

"IT'S ONLY A GAME OF TAG"

To Darnell Garcia, who came out of nowhere to win one of tournament karate's biggest titles, competition is a small part of his art.



IF HE WINS, GREAT. IF HE LOSES, THAT'S OKAY, TOO. Darnell Garcia enters a karate tournament to play a game that he enjoys playing. There is none of the win-or-else pressure that haunts and often hinders other fighters. "They'll worry about it (the tournament)," Garcia explains, "and through worrying, they'll drain themselves."

Garcia's method of preparing for the big contest is in contrast to the intense manner of many athletes who stalk the floor, pounding their fists in their palms and trying to psych themselves up. Instead, Garcia takes everything nonchalantly. "Tournament fighting is a game of tag," he says, repeating a line he attributes to veteran competitor and frequent tournament champion Ron Marchini. "It's probably one-tenth of one-tenth percent of what karate is all about."

The 25-year-old philosophizes, "Every guy I have ever seen who has been in the art for the glory of it hasn't been successful in the glory part of it. But it looks like every guy who tries to get a little more out of it—like a better self or whatever—they seem to be the ones who rise right to the top."

Three words from that last quote—"a better self"—sum up Garcia's goal in karate. Trophies and titles aren't nearly as

important to him as that intangible quality of self-development. For it is through that self-development that he hopes to get the most out of the material things he really wants in life: a family and a career as an attorney. Still a bachelor, he says the most immediate goal is a law degree. He is presently five semesters away from completing his undergraduate work in political science before he enters law school in Los Angeles.

It took Garcia a long time to develop his present attitudes about karate, his hoped-for career as a trial lawyer, and life in general. The path he followed during his childhood and adolescence seemed to be leading anywhere but to the hallowed halls of California State College, Los Angeles and the karate dojo in nearby Redondo Beach, where he is an instructor.

Born in New York City of Puerto Rican heritage, Garcia describes himself as a "mess-around, getting thrown out, telling teachers off and walking out of class" individual while he attended grade school in New York and high school in Southern California. He was occasionally seen in the midst of gang fights, and his car-racing wasn't too popular with his L.A. neighbors.

If not for his skill as a gymnast, Darnell might never have received a high school diploma. He had been thrown out of Manual Arts High and his future looked bleak. But the gymnastics coach at Washington High (in L.A.) made room for Garcia on his team. The grateful student stayed relatively free of trouble and managed to hold on until graduation.

