

Biography: Lend McCaster

Lend ("Mac") McCaster, former sensei and director at the KoSho East Karate School, was one of Tucson's most remarkable martial artists. An excellent instructor, great (world champion) competitor, and caring friend to all his students, Mac nevertheless talked about himself rather little. It is a responsibility of all karate students to be familiar with the basic facts of their own sensei's background, and this modesty on Mac's part sometimes made it a little difficult to really get to know him. To the rescue comes your newsletter editor! Here is a profile of our sensei which I'm sure everyone will find very interesting.

Early Life

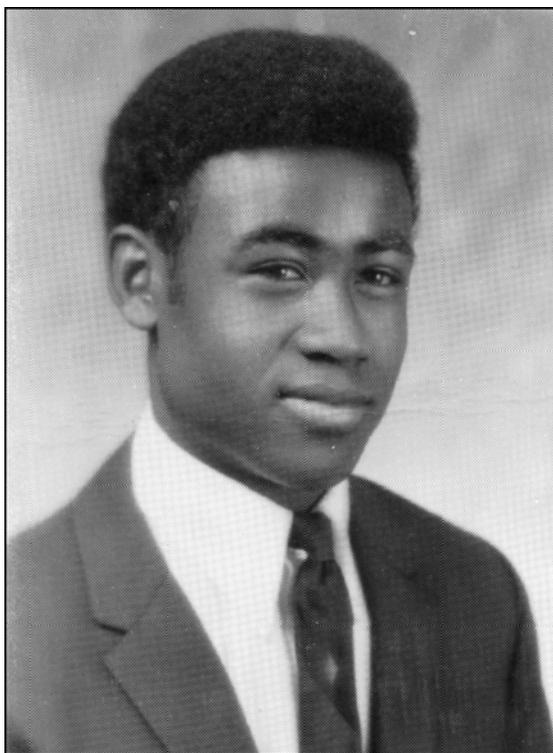
Lend McCaster was born on September 4, 1951, in the small rural town of Matthews, Missouri (population 257) about 160 miles south of St. Louis. His mother had intended to name him "Lynn," but it was misspelled by the person filling out the birth certificate; in later years, when Mac learned of the error and could have had it corrected, he decided he liked it the way it was.

As with most black families in America following the Civil War, Mac's ancestors probably adopted the surname of the slave owner they had worked for (during the slavery period black people generally did not have last names). It's unlikely that he carries any real Scottish ancestry. There is a family tradition that at least some of his forebears came from Nigeria, but no one really knows. They do remember, however, that Mac's great-grandmother in Mississippi was full-blooded Cherokee. Her name was "China," probably a Cherokee name only coincidentally sounding Chinese. Born right at the end of the Civil War, she married a free black man in Mississippi, had many children, and died in 1971 at the age of 107.

Mac was the eldest of two brothers, three sisters (including Rosetta, who worked in his dojo), one half-brother and one half-sister. He became something like a third parent to his younger siblings, watching out for them, protecting them, standing up for them and providing big-brotherly guidance whenever needed. He once told me about the time their house caught fire when he was only 7 years old; everyone at first appeared to have gotten out all right until his mother realized that baby Rosetta had been left on the couch. Mac raced back into the burning building and snatched up Rosetta only seconds before the flaming ceiling boards collapsed onto the sofa where she had been lying.

Mac grew up leading interference for his brothers and sisters in the community. Everyone

in town knew that if they gave any grief to a McCaster, they'd have to face Mac, who would step in to prevent his brothers from fighting, and would take over the fight himself if necessary. "People might have thought I was a little hot-headed," he said, "but I just wasn't going to let my family take any guff from anyone."



Boxing

Mac's father, Mark, was a farmer, raising cotton, potatoes, beans, corn, wheat and livestock, and even serving as a veterinary assistant at times. Mac helped out in the fields, as all farm children do, and eventually attended Matthews High School. It was there that, at the age of 13, he made the acquaintance of an older student and athlete named Woodrow Speed. Speed was, among other things, a boxer, and after watching a few of his matches Mac thought, "I can do that!" A short time later his father took him into nearby Sikeston and signed him up for boxing lessons at the gym where Woodrow Speed trained.

