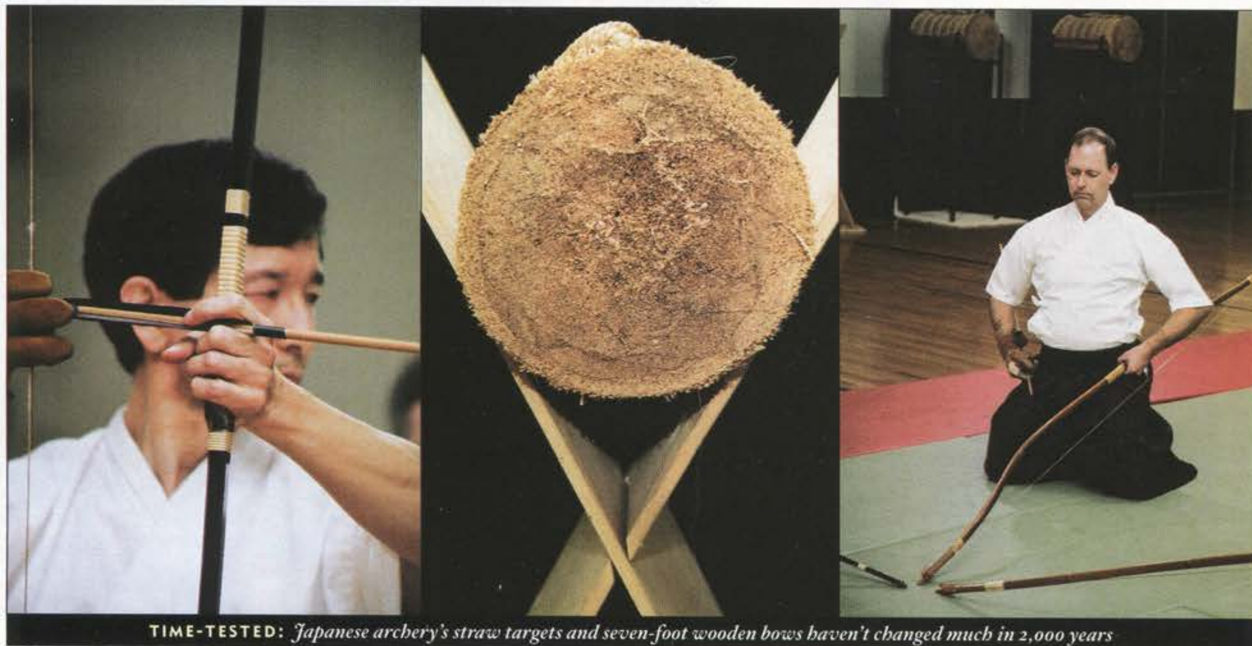

TIME-TESTED: *Japanese archery's straw targets and seven-foot wooden bows haven't changed much in 2,000 years*

True to Form

LOS ANGELES KYUDO KAI STUDENTS SPEND YEARS LEARNING THAT HOW YOU SHOOT AN ARROW MATTERS MORE THAN WHERE IT LANDS BY ROBERT ITO

RICK BEAL STUDIED JAPANESE archery for more than two years before he shot a single arrow. For months he swept and mopped the hardwood floors of his teacher's East L.A. gym. He set up the *makiwara*, squat drumlike targets consisting of tightly bound stalks of rice straw, and made tea for his instructors. Later the 43-year-old financial consultant learned to sit and walk and practiced his sport's relatively simple movements—eight in all, from setting the feet to final release—without a bow. During breaks he sneaked glances at the advanced students as they fired their seven-foot weapons. "When it looked like I was trying to learn something," Beal says, "they would send me off to make more tea."

Patience is a necessity in *kyudo*, an ancient martial art that values form above all else, even accuracy. The best practitioners are deadly shots, but a bull's-eye is almost an afterthought; the target is important only as a way to check one's technique. In fact, when archers get really good, they sometimes get worse at hitting the makiwara because they have moved beyond the egotistical desire for precision.