TURNING POINT

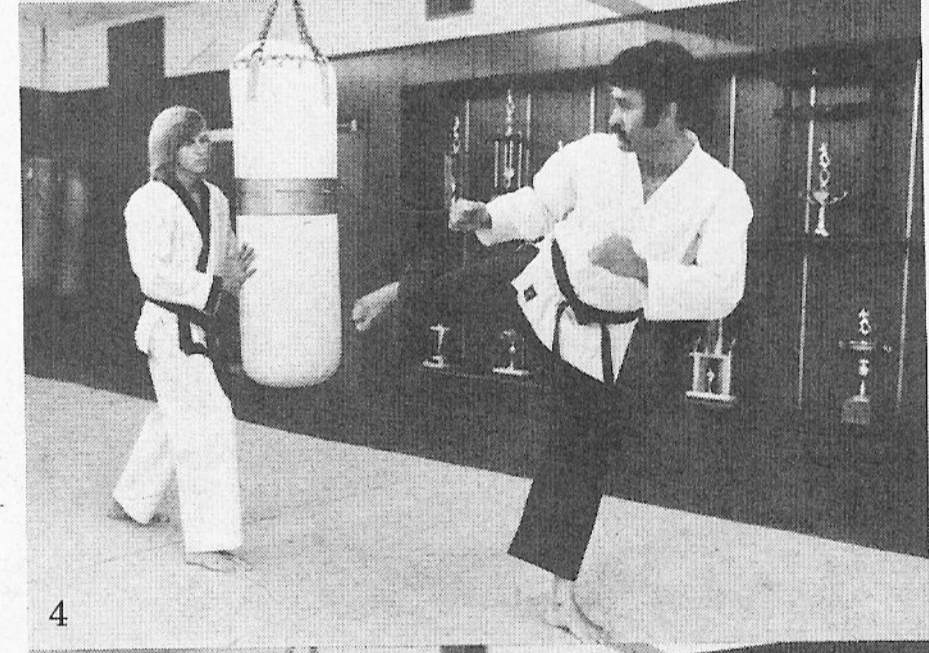
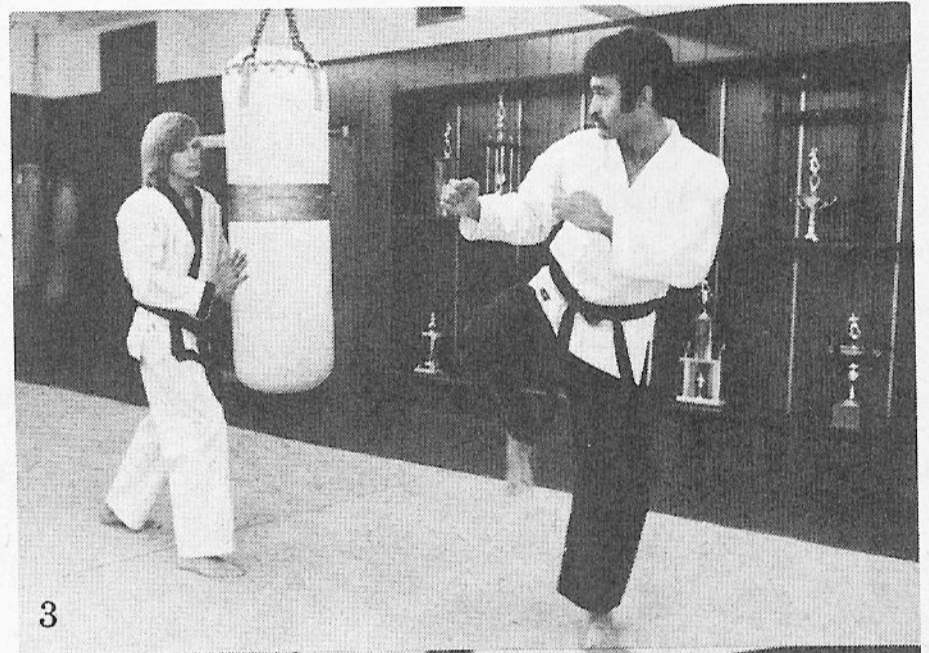
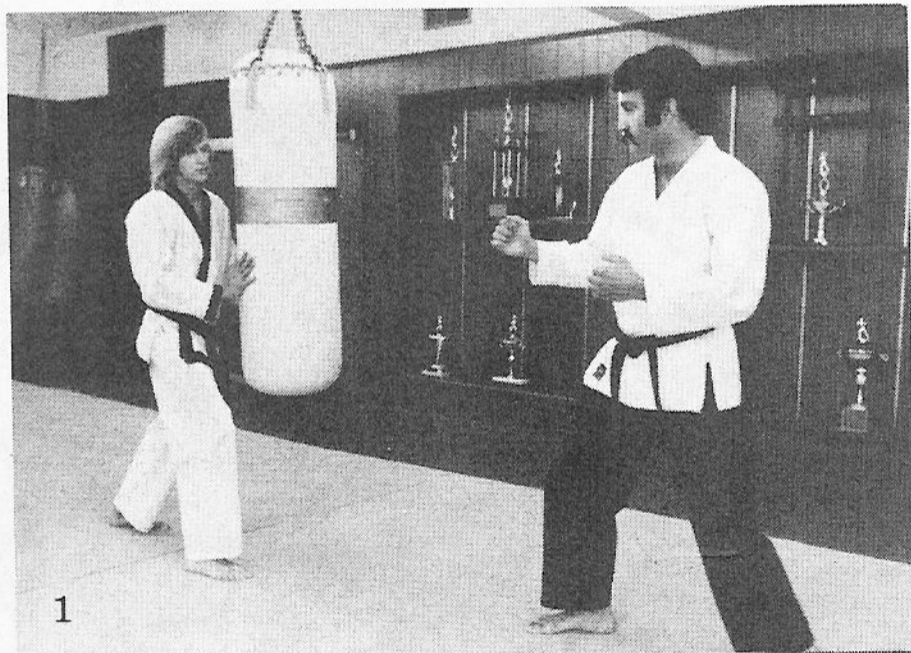
Garcia then worked in a steel plant and an aircraft company before being drafted into the Army in 1966. Although he was the only surviving son of four generations, he embarked on a two-year hitch that turned out to be a turning point in his life.

"THE BEST PERSON TO WORK OUT WITH"

Garcia's favorite sparring partner is the heavy bag. "It never complains," he says, "and it will always be there when you finish." He uses it to develop power in his punches and kicks and to "get the feel of what it's like to hit something." In this series, he polishes his execution of the slide-up side kick.

