

Tsurugi Bashi Kendo Kai

University of Cambridge Kendo Society

Kendo, literally “the way of the sword”, is a modern Japanese martial art with roots in the ancient swordsmanship spirit and techniques of the samurai.

Background

The samurai sword, the legendary katana, impeccably forged as a combination of carefully matched varieties of steel, combines an extremely hard and sharp cutting edge with a blade that won't chip or break. Its secrets handed down by generations of swordsmiths, it is widely recognized as the finest blade ever made. A single stroke could split a head in two and indeed, in a duel, the samurai aimed to kill his opponent with just one decisive first cut. This required not only a fine sword but also perfect technique, total commitment and intensely focused concentration.

Modern kendo is a martial art with deep links to this centuries-old tradition. Having abandoned the emphasis on killing techniques, the kendo practitioner still seeks, through strict training, a discipline of total commitment such as that needed by the samurai to face the life and death struggle of mortal combat in which there is no second chance. The All Japan Kendo Federation appropriately says: “kendo is a way to discipline the human character through the application of the principles of the katana”.

It is improper to describe kendo as a sport, since this puts the emphasis only on competing and winning. Any people practicing kendo just to win tournaments would be missing the true spirit of the art.

Equipment

Kendo is practiced with a *shinai* (bamboo sword), which is a shock-absorbing weapon made of four slats of bamboo held together by leather fasteners, suitable for full-contact free sparring against an adversary wearing *bogu* (armour). Kendo is also practiced with a solid *bokuto* (wooden sword), shaped like a katana; this type of sword is used in the context of *kata* (forms), which are performed without armour. Repeated practice of the *kata* is important to master the techniques of kendo. Experienced high-ranking practitioners have such a great control of their technique that they can practice *kata* with real swords.



Source: British Kendo Association

Ranking

Modern kendo uses the *dan-to-kyu* grading system originally introduced by Kodokan Judo in the 19th century, with the difference that there is no external indication of one's grade such as a differently coloured belt. The *kyu* grades start from 6th (lowest) up to 1st and are followed by the *dan* grades, corresponding to “black belts” in other martial arts, from 1st (lowest) up to 8th.

Joining the Cambridge dojo, “Tsurugi Bashi”

Tsurugi Bashi is the Kendo Society of the University of Cambridge. We are a university society, founded and intended for Cambridge students, but we also welcome other members. The current dojo leader, Frank Stajano (3rd dan), a university lecturer, obtained all his kendo grades in Japan. The chief instructor and former dojo leader, Sergio Boffa (5th dan), who also frequently trains in Japan and is former coach of the Belgian national team, returns to Cambridge every few months. We also organize visits from senior Japanese masters: in 2004 we hosted Korogi-sensei (hanshi 8th dan) for a week. If you are a Cambridge student, notice we beat Oxford for the last three years in a row!

Beginners need to attend a training course before they can safely join a kendo practice session; therefore we only admit new members a few times per year. The main intake is in October, at the start of the academic year. There will be two free *open days* with demonstrations and explanations, on **Wed 5 and Fri 7 October 2005**, at St Luke's school, French's road, Cambridge CB4 3JZ, from 19:00 to 21:00 (our usual training times and days). You will see all the weapons and equipment and you will witness both *shinai*-based free sparring and formal *kata* practice. You may just watch or, at your option, even try your hand at it. If you wish to *try* kendo, come in loose sport clothes (e.g. a tracksuit rather than tight jeans) and please clip your toenails. Practice is barefoot. We will lend you all the necessary equipment for the day. Note that such open days tend to be very popular. You may leave early if you wish but please arrive punctually by 7 pm as doors will close shortly thereafter to avoid disruption.

If you like what you see at one of the open days you may, if you wish, join the dojo immediately afterwards. The beginners' course for this year starts on Wed 12 October. For your safety, you are required to attend *all* six sessions (two per week on Wed and Fri) from 12 to 28 October and, for insurance purposes, to register as a temporary member of the British Kendo Association. We welcome both women and men but you must be over 18. Details of fees will be given separately but you will find they are low compared to other clubs. We are strictly non-profit-making: none of the instructors or officers receives any payment and all fees go back into renting halls, buying equipment to be lent to members at no charge, providing insurance cover and so on. Fees are paid termly (i.e. about every three months) or yearly, independently of the number of sessions attended, and there are no refunds.

Initially you won't have to buy any expensive equipment other than the *shinai* included in the joining fee. From around January you will buy a *bokuto* and, a little later, proper clothes. Armour is expensive but we will lend you your first set when you are ready for it (towards April if you are proficient).

Kendo is very hard, not so much physically as in terms of spirit and dedication, but also extremely rewarding. If you are intrigued, we hope you will join us on one of the open days to find out more about this fascinating aspect of Japanese culture.

For further information: <http://www.cam.ac.uk/societies/kendo/> .