Kyudo is rich in such contradictions: Every aspect of the sport was designed to maximize a warrior's efficiency on the battlefield, yet it often is studied as a means of spiritual improvement. Once performed at heart-stopping speed by samurai riding at full gallop, it now is practiced at a languorous, tai chi–like pace. The basics can be learned in a day, but one can spend decades trying to perfect the tiniest detail.

This complex blend of physical and mental disciplines has attracted a small, ardent following in Japan and a smaller if no less ardent one at the Los Angeles Kyudo Kai, the sport's lone club in Southern California. Most students are culturally curious Japanese Americans and judo or kendo black belts searching for another martial art to master. A handful view kyudo as akin to a religion—either converts like Beal, who currently teaches most of the school's classes, or longtime disciples like Hirokazu Kosaka, the iconoclastic Buddhist priest who helped revive the club in the mid '70s.

Although he rarely attends practices anymore, Kosaka remains the school's spiritual center. His students describe his skills in hushed tones and compare his archery to breathing, something done without thought.

At 54 he looks fit; his strict bearing, salt-and-pepper hair, and wire-rimmed glasses give him the appearance of a lifelong scholar. He has no belt, black or otherwise, and is, technically, the lowest ranked of the school's members (ever the purist, he rejects the official testing system because he thinks it violates the spirit of the sport). In recent years he has also gained acclaim as a playwright and performance artist.

Kosaka speaks openly of his feelings for kyudo but is maddeningly cagey about his own past. He says he saw his first exhibition in Japan when he was nine, the same year he came to the United States. Asked about when he took up the bow, he says only that he has been practicing "for ten generations." Students have heard this before. "In his case," says Beal, "it's true."

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Kosaka describes his introduction to kyudo in almost mystical terms. "When I studied kendo and judo as a child, [those sports] told me who they are," he says. "But when I picked up a bow and arrow, they told me who I am." Following its master's lead, the Kyudo Kai is far removed from the kung fu schools and cardio kickboxing classes that dot the L.A. landscape. It remains a "hidden club" that refuses to advertise or recruit. "Many of the area's martial arts have become corrupted," says Kosaka. "We wanted to create a place separate from that, one that not everybody would be able to join."

ARCHERY HAS EXISTED IN Japan, in one form or another, for 9,000 years. The bow was used for hunting, then for conflict resolution between feuding nobles and as a weapon of choice for the samurai class. Japanese history and folklore is full of fanciful tales of warrior archers. In the 12th century, it is said, shogun Minamoto no Tametomo wielded a bow so strong it took five men to pull it and once sunk a ship with an arrow that pierced one side and flew out the other. When firearms rendered archery obsolete in the 16th century, kyudo split into two major camps—one rooted in its militaristic past, the other focused on its more ceremonial and spiritual aspects. In the late 1800s the two styles were fused to create modern kyudo. Most of the schools were united in 1949 under the All Nippon Kyudo Federation, which has more than 150,000 members. It's a tiny part of the country's martial arts scene; more than half of the junior high schools offer kendo classes, while 2 percent teach kyudo.

In the West the sport became popularly—and wrongly—known for its "Zen archers" after the publication of Eugen Herrigel's 1953 memoir *Zen in the Art of Archery*. Although the traditional sport has been influenced by Zen Buddhism, one can teach and learn it without having a background in the religion—and many do, including Beal and Kosaka, a devotee of Shingon, an esoteric branch of Buddhism that bears little resemblance to Zen.

Herrigel, a German philosophy professor, wanted to study Zen Buddhism while teaching in Japan in the 1920s. He was told that he should begin by learning a Japanese art form that had been influenced by the religion. He chose kyudo and worked with instructor Awa Kenzo for six years. Unfortunately, Awa had never practiced Zen, and his theories about kyudo were so unorthodox that he was often ridiculed by his peers. (He was even pelted with rocks at exhibitions.) Also, Herrigel spoke no Japanese. In a pivotal instance in the book, he apparently misinterpreted his teacher's *sore deshita* ("that's it") for *sore ga iru* ("it shoots"). Thus a kindhearted "nice shot" was transformed into an awestruck "Eureka!"—what Herrigel believed was a transcendent moment in which the arrow shoots itself.