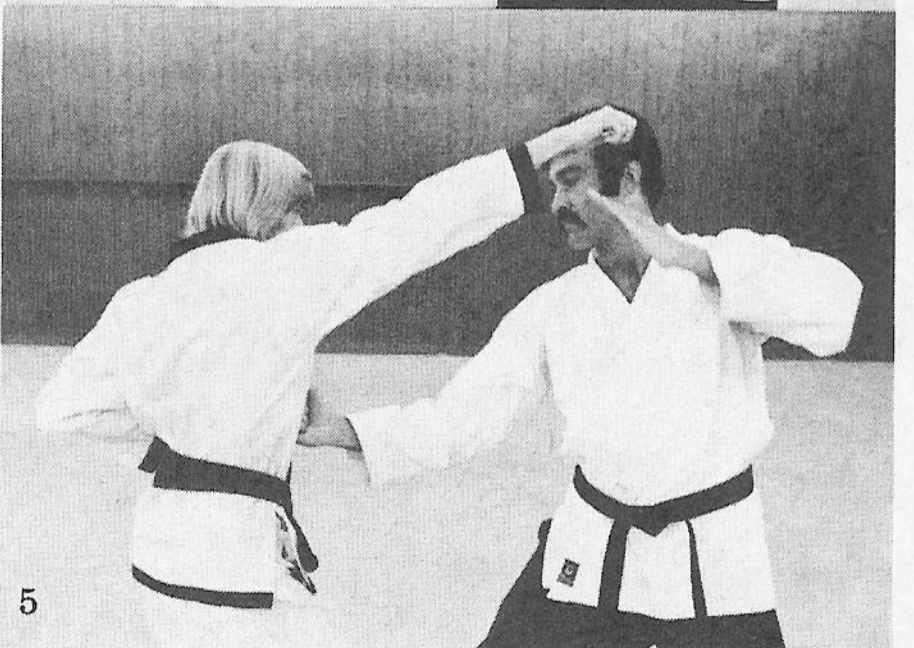
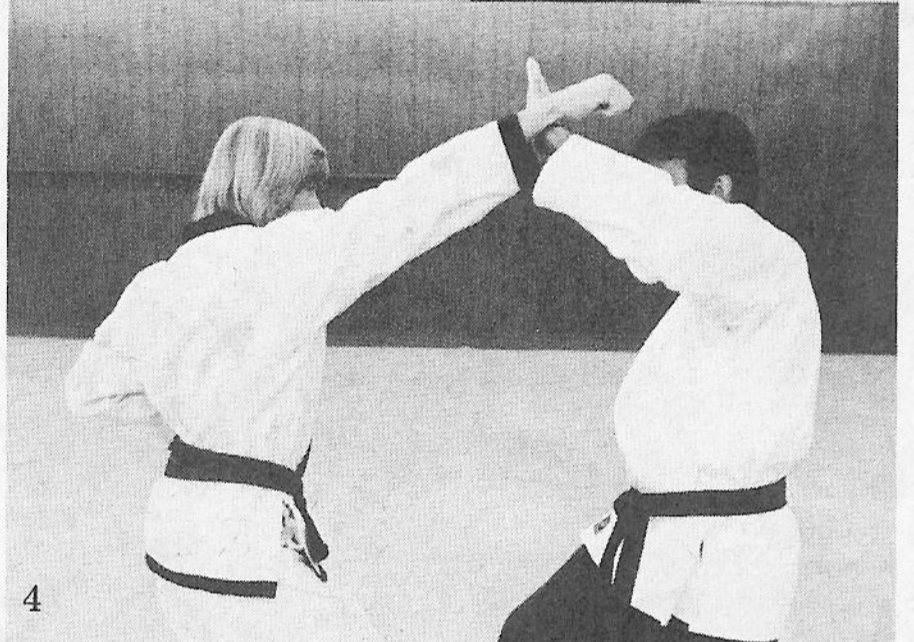
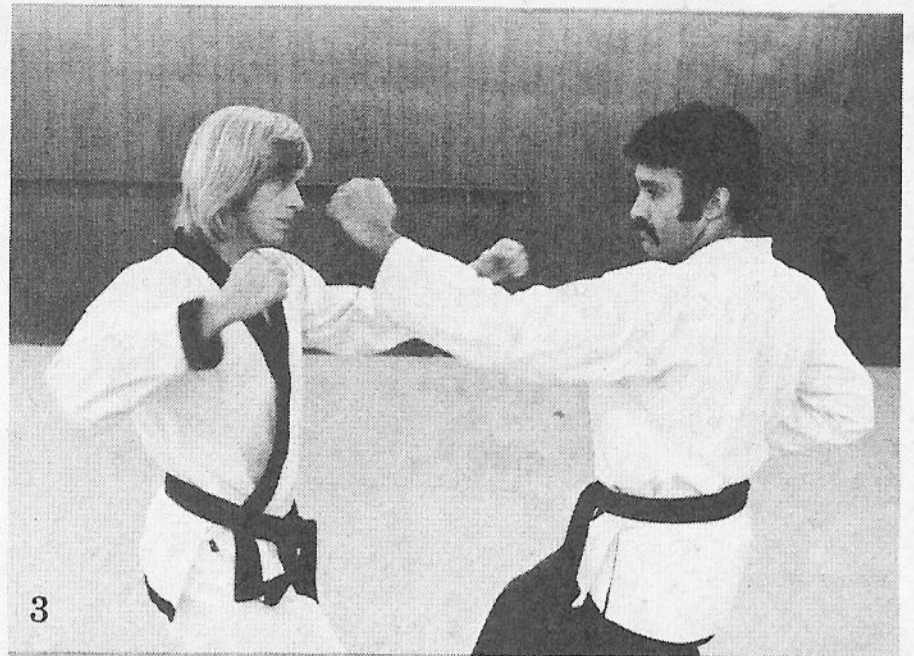
The results of a qualifying exam during basic training put him only two points away from Officer Candidate School. Even though he didn't make it, he was so encouraged by his performance that he took a new look at himself. "That really surprised me and made me think," he remembers. "Until then, I really thought maybe I didn't have much in the way of thinking power."

