

## CALENDAR

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MOVIES

## When Elvis bowed to karate's kings

A Presley-backed documentary on the sport is finally out — minus footage of the black-belt singer.

By SUSAN KING  
Times Staff Writer

IT'S just a frayed, weathered, black karate belt, but it means the world to George Waite, the former president of TCB — Elvis Presley's film company. The belt belonged to the King way back when, and Waite has had it since Presley's death in 1977. Until recently, Waite had never shown it to anyone because the memory of his loss was so painful. Presley's death also put an end to a karate film called "New Gladiators" that the singer had financed and that Waite — a self-described "karate bum" — had produced in 1974. "New Gladiators" was supposed to be to karate what Bruce Brown's classic "The Endless Summer" was to surfing — a definitive film about the sport. Presley was scheduled to co-narrate and demonstrate karate moves.

"I kept it going until Elvis died," says Waite, who studied with Presley's martial arts instructor, Ed Parker.

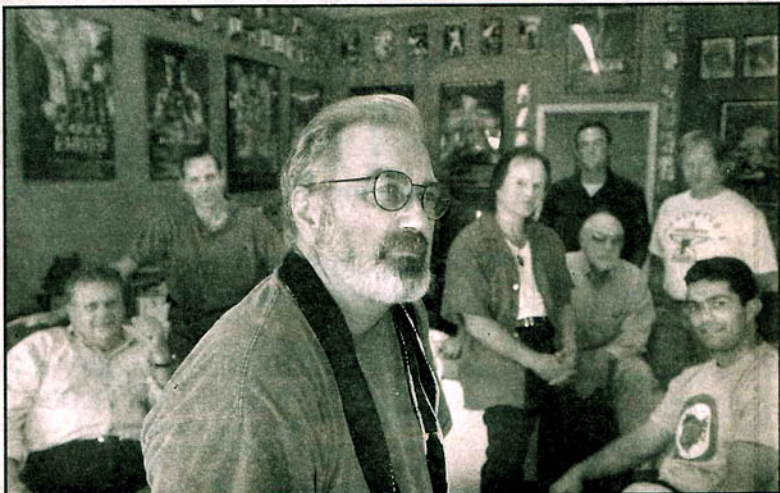
But that wasn't the end of the story. Waite had 50 hours of footage — including 33 minutes of medium-girthed Presley showing off his black-belt moves and eight minutes of Bruce Lee demonstrating karate in 1967 in Long Beach — in the back of his 1963 GMC pickup truck in his garage. And there the project stayed until recently, when he gave the footage to Isaac Florentine, an Israeli-born director of action films, and Florentine's partner, Don Warrener, who ran a chain of karate schools in Canada. Florentine and Warrener's company, Rising Sun Productions,

which distributes karate movies and other martial arts-related items, edited the footage down to 93 minutes. (None of the footage of Presley is in the movie because the Elvis Presley estate wouldn't allow it to be released, according to Warrener, the estate was unhappy with the singer's less than flattering appearance.)

The two are now distributing the "finished product," "New Gladiators," on video and DVD, and are hoping to interest Hollywood in a theatrical release. "New Gladiators" documents what fans know as the golden age of the sport, when martial artists were interested in the art of karate and not the glory or the money. The film focuses on several karate fighters in training and captures tournament action — two European team matches and the Urquidez Brothers Invitational in Beverly Hills. Several well-known martial artists of the period appear, including John Corcoran, Ticky Donovan, Emil Farkas, Roy Kurban, Ron Marchini, John Natulivid and Benny "the Jet" Urquidez.

On a recent morning, Florentine, Warrener and Waite gather in Rising Sun's cramped Beverly Hills office with three of the men in the film: Urquidez, a world-champion kickboxer who operates the Jet Center in Burbank; Farkas, who wrote the Encyclopedia of Martial Arts and is owner of the Beverly Hills Karate Academy; and Dave Brock, a seven-time karate champion. Also sitting in are writer Joe Hyams, one of Bruce Lee's first students and author of "Zen in the Martial Arts," and Majet Raz, one of Urquidez's students. They are there not so much to talk as to show their support for "New Gladiators."

