

Kurasawa Cup 2010 Barcelona Trip Report

By Ruairidh Pooler

On one gloomy, not unpredictably arctic Edinburgh morning, at a time when no living species should be sentient, six disheveled creatures emerged from their respective lairs. They congregated at Waverly with gleeful anticipation (no hint of exaggeration). Simon, Matt, Neill, Koji, Ruairidh and (a disconcerted after a night with Koji) Chris. The hexad met in a circle: cue individual eye close-ups. Each one knew; each was ready – without a word they embarked. Barcelona the destination; glory in their sights.

The silence was broken on the train, as each cog in their minds slowly began to turn again. So much was it broken that a member of the public felt the need to notify them of the extent of their cog movement. Apparently other creatures too were awake. Newcastle Airport was found and bougu were sufficiently disguised as normal passenger luggage. Shinai not so much, but the kendoka managed to pass off as pensioner fishermen fairly easily. Especially Simon: stick a grass stalk in his mouth, a pie hat on his head and shove him by a river, instant angler. So with minimal toil they were on their plane to Spain.

Arrival in Spain exiled the established directional coherence and ushered in a new wave of orienteering failure. The new language, stifling 15° heat and structural similarity of each street resulted in many wrong turns and much back-alley meandering, though fortunately with few abortions. Coats remained on their hangers. The hostel was fresh and clean, at least when they arrived. Three days and two nights of the familiar all-permeating bougu stench blended with the unmitigated and eye-watering flatulence of six tapas-infused stomachs rendered the once cheerfully sterile dorm a noxious quagmire of stagnant stench, filling every crack and crevice until it became part of the very being of the room itself.

There was no time to dither upon arrival, nor to chat to the ridiculously friendly receptionist, as keiko began shortly. Tapas were tasted, beer belched, restrooms violated and the pilgrimage that was to become the Quest for the Dojo began. The road was long and arduous and fraught with peril; battles of the wits were fought with crazy Spanish motorists and seemingly indecipherable area maps. Then, after all directions were exhausted, they hung their heads in defeat and, ironically, saw the dojo right underneath them.

The seminar was held by Takizawa Sensei 8th Dan Kyoshi with Chiba Sensei 8th Dan Kyoshi, aided by the helpful (Spanish) translation of Hiruma Sensei 6th Dan. The hall in Barcelona's Polytechnic University was thronging with over 150 kendoka, mostly hailing from within Spain itself. In fact, Edinburgh was only one of two English-speaking dojos represented, the other being our Irish friends from Dublin. To start things off, Nihon Kendo Kata 1 – 7 were covered, and although the Edinburgh kendoka's ears could not gain too much insight, their eyes certainly worked. Matt especially should be commended for managing all seven kata. This was followed by keiko, which consisted of kihon waza as well as some shikake waza and ojiwaza, demonstrated intermittently by Takizawa Sensei. Subsequently mawari geiko ensued, wherein kendoka could hone their staying warm technique in the expansive queues. The option of fencing a fellow competitor was possible also and little bouts skirted around the heavyweight Hachidans.

Virtually on the call of “Mokusou yame!” the mighty crowd stampeded to the incapacitated changing rooms, so the six sweaty students bowed and slunk out into the night.

As Barcelona’s streets looked no more comprehensible in the dark, the consensus of the group was to walk until a decent eatery was discovered. There was little luck: there wasn’t even an innkeeper to grunt “No room at the inn,” there was no inn at all. Suddenly a restaurant sign was spotted, leading into a vacuous hallway and ascending staircase. The sign may as well have read “Stand-ins for Hansel and Gretel wanted.” But they were desperate, so tentatively they climbed, making nervous jokes about Russian mob dens. Their fears were unjust, however, as the grotty door opened into a delightful restaurant with delectable food. Suddenly it was they who felt out of place. So Barcelona had a few tricks up her beautifully crafted yet bewildering sleeve.

Competition day was awoken by an obnoxious “Wake up Koji!” which, as the lunchtime news reported, caused several premature births and a number of untimely deaths in old people’s homes. Nevertheless, with a few less than grunted grunts, the six young warriors were awake. Ideas of a Rocky-esque training montage were abandoned and they set off towards the Dojo with an air of confidence – at least they knew where they were going.

Anticipation fluttered about the hall as muscles were loosened, minds cleared and hangovers suppressed. To begin the day, Takizawa Sensei led a short seminar concentrating on Kodachi Kata. Then the Sensei organized an interesting keiko to train both competitors and shimpans: the bullring.

Competitors were segregated into grade: Ikkyu, Shodan and Nidan and were told to form circles. Three members from each circle would enter into the centre, forming a triangle. They would then begin to fight, each man for himself, watched over by a shimpan. If an ippon was awarded then the receiver would run back out into the circle and a new fighter would enter to take on the two remaining. Shimpans, too, would rotate. Fairly straightforward in theory you might think. In reality what ensued can only be described as a brawl. As shimpans struggled to be heard over ongoing screeching kiai, new fighters flew in haphazardly from all angles, people were blindsided and suckerpunched; it was like a battlefield. Great fun, but it also was an efficacious exercise in zanshin, you had to be constantly on your toes and ready for anything, and timing because you often had to run from the other side of the ring and find issoku itto no mae to get an ippon.

