

As featured in...

SUCCESS

Volume 4, Number 10

December 1997

A Tiger's Tale

It was supposed to be impossible to build an upscale chain of karate studios. So he went and did it.

IT WAS 1982, AND 20-YEAR-OLD TIGER SCHULMANN faced one of the toughest decisions of his life. Should he continue competing in karate, where he was a six-time North American Knockdown champ but was bringing in barely enough cash to scrape by? Or should he start a karate school?

Schulmann, who was conducting karate classes at night, sought advice from his own teacher. The sensei told him that martial-arts instruction was a second job, at best. Pressed for cash, Schulmann decided to go ahead with the school and opened his first Tiger Schulmann's Karate Center in the suburban Philadelphia area.

Fifteen years later, he's turned that venture into a chain of 32 schools, spread through New York, Connecticut, Pennsylvania, Florida, and New Jersey. Tiger Schulmann's Karate Centers are arguably the most successful karate schools in the country.

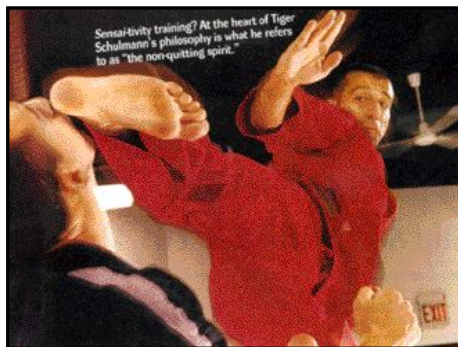
Schulmann, now 35, says he still misses competing but insists he couldn't have built his business any other way: "I'm a perfectionist, and I like to do things 100 percent."

Watch him in action, and you realize just how intense his one-way focus can be. Practicing high kicks with his brother Ron at his school in Manhattan, Schulmann deploys a formidable precision and force again and again, his only signs of fatigue the sweat beading on his forehead.

Schulmann began teaching professionally when he graduated from high school in Quakertown, Pa. At the time, the only opportunities he saw around him were factory jobs; he'd force himself to take one, spend two stupefying days there, then quit. So he began teaching a karate class at a small motel that his father owned in Quakertown. When a cheap storefront opened up in town in 1982, he moved the school there. Borrowing \$4,000 from his father, Schulmann converted it to a dojo, doing the construction work himself.

Karate was the one thing he loved. Since he'd started taking lessons as an eight-year-old, he'd be at the dojo every day. "I liked karate so much, it overwhelmed my life," he says.

After he became engaged, Schulmann knew he had to start making a living. He and his future wife,



Debbie, moved to Spring Valley, N.Y., where he began studying electrical technology at Rockland Community College during the day.

The discipline he'd learned from karate helped him focus on school. After pulling in a 4.0 GPA his first year, he was offered a government job. But it paid only \$16,000 a year. He decided to drop out. That kind of money didn't make college a worthwhile option for him.

That was when he used his savings to open that first Tiger Schulmann's Karate Center. Since his years in competition, Schulmann had developed a blend of karate, jujitsu, and aikido that focuses on practical self-defense rather than ancient ceremony. But to bring Tiger Schulmann's Karate to a wider audience, he knew he had to upgrade the seedy image that plagued martial-arts schools. Many were located in damp basements and dingy second-floor walk-ups - not exactly the type of places that would inspire hundreds of suburban parents to sign their children up for lessons.

Schulmann decided to open in an upscale suburban shopping mall. "I

have parents who drop off their children, and I want them to have a place to shop for an hour," he told the owner.

The school was an immediate success, and Schulmann began to grow into a chain, offering partnerships with his best instructors. Although he owns a majority share of each new unit, half of the profits go to those partners. He says that these arrangements ensure that his schools are well run. "It's not a nine-to-five type of job for them," he says. "They'll work as many hours as possible."

Each instructor is trained personally by Schulmann at his headquarters in Paramus, N.J. At the heart of the philosophy he teaches is "the non-quitting spirit." "You're going to plateau at anything you do," he says. "You climb really quickly at the beginning, then you climb again and plateau.

Where do people give up? On the plateaus. How do you achieve? By never quitting."

Schulmann takes just as tenacious an approach to growing his business. Earlier this year he acquired five schools from master Glazier's Karate, a publicly traded company in Piscataway, N.J.

Glazier says that Schulmann was the only martial-arts entrepreneur he'd met with sufficient financial might and commitment to qualify that he would trust him with his schools. "I don't see anyone else in the industry who has that ability."

All-out intensity has paid off handsomely for Schulmann, who now lives with his family in Upper Saddle River, a tiny enclave in Bergen County, N.J.

But he says that acquiring wealth was never his overriding goal: "I have to stop myself from coming to work. I come in early and leave late. To me, more important than the money or the growth of the schools is making sure I love what I do. This is my hobby. I still don't think of myself as an entrepreneur, but I guess I do fit the description.