

# You Know Kyudo?

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I sure didn't when I stumbled up the steps to the *kyudo* range in the Tsuru ga Oka shrine in Kamakura one fine day in June. I only remember several months prior, while riding my bike home through the shrine grounds, I had stopped, walked in, and randomly asked the *kyudo* sensei to teach me the traditional archery of Japan. He was a little stunned but simply told me to inquire at the office on the first floor. The young *Miko-san* (shrine maiden) had me fill out forms and informed me there was only one class per year and she would send information via post when the time came.

When the letter arrived I shook my head because I didn't even remember signing up. Nonetheless, I was on the roster with nearly 80 other students split into afternoon or evening classes. I was scheduled to begin afternoon classes the first week of June. The first practice was crucial. That was when we would be fitted for our new practice uniforms.

First week? Uh-oh! I was going to be in the US! I rushed the 2-minute ride back to the shrine and told them in rather poor Japanese I could not make the first lesson. The *Miko-san* just scowled. First days are very important and to miss them is near unforgivable. I explained my predicament and she said I would need to find a practice uniform on my own. Oh! No problem, I had plenty at home...I had my uniforms from swordsmanship.

The second practice became my first and trembling I made my way to the *shajo* (shooting range) on the roof of the *Kenshin kyudojo*. I peeked through the door to a large waiting area called the *hikae*. On the right were two tidy *tatami*-mat rooms on each side of a massive picture window on the end. To the left, beyond some benches, was the *shajo* (shooting range). My heart quickened.

On the right side of the *shajo* was a slightly elevated alcove. It was the *kamiza* (god-seat) bearing an ancient looking scroll whose black characters looked more like artistic doodles. On the left were *makiwara* (practice bails) held round and taught by straw ropes. Each balanced on wooden stands and set back in another alcove. The floor itself was dark brown with patches made light and glossy from extended use. Beyond the floor's edge was the perfection of green grass under a clear sky leading to another small building. The roof of the *matoba* covered a pristine mound of dark sand known as *azuchi* (target bank). Above the *azuchi*, a graceful curtain of purple was caught up at the middle by a thick cord with fat tassels hanging above a single black and white target. The curtain bore on each side, bold white characters, symbolizing the crest of the shrine.

In the *hikae*, students started to arrive. Some mingled with friends and others like myself just stood looking around with curiosity. Each student wore a thin, crisp, white *kyudogi* (practice top) with short sleeves. The men wore black pleated *hakama* that looked to be floor-length skirts but were actually culottes held in place by long straps over a thick cotton *obi* (sash) about the mid-drift. The women also wore *hakama* but navy blue in color and where the men had a distinct *koshiita* (back panel), the women's were simple straps with no back support. The women also wore a *mune-ate* (chest guard) and every recruit also donned spiffy white, split-toed *tabi* socks. Except me.

The only white top I had was my bulky *judogi* with long sleeves. For the bottom I had chose my blue denim *kendo hakama*, which, like the men's, featured a *koshiita*. As for *tabi* and a *mune-ate*? Well, I hadn't thought that far. Looking around the room, I felt distant and removed and also very pale. I was the only non-Japanese in the room. Suddenly there was a sharp clapping sound and everyone shuffled out to the *shajo* and most habitually lined up in rows facing the *kamiza*. This was a common ritual before the start of martial arts classes and I felt comfortable thinking I knew what was about to happen.

Everyone sat in the formal *seiza* position with their legs tucked under themselves. Good so far. Then they bowed. Yup, I'm still there. Then they bowed again. Uh... ok. Then everyone raised their hands in prayer. Follow their lead. Then they clapped twice. Now I'm lost. They bowed again. Try to keep up. They clapped again. They bowed again. My face was no longer pale. I was red with embarrassment.

The five sensei seated in the front stood and the head teacher, Motomatsu-sensei, proceeded to expand on the day's lesson plans. I strained to keep up with his rapid-fire Japanese but only to realize that I had no idea what he'd said and had no idea what I was doing there.

