

Master of the game / Martial arts guru helps Giants' hurler Kuwata get career back on track

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If you suspect there is something fishy about right-hander Masumi Kuwata's resurgence with the Yomiuri Giants, you're not far off base. "I am trying to move my body like a school of small fish, which can change its direction instantly," says the 34-year-old veteran of a new training exercise he has implemented this season. "It's different from one big whale that turns around with a twisting motion."

Kuwata has come back from the verge of retirement last year after developing a new pitching style based on body mechanics drawn from classic Japanese martial arts.

Reporters have been bewildered by seeing Kuwata repeat a set of unusual, short movements during training this year. He would turn around, bend his knees quickly and shift his weight alternately from right foot to left: motions more akin to a kabuki stage than a pitchers mound.

Asked what he was doing, Kuwata's reply, through the vagueness of the aquatic simile, contained the secret behind the pitcher's remarkable comeback this season.

Kuwata was reciting the teachings of Yoshinori Kono, a 53-year-old master of Japanese martial arts. Kuwata's unusual movements in practice were techniques used to manipulate a cane, called "jo"--a weapon used in classic martial arts, though in public he usually practices empty handed. Since undergoing elbow surgery in 1995, Kuwata had studied the latest trends in nutrition and tried a variety of modern training methods, including weight training. However, they did not prevent a steady decline in his performance.

In the spring of 2000, Kuwata came across Kono's martial art. Kono developed his own style of fencing, grappling and other martial art techniques after studying aikido and a school of Japanese swordsmanship known as Kashima Shinryu.

When Kuwata visited Kono's school in Tokyo, Kono applied the body mechanics used in his martial art and demonstrated how to hold a base runner with a fake throw. What Kuwata saw was a revelation. "He could move faster than any Central or Pacific league pitcher," Kuwata says.

According to Kono, a human being can move more efficiently by avoiding twisting, winding and cocking motions--a theory that contradicts the conventional practice of modern sports.

"If you twist or wind up your body, you cannot utilize the energy of your entire body efficiently since power clogs up inside of your body," Kono explains. "With a cocking motion, you also telegraph your moves to others." Kono's techniques do not depend on raw physical strength but utilize the potential energy of one's body mass, which is released when a person is about to fall over, Kono says.

With body mechanics he has learned from classic Japanese martial arts, Kono, a man of average build, can throw a wrestler much larger than himself with ease and can stop a charging college football player with one hand.

Before he began instructing Kuwata, the basketball team of Tokyo's Toho High School benefited from the application of Kono's theories. The team qualified for the finals of a national high school tournament in 2000, a surprise to many as the school was known more for its academic standards than its sporting prowess, with numerous graduates going on to prestigious universities each year.

Although he applied Kono's body mechanics to his pitching, Kuwata could not feel any effects at first.

However, when he was sent to the Giants' Western League farm team last summer, Kuwata was surprised to find that he was the fastest player in shuttle running. Kuwata ran with a style called "nanba," a technique he has learned from Kono.

Before Japan began its massive import of Western culture about 130 years ago, samurai warriors and express messengers reportedly walked with the hand and foot on the same side of the body moving forward simultaneously--a style that requires almost no twisting of the body. That is

nanba walking. It might look funny from Western eyes, but people walking that way could walk faster with far less fatigue than people these days, Kono says.

Kuwata also says his fielding techniques have improved thanks to Kono's theory. He can now catch line drives back through the box that he could not handle in the past.

"I can tell my body is changing day by day now," he says.

Kuwata's new form, based on Kono's techniques, contains far less cocking, twisting and winding motions than a more conventional pitching motion.

"If you throw a pitch at 150 kph, but with a cocking motion, a batter can hit it because it is easy for him to time your delivery," Kono explains. "But, if you throw a pitch without any cocking motion, even with less speed, a batter has difficulties getting his timing because your ball looks like it is coming suddenly out of a smoke screen."

In addition, the new form is less likely to cause elbow injury because stress does not concentrate in any particular part of one's body. Even if he has to throw a lot of innings, Kuwata now feels less tired, according to Kono.

As his new form looks unconventional, it attracted criticism from baseball analysts when they first saw it in spring training. Some experts predicted Kuwata would never be able to get batters out with a pitching style that wouldn't allow him to throw as hard as before.

However, Kuwata has been breaking more bats this season than ever before, even though his speed of 140 kph is no faster than it was. Through Tuesday his record was 8-6 with a 2.407 earned run average, second best in the Central League.

"His form has much more room for improvement," Kono says. "He can still increase the speed of his pitches."

In Japan, there are many tales of elder sword masters who could easily beat younger challengers. They may sound preposterous today, but Kono believes that those martial art masters could make unbelievable moves utilizing hyper-efficient body mechanics which have been lost in today's martial arts such as karate or judo.

"I wish Mr. Kuwata would continue to study such moves even after retirement," Kono says. "He will be able to become a pitching coach, and someone who can get out any batters for an inning or two even at the age of 60."

Yomiuri Shimbun sportswriter Hiroyuki Koishikawa