

Lieb was persuaded to enter the kata competition at the last minute. He made up a kata on the spot and won with it, hoping there would not be a tie because he couldn't remember the form for a second performance. But mostly he was a fighter.

"I like fightin'. I always will. You know, I see a good fighter and I just want to go up and hug him. But there's a time to quit. When the injuries catch up, it's time to quit. Then you're a fool if you continue 'cause those young guys are gonna whip you, beat you bad.

"I can't do the things I used to do," he admitted. "I'm limited to a certain point. I can still do a lot of things, but I'm gettin' older. I'm no spring chicken. And when I free-fight, I have to readjust myself just to survive."

He refers to Dave Hayes, a 20-year-old third dan from Muskegon and one of Lieb's top competitors: "Just for me to survive and free-fight him and to even score a point, would be, I think, an accomplishment because he's younger, he's quick. Any of my black belts, if they're younger, have the advantage over me. If I couldn't use karate to benefit me, if I did it the old traditional way, I'd never have a chance against them. Now, I can survive because I'm sneakier, more experienced, and I can set 'em up once in a while, get a score. And I can even beat 'em every so often.

"There was a time nobody could score on me, not even one point. I wouldn't let 'em. Then I got polite and I let 'em score once in a while to build their ego up a little. But now, whether I want to or not, they score on me because they're gettin' better. So now should I feel bad? No! Isn't that the goal of an instructor, to make his students better than himself? I can never feel negative because they'll never take my knowledge away from me. You put it into your students. I have the same feelings I had when I competed. I live and die for them out there," he said.

But why Muskegon, Michigan? The Midwest isn't exactly the karate capital of the nation.

"I like being where I'm at. I like the Great Lakes. I like my job. Let me put it this way: I have a tremendous amount of affection for my students. And if I didn't have that, I would've moved away a long time ago. If I didn't have the feelings that I have for my students and instructors, I would've been gone because I could have grown bigger and made more money. I'm not unhappy about that," he continued, "I just don't care for those things, never have. I get

so much strength from the support of my students.

"There was a time I probably would have quit without it because I don't need the hassles. It'd be easier to be a family man and forget about karate. But then again, I've tried that and it cost me a divorce. One time, at my first wife's request, I got out of karate completely for two or three months, but I was so unhappy, so high-strung, I found that I wasn't me. Karate is a part of my life, I cannot give it up.

"Two or three times I should have been buried (as a result of injuries), but I wasn't. I came back. The way I look at it, there's something up there. You know, I believe in God, I'm a Christian. There's something up there that says I've got something to do. It sounds crazy, but my wife will tell you—I'll die for karate. Without a question. It sounds foolish and stupid, but my belief is that strong."

Today, Ernie Lieb lives with his family in a neat, yellow house in suburban Muskegon. He looks like a guy who enjoys working in his yard or shooting

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pool in the basement with his friends. He works second shift at a correctional facility in Muskegon as a housing unit supervisor. It's sort of an unusual job, definitely dangerous, but he likes it:

"My safety lies not in my physical strength or my ability in the art. My safety lies in the respect that the prisoners have for me as a person. Because I treat everybody fair and square and equal. You treat me like a human being, I'll treat you like a human being. Treat me like garbage, I ignore you. They respect that, they really do. Everybody thinks prisoners are dumb; that's not true.

Lieb teaches karate classes at Muskegon Community College in the mornings, and, while he still supports the AKA as chief instructor and still travels to tournaments to serve as head referee, his biggest concern now is teaching his students and improving his style. Lieb admits he's outspoken, but his students in the Midwest will tell you that his actions speak louder than his words.