"When [that book] came out, a lot of U.S. intellectuals were interested in Zen Buddhism, and so people came to learn what they had read," says Kosaka. "We let them do whatever they wanted." Pupils often were surprised to find they were taught nothing remotely Zen-like.

Historically, Japanese American communities favored sports such as baseball, sumo, and judo. Archery, however, had its proponents, and the Los Angeles Kyudo Kai was formed in 1916, when 40 gardeners, merchants, and farmers gathered to shoot bows they had brought from Japan. They practiced at a community center on what is now San Pedro Street in Little Tokyo, and in Griffith Park. After Pearl Harbor many Japanese artifacts, particularly martial arts weapons, became contraband. "People would break their swords and family heirlooms," says Harry Honda, former archivist of the Japanese American Citizens League. Bows were burned or hidden, and the downtown gym was closed. The group disbanded in 1942, when its members were sent to internment camps.

After coming to the United States in 1958, Kosaka studied art at the Chouinard Institute (a precursor of CalArts), majored in theology at Columbia University, and spent five years in a monastery in Japan before returning to L.A. to serve as a priest at the Koyasan Buddhist Temple downtown. He has a fierce admiration for old Japan—he often uses archaic pronunciations when speaking Japanese—but as an artist he loves the freedom of L.A., which he calls the center of the modern Silk Road, because the ethnically diverse area lacks a "traditional culture."

In 1975 Kosaka and two other priests resurrected the Kyudo Kai by persuading locals to join. When Kosaka heard that a family had buried its bows in Gardena before the war, he located the home and asked the new owner if he could dig up his yard to look for them. "I told him, 'I'll put in brand-new grass for you,' and he was really happy," says Kosaka.

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The club didn't hand out flyers or advertise in the local Japanese American papers; showing outsiders certain shooting styles was forbidden. Membership rarely exceeded more than a few dozen, although a handful of non-temple members started to join, including Laker great Kareem Abdul-Jabbar, who practiced with the group for several years in the early '80s. They still have his shooting glove, which, says Beal, has "really long fingers."

Previously based in East L.A., today the Kyudo Kai holds its main weekly meetings at the Pasadena Japanese Cultural Institute. On a Saturday night, a dozen people meditate and chant sutras on large tumbling mats, a nod to the sport's roots in Shinto—one of Japan's oldest religions—and Buddhism. Martial arts dojos are commonly filled with the sound of bodies thudding against each other and choruses of grunts and yells, but the Kyudo Kai train in near silence. The quiet is enforced for spiritual as well as pragmatic reasons; archers *hear* a good shot as much as they see or feel it. Kosaka paid $10,000 for a silk *hakama*, a long traditional skirt that is part of the uniform, because he liked the way the material sounded.

Each student fires two arrows at the makiwara from about eight feet away, then returns to the mats to watch the others, especially Rick Beal. After training with Kosaka for nearly 20 years, the South Pasadena resident is now the group's primary leader and teacher. A six-footer of Welsh descent, he moves with a grace that would look perfectly natural for a geisha-in-training but seems incongruous for a man his size. When he lifts the bow overhead it appears weightless; as he draws the string back, each gesture flows seamlessly into the next.

Once everyone is done, the group assembles in a circle for snacks. Rice crackers and Girl Scout cookies are passed one way, green tea and a liter of A&W root beer the other. For the first time, people speak above a whisper. Frank Matsuyama, who was just promoted to third-degree black belt at 68, answers questions about his recent test. The judges, all from Japan, could tell if someone was breathing from the chest (bad) or if someone was losing concentration (also bad). "They don't have to see the shooting," he says. The conversation is genial, often self-deprecating, but always wends its way back to kyudo.