After turning down four opportunities to enroll in Warrant Officer Flight School, Garcia finally joined the military police. He had always been fascinated by the policemen whom he had more than once come in contact with as a youngster, and the MPs seemed to him to be an elite group. "They were kind of



SWITCHING BACK AND FORTH

To get the feel of actual competition, Garcia often practices rapid, close-in series of punches and blocks, switching back and forth between offense and defense. Shown here working with fellow tang soo do instructor Terry Updike, Garcia executes a right open-hand block, follows up with a left punch, retracts the punch, blocks with the left hand and follows with a right punch. Garcia takes about one minute to gradually attain full speed in this exercise and then goes all out for about 30 seconds. He also consciously works on trying not to blink during this type of close-in fighting.



like overseers," he says, recalling his attraction. "I had always been one of the mass—a goof-up. I had grown up in New York City in the ghetto, grown up in Los Angeles in the ghetto; you have a perspective that you're limited—very limited. I started thinking to myself, 'Maybe you're not as limited as you think yourself to be.' And I just stopped to reevaluate myself."

Upon graduating from Leadership Training School in Georgia, Garcia was sent to Anchorage, Alaska ("I really liked it") to serve as a stockade guard and also as the personal bodyguard of a high-ranking medical officer. Seven letters of commendation (he talked one prisoner out of committing suicide) and a reinforcing of the feeling that "I don't want to

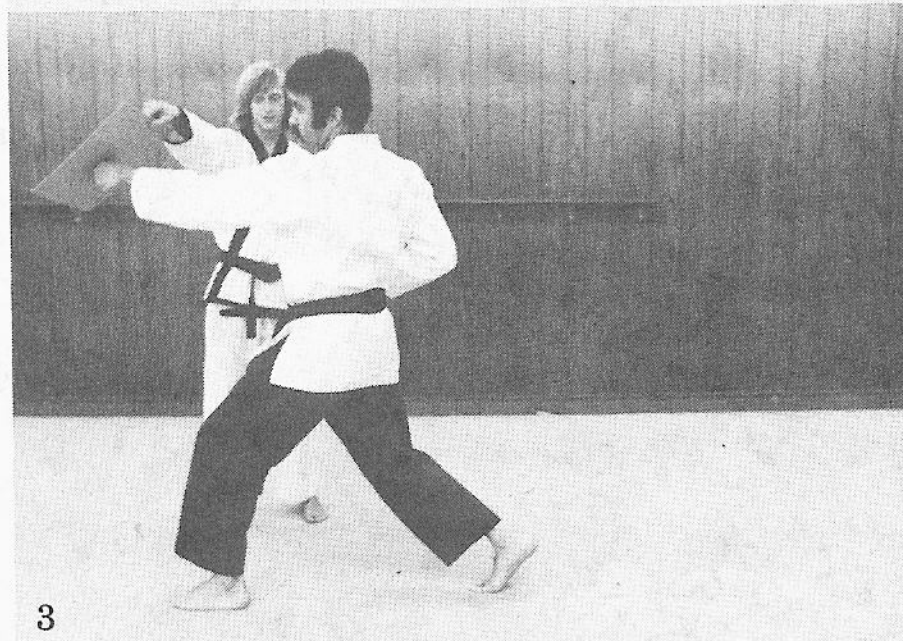
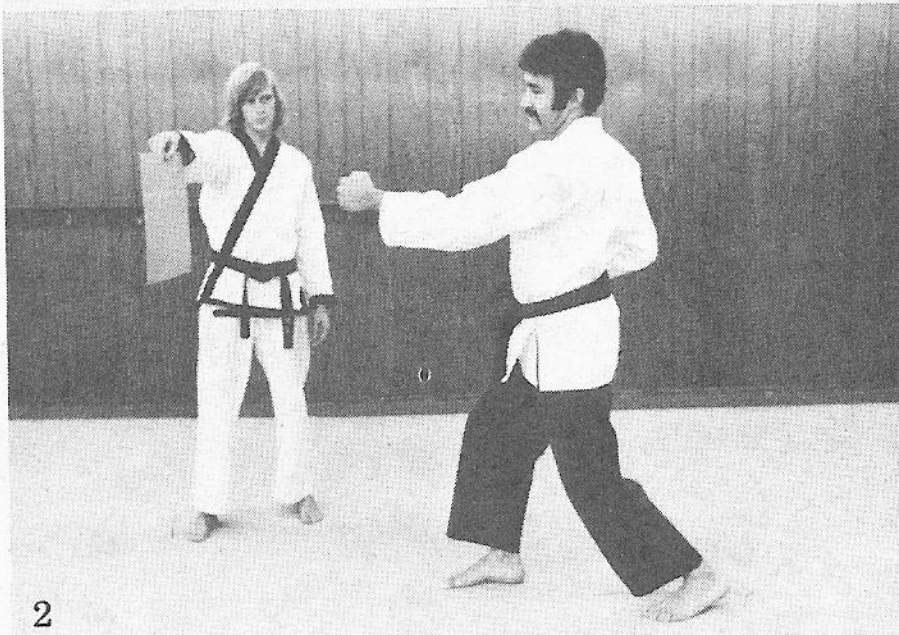
be locked up" provided him with even more encouragement to find a better way.