Waite first came up with an idea for doing a documentary on tournament life in 1974 and shared it with Parker, the instructor. He said we should have E.P. look at this; we'll call him right now," Waite recalls,



**KARATE CLUB:** With Elvis Presley's black belt slung around his neck, George Waite, foreground, former president of Presley's film company, meets with Don Warrener, left, Isaac Florentine, Benny Urquidez, Dave Brock, Joe Hyams, Emil Farkas and Majet Raz.

Presley agreed to meet with them that afternoon. "We went up to the house and we talked for a bit, and I presented the idea to him."

Presley was leaving for Las Vegas that night and told the two he would have to think about it. "A couple of hours later, he said he liked the idea and said, 'Come to Vegas.' So I went to Vegas and we talked about the film. He gave me a check for \$50,000."

Waite says he never completed the film and didn't want to use the 16-millimeter footage of Presley, hoping instead to shoot him on 35-millimeter in more choreographed moves. But the King's weight had ballooned since the film's inception. "We thought he was going to come down a little bit [in weight]. We flew back to Memphis a few times and showed him the film, and he said, 'That's good enough to me.' He wore a rubber suit and I thought he would get smaller, but he didn't. It's always hard to cut someone into something when they are heavy. And it doesn't look good for the sport."

To Florentine and Warrener, resurrecting "New Gladiators" is akin to exhibiting the Lost Ark of

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— ISAAC FLORENTINE

co-producer of "New Gladiators," shelved for 25 years after Elvis Presley's death

the Covenant or the Holy Grail. The film has achieved almost legendary status among karate devotees. In fact, Florentine first heard of "New Gladiators" back in Israel in the late '70s when he was a teenager.

Since its release on DVD and VHS in August, "New Gladiators" has become Rising Sun's biggest seller of the year (1,345 copies sold so far).

Waite says that the film was 90% complete before he gave it to Florentine and Warrener. "I tried to keep it as much as possible intact the way they meant it to be," Florentine says. "I didn't want to

cut stuff. When you see it now in the 21st century, it takes you back into the '70s and really captures the period. There were holes in the film, but we patched it."

"This film was never made for release for the general public," Waite adds. "It was made for us — the karate world."

To complete "New Gladiators," Florentine used the work print — one that hasn't been color corrected or timed. So the quality of the print is atrocious — there are skips, jarring jumps, and the picture is a faded mixture of browns and yellows.

Then there are several credit problems. The poster says that Oscar-winners "Davio & Hora" supplied the cinematography. It is pointed out to a rather embarrassed Florentine that one of the cinematographers is Allen Daviau, not Davio — he's also listed as Allen Daviau in the credits. And though Daviau's been nominated for such films as "E.T." and "Bugsy," he has never won an Oscar. John Hora, who was the director of cinematography on such films as "Gremlins," has never been nominated for an Academy Award. And on both the credits and posters, the late

actor Iron Eyes Cody is referred to as Iron Eye Cody.

Everyone involved in the film knows that, as is, "New Gladiators" couldn't be distributed theatrically. Still, Florentine says, "I think it deserves justice." It is their dream that a savvy filmmaker in Hollywood will restore the original print, recut the negative and release it theatrically.

Waite believes the original negative is in pretty good shape — it sits in boxes in a corner in the back room at Rising Sun. Time is of the essence for restoration because Waite, Florentine and Warrener say they were knocked back from the smell of vinegar when they opened the film cans — a sign that the negative could be suffering from "vinegar syndrome" deterioration.

They also have had a hard time explaining to Hollywood executives exactly what they have on their hands.

"We approach people and say we have this documentary and it was funded by Elvis," Florentine says. "People don't believe it."

"In the martial arts world our credibility is unquestionable," Warrener says. "But the outside world is a new level for us."