

## “AN INTERVIEW WITH IAN MCCRANOR”

*Ian McCranor is a 6th degree black belt and former international Karate competitor. Born and raised in Coventry, England, Ian competed internationally for four years as a member of the English Karate Council. His numerous individual and team medals include National Championships in TERA Association, gold medals in Transatlantic Cup and English International Challenge, silver medals in Belgian Cup, Commonwealth and Dutch International Championships and many others. Considered an expert in both karate and self defense, Ian was a regular columnist for Traditional Karate Magazine (Great Britain) and has appeared on its cover, and the covers of other karate magazines. He's been a professional karate instructor and fitness coach for Central England Karate Association and a Self-Protection Instructor for the British Combat Association. Ian also has 15 years experience in nightclub security. Ian moved from Coventry to Carmel, Indiana, seven years ago with his wife, Lynne, and son, Wesley. He is a full-time group fitness instructor, personal trainer, and boxing coach and, most recently, has decided to return to coaching competitive Sport Karate, his true passion.*

Ian McCranor, 47, looks every bit the former international sport Karate competitor and champion. Six feet tall, he is fit and muscular, ruggedly handsome, with a nose that has undoubtedly been broken more than once! An intimidating man - until his friendly, expressive manner puts you at ease. I caught up with Ian in a local coffee house as he sipped an Earl Grey tea ("you Yanks haven't brewed a good cup of tea since you threw it all in Boston's harbor.")

**Q. How did you go from international sport Karate competitor in England, to kick ass group fitness instructor here in the U.S.?** "My workout and training is who I am. When I first arrived in the States, I went to several Karate schools, hoping to just get a good work out -- stay in shape. But, as a member of the England Karate Team for years, instead of clubs embracing me as an asset, they saw me as a threat to their business. My skill level didn't allow me to work out anonymously. So, I went to gyms and did my own work out -- punching a bag, kicking, jumping rope -- anything to work up a good sweat. One day, a couple girls took interest in what I was doing and asked me to work with them. We put on some music -- they loved it! It grew from that to the successful fitness business I have today."

**Q. That must have been an interesting transition from competitive Karate to group fitness and personal training?** My Karate training - body conditioning, endurance, strength training - was knowledge that translated perfectly to group fitness and personal training. The transition was more about my approach with my clients. Most of my clients, probably 95%, are women. They aren't interested in building muscle or in perfecting their Karate technique. Their goal is weight loss. In Karate, I worked with self-motivated athletes. My clients nowadays work hard when we personal train, they push themselves in cardio kickboxing, but they all expressed the same frustration. They have trouble losing weight because they struggle with staying motivated and on track the 23 hours I'm NOT with them. To help them, I created an inexpensive weight loss game that, not co-incidentally, resembles the type of reward system in Karate. Just like the belt color is a visible reflection of the technical excellence achieved, my weight loss game provides 24 hour visible reinforcement of the weight loss goals achieved. It was a motivational tool for my clients, but they told their friends, who told their friends, it was picked up by other trainers, Karate coaches and on and on. In fact, the name of the game, **Play It Forward**, came from the very way it became popular -- people were passing it on.

**Q. That sounds like a creative solution and an interesting topic -- for ANOTHER interview. But, back to the Karate....if you couldn't find a school that suited you, why didn't you open your own 7 years ago?** "Sorry -- I get excited when I talk about the success I've seen with Play It Forward. Ok, seven years ago...when I first moved here, it *was* my goal to start coaching as soon as possible. But, Karate is structured so differently here in the States. My love is kumite -- to compete -- and in the UK my Karate club focused on that: sparring and inter-club competitions. Here, you have Karate schools, not clubs. It is very commercial. It has to be run like a business just to cover overheads. Karate schools cater to kids. I didn't have the finances to start a school, but I wasn't interested in going down that road either."

**Q. Why start coaching now?** "My first love is still Karate -- and that kept nagging at me. Then, last year, I met up with some English mates at the Karate World Championships in Mexico. I saw the American team. They looked and fought and trained the way I used to in the UK. It inspired me to develop that kind of program locally. I know now I can coach at the level I am used to."

**Q. What direction will your Karate clubs take?** "Club members will be divided into two groups: 12 - 14 year olds, and 15 years and older. As the coach, I want to train individuals and teams to compete in WKF (World Karate Federation) competitions. Karate is not generally respected as a sport. There are so many different organizations, styles, and standards. I want to produce top standard Karate athletes who can compete at the consistent, well-regulated, high standard of the WKF, a very professionally run organization."

