

Sword and Spirit

The Journal of Itten Dojo

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— Why Budo? —

Regardless of the times in which you live, or the circumstances of your life, success largely depends on things you can control:

- **Building a foundation of strong relationships in a community of mutual support and achievement.**
- **Forging a disciplined and positive mindset.**
- **Enhancing your physical health and capabilities.**

These are exactly the benefits membership in an authentic dojo provides.

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Crucible Once Again

(Photos courtesy of Nicklaus Suino and others.)

In the weeks leading up to the 2025 JMAC Crucible—my second participation in this event that “Nobody Leaves Unchanged”—I wondered if it were better knowing what to expect, or not knowing what to expect (as was the case for me last year). As it turned out, my experience this year was very different than last year, so whatever expectations I had proved to be pretty much irrelevant. I went into the 2025 Crucible differently than in 2024. Coming out, compared to last year, I have experienced changes that I would categorize as profound.

Nicklaus Suino Sensei created the Crucible in 2011, and his Japanese Martial Arts Center in Ann Arbor, Michigan, has staged the event in most years since. The Crucible runs for 12-hours, locked-in, typically from 6:00 a.m. until 6:00 p.m. (although there has also been a “Midnight Crucible” that started at 6:00 p.m.). The general format for training is four hours of striking (karate and kickboxing), four hours of take-downs and throwing (judo, wrestling, and jujutsu), and four hours of ground-fighting (judo newaza and BJJ), interspersed with iterations of the JMAC-18 conditioning and stretching sets. There were more frequent breaks this year than last, but as before the breaks were short—usually two to three minutes, with an occasional longer opportunity to eat and/or hit the restroom.

The Itten Dojo contingent last year was six individuals; this time there were also to be six of us but two people had to drop out due to circumstances beyond their control. Alan Starner (his first Crucible), Charles Hudson (his second), and Joseph Bailey (his first) joined me this time.

I set for myself two major goals this year. During the karate free-sparring session—multiple rounds of light sparring, not heavy competition by any means—I wanted to train with as many of the top-tier instructors as I could manage. During the BJJ-style free-rolling session, which occurs at the very end of day, I wanted to complete all the rounds. The format is 45-minutes of rolling with just 30-seconds between rounds. Last year I was conservative in pacing myself, and engaged in no more than half the rounds. This year it would be everything.



Before...



We departed early enough on the morning of Friday, July 18th to arrive at our accommodations in time to go out for dinner and have time to digest prior to an early bedtime. I set my alarm for 4:00 a.m. on Saturday the 19th, to avoid having to rush to get ready, eat a breakfast (sort of) that I'd packed, and do a final check of gear. I took a karate-gi and sparring gear, two judo-gi, three rash guards, knee-wraps, compression wraps, lots of water and LMNT packs, and snacks plus 5-Hour Energy drinks. In 2024 I didn't eat anything during the course of the day but this time I did—and judging by results I think eating reasonably was a much smarter strategy. Staying adequately hydrated has proven, for me, at least, to be nearly impossible (despite trying).

The instructor cadre for the 2025 Crucible was a who's who of world-class talent and experience: Suino Sensei (ukemi, judo newaza, and he also ran everything), Randy Dauphin (karate), Conroy Copeland (karate), Scott Taylor (BJJ), James Fries (karate), Ben Ladouceur (kickboxing), Doug Knispel (jujutsu), Richard Monroe (judo), Michael Mancini (wrestling takedowns, shrimping drills), Sydney Dauphin (karate, stretching), Cheyanne Hussey (karate, stretching), Brandon Francis (judo), and Will Starks (ground-fighting).

As we did last year, we arrived at JMAC by 5:30 a.m. wearing keiko-gi pants and a t-shirt, so as to avoid the

crush in the dressing room. There was the inevitable release form to be completed and a Crucible t-shirt to pick out. If you show up, you qualify for the commemorative shirt. The only way to receive the coveted challenge coin is to finish the day.



Training started promptly at 6:00 a.m., with Suino Sensei setting the ground rules and driving home the point



that the overriding spirit for the day should be learning and mutual support rather than competition. That tone, set by Suino Sensei and reinforced by all the other instructors, ensured that injuries were limited to bumps, scrapes, and bruises, despite very high intensity training with an appreciable degree of potential risk.

Following are some views of training, selected from the hundred of photos taken, and my own impressions—note that I’m only presenting a tiny fraction of all that happened.



The early morning sessions focused on karate. In the photo above, Fries Sensei is conducting a kicking drill.



Copeland Sensei’s segment was a challenging series of movement drills designed to enhance the ability of karate students to engage multiple opponents. He’s amazing!



