

MAN OF THE IRON FIST

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On Okinawa, there is a small place called Gushikawa Village. It is off the beaten path and not too well known by the karate students of today, but it once was the scene of one of the martial arts' most colorful legends.

There is a certain tree in the village which is still the topic of much discussion among local residents. This tree first became famous around the turn of the century when a villager named Agena made history. Agena, nicknamed Tairagwaa (the small calm one), was born in the tiny village in 1870, the first son of an upper middle class family. As a youth, he became one of the first non-noblemen to take up karate and though only a commoner was affectionately referred to as a living bushi (a samurai warrior).

Despite his slight physical stature, he was obsessed with the thought of becoming a man of the "iron fist" and "steel fingers." He pursued this objective with extreme dedication, eventually developing a fist like Thor's hammer. Unlike most karate masters, Agena never opened a school, but instead continued working exclusively with his own fist and fingers until they were capable of performing the incredible feats for which he is now remembered.

One particular day, so the legend says, Agena visited his friend Tengan Matsu. Tengan knew Agena had developed his hands to an extraordinary degree which bordered on the supernatural. Tengan opened a bottle of sake and after a few drinks said, "Agena, I'll make a bet with you. I bet I can rip off the bark of that tree there faster than you can. The wager will be five pounds of meat. What do you say?"

"Aw, come on," replied Agena, smiling, "forget it. Drink up. Anyway, it is a silly bet. You have as much chance as a snowball in hell." "No, I'm serious," insisted Tengan. "But there is a condition. I use my chisel and you use your hands. After all, you are the man with the iron fist and steel fingers." Tengan smiled, feeling secure in the knowledge that even Agena would not take up such a bet.

Agena then jumped up and said, "Get ready to buy me five pounds of top sirloin. I'm not asking for filet, just top sirloin." And he ran to the tree. Tengan followed with his chisel.

Tengan called the village headmaster as referee, and on the mark, they started. Tengan was thinking, "Agena must be drunk. I wonder why he took up such a bet. How can he beat the chisel, no matter how strong his hands are?"

Agena repeatedly punched the tree with his fist, loosening the bark and ripping it off with his fingers. First punch, then rip, and the bark came off in wide strips. Within two minutes, he had punched and ripped off an eight-foot strip, while Tengan had barely come down only one-third of the way.

Tengan threw down his chisel and admitted defeat. By now the village people had heard what was happening and had gathered around the tree, wondering how Agena could manage to do what he did. Tengan went off to the market place and bought the meat. With the help of the village headmaster and his family, both friends finished off the meat and a few extra jugs of sake.

There are many episodes about Agena and his steel fingers, but it is said he never hurt another human being, and in times of self-defense merely subdued his assailants rather than killing them. Agena was a master of himself who behaved truly to himself. He died in 1924 at the age of 54.