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Local Top-ranked kendo master Shozo Kato aces Japan samurai test

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Top-ranked kendo master Shozo Kato aces Japan samurai test

BY PAUL H.B. SHIN
DAILY NEWS STAFF WRITER

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Gabel for News

Shozo Kato, 54, at his Shidogakuin dojo in midtown, is one of only three people from outside Japan to pass notoriously difficult eighth-degree dan exam in kendo, the martial art of Japanese fencing.

New York City now has its own hometown virtuoso in the swordsmanship of the samurai.

Shozo Kato, 54, recently became the third person from outside of Japan to pass the notoriously difficult exam for eighth dan in kendo - the highest rank in the martial art of Japanese fencing.

The pass rate is about 1%, earning it the reputation of being the toughest test in Japan.

"I feel the real training for eighth dan is just now beginning," said Kato, a fine-art photographer by day who has been teaching kendo at the Shidogakuin dojo in Manhattan for some 25 years.

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On the flight back from Japan, "it felt like I was still dreaming," he said, adding he now feels a heavy responsibility to propagate the art.

The achievement is all the more remarkable because he didn't have frequent access to high-ranking mentors, said Alex Bennett, a New Zealander who lives in Japan. Bennett passed his seventh dan exam on April 30 - a feat he said "pales in comparison" to reaching eighth dan.

"If you do pass it, you are elevated to demigod status in the kendo community. It's quite an achievement," said Bennett, 40, a Japanese studies professor at Kansai University in Osaka.

In kendo, practitioners wear padded armor and use bamboo swords for full-speed, full-contact combat. In an exam, you must not only score points by striking targets correctly, but also display mastery of the mental game.

Candidates must have held a seventh dan for at least 10 years and be at least 46 years old to be eligible to take the eighth dan exam, which is administered twice a year - in May in Kyoto and in November in Tokyo by the All Japan Kendo Federation.

"The people taking the eighth dan exam are all hard-core kendo people who have been doing kendo for many, many years," Bennett said. "To be that 1% that shines out above everybody else means they have something special."

Kato passed on his sixth try. Some people have been trying for decades.

Dr. Tsuyoshi Inoshita, an oncologist who founded Shidogakuin with Kato 25 years ago, said he was in a meeting in Florida when he learned his good friend had passed the exam.

"I had to get out of the meeting. I couldn't concentrate because I was so emotional," said Inoshita, 59, a seventh dan kendoist who now lives in Portsmouth, Ohio.

"It will give a lot of hope to people in countries where there are not a lot of high-ranking sensei," he said.

Kato said one way he tried to overcome the disadvantage of the lack of local mentors was to make every bout with every opponent count. "Sometimes a student is the best teacher," he said.

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