**Q. Are kids under 12 too young to train in karate?** "Not at all. Any kind of physical activity - karate, football, skating - is great for kids. It improves their health, coordination, confidence. Sport Karate, however, is about training to compete. The training regimen is geared toward technical skills, body conditioning and developing the muscle memory, reaction and timing to compete. Belt awards are not just about learning techniques -- its about executing those techniques with the proficiency required to meet the high standard of a WKF competition. Not everybody in my club will be able to compete, or even want to. It takes a level of mental maturity to accept the hard work and discipline necessary and a level of physical maturity to actually achieve that standard. Every belt awarded in my club will be well earned, one to be proud of, a reflection of skill and athleticism. Thats not a concept young kids grasp easily. In a competitive arena, you do a kid a disservice by handing them belt ranks based solely on knowledge, then allowing them to enter a competition where their opponent proceeds to mop the floor with them."

**Q. So, what's in it for those who can't or won't compete?** "(Laughs) Believe it or not, just being part of the organization! For the athletes, the emphasis on fitness, agility and physical conditioning carries obvious benefits. But unlike a traditional karate school, the organization provides a place to learn refereeing, judging, and coaching. The club will need parent support groups, competition organizers and team managers. It's a hobby AND a passion that goes way beyond the athlete earning a belt."

**Q. What other differences can we expect between your sport Karate club and a more traditional Karate school?** There are some basic differences in the way my club will be run. For example, there are no long term contracts or large up front financial commitments required from members. As a Brit, too, my mindset is different in a way that is difficult to explain. Here in the U.S., there is a big difference in the importance placed on athletics and athletes. Young lads, in particular, expect to impress others with their physical toughness or ability, be it in the Karate dojo or on the football field. I don't understand the prestige assigned to being able to throw a ball well or to deliver a roundhouse kick accurately. In my club, respect is earned, and it is mutual. It is a two way street between me and the member. If I choose to hand them something, they have to reach their hand out and take it. I don't demand respect simply because I am the coach, just as they don't get a belt rank simply by showing up every week and paying for training.

**Q. I understand you worked many years as a night club bouncer in the UK.** "Yes, 15 years, in fact."

**Q. Tell me about that experience.** "It's not an experience I care to talk about much. Doorman (bouncers) in the UK have a very different job to their American counterparts. Brits are a tougher, rougher lot. Violence and brutality were a regular part of my job. There wasn't a week that went by that I didn't knock someone out or put someone in the hospital. Obviously, it was demanding physically. But, it took a mental toll as well."

**Q. Your Karate training must have really had an impact in your job as a bouncer.** "It did, but NOT in the way that you think! When you are involved in a combative sport, the misconception is that you are experienced in self defense. In actual fact, the vast majority of Karate practitioners have, and never will be involved in a real altercation. Their knowledge of self defense is based entirely on theory. My black belt, earned through skill and athleticism, created a mystique of being unstoppable that I couldn't live up to -- like a gun with no bullets. I took the job because I knew I *couldn't* fight. Sport fighting is about skill."

Street fighting is about finishing. Once you know the real difference, you can't become disillusioned. Karate is a fascinating sport. Self defense is a different animal. If you screw up in a competition, worst case you don't get a trophy. Screw up in a self defense situation and it could be your life."

**Q. As an experienced street fighter AND Karate expert, what is your opinion of mixed martial arts, such as cage fighting?** "I dislike it immensely. There is no question that the fighters are skillful and tough. It took me a while to figure out what I didn't like about it -- the spectators aren't interested in the skill of the winner, but in the brutality inflicted on the loser. When I watch cage fighting I don't see a sport. I see ancient Rome."

**Q. Pretty harsh words from someone who made a living surrounded by violence and brutality!** "A fair statement. As a doorman, I had literally hundreds of street fights. People think that makes me a tough guy. There is not one tough thing about me. I gained the advantage by understanding the dynamics of a physical confrontation. I'm familiar with the adrenaline rush, the heavy legs, the disabling effect of fear. There is so much psychologically that prevents you from reacting well technically. Sport fighting or any kind of fighting in a controlled environment with rules and regulations is a far cry from what happens in the street. It is 90% about handling the fear and 10% about the physical reaction. There are a lot of technically skilled black belts who won't believe me. But, if you've never had a real fight, how would you know?"

**Q. One last question...what will Ian McCranor be doing 5 years from now?** "I expect to have an association that produces athletes that compete around the world. We will be inviting teams from other countries to visit, train and compete with us and vice versa. Karate narrowly missed inclusion in the 2012 Olympics, so it is only a matter of time before it is an Olympic sport. Interest in Karate is only going to increase and I expect to be right in the middle of it. "