Completing his military duty in 1968, Garcia returned to Los Angeles. He went back to work, started college and soon got into karate. Except for a very small amount of judo training in the Army ("just enough to hurt yourself"), he had never before studied the martial arts.

Garcia distinguished himself quickly in karate tournaments. In 1972, after only a few months as a black belt, he went to Albuquerque, New Mexico to compete in the National Black Belt Karate Championships and the National Grand Championships. (The two events are held in conjunction with each other

FOR TIMING AND SPEED

Another of Garcia's favorite training devices is a simple piece of cardboard, which here becomes a target for a punch. The object is to strike the board before the holder can drop it.



on the same day.) It was Garcia's first major tournament, and he didn't even know the names of some of the top-rated fighters. To everyone's surprise, he won the middleweight division of the Black Belt Nationals in the afternoon. Then, a few hours later, he fought three of BB YEARBOOK's Top-10 rated fighters, beating two of them. He lost to the third man (number-one rated Bill Wallace) by one point in an overtime of the grand championship match.

FROM DEFEAT TO VICTORY

The only time Garcia ever set his heart on winning a tournament title, he lost. Two months after Albuquerque, Garcia was one of the 2600 contestants at the International Karate Championships in Long Beach, California. Having won the tournament's kata title for white belts in 1970 and brown belts in 1971, he was aiming to run the gamut by winning as a black belt in '72. As it turned out, he fell way short of this goal and, in fact, even missed out on third place when he fell during his performance. He was so discouraged that he decided not to compete in the kumite.

"That really demoralized me for the day," he recalls. "To me, winning kata means more than winning the fighting trophy. Kata is a total individual effort. If you get five judges out there who don't care if you've been a Korean all your life or what and judge you totally on what they see, and you win that, that has to be *the* number-one thing."

Eventually, with a little encouragement from friends, Garcia reasserted himself and competed successfully in sparring through an afternoon of eliminations. That evening, he beat another tang soo do stylist, Bob Burbidge, for the middleweight title and prepared to fight in the round-robin playoff for the grand championship.

As more than 8,000 excited spectators waited for action, Garcia sought out a relatively quiet spot in the Long Beach Arena to gather his wits. "I was sitting in the back," he recalls, "and I had my legs hanging over this chair. I was just trying to totally relax—just let my adrenalin, my heart and everything slow down. If you can keep yourself calm in a crisis, you can always prevail."

It is here that the distinction between *wanting* to win and *having* to win attain a practical value. Without the nagging pressure of a "must" situation, Garcia simply thought about the task at hand and readied his tired body. As he so aptly puts it, "I've always been told don't beat yourself at anything. You just gotta get in there and do it. You can't be intimidated."

Sometimes the crowd misunderstood his attitude. "When it came to the point that Byong Yu and I were going to fight (in the first round of the round-robin), a lot of people came running up and said, 'Hey, you're gonna fight Byong Yu.' They were all nervous and everything. I guess they thought I either didn't give a damn or had given up."

Part of Garcia's psyching down process that night was to size up the men he was going to face and digest all the information he had compiled on them. ("He's a very analytical fighter," one tournament veteran says of the surprising newcomer. "He knows the weaknesses and the strengths of all the guys.")

In the round-robin, Garcia had to compete against two veteran fighters, Yu and Joe Lewis. He had seen both men in action many times and was as familiar with their styles as he was with his own. He planned how to combat Yu's vast arsenal of Korean-style kicks and how to offset Lewis' devastating

MOVING OPPONENT

While the heavy bag is most desirable for developing power, it is pretty easy to hit. So, in order to simulate the reactions of opponents, Garcia rigs up a target that thinks and reacts. Here, Terry Updike, with the cardboard and a foam-rubber backing tucked under his black belt, attempts to move whenever he senses Garcia is about to attack.

back knuckle and side kick by pressing and keeping him off balance.