We began with a series of stretches. Then one of the instructors approached me and spoke very slow. She wanted to know who I was. I apologized for missing the first day but she still didn't know who I was. She looked at the roster. She said I wasn't on the list. I explained that I had indeed signed up for the class. She showed me the list and I pointed to my name. She looked at the name and then at me with a quizzical look on her face. My first name is Erika and it is a very common name in Japan. She had expected me to be Japanese. She told me no one spoke English and had this uncomfortable look on her face. "What do I do with her?" So it had begun.

Learning *kyudo* is like growing up. First you must learn to sit, then stand, then walk. My class was the 16<sup>th</sup> class since the *kyudojo* was rebuilt. Ranging from high school to elderly, all now embarked on this mission of learning to walk again. We learned every motion in part and then learned to blend them. Although I didn't seem to have trouble following along, I had difficulty getting my bare feet to slide gracefully along the wood floor. I tried to blend the movements but my feet would jerk as they stuck with nervous sweat to the wood. My first day felt like a failure.

The following practice I looked different. In three days, I had sewn new and proper attire and came to practice wearing new *tabi* and a homemade *mune-ate* of leather. Although, I still had a slight language barrier, I was starting to grasp the basics. Next, they started us on the *gomu-kyu* (rubber bow). A replicate bow grip with a long rubber tube, the *gomu-kyu* allowed us to draw and practice releasing with proper form. For the next several weeks, we became masters at going through the motions of shooting the *gomu-kyu*.

After being fitted we eventually were allowed to hold a *yumi* (bow) and two *ya* (arrows) but never more than learning to sit, turn and stand with a 2-meter long object. We also learned how to string the *yumi*. The tricky part was when we were given *kake* (shooting gloves) to practice on our *gomu-kyu*. The *yumi* is drawn with the thumb and held by bracing it with the index and middle finger. The hardened thumb on the *kake* was bulky and difficult to properly hold the rubber band. Maybe it would be easier with the *yumi*.

A month later we were given the chance to actually shoot the *yumi* at *makiwara* (practice bails). This was the day! I was so excited as was everyone around me. We stood in line awaiting our destiny with the straw. The girl in front of me yelped and dropped her bow after slapping her arm with the string. She bowed profusely and apologized for the disruption, picked up her bow, and walked to the back of another line. "*Tsu--gi!*" Ne--xt! I swallowed hard. Motomatsu-sensei sensed my apprehension and reminded me to release with strong back tension and open my chest.

OK, I can do this...the *hassestu* (eight basic steps). Bow to the *makiwara* and take three gliding steps forward, pivot and extend my left leg to spread my legs apart. *Ashibumi* complete. Arrow is nocked and bow is held in front with end resting on my leg, my other arrow is in my hand at my right side. Clear my mind. Good, *dozukuri* is done. Now, take the string with care not to drop the second arrow. Hold the bow with proper *tenouchi* (grip). Look at target. *Yugamae* is complete and, well, now I'm nervous. Start *uchiokoshi* and raise bow. Don't forget to breath. Start my *hikiwake* (draw) to *kai*. Try not to shake at full draw. Remember what sensei said.

I then released the arrow, opening my chest and squeezing my back. Yow! I felt a sting on my face. I stood holding the bow in follow through when I noticed the bow looked funny. The string was gone. The arrow lay in the *makiwara* and the string lay in two pieces on the floor. I felt the burning in my face. I just wanted cry. I was so embarrassed.

Motomatsu-sensei didn't seem bothered by my breaking the school's bow. On the verge of tears he approached me. Expecting the worst, I was shocked when he told me I had made a great shot. What! But I broke the bow. He told me that the hemp bowstrings break all the time. He slowly explained that a string that breaks in the middle while the arrow still hits the target is called an *anzen-zuru*. It is considered very lucky and these bowstrings are given to pregnant women to protect them through labor. He handed me the broken pieces and told me to keep them. I still have them.

So I survived my first shot ever with a bow. Sometimes on off-days I would go to the *kyudojo* just to watch the senior shooters practice. I realized I had a long way to go before I would ever stand on the *sha-i* (shooting lane) and shoot at a real *mato* (target). But hey, that's another story...