Over the next six years, from 1964 to 1970, Mac studied boxing enthusiastically. He did most of his sparring and learning with Woodrow Speed, who might be regarded as his first martial arts instructor. There were plenty of matches and tournaments to enter, and Mac pitted himself against everyone he could, compiling an amazing record of 112 wins, (including three Golden Gloves championships), two ties and only one loss. The loss was against a good friend whose entire family had come from far and wide to watch him box; "I fought him," says Mac, "but I just didn't have the heart to fight him hard, and he won."

Following high school Mac attended Three Rivers Junior College, where he studied design drafting and also worked as an architectural designer for the Forest Service. His father died in 1969, and Mac got married a year later, at the age of 19. His first son, Daronic, was born in 1971, by which time family hardships and the responsibilities of fatherhood forced Mac to drop out of Junior College just one month short of graduation.

Military Service

After Junior College, Mac joined the Air Force in 1971 and was trained as a jet aircraft mechanic; he was then stationed at Holloman Air Force Base in Alamogordo, New Mexico. Mac continued to train and fight, off and on, as a boxer, but had long felt an urge to investigate karate. The opportunity came when he heard that another airman, Darrell King, was giving classes on the base. King (who later changed his name to Darrell Khalid) was a black belt in Tang Soo Do, a Korean style of Taekwondo. Mac studied under King almost daily (attending karate class from 5 to 7 o'clock, then boxing from 7 to 9 o'clock), for about six months in 1972. He really enjoyed the new style, particularly the idea of learning how to fight with four weapons (hands and feet) instead of only two. Changes in duty assignments eventually interrupted the karate training, and Mac continued on with boxing, fighting 35 more bouts against other servicemen without a single loss. A daughter, Lorrie, was born in 1972.

Even his boxing was halted in 1975, however, when Mac suffered a fall from an aircraft that was undergoing maintenance, and smashed his left shoulder joint. Recovery was difficult,

and the shoulder has never regained full mobility, but Mac got back to boxing as soon as he could. It was after that injury that he lost his first match in the military, against Raoul Campos, then the number 2 ranked welterweight contender in the Navy.



Lend McCaster with the late Grandmaster Robert Trias at a Kamiza ceremony in Phoenix

Tucson

Mac was stationed in Iceland for a time (in the first group of black servicemen ever to be sent there, as it turns out), and then was transferred to Tucson, Arizona in January of 1979. He was discharged in late 1980 but continued to work on the base as night manager and chief bouncer of the NCO Club. Friends told him that the ID checker at the club, Johnny Linebarger, was giving karate lessons across the street, where he (and Brian LeBreque) had just established a small dojo called the Davis Monthan Self Defense Club. Mac had wanted to get back into karate and had been looking for an activity which his whole family could do together, so he signed up his wife, son, daughter and himself for classes there.

Linebarger had begun his own martial arts training in 1972 under Kale Makaio (Charles Matthews) in Hickory, North Carolina. He had earned his black belt there in Shorei-ryu Okinawan karate in just three years. His stint in the Air Force beginning in 1976 had then fortunately taken him to Tokyo, Japan, where he was able to train under various karate masters for three years. In 1980 he had been re-assigned to Davis Monthan Air Force Base.

In Phoenix, Robert Trias had opened the first American karate school in 1946, and was still teaching his eclectic style of Shorei-Goju-ryu karate (to be renamed Shuri-ryu around 1973) when Linebarger came to Tucson. Within a short time, Linebarger had joined Trias's dojo, making weekly trips to Phoenix to train there. Mac eventually began making occasional trips as well.

Tournament Successes

Mac's early boxing and Taekwondo training combined with the Okinawan karate learned under Sensei Linebarger and Grandmaster Trias began paying almost immediate dividends on the tournament circuit. He began competing as a color belt at various Arizona tournaments (Shotokan, Kempo, Taekwondo, and USKA open events) in 1981, and proved to be just as formidable as he had been in boxing. Incredibly, he won his first 75 matches straight, taking first place in every tournament he competed in between the ranks of white belt and purple belt. During the 1980's he competed in over 200 tournaments sponsored by all styles, and took home over 500 medals, awards and trophies, including dozens of Grand Championship awards. Many of the awards were for kata as well as fighting.

