

Below, it's the sparkling Vitali ridgehand, while at right, perched on a rock, he abuses friend Larry Black. (Photos by Dick Tirschel.)



Well, I went to Texas and knocked Al Francis out with a round kick. The rules were no flip kicks. You had to kick hard. It was a front leg round kick and he went out for about a minute and a half. I was not warned. I was not disqualified. I actually got a point for the knockout. And I got the respect of all the Texas fighters when I knocked him out. As he woke up, the only thing he told me was, "When we finish the match just tell me what you hit me with because I never saw it." And we're the best of friends to this day. I've got a lot of respect for Al. He came to the Battle of Atlanta and won the lightweight division. A fighter who can win outside of his region like that really impresses me. I consider it a great win for me to beat somebody like Al Francis.

What about tournaments that call for no equipment?

For me, that's the exception. I'm the type of fighter who just will not sanction or participate in a tournament that has no gear. I'm not about to belittle myself to prehistoric fighting methods. I only fight in those tournaments which have at least sanctioned safety gear in the black belt division. I mean, by me entering a tournament without safety gear would be like endorsing that kind of an event. A lot of guys might resent this, thinking how can a guy like this Keith Vitali from the Southeast try to band a bunch of fighters together and get them to boycott certain events because they're not using gear, but I want people to know that I'm committed to the well being of the sport.

You think sport karate has a future, then?

This sport can go as well as tennis has gone. We are right where tennis was 20 years ago. We are on the verge of getting television exposure, but it's got to be accepted by the mass media. They're not about to accept something that has blood and gore in it. You've almost got to hit people in the face with this stuff. They've got no balls, no teeth, eye injuries, and they're telling people not to use the equip-

ment. But gear will prolong the length of a fighter's career. Therefore, I can fight to an older age, enjoy karate, plus I'll have all my teeth to do it with. See, a lot of people don't know this, but I came up in the early 70s. I've fought a lot of fights without gear.

Have you been hurt?

I've been kicked in the groin. I've had chipped teeth, and bloody noses and bloody lips, but never with gear. Always without gear. The only time I've ever been hurt with gear was when I got kicked in the groin by Glen McMorris about four years ago. He just broke the groin cup, just cracked the hell out of it, and won the match to boot. I went down and out for a few minutes.

What was it, a power front kick?

It was a double kick. He grabbed my leg, front kicked me, looked around, and when the referees didn't say anything, he did a back leg front kick again. Picked me completely up off the ground. And when I got up again I was saying, "No, come on, guys, let me fight some more. Don't change the score and just let us fight some more." But they said no.

But other than that, you've never been hurt with the gear?

Never. It's possible that you can get maybe a broken nose if you get hit hard enough, but you've not going to get the bunches of superficial tears in the knuckles and face. It won't cut you like the bare knuckles. Before the gear came in there were months that would go by when I wasn't competing. My feet would be bruised from guys elbowing me when I was kicking, or I'd get my face cut. But I've only had one bloody nose since I've started fighting in gear tournaments.

Some people say that lighter fighters have all the advantages and none of the disadvantages when they're fighting heavier fighters and using equipment.

I think it's easier for a lightweight to win it with no contact. When I fight these bigger guys, I've actually got to stick 'em