

Buffaloe done but not out



Logan Ulrich/Dispatch photo

Christian Buffaloe spars with his father Kenny at their dojo outside their home in Warren County, North Carolina. Christian is a youth champion as a Kyokushin fighter, a full-contact style of karate, but just competed in his final youth tournament and isn't sure he'll continue as an adult.

The Kyokushin fighter competed in his last youth match, but the sport isn't done with him

BY LOGAN ULRICH
SPORTS EDITOR

Finding Christian Buffaloe is no easy task. For starters, you're probably looking in the wrong place.

Unlike the rest of the elite youth karate fighters in the United States, you won't find Christian in the city hubs of New York or Los Angeles or in established dojos along the west coast. You have to drive deep into the green heart of rural North Carolina an hour northeast of Raleigh, past dilapidated husks of decomposing wood and peeling paint that used to be buildings, through towns little more than an intersection of two roads. You have to leave the asphalt, bumping along a gravel-studded, red-clay road until you see his house tucked into the woods.

Several yards away is his dojo — a shed perched on cinder blocks, but furnished inside with the same red and royal blue mat he competes on in tournaments as far away as Japan. Arrive early enough during the summer, 7 a.m. at least, and you can find him training with his father, Kenny Buffaloe, his sensei and his only

steady sparring partner.

If your familiarity with karate doesn't extend far beyond The Karate Kid, the intensity of Christian's training would be surprising. Christian practices a brand of karate called Kyokushin, noted for its physicality and brutality. It's full contact, bare-knuckle, no protection fighting. The goal is to knock your opponent down or knock them out. And Christian is good at it.

The walls of the dojo are covered with photos of Christian from the time he was eight posing trophy in hand with Kyokushin legends. Over a nine-year career, Christian fought in 19 international championship tournaments in the U.S. and four world championships in Japan, finishing as a seven-time Kyokushin youth knock-down champion.

It's a run that ended with a second place finish in June at the 2017 All American Kyokushin Karate International Championships in New York City. It was the last youth tournament Christian was eligible to compete in, and for now there are no plans for Christian to continue fighting in the

adult division.

He's been defying the odds long enough.

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At 17, Christian isn't the most imposing fighter, standing only 5-foot-6 and 155 pounds. But a closer look shows bulging, rounded knuckles, where layers of bone have built up over a lifetime of punching hard objects. At a summer camp last week, a nurse freaked out when she saw his hands because she thought he was hurt.

Even in the austere, formal setting of the dojo, he still flashes an easygoing grin and an occasional wink from time to time. He sports long, curly brown hair pulled tight in a ponytail behind his head. His smile shows gaps between his front teeth. He's never had braces; they would have been an expensive waste of time.

When he trains, his brow furrows and his dark eyes take on a new intensity. His mouth purses like an ape, and every word and sound as he punches and kicks is guttural. *Osu!* *Osu!* The most common word in the dojo is *osu*. It translates as a combina-

tion of patience, determination and endurance, and signifies respect and affirmation. Every command by the sensei ought to be met immediately by *osu*.

In Christian's case, the role of sensei has been filled by his father, who trained Christian in Kyokushin since he was three. He looks the part, with black hair tied behind his head and neatly trimmed mustache and goatee spackled with white. Photos of him in his younger days dot the walls, all with the same flexed stance and grim expression. Once he starts to talk about Christian, though, the sensei transforms into an effusive and proud father.

American fighters already face somewhat of a disadvantage from their foreign counterparts, as Kyokushin is far less popular. It's harder to find the rigorous training and circuit of smaller fights needed prepare a fighter's body for the punishment it will take. The Buffaloe's isolation in North Carolina exacerbated those issues.

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Kenseth likely done at Joe Gibbs Racing at end of year

BY THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

SPARTA, Ky. — NASCAR driver Matt Kenseth said Friday he has no job lined up next year and likely has no future at Joe Gibbs Racing.

"I'm not really worried about it but as of today, I do not have a job for next year. Hope to still be racing," Kenseth said at Kentucky Speedway. "I think I got some wins left in me and hopefully race for championships. Right now, I'm focusing on finishing up this year."

Kenseth is the 2003 champion and two-time Daytona 500 winner. He is in his fifth

season driving for Gibbs and his 18th overall. But, he does not believe returning to the No. 20 Toyota is an option for 2018. Erik Jones is likely going to be moved into that car from Furniture Row Racing, Gibbs' sister team.

"I do not think I will have the option to return to race at JGR next year. Unfortunately," he said.

One possibility is replacing Dale Earnhardt Jr. at Hendrick Motorsports — or even sliding into the No. 5 should Rick Hendrick decide to release Kasey Kahne. But, a slot at Hendrick may not be a slam-dunk. Kenseth is 45 and

would likely be a place-filler until a younger driver is ready and that could be sooner rather than later.

Xfinity Series driver William Byron has back-to-back wins, and along with Alex Bowman — who filled in for Earnhardt last year — the duo could be positioning themselves for early promotions into Hendrick's top rides.

Kenseth could also swap positions with Jones, a development driver for JGR who is really just being stashed