

**How can we learn from Count Dante (John Keehan)?**

Anyone who has been in the martial arts for certain length of time has heard the great stories of John Keehan, a.k.a. Count Dante and the “Dojo Wars” that took place in Chicago, Illinois back in the 1960’s. Although this is common place today to hear of people like Keehan we must keep in mind that there is definitive moral for all martial artists hidden within his story.

**Who was Count Dante / John Keehan?**

John Keehan was a martial artist who had worked into prominent positioning among the United States Karate Association underneath Grand Master Robert Trias. Keehan became the director for the Mid-West region of the USKA and was listed a senior instructor as well. It has been noted that he trained in Judo, Karate and Kung Fu but no one is certain of his actual status as an instructor except for the claims on his website at <http://www.countdante.com/> which is designed to keep his legend alive.

Keehan was instrumental in helping to popularize Karate in the mid-west and assisted in promoting the 1st World Karate Championships held in Chicago, Illinois in the 1960’s. In 1961 he opened his first school in Chicago and was considered to be the driving force to spreading “traditional” martial arts throughout the Midwest region. He was seen as charismatic, influential and full of vigor about the martial arts. Keehan was perhaps one of the first martial artists to use mass media to promote his “visions” of the arts. He made sure that all his events were publicized as well as using more of the “flashy” parts of the arts to attract scores of people. In his early days many of his tournaments were attended by big name martial artist such as Ed Parker, Jhoon Rhee and a pre-famous Bruce Lee.

**The controversy begins...**

So what actually happened that made this great Sensei, considered by many a talented and good martial artist as well as a wonderful event promoter turn into the “Count”? Keehan was one of the first martial arts instructors in the US to accept non-whites as students. He would train anyone regardless of race, creed or their reasons for wanting to learn the arts. For the traditionalists this was a big no since there is more than just fighting in the arts to them. Keehan was considered to be a rebel...but did he ever have an actual cause? When researching Keehan I have searched the internet, read blogs and books and recall the stories I heard about him around the dojo when I was younger. His cause was no different than that of MMA practitioners today. He wanted to teach people effective fighting skills...but ended up paying for it with the greatest price and in many ways.

Robert Trias had given John Keehan a lot of control and power in the USKA. At Keehan’s young age this may have proven to be too much for him since he was already known to have a strong arrogance to his persona. In an interview with Black Belt Magazine in 1969 he stated that since he trained negroes in his school and his was the only one in the USKA that Trias didn’t like or approve it. Later on in a different Black Belt Magazine article published in 1975 Trias dismissed his allegations as “nonsense”. Trias was later known to have said that “he was given too much power to young and too fast”. It was also mentioned by James Jones, a student of Keehan, that race was really not the issue but in fact it was more of a power struggle between Keehan and Trias that led to the 1964 ruling by Trias to expel Keehan from the USKA.

**The Count Dante Legend begins...**

In 1965 Keehan and Doug Dwyer, a longtime friend and student, were arrested after drunken dynamite blasting caps attempt to blow out a window on a rival dojo in Chicago. Around this same time Keehan purchased a lion cub and began parading around with it throughout the Chicago area. His dress and attire also began to change as he started wearing black suit outfits with a tall

hat and satin cape. In 1967 he promoted an event claiming a live bull would be killed with a single blow during the event. Keehan would not be the one executing the blow but rather a 19 year old student of his would. He stated that if the police threatened to shut him down that they would kill the bull in a truck right there in the street. The day of the event they paraded the bull around throughout the town on a flatbed trailer but never did complete the propaganda stating they were shut down. Many still believe to this day that the intended killing of the bull was never really going to take place but rather was just a marketing ploy to draw attention to their tournament.

John Keehan legally changed his name to Count Juan Raphael Dante in 1967. He did so claiming his family was actually of Spanish Nobility and that it was hidden to protect them as they fled to America to escape the Spanish revolution. The hardest part to believe about his claims was that Keehan was actually a red headed Irish kid from the city's south side. He also opened a salon in 1967 "The House of Dante" and changed his appearance by dyeing his hair jet black and shaving an unusual beard that later became part of his trademark persona. With this new persona, self-inspired to say the least, Keehan began his bid for national attention. Inspired by his supposed training in the Dim Mak portion of Kung Fu he began placing ads in comic books promoting his self acclaimed book called "The World's Deadliest Fighting Secrets" in which he promised the purchase that they would learn to defeat any man in any situation. To top things off he also included a free membership into his newly formed "Black Dragon Society" as a bonus. The book he developed was purely to feed his ego but it did open up that in many instances a fight did not end with a single attack...but rather one needs to keep fighting until it is clear that you have won. The cost of this book was \$5.

Although it is not known how many people purchased this item, Keehan's fortunes grew and by 1969 he had opened another three dojos in Chicago. Keehan continued to hold full contact tournaments and began to build a reputation as a "bad boy" within the Chicago scene. Standing at 6'2" tall and being very muscular he was a well known fighter both in and outside of the dojo. Although Keehan constantly requested Black Belt Magazine to cover his events they always refused and in 1969 they published a roundtable discussion on Keehan in which several Chicago area instructors lashed into Keehan's tactics and his ethics.

The beginning of the end for our beloved Count Dante...

Keehan always felt he was in severe competition with the other dojos, 13 of them, in the Chicago area at the time. This brought about the famous stories of the dojo wars that took place in Chicago from 1965 to 1970. It is a tale of violence, needless stupidity and death, one that you can still hear today from the Sensei that lived during that era.