After the dust of the tumult had settled, a cool waft of static anticipation filled the dojo, as the teams convened and began preparations. The six warriors chatted nervously amongst themselves, noting all embarrassing possibilities in an effort to quash all responsibilities for their forthcoming actions. They sized up the competition – somewhat foreboding. Stalwartly they coalesced into a hexagon for a warm-up. They bellowed to the skies in a hugely intimidating kendo haka. The opponents recoiled into their shells like poked snails. Hands of the six formed spokes of a wheel. While other teams roared their dojo names, the Edinburghans, noble to the end, had a higher cause in mind: “Let’s do it for Haiti!” Hands flew into the air.

Shimpans unfolded their flags. Mens were donned in unison. It was time. Team A (Neill, Matt & Ruairidh) was first into the fray. Their first opponents took the shape of the host dojo – Barcelona Polytechnic University – the only other

university in the competition. Sempo Ruairidh, like an uncute lamb to the slaughter, was dropped onto the conveyer belt. Somehow he managed to score two quick ippon and take some pressure off the other two. Matt held his ground in the second fight but his opponent prevailed. Neill, as Taisho, finished the Uni team off with a kote and men. They had won their first fight! Deservedly so, but nonetheless a good victory. The next team, from Madrid, was a different story. Ruairidh came up against the dojo leader and was presented with his buttocks on a platter. As Ruairidh charged bullheadedly at his opponent, Mister P. Perez stepped aside with a calm "Olé!" and placed a composed kensen between Ruairidh's blundering horns. Perez bowed to the crowd and the bull's corpse was dragged from the shiai-jo. Next, Matt faced the matador's brother (presumably), R. Perez. Fairing much better than his predecessor, Matt fought courageously but was bullied into submission by the towering R. So Team A's road had turned into a cul-de-sac, but Neill salvaged some pride by coming back to beat Madrid's Taisho 2-1.

With their comrades' fate sealed, Team B prepared for their turn. Their first challenge was Sevilla. Koji was first to step up. After a fervent fight, Koji's opponent emerged with the upper hand. Next was Simon, who took an uncharacteristically zen-like approach to his first bout, which was calmly orchestrated into an equitable draw. This necessitated Chris to score two points to break even. Now to fully appreciate the tale of this fight, some background information must be conveyed. Being keen ornithologists, the single members of the club had done a spot of "bird-watching" and had spotted a particularly aesthetically pleasing member of the female gender. She was pretty and delicate-looking, like a fawn in a woodland glade – innocent, pure. Now, having admired her much like one would admire said fawn, i.e. from a polite (and legal) distance, they did not know to which club she belonged. Well Chris was to find out that she was acting Taisho for Sevilla. "Oh no, don't beat up the pretty girl!" mourned Neill. But Chris had no choice. Like a remorseful hunter with a rifle barrel pointed at the fawn, Chris stepped into the Shiai-jo. Then something no one could have anticipated occurred. The fawn opened her mouth, and as if possessed by the spirit of the mighty Kraken, let forth an enormous kiai from the very depths of hell. It was as if the very fabric of time was stunned by this extraordinary transformation that it dedicated a moment in time purely to acknowledge it. Chris was perhaps even more stunned but had to commence. The belligerent beauty mercilessly bludgeoned Chris with attacks, and suddenly, in amongst the barrage, Chris' shinai caught her sharply in her poor-quality, horizontal pointing tsuki. This would have been painful even with a good quality bougu, so she had to sit out momentarily. This brief respite only seemed to enrage her further and she wrought powerful wrath against Chris' men, mostly in the form of heavy downward-moving cudgels from close ma-ai. Chris managed to score a men ari against her but either could not bring himself to inflict more pain or did not dare rile her further, so the match ended like that. The girl emerged smiling and cheery, which rose questions of a predetermined vendetta of fury against Chris. The mystery remains in the annals of time. Anyway, this result meant that the next team would have to be vanquished in order to proceed. Unfortunately that team happened to be the hosts of the tournament, Barcelona A, headed by the inimitable Oscar and his powerful eyes.

Koji landed a succulently timed kote-nuki-men on his opponent but went on to lose 2-1. Simon matched up against a young kendoka, clad wholly in white – which vexed a number of members, that number being 1, Ruairidh, who declared that only Nana/Hachidan Sensei should be allowed to wear pure white keikogi. However, this rancor did not obstruct the Spaniard's speedy dekote, and he went on to beat Simon 2-0. To culminate Chris' somewhat frightening Spanish kendo experience, he came up against Barcelona's dojo leader, Oscar. A very friendly man, but a man possessing the eyes of a cobra hypnotist. Chris, however, was not easily charmed, and held out to a close-fought 1-0 loss. That marked the end of EUKC's part in the 2010 Kurasawa Cup. Mallorca went on to seize victory, while Dublin (almost Scotland, after all) finished in bronze position, with Martin earning the fighting spirit award.

The sayounara party in the evening was delightful, with platter upon platter of delectable cuisine brought forth (none, incidentally, supporting any buttocks.) Despite being blanked by all Sensei, a merry old time was had by (mostly) all, including a few somewhat extortionately priced Guinnesses.

Overall the trip was a tremendous success, filled with jollity, frivolity, succulence, flatulence, male bonding and/or bickering, and yes, even a bit of kendo.

Sadly, one casualty was suffered on the trip, as an innocent maid was found unconscious in the doorway of their vacant room.