

“Really good things happen to those who win the Battle of Atlanta,” says Joe Corley, and Number One-ranked Keith Vitali seems to agree.

KI: Let's start with a little background. When did you first start karate and what got you interested?

VITALI: I started in 1971. What got me going was that I was a frustrated athlete at the University of South Carolina. I was there on a track scholarship as a long distance runner. I ran one year and didn't really want to run again. And yet, when I quit, I thought all I had ahead of me was intramural sports, Sunday softball or something like that.

Why didn't you want to run anymore?

The running was great, but when you're forced to run, getting in about five miles in the morning and about 20 miles at night—just being forced to run went against my grain, I guess. It personally didn't agree with me too well. Like I said, I had a scholarship and was a pretty well-known runner from high school, so it was kind of surprising for some of the people I've known to learn that I went from track to karate.

What do you think running did for your karate performances?

I think that distance running was one of the things that built up a base, giving me strong legs and good endurance. So I can fight a long time and not get tired. And coming from a running situation, automatically I had real strong legs when I first jumped into karate.

How did it come about, how did you find karate?

I just walked into a karate class. I has no idea what it was. I walked in and saw two people sparring, and to me, that one-on-one type of contest is what always appealed to me about sports. In track, you have to compete against individuals and it's nobody's fault but your own if you lose a race. Somehow, team sports didn't agree with me that well. Like baseball, in which somebody could make an error and your team could lose even though you yourself played your best. What I enjoyed most were sports where at the end you had nobody to blame but yourself.

What other sports have you been involved in?

I was basically interested in tennis and baseball, but I stayed away from football; that's why I have good legs today. I played baseball for eight years. Thank goodness, I was a pitcher. Otherwise you never get to touch the ball. But track was the thing that first gave me that one-on-one type feeling. As you crossed the finish line there was just nothing that could compare to what you felt like in winning a race. Karate is basically the same. By the same token, I haven't fought in too many team matches. Down in Texas this year was the first time I ever fought in a team match. Maybe it's a little selfish to think in those terms, but you can win your match and the team can lose. Don't get me wrong, though. I enjoyed it. I think it's something everyone should do.

How would you describe your approach to competition, emotionally speaking?

I'm a real perfectionist when it comes to karate. I tend to get down on myself a little. I mean, I've never ever been mad at anybody's beating me, though. I'm the type of guy when I get hit, I enjoy the karate so much, that I almost want to thank the guy because I'll be so impressed that somebody hit me. Then I'd do my best not to get hit with the same thing again.

What do you have to say to that faction in the martial arts that claims karate is not a sport, should not be a sport, but should be and remain an art of self defense, something with which to kill and maim?



For those people, I strongly recommend that they divide the sport from the martial art. They are two separate elements. What they should do is stay closely involved in the part they enjoy most. I get my personal satisfaction out of what I do, and with the self defense I've developed I believe I have the power and capability to defend myself under most circumstances. Now, believing that one punch is going to kill somebody in one move—I guess that's possible, but I believe that the better fighters are those wearing the safety gear and not those without it. And I do think that those people without the gear are fooling themselves by thinking that one punch is going to kill somebody every time. Sometimes you can hit or kick somebody in the head real hard and have them smile back at you. What you have to do then is go back to your drawing board and figure out how to get more power into that technique. I think the better fighters have done so. Actually, I think that people who train without gear, using no contact, are frustrating themselves and not progressing as quickly as they could. I know that using the gear has helped me to progress much more quickly than I did when I was fighting without gear.

Why do you think that?

With the gear I was able to make light contact. I knew that some techniques that I was throwing and getting points for were not good techniques and not good points—round kicks that I was throwing three feet away from people, for instance. When I threw them in a tournament with the pads on, suddenly I wasn't getting points for them anymore. I'd