Ben Ladouceur is a former heavyweight world champion kickboxer, taught by another champion, Jean-Yves Theriault. He had us working in pairs, with one person acting as the coach providing targets for strikes in combinations. Things started simply enough—just a jab/straight cross—but then built up in stages to multiple combinations, including kicks, as indicated by the “coach.” I was really lucky to be working with Pam Suino during this segment, as she was doing better keeping up.



Next up, Dauphin Sensei taught striking from a clinch, assisted by his daughter, Sydney, herself an accomplished competitor and instructor. The biggest takeaway for me from the lessons that Dauphin Sensei taught was his explanation of where in the space between opponents blocks should occur to maximize counter-strikes.





In a very logical segue from striking in a clinch, Mancini Sensei presented a series of wrestling take-downs, applied from a clinch.



Moving more into the midday, focus shifted to judo, first with Suino Sensei reviewing the JMAC approach to learning ukemi, and then with applications taught by Monroe Sensei and Francis Sensei. Monroe Sensei's throws were spectacular—his precision and power are just

awe-inspiring. Equally inspiring was the skill in ukemi demonstrated by Mancini Sensei—as uke he was thrown by Monroe Sensei with techniques that looked for all the world like once and done, and yet Mancini Sensei was able to make his landings look pillow-soft. I was amazed.

Francis Sensei's approach to judo was especially interesting. He uses the term “ecological judo” to emphasize the manner in which techniques should be executed organically in response to the circumstances of the moment, and taught a methodology to learn how to perceive such opportunities.



The middle section of the Crucible wrapped-up with a presentation of jujutsu by Knispel Sensei, who I understand to have been a student of Wally Jay Sensei.



A Crucible highlight: Shrimping drills led by Mancini Sensei. (I can't say anything more without cursing...)





Suino Sensei started the ground-fighting portion of Crucible with judo newaza.



The section of this Crucible to which I was most looking forward was instruction by Scott Taylor Sensei, the “Dirty Demon Wristlocker.” Taylor Sensei is an innovative BJJ instructor—he’s taken a range of joint-locking techniques from aikijujutsu and found ways to apply those techniques from various positions on the ground, in ways that are simply devastating. I’m not deeply enamored of BJJ, but I am thoroughly interested in learning a few techniques that I might be able to employ against BJJ adepts if I’m for some reason training within that context. Especially if those techniques are something for which I already have decades of experience (although I never would have thought-up any of these applications).

We’ll be digging deeper into this topic: Taylor Sensei will be visiting Itten Dojo for a seminar in November.

The final, instructional portion of Crucible was led by professional MMA fighter, Will Starks.



In addition to his current record of 11-3-0, Starks is a JMAC member, training in judo. While instructing during the Crucible, he wore his JMAC rank (green-belt). This made an impression on me: The formal rank someone holds in a particular art may have nothing whatsoever to do with their actual, practical experience and abilities.



Following the 45-minutes of free-rolling that took us to the end of the day, Sydney Dauphin led a warm-down session of exercises and stretching. The first thing she did was to lie down on her back and then she sat up slowly, pantomiming pulling herself up, hand-over-hand, on an imaginary rope. Whoever was holding the other end of my imaginary rope kept feeding slack, because I couldn’t even pull my head off the mat by that point.



The goals I set for myself prior to the 2025 Crucible were achieved. Last year as we trained I was acutely aware of the time and of how much of the day remained, and tried to pace myself accordingly. This year, I paid very little attention to the time and I didn't really worry about pacing. Consequently, the day pretty much flew by.

Overall, I felt like I was in much better shape than last year, despite having had to rehabilitate some relatively serious injuries in the intervening year. Being in better shape might actually have been a consequence of all the physical therapy and weight training. Or, my perception might have been a consequence of being able to stay much

more relaxed this time, even during the sparring and rolling sessions. I do think that Crucible this year was more demanding—both physically and mentally—than last year, due to the complexity and intensity of some of the material presented. I also think that the more frequent, short breaks enabled a faster pace throughout.

The big changes for me, coming out of Crucible 2025: I now have much greater confidence in what I can still accomplish, on and off the mat, and I am now enjoying closer personal relationships with several of the elite instructors that taught this time.

Thank you, Suino Sensei and JMAC! 🌀



Robert Wolfe, chief instructor of Itten Dojo, began martial arts training in 1975 while attending Bucknell University, where he earned a degree in Japanese Studies. Mr. Wolfe has taught since 1985, and founded Itten Dojo in 1992. His articles on martial arts have been featured in publications such as *The Bujin*, *Budo Shinbun*, the *Journal of Asian Martial Arts*, *Bugeisha*, *Aikido Today Magazine*, *Inside Karate*, *Martial Arts Training*, and *Martial Arts Professional*. He is the author of two books: *A Journey of Sword and Spirit — Itten Dojo Through Three Decades* and *Lessons Learned Along the Way* and *Budo Renaissance Man — The Martial Arts Journey of Nicklaus Suino*.

