

VERNON BELL

Founder of the British karate movement who applied stringent selection criteria to students

VERNON BELL was the founder of the karate movement in Britain. During the Fifties he began to train in the martial art in a dojo in Paris, and founded the British Karate Federation from his parents' house in London. It was the first organisation of its kind, and paved the way for the introduction of different forms of Japanese karate to this country.

Vernon Cecil Frederick Bell was born in Ilford, Essex, the only child of Leonard Bell, a civil servant, and his wife Elsie. Educated at Palmer's Public and Endowed School and, later, the Royal Liberty School, Romford, he volunteered to join the RAF early in the Second World War after failing to matriculate, and helped to track V1 and V2 missiles in the radar section. It was during this time that he began to learn judo from a fellow serviceman.

He left the Air Force in 1946 and worked for the Ottoman Bank in London. Involved with the Health and Strength League, he opened a barbell club, and became a founder member of the Amateur Judo Association. He left the bank and began a course to become a PE teacher, but quit early because of financial pressures and took work as an encyclopaedia salesman. In 1949 he became a professional judo instructor.

Bell graded to black belt (1st Dan) in 1952 and 2nd Dan in 1953 under the Amateur Judo Association. He then began to train with Kenshiro Abbe, one of Japan's greatest judo masters. Bell graded to 2nd Dan again, in 1955, and 3rd Dan in 1958 under the British Judo Council. At this time he also held Dan grades in ju-jitsu.

In the mid-Fifties, fascinated by a photograph in a magazine of a Japanese *karateka* breaking wood with a kick, Bell began periodically to travel to Paris to train with Henri Plee, who is widely recognised as the pioneer of karate in Europe, and Hiroo Mochizuki, from the Yoseikan, an extremely highly regarded dojo in Japan.

On April 1, 1957, having become the first Briton to hold a black belt in karate, Bell formed the British Karate Federation, which was initially affiliated to the Fédération Française de Karaté. The first newspaper reports and demonstrations of British karate appeared that year, as did the first television broadcast, when ITN showed a two-minute film on the evening of July 22, 1957, of Bell and his students training in the garden of his parents' house in Hornchurch.

The federation gave a large number of demonstrations to promote the new art, but Bell always looked for quality, not quantity, in future students and would operate stringent selection criteria. Numbers remained remarkably small, with only 56 students known to have been members by the end of 1959.



Bell, centre, with the four original British Karate Federation students in 1957. The first BKF dojo opened in 1958

The first British Karate Federation dojo was opened in January 1958 at the British Legion Hall in Upminster. It initially attracted ten students. The first in London opened that July in an upstairs room over the Wheatsheaf public house in Kenton Street, near Russell Square. In August that year, Bell attended the first European Karate Union meeting in Paris and trained with Tetsuji Murakami, whom he later invited to teach a basic form of the Shotokan discipline for the British federation.

In 1958 the British group also became a member of the International Karate Federation. Influential clubs began to open up elsewhere, with Liverpool, Middlesbrough, Stoke and York the first in Britain, in 1959-1961, and Saltcoats, Ayrshire, the first in Scotland in 1961. Irish Shotokan began with the affiliation of the Dublin club in 1962. At the start of the Sixties Bell also taught karate to US Air Force personnel.

Under the captaincy of Terry Wingrove, the British Karate Federation took part in the first European karate competition in 1963 in Paris,

alongside France and Belgium. A number of Bell's students became national and international competitors of note, including Andrew Sherry and Terry O'Neill. Some of the highest-ranked Shotokan *karateka* today — Sherry, Michael Randall, Raymond Fuller and Pauline Bindra, all of whom are ranked 8th Dan and each of whom head karate associations — began karate under the federation.

The British Karate Federation was appointed the Japan Karate Association's representatives in Britain in 1964, and Bell was awarded 1st Dan from that organisation. In 1965, in a decision that would change the face of British karate forever, he arranged for a party from Japan to visit England and give a number of seminal demonstrations, thus introducing the British public to expert and intricate styles of karate previously unseen in the country. He also secured permission for the Japanese organisation's grand champion, Hirokazu Kanazawa, to stay and teach in North London for a year.

In 1966, to Bell's regret, the bulk of the organisation's membership left for

the newly founded Karate Union of Great Britain, where the great masters Kanazawa and Enoeda were teaching the Japanese styles. Bell went back to teaching the Yoseikan style of karate. Throughout the ten years of the establishment of Shotokan karate, he continued to operate his rigorous selection of prospective students, conscious of the responsibility he had taken upon himself in introducing karate to the United Kingdom.

Besides karate, Bell was highly skilled and knowledgeable in both judo and ju-jitsu. Indeed, though he is remembered as the founder of British karate, his prime interest lay with ju-jitsu, in which art he held the rank of 10th Dan. He was described by Master Enoeda (obituary, April 9, 2003), the chief instructor to the Karate Union of Great Britain for more than 40 years, as "a great master in history who discovered karate for Britain".

He is survived by three sons and a daughter.

Vernon Bell, martial artist, was born on October 9, 1922. He died on February 27, 2004, aged 81.