TIRED BUT CONFIDENT

When he was called to the ring, Garcia wasn't completely ready but showed few signs of weariness. He beat Yu in sudden-death overtime, 3-2, scoring all his points on punches, and then subdued Lewis by the same score, earning his final victory on two more punches and a penalty point for contact. In the Lewis bout, the deciding point came with 30 seconds left, and pandemonium reigned in the arena. Garcia says he was "exhausted," but he seemed cool and confident. The experienced Lewis charged desperately in the closing seconds, but Garcia maintained his poise until the end.

Ironically, the new Internationals champion, who first took up karate after attending the '68 Internationals, won his title with a strategy that Lewis himself had taught him. Garcia says Lewis had never seen him fight until that night but he (Garcia) had watched Lewis fight "ever since I've been in karate." Garcia also recalls that as a green belt he once met and talked to Lewis ("though Joe probably wouldn't remember"). What the young fighter learned by watching and listening was Lewis' concept of "musical-rhythm" fighting, of hitting an opponent between his "upbeat" and his "downbeat."

Against Lewis in Long Beach, Garcia was "trying to bounce him back and forth, trying to get him nervous. Anytime he thinks you're not confident, he'll take it easy and run fakes at you. But anytime he thinks you're not leary of him at all, he gets nervous and starts tightening up."

Unfortunately, there was one aspect of the "game" with Lewis that Garcia didn't enjoy. The former three-time champion is something of a villain on the tournament circuit and wasn't at all in the favor of the Long Beach crowd. "I honestly believe," insists Garcia, "that people weren't rooting for me as much as they were rooting *against Joe*." To him, this negative reaction puts tournament karate "out of perspective" and is nothing short of "super sad."

Garcia's reflective dialogue is equally colorful in discussing karate. He is concerned that people will judge him by his rapidly expanding collection of trophies, not for his worth as a person, and he says, "I would like to take all those trophies and put them in my mother's garage." He constantly re-emphasizes that tournaments are but a "small, small" part of karate and strongly urges aspiring karate students to "find a good instructor, someone you can respect and believe in." If a karateka competes, Garcia believes he should give a "decent,



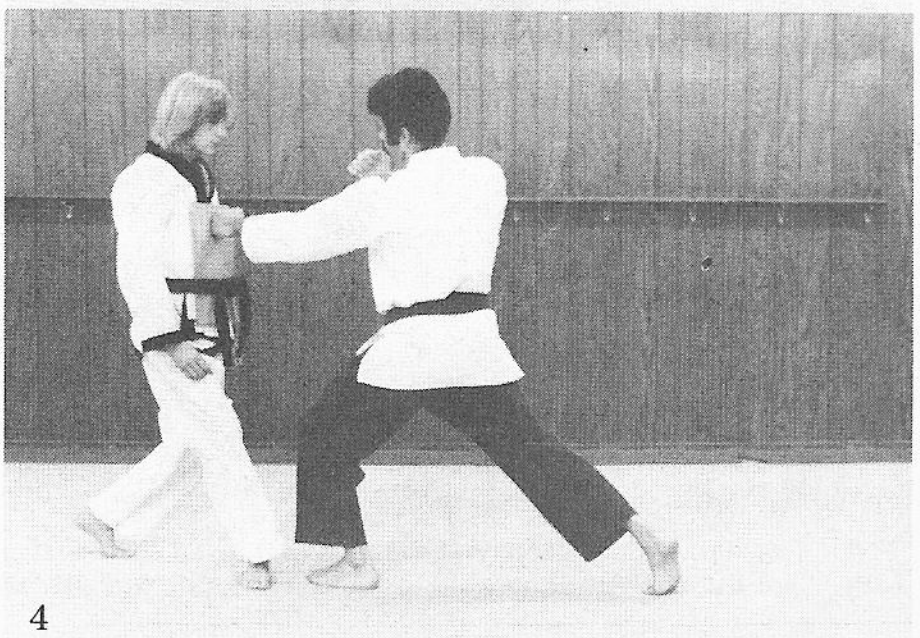
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up-and-up fight. If you're in there for three minutes, it's your responsibility to fight for three minutes, not to get one point and then dance around the ring."

Garcia, like many other present-day competitors, believes the key to successful tournament fighting is "just simple basics—simple punches, simple kicks. "The guy who throws all that fancy stuff either gets himself in trouble with contact or gets in trouble with making himself more vulnerable.