In 1970 Ken Knudson, a well known martial artist of the time...and even more famous today, received a call from Jim Koncevic explaining that Keehan wanted to visit a rival dojo to settle a beef with a member there. The dojo was the Green Dragon's Society Black Cobra Hall of Kung Fu. Knudson, an avid competitor of the time, refused the offer stating that a "kids rumble" was not worth his time. Keehan stated later that he and his students had received death threats from the Black Cobras. Keehan, who always felt threatened by rival schools in the Chicago area, responded by calling their dojo and saying they were going to come down there and level their entire instructor staff. Keehan traveled to Koncevic's dojo and acquired a group of four men, including his long time friend Koncevic and proceeded to the Black Cobra dojo to settle the dispute.

According to an article published in the newspaper at the time Keehan smashed down the front door and found six men armed with Chinese weapons inside. Somebody, although it is unclear, made the first move and the brawl began. In the end two Black Cobra members were seriously injured including one needing to go to the hospital for eye surgery but the worse injury was to Keehan's long time friend Jim Koncevic who was fatally stabbed with a sword. It is stated that Koncevic made it outside of the building, walked three steps and fell to the ground in a pool of

blood. During the court trial Keehan was found not at fault since he had no way of knowing they would be armed with weapons but the judge stated that both sides were at fault and accountable for the death of Jim Koncevic. Keehan was only charged with aggravated battery and impersonating a police officer (which the later charge has never been fully explained). It is wide spread speculation that the neither side is telling the entire truth...even today.

**An Empty Vow from Count Dante...**

In an article published in Official Karate about the dojo war with the Black Cobra, Keehan stated "I blame myself to a great extent for being responsible for us going over to the Black Cobra Hall in the first place and have gone through living hell because of it," he wrote. "My days of fighting at the drop of a hat have come to an end and challenges I will accept no more unless first attacked." Although it sounded like Keehan had learned a valuable lesson this vow was broken very quickly. Soon after the article was published Keehan beat up two men who made fun his Spanish coat of arms on his car and even punched his lawyer in the chin.

By 1974 Keehan had a financial interest in a chain of adult bookstores and a car dealership. He continued his bad boy ways which finally lead him into a confrontation with an member of Chicago's mafia, Jimmy "The Bomber" Catuara. It is reported that Keehan paid off the bomber in the amount of \$25,000 to avoid the problem but this led to his reported ties with the mafia at the time. John Keehan was arrested and had to testify to his part in an alleged mafia hit that netted over \$4 million from the headquarters of Purolator Security. Although never formally charged in the heist the events seemed to have shaken Keehan badly.

**The end comes swiftly to the Count...**

By 1975 Keehan was showing signs of medical disorders. He would often stumble through conversations and was quoted as stating he was taking booze and pain killers together. That same year he made a final attempt to revive his career as a martial artist by hosting an event in Massachusetts. The event was an utter failure and was quoted as "trash". In a follow up article Keehan was quoted as saying he "wanted people to forget him". On May 25, 1975 John Keehan, a.k.a. Count Juan Dante died from hemorrhaging caused by bleeding ulcers in his stomach. Many people speculate that the ulcers were the result of stress caused through his own actions which resulted in the death of his friend Jim Koncevic. John Keehan was buried in an unmarked grave in St. Joseph's township cemetery in River Grove. Before he died he helped his friend and student William Aguilar set up and take over the Black Dragon Fighting Society. Aguilar died in January 2006 and his son, Williams Aguilar III has taken over the association.

**What can we learn from all this Count Dante stuff?**

As martial artists it is important that we not only the story of Count Dante for historical purposes, but also for moral ones as well. In traditional martial arts the physical side of our training is but a mere part of the whole. Keehan began on the path to righteousness. He was a talented martial artists, hard worker and incredible promoter who acquired respect through his peers. As his ego began to inflate he began to make terrible choices and also to dis-respect the true reasons one trains in the martial arts.

Even though I began training in 1978, which was eight years after the Dojo Wars had ended, the stories of the infamous Count Dante still circulated in the dojo walls. My Sensei talked about this since had personally lived through that era and competed at some of the earlier events hosted by the USKA and Keehan in Chicago. He would relate the story of this young, talented and charismatic martial artist who had the world in his hands yet destroyed his own fate by forgetting the main reason one trains in the arts which is inner peace and self discipline. Even today I relate this story to my own students as to the damage allowing your ego to take over can cause. Humility is a trait all great masters have...and some wanna be masters claim. To truly be humble all

you need to do is remember the story of Count Dante and how his need for power, fortune and claim destroyed his life. Keehan wanted it all but it is evident he had some insecurities that caused him to become a reckless leader who abused others and made claims to satisfy the media and general public in order to promote his own self inflated need to fame.

Out of this story developed the common tale that there is a dark side and a light side to the martial arts, much like the Jedi have Star Wars. Once you are sucked into the dark side you will never escape since it leads to devastation, war and death. True martial artists train for inner peace, to develop a cast iron will and learn how to be the best person they can be. We all want to develop the ability to defend ourselves, but Keehan used his skills to fight...which is not self defense. Keehan was also money hungry and maybe an example of the first Karate Mafia as he tried to control the dojo in the Chicago area. Since he, himself probably did not believe all his claims he developed insecurities so whenever a rival dojo would slam him he immediately went to arms to prove his claims. He never did, nor was able to, and his constant battling with other dojo lead the death of one of his long time friends over stupidity.

Keehan was a master at publicity and marketing. He evidently had some decent physical skills since he was well known as a fighter with tremendous ability. It is important to note that here is a man who could have been anything he wanted to be and through his own actions he destroyed his own life. If this is the first time you have ever heard about these true events please use this a moral story to teach your students what can happen if they ignore the complete training of the entire person in their martial arts. There was no glory to this story, only death of a friend and death of the person.

As always, yours in the arts...

Steven M. Franz, Shihan