QUIET TIME: *Archers meditate before shooting*

The archers return to the practice area, still talking about the sport. "The target is just a mirror of yourself, so that you can see how you're doing," says Beal. "So if you hit the target it's good, because then your form is good. But if you hit the target and your form was bad, that's still not good."

"One of the beginners said all you have to do is aim more to your left," says George Nakashima, a pediatrician who works in Little Tokyo. "But I don't want to do that. If I adjust my sight to the left, yes, I'll hit it, but my form will always be wrong."

War stories are not about consecutive bull's-eyes but about outings when the shot "just felt right." Beal has experienced this five times. Is there a Japanese word for these special moments?

"Kyudo," says Nakashima.

THE KYUDO KAI HAS A STANDing reservation Sunday mornings at the Rancho Park archery range. Unlike in the short-distance makiwara practices, tiny wooden circles are hung on a wall 28 meters away. Beal and a half dozen other members arrive, many wearing their traditional uniforms. They carefully unwrap the cloths swaddling their giant bows, drawing stares from other archers, including

two men clutching gleaming fiberglass-and-aluminum models laden with the latest gewgaws and another holding an issue of *Traditional Bowhunter* with a freshly killed deer on the cover.

Beal offers to waive the long waiting period and let me shoot a couple of arrows. I've fired on rifle and pistol ranges, with passable results, but the idea of practicing with these guys scares me. Coordination and agility problems aside, I've never felt that comfortable with the whole mind/body/spirit connection. *Kyudo is easy*, Beal assures me: The bow and arrow already know what to do. The archer just allows it to happen.

Before I even get to the firing line, I'm having trouble putting on the shooting glove. Beal slowly slips on his own glove so that I can mimic his movements; the teaching is going to be done in silence, Japanese style, all by observation rather than direction. Beal hands me a bow and signals for me to take off my glasses. "You won't need them," he says, prompting laughter from the others. Of course, there's a practical reason, too: Because the arrow is about a meter long, its feather end is behind the shooter's ear by the time the bowstring is fully drawn. If I'm a little off, the release will send my glasses flying. The long draw is a peculiarity of kyudo. Aficionados claim to like feeling the string's breathy kiss as it brushes the cheek—possibly macho posturing, since a centimeter's miscalculation means scraping the top layer of skin from the side of the face. At times the bowstring can catch against the ear. The resulting slap creates large red welts—and great pain. "I lost my hearing for about a minute," says Nakashima.

Beal places me in the proper stance, then guides me through the movements. The finger position feels awkward, and the arrow keeps slipping out of the small groove in the glove that holds the string in place. When I'm at full draw, he tells me to clear my mind and let the arrow go. I realize I have no idea how to release it—the string is wedged in the groove.

I twitch around a little, and the arrow finally flies out. It hits the wall several feet from the target. I'm not so much embarrassed by the poor shot—I was, after all, supposed to ignore my desire to hit the bull's-eye. I'm convinced, however, that I looked like a fool in full view of these experts who make it seem like ballet. Nakashima approaches me. "Rick loves to say that kyudo is easy, but don't believe it," he says. "Kyudo is hard."

He's being nice, but I can see how they're both right. The mechanics are relatively easy to learn; Beal tells me his six-year-old daughter is quite a shot. But the discipline it takes to perfect every aspect is, in many ways, tougher than learning sports like judo and karate, with their scores of separate skills. Kyudo, in its eight-step simplicity, is unforgiving.

"When I was growing up, I remember hearing Japanese fairy tales about archers who were able to put three arrows in the air at the same time," says Dan Yoshimura, a personnel director for the City of L.A. who recently took up the sport with his 11-year-old daughter. "But modern kyudo is very courtly. There is nothing about it that's particularly fast."

Like many things about this sport, the slow pace can be at once frustrating, mystifying, and addicting. "My family understands that I enjoy it because it's a 'cultural thing,'" Yoshimura says. "But it's hard to explain to other people why you would stand there for five hours and only shoot two arrows." (LA)

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