A QUESTION OF STYLE

Although Garcia is a Korean stylist, many observers say he fights like a shotokan stylist. He seldom scores on kicks, though he frequently employs them to set up his reverse punch, and seldom attacks the head. "The reason I throw very few head techniques," he explains, "is that I never try to hurt somebody unless they're trying to hurt me." But when an opponent does forget it's only a game and tries to do him in, "I'll try to knock him out, bust his nose, break his jaw; not to prove who is boss, but just to make him reevaluate what we're doing." Most often though, he would rather sacrifice getting hit than hurting someone. He opposes the use of rubber hand and foot guards in competition because he believes it

encourages more contact, and he advocates the elimination of groin kicks.

EARLY RETIREMENT?

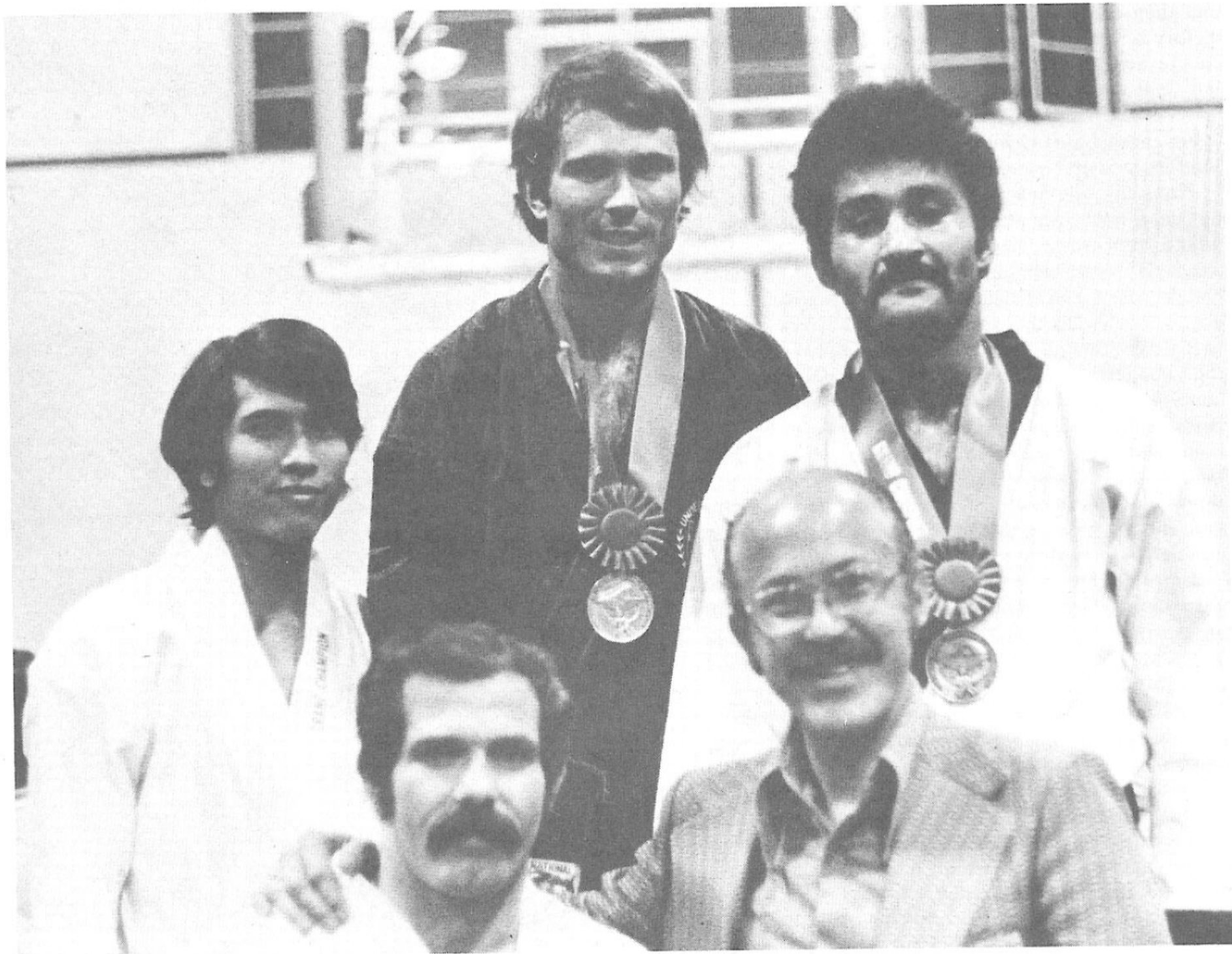
The candid fighter's training methods often differ from the norm, too. He does absolutely no running because it "has to be done right, and I don't have time to do it right. When you run, your muscles will contract when you stop. And when your muscles contract, you get tighter. And when your legs get tighter, you're gonna kick less."

In place of running, Garcia develops leg strength by kicking the heavy bag, one of his favorite pieces of training equipment. "The bag is the best person to work out with. It never complains, and it will be there when you finish. You can kick it as hard as you can, in every direction."

