forward and strike’ actions. As you regularly practise this sequence of actions, the brain sends that order when you are at the moment that the action is required and we need to make sure that the body follows that order. That is the reason for basic practice.”

Setsuko sensei’s kendo career then can be divided into two periods, from 1943 to 1965 and 1975 up until today with a 10-year break in between. The first period was pure dojo kendo taught by her father Tessui sensei and the second period was a slightly different kendo concept taught by Akao and Sekine sensei. The author felt that this is perhaps why she has such special open mindedness and depth in her kendo.

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