

Karate Giant of South Africa, Kyoshi Sonny Pillay

South Africa's 1st Indian coach, Sensei Brando, will coach the Protea karate team at the Commonwealth Championships in the Olympic city of Sydney, Australia. SUTRA interviews his father, legendary Kyoshi Sonny Pillay

WHEN A POOR LITTLE BOY from the slums of Springfield was weeding the gardens of rich white people on the Berea, he never dreamt that one day he would be a world-renowned karate practitioner and the head of a family that would one day distinguish itself in education, sport, and most notably, karate. That little boy grew up to be Kyoshi (Professor) Sonny Pillay, internationally acclaimed 8th Dan Master of the Greek martial art Pankration (utilized by the army of Alexandra the Great in his many historical battles) and 7th Dan black belt karate maestro.

The Pillay family is unique in that the entire family of six is involved in the martial art-karate - probably the only one of its kind in the history of the sport.

Sonny himself has blazed an unparalleled trail in karate. Apartheid had closed the doors to the likes of Sonny. He had just married the beautiful Anita Maharaj and started work as a cardex clerk at Dunlop Tyres.

After several years of arduous training, Sonny had reached the ceiling in South Africa and the only way for him to get the deserved black belt grading that he was being denied in his home country, was to get to the karate capital of the world, London, where the great Japanese masters had set up their karate centres.

Living in the cramped front lounge of a relative's house with no central heating, in icy cold, lonely London, the couple got themselves jobs - Anita as a mannequin in a clothing factory and Sonny as cutter in a textile firm. This was followed by gruelling training sessions under the close scrutiny of Japanese



BY Ronnie Govender



ABOVE, LEFT TO RIGHT: Sonny Pillay, in his Protea colours; and the entire family in karate gear - Lorenzo, Deniro, dad Sonny, Brandito, Evita, and mom, Anita **BELOW, LEFT TO RIGHT:** Sonny and Anita Pillay, Sonny receiving his Lifetime Achievement Award, and with the then Deputy President Jacob Zuma.

master Professor Enoeda known as the "Tiger of the Rising Sun" at the headquarters of the JKA (KUGB) in London.

He eventually qualified as a black belt in the winter of 1977. Back in his beloved country, South Africa, he set up karate schools largely in the poor areas of Phoenix, Chatsworth and Ntuzuma. He soldiered on, until he went on to be graded by world karate legend grandmaster Kanazawa as a 7th Dan black belt - the first African to reach this high ranking. But his biggest achievement was to bring and stage the Karate World Cup at Durban's ICC in 2003. Despite having to withdraw from his own pension fund, a R300 000 loss (due to the lack of sponsors) to make the event happen, Sonny has no regrets and maintains "everything in life including fame comes at a premium". In contrast, Ali Bacher received R5 million and for his help in staging a much smaller event, the 2003 Cricket World Cup with huge support from the corporates.

Anita, whose blossoming karate career was cut short by illness, was awarded an honorary First Dan black belt by Master Kanazawa for her "sterling contributions to karate".

Sonny is an avid movie buff and Anita indulged his desire on giving his children nicknames after top movie stars.

In terms of the shastras they named their first son Deenagaran. Sonny however chose to call his first-born Brandito after his movie idol, Marlon Brando. Brandito has since gone on to more than live up to his father's prescient name. A First Dan junior black belt at the age of eleven, Brandito has achieved the unparalleled feat of having led his team as captain and coach to ten consecutive victories in the Gift of the Givers International Kanazawa Cup Championships. He only recently has been appointed the coach of the Proteas Karate Team who are currently in Mozambique for the Africa Zone Six Championships and in July 2011 Sensei Brandito will coach the Proteas team at the Commonwealth Championships in the Olympic city of Sydney, Australia. His remarkable appointment as coach of the Protea team is historical in that it's the first time ever that a South African of Indian origin has been appointed as coach of the national karate team.

A year after Brandito was born, on 6 October 1980, Anita gave birth to another beautiful child, this time a girl. Her name according to the shastras was Desigie but Sonny called her Evita after Argentinian Icon Eva Peron. She has achieved a 4th Dan black belt and fought gallantly in the 2000,

2003 and 2006 Karate World Cups (hosted in Bali, Durban and Tokyo respectively). She did equally well at university qualifying as a triple graduate - a post grad in education and a sports science degree amongst others from the University of KwaZulu-Natal. She is now teaching high school students in Perth, Australia, where she has settled with her husband, Robin Ross.

Then came Ravikumaran, whom Sonny called Deniro after Robert de Niro. Deniro has excelled in his studies. He qualified as a lawyer with a Masters in Business Law. He is an associate attorney with global legal giants Norton Rose. He is also a top class karateka and teacher with a 4th Dan black belt. He also represented KZN and participated in the SKISA Team SA in the SKIF World Cup in Milan in 1997, in Bali in 2000, and in Durban in 2004.

Finally there is Kumaran whom, for a change, his mother Anita nick-named, Lorenzo. Lorria as he is known at home is currently completing a Bachelor of Psychology degree through Unisa and serves as a professional karate teacher. He won the Rajiv Gandhi International Tournament in 2007 in the Tata built city of Jamshedpur, Bihar, India, the home of his paternal great grandparents.



The fascinating stories of the Pillays is told in absorbing detail in two books written by Ronnie Govender which are to be published soon. The working titles of the books are "The Sonny Pillay Story" and "Sai Baba, the Durban Connection - the True Life Story of the Miraculous Experience of Anita Pillay". 