In Linebarger's early days with Makaio the concept of "light contact" in sparring was almost a joke. Makaio encouraged his students to hit hard, penalties or no, especially if it appeared they were going to lose a match. The idea was that, if they lost, at least the other guy

was going to pay a painful price for his victory. When Makaio's group marched into a tournament hall in their matching black gi's, jackets and duffle bags, some of the other competitors would often walk right out rather than face them in the ring, such was their reputation. This approach persisted for a while after Linebarger's move to Tucson; Mac and Johnny beat the heck out of just about everyone on the southwestern tournament circuit, regardless of style (making some enemies in the process). And woe be unto any opposing fighter who managed to beat Linebarger and then had to face a vengeful Mac! ("Nobody beats my sensei and gets away with it!" he said.)

Makaio's attitude was more that of a street fighter, however, and when Linebarger finally shifted allegiance exclusively to Robert Trias, Trias imposed a more gentlemanly philosophy of conduct in keeping with the original dignity and image of genuine Japanese/Okinawan martial arts, and made them exchange their evil-looking black gis (usually associated more with Ed Parker's Kenpo style) for the traditional karate white. Trias himself had been instrumental in starting up the first World Karate Championships at the Chicago Coliseum in 1963. Those were brutal, full-contact, win-by-any-means tournaments in the 1960's. But Trias had also been running less violent point-fighting tournaments; the national mood was demanding more restraint, and karate could not attract a broader segment of the public unless the brutality was toned down significantly. In his later years Trias shifted more to the less dangerous, more user-friendly training and competition format that students and competitors enjoy today.

One amusing story told from the days of those early 1980's tournaments involves the time Mac took a brutal, full-force roundhouse kick that dislocated his bad shoulder. In terrible pain, Mac bound the arm up quickly in a sling and went back in, winning the match anyway. His next opponent was a good fighter named Fidel Davis. Davis's wife told him before the fight, "If you can't beat the one-armed guy, you're sleeping alone tonight!" Davis thought he was sure to win, but Mac, with his lightning reverse punch, beat him one-handed! No one is really sure where Davis slept that night.



In 1986, two years after Mac earned his shodan (black belt) rank, he entered the U.S. Karate Association's World Karate Championships in Chicago, where he placed fourth in kata and second in fighting (lightweight division). Finally in 1987, at the World Championships in Irvine, California, he took first place in fighting. This win raised his overall point standing high enough to rank him as the undisputed number one (lightweight) black belt fighter in the country. At the same time he was also ranked number two in kata and number two in weapons in the nation.

Meanwhile Johnny Linebarger had been fighting his way to first place in the heavyweight division. At the 1987 World Championships Mac and Johnny were both contenders for the Grand Championship. Out of respect, Mac declined to fight his own sensei. Incredibly, at the 1988 World Championships Mac took first in the lightweight division again, and once more faced Johnny Linebarger for the Grand Championship. This time they did fight (Grandmaster

Trias insisted) and, as Linebarger now graciously tells it, "Mac let me win." There has never been another instance of a student fighting his own sensei for the World Grand Championship. Incidentally, although Mac's wife had dropped out of karate training after only a few months, his son Nicky and daughter Lorrie won gold medals in the junior brown belt divisions at the World Championships, in 1986 and 1987 respectively. Nicky went on to become an accomplished black belt.

KoSho Karate

In 1983, when Johnny Linebarger was promoted to 3rd dan (and while Mac was still a brown belt), Johnny decided to open a KoSho karate school for civilians under the auspices of Trias's U.S. Karate Association. He had originally intended to ask the help of his former partner, Brian LeBreque, but LeBreque left Tucson, so he invited Mac to join him in partnership. They worked together for seven years building up the school, with Linebarger as Sensei and Mac as Chief Instructor. In 1992 Mac opened his own KoSho dojo on Tucson's east side.

