

Living by the sword in St. Helens

By DARRYL SWAN
The Spotlight

Few mental and physical disciplines exude as much romance and mystique as Japanese-style sword fighting. It's true for any adult who has ever explored James Clavell's epic novel set in feudal Japan, "Shogun," or for today's kids whose introduction to sword-fighting techniques is derived from Samurai Jack cartoons on Nickelodeon.

For Grand Master James Wade Lewis, kendo (in Japanese, "the Way of the Sword") isn't just a passing entertainment; it is a part of everyday life.

Despite Lewis' slight stature, he commands an aura of respect. In fact, he's one of the most accomplished martial artists in Oregon and his school, though comparatively small at 40 students, is one of the most decorated on the USA Tae Kwon Do competition circuit.

Lewis started his training in the Korean-derived tae kwon do in 1968 while enlisted in the U.S. Marines. He continued his exploration of martial arts while stationed in Viet Nam, and after his discharge stateside he re-en-



Master James Wade Lewis (left) demonstrates Japanese-style sword fighting techniques with instructor and student, Stephen Toney. Lewis is using a "bokuto," or a wooden sword, in this exercise.

SPOTLIGHT PHOTO:
DARRYL SWAN

IF YOU GO

WHAT: Lewis Taekwondo, Japanese Sword Class

WHO: Open to ages 6 and older

WHERE: 35305 Millard Road, St. Helens

PHONE: 503-366-8097

WEB: DAMasterlewis.info
Cost: \$40

listed in ranger and paratrooper schools. While stationed at Fort Bragg, N.C., as part of the 5th and 6th U.S. Army Special For-

es, he advanced his training in the Katori Shinto Ryu — one of the most distinguished of all Japanese martial arts.

"Basically it's just a traditional system," says the 58-year-old Lewis.

Stephen Toney, a former U.S. Navy Seal and instructor at Lewis' school, once challenged his master to an honest-to-god fight. It was a wake-up call, Toney said, and he has since been devoted to Lewis' mission as a martial arts instructor.

"We run a very tight school," Toney said. "We run a very hard school."

Today, Lewis is opening his Japanese sword classes, once reserved for students who have completed a certain level of tae kwon do mastery, to everyone, even those without a primer in martial arts.

And it's not just about swords. As Lewis points out, the fighting techniques demonstrated apply to any weapon of length: sticks, pool cues, staffs, canes.

"Anything you do with a sword can be applied to any length weapon," he said.

Incoming students are issued a wooden sword, called a bokuto, to start. "It's got all the characteristics of a live blade," Lewis said.

Surprisingly, it doesn't take long to learn the sword, he said.

"You do a lot of standing technique, you do a lot of kneeling technique," Lewis said, demonstrating overhead, diagonal and horizontal cuts that make up the fundamentals of Japanese sword fighting.

"You can actually, in two to three months, be pretty effective with a sword," he said.

Mastery is another matter, however. Lewis said he imbibes a sense of Japanese sword fighting culture in his students through normal conversation in his classes, including discussions that border on trivia — for instance, the fact that a license is required to own a sword in Japan, and only swords considered cultural or artistic are granted license — to historical, including lessons about the cultural faux pas of two swords brushing together in the Samurai tradition — an invitation, intentional or otherwise, to fight.

As the student progresses, instruction transitions into the use of live blades — dulled steel at the beginning, but steel nonetheless, that warrant cautious consideration.

"You have to be really careful, because these things will slice," Lewis said.

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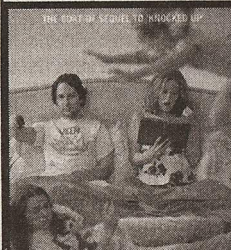
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