

A Lesson in Humility

By Rich Hale

In 1982, while teaching in Caracas, Venezuela I met a man by the name of Rodolfo Rodriguez. He was the Venezuela black belt fighting champion and number one student of my friend Oscar Gonzalez. Oscar's school, in Caracas, was quite large and had approximately 600 students, so to be the number one student was quite an accomplishment.

During the weeks that I was teaching at Oscar's school I learned as much as I taught and probably more. I taught them Ed Parker's Kenpo and they taught me the true meaning of humility. Although the lessons were many, I'd just like to tell you about one.

As I have stated, Rodolfo Rodriguez was a guy who had paid his dues. A superb black belt who had not only earned the respect of everyone in his school but in his community as well. A good looking athletic young man, Rodolfo had distinguished himself as a champion at tournaments, teacher to his peers, protégé to Oscar and a friend to everyone.

At the time, Rodolfo was a 1st degree black belt and unlike most schools I've known, they actually title their certificates not only as to rank, but the position you hold in that rank. In other words their certificates will say not only that you are a 1st degree black belt, but you are the Number One 1st degree black belt, or the Number Two 1st degree black belt, etc.

Rodolfo, I was told, was to be promoted to 2nd degree black belt in a couple of months, which would make him the Number One 2nd degree black belt under Oscar – a position he would hold forever in that there may be other 2nd, 3rd, and 4th degree black belts, but there will never be another Number One 2nd degree black belt in the Gimnasio Venezuela Oskarate.

Toward the end of my stay, in early December, I was told there would be a banquet in my honor at the residence of another one of Oscar's students, at which time I would be promoted from my current rank of 1st degree black to 2nd. At the time I didn't understand the significance of this promotion, but was very much flattered and anxiously awaiting any opportunity to attend anything in my honor.

It was during the banquet itself that it was explained to me, by friends of Rodolfo, that I was now replacing him as the Number One 2nd degree black belt in the association. Although I was taken aback by the news, I was also bewildered in that no one seemed to hold any grudge against me stealing away Rodolfo's position of honor. A position he had earned with years of hard work, blood, sweat and tears.

About this same time Rodolfo came into the room, looking for me, and carrying a large photo album. He insisted I follow him into the living room where everyone was gathered and look through the album with him. Finding it difficult so understand why everyone was still being so nice to me (especially Rodolfo) I followed along and sat with Rodolfo as he flipped through the album. The album itself was filled with photos of all shapes and sizes. There were picture of him training, competing, winning and just hanging out. Some were in color, some were black and white. Some were taken with a Polaroid, others with an Instamatic and others with a 35mm. One thing for certain is that he didn't own the cameras or the negatives. All the photos in his album had to have been gifts from his friends, his family and his fans.

As we looked through the album, he kept insisting that I pick out my favorite photo. When we had finished looking through the album I flipped back to a black and white 8 x10 of Rodolfo poised to deliver a full power right punch to an attacking opponent. I said to Adolfo, "This is my favorite, this is the best photo!" He immediately peeled back the protective sheet, removed the photo and asked for a pen. As he speaks, in Spanish, instructing a friend what to write on the photo I insisted, "No, I didn't mean for you to give me the photo! I was just saying which one I liked the best – I'm not asking for you to give it to me." I was afraid his limited English was preventing him from understanding me, but my interpreter intervened and said, "No, this is what he wants to do. He wants you to have it. He insists."

At this point I am feeling worse than ever. First I steal away Rodolfo's place in history, now I possess the only copy of an irreplaceable photograph of (what I later learned) was the punch that had won him the Venezuela black belt fighting championship. The straw that broke the camel's back was when I read what he had written on the photo: "For Sensey Rich with love and admiration of his friend and student. Rodolfo Rodriguez"

I just couldn't take anymore. I found Oscar and told him what Rodolfo had done and then I told him I could not accept the promotion. Oscar just smiled at me and said, "You do not understand, my friend. It was Rodolfo's idea to have you promoted before him. He has told me that if I were to promote you as our Number One 2nd degree black belt, he would then be "directly under you" and that would be a great honor. I was surprised, I was speechless and mostly I was humbled.