Mac was promoted to Nidan (2nd degree black belt) in 1986, 3rd dan in 1989, and 4th dan in 1993, in each case following a rigorous examination. He received his 4th dan rank in ju-jitsu and his 4th dan rank in Korean taekwondo in 1994. In 1997 he received a pleasant surprise: he was awarded the rank of 6th dan in Shuri/Shorei karate by the Shuri Karate Association (an organization unaffiliated with KoSho), in recognition of his remarkable skill and achievements. The certificate presented to him was signed not only by Grandmaster Sabuti Yasashi (10th dan) and S.K.A. Director Woodrow E. Fairbanks, but also S.K.A. Regional Director John F. Jelks (7th dan), and yudansha John R. Venson (7th dan), Milton Kinbe (6th dan), Willie E. Brown (4th dan), and Joseph Bradshaw (4th dan).

Mac also studied kobudo (karate weapons) and jujitsu under Linebarger and Trias. The bo and kama were his favorite weapons, but he also competed with others such as the teki, tonfas and sais. Many of the katas and techniques were picked up in Trias's classes and in out-of-town seminars. He now holds black belt rank in kobudo as well.

Teaching Children

Mac has always had a love for children and young people, and has especially enjoyed the role of teacher and counselor. Having served as a source of guidance to his large family and friends for so many years, it was natural for him to continue on an informal basis in the service to help people whenever he could. He was so good at it that he was assigned as a guidance and drug-abuse counselor for teenagers at the local school for servicemen's families in Alamogordo, and was even assigned duty as a marriage counselor for servicemen!

Following his discharge he taught the children's classes at his and Linebarger's KoSho dojo beginning in 1983, and later began teaching children and young people karate at various public and private schools including the Tucson YMCA, the Kino Learning Center, five local public schools, Pima Community College, and Castlehill Country Day School.

One only has to sit in on a few classes for 4 and 5-year olds to see immediately what fatherly affection and sympathy Mac has for the little ones. He is firm but he makes them laugh. When he praises them you can see their little chests puff out with pride. When they get bruised and want to cry, he helps them bolster their courage, then eases the pain with a little skilled shiatzu pressure on the sore spot. When they are awarded promotions he gives each child a warm hug along with a new belt or stripe.

Once I saw a 5-year-old being given an introductory lesson while his increasingly restless 2-year-old brother watched from the sidelines. Finally the 2-year-old could hold back no longer, and jumped out on the mat kicking and punching, running circles around Mac in the midst of the instruction. People watching from the sidelines were taken aback, but Mac didn't miss a step, and didn't seem to mind a bit. Like a father bear with a tiny boisterous cub climbing all over him, he gave the little one a hug and kept on with his training of the 5-year-old. On another occasion Mac's 8-month-old daughter was complaining loudly from the sidelines during the evening brown belt class, so he just lovingly scooped her up and continued his instruction while holding her. No problem. You can't help but like a man who can cheerfully teach death-dealing hand-to-hand combat while cradling a baby on one arm.

In the Nineties

In 1989 Mac was involved in a serious car accident resulting in knee, back and head injuries. Though the recuperation was difficult, involving arthroscopic surgery on his knee in 1993, he overcame the pain and problems through sheer determination, and his students

couldn't tell by looking at him that he had ever had any physical problems. (We should all look so good.) His katas are still inspirational models of power, precision and grace. And his fighting is still a pleasure to watch; he helped the Arizona men's black belt fighting team win the silver medal at the 1995 National Championships, fighting men half his age.

Mac eventually had 75 students at his KoSho East Karate Studio, plus another 95 to 100 students at Pima Community College and Castlehill Country Day School who took classes from him at those locations. A number of his own students have won medals at the National Championships in recent years, including his 9-year old son Marcus and his nephew and nieces, Jeremy, Crystal and Stephanie Harden.

One of Mac's great pleasures has been to see the amazing improvement that students can make, even in a relatively short time. He worked hard to figure out what type of teaching and motivational approach each student needed in order to flourish. Through experience he learned that "anybody can do anything they put their minds to," regardless of whatever problems and barriers they might feel are blocking them. Sometimes it just requires an adjustment of their mind set. He is himself living proof of what sheer determination can accomplish.

Mac McCaster retired from running a karate dojo around 2003 and moved to Chandler, Arizona, where he is currently giving private lessons and working full-time for a precious metals company while his wife Sharlene works for Intel.

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