He also punches the heavy bag—but does not use the speed bag—because "in karate, the emphasis is supposed to be one, solid heavy punch." He works on timing by throwing at a target tucked inside a student's belt, and he finds that the old-fashioned sit-up is "fantastic" for the midsection.

Although he looks strong at 5-10 and 172 pounds, Garcia says he sometimes doesn't "eat enough to sustain some of the

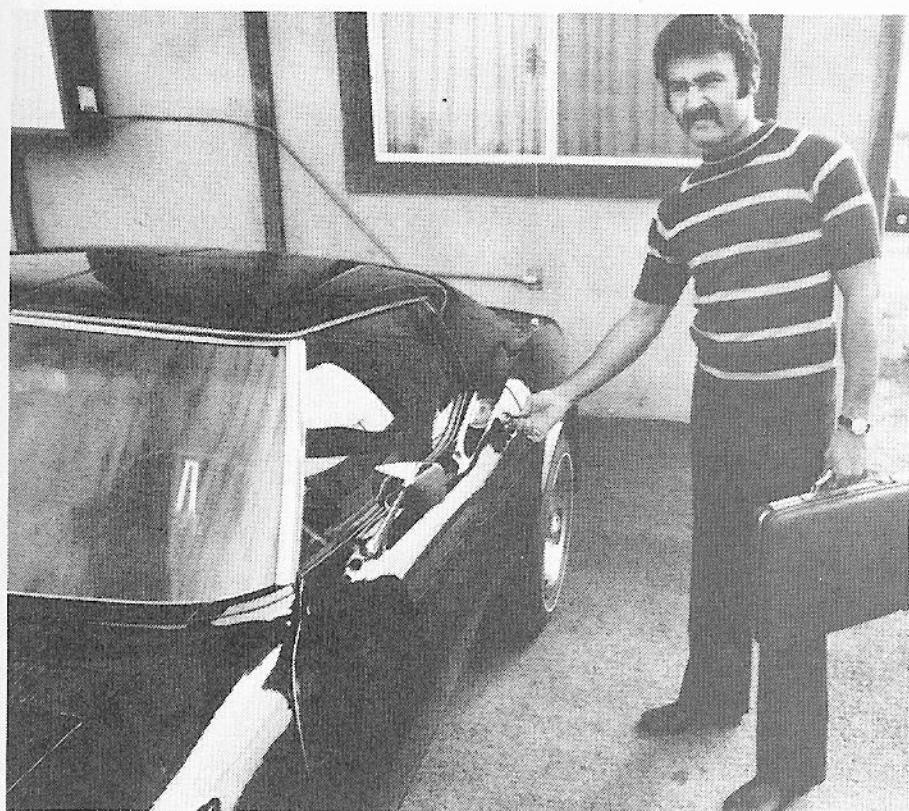
Photo by Phil Pacheco



MAKING HIMSELF KNOWN, Garcia achieved his first major tournament success at Sam Allred's 1972 National Grand Championships in Albuquerque, losing only to Bill Wallace (in black gi) in the grand title match.

punches and kicks I might incur," and he hasn't gained weight in five years. To compensate, he practices the spinning, circular movements of aikido and in tournaments will turn his side into a punch to absorb the impact. He tries to eat "fairly well" before competing and gets added stamina from amino acid tablets. To keep alert, he drinks a cup of black coffee about an hour before he fights.

Although fans now cheer him when his name is announced at tournaments, and opponents regard him as "the man to beat," Garcia may not be training for tournaments much longer. He has no definite plans to compete in 1973, except at the National Grand Championships and possibly at the Inter-



AWAY FROM THE DOJO, Garcia is frequently seen hopping into his flashy sports car with a brief case full of books and driving off to class at Cal State, Los Angeles. A political science major, he is planning to enter law school upon graduation.

nationals. The enjoyment is beginning to wear off a bit, and he is more and more involved in his law studies.

"I would rather watch it now than do it," he says of competition, though admitting, "I still enjoy fighting the good caliber of fighters—to outwit 'em, to out-manuever 'em. It's like playing chess."

Garcia realizes what the general reaction may be if he quits now. "Someone might feel, 'Well, you won the biggie and now you're afraid to come back and run the risk of losing.'" But Garcia would probably refuse to listen to such criticism. He doesn't see why he should continue to be the Internationals champion. "If you have to do it every year," he says, "there's something wrong with you."

Everyone may love a winner, but if Garcia has to be one to be loved, he says he'll pass.

"Anyone can be a winner—anyone. If you want to learn something from people, you should look at the loser—it takes a much stronger person to lose than it does to win."

The young man who grew up in the ghettos now lives peacefully with himself. After a recent verbal assault by a belligerent adversary, he responded by saying, "He was going to be in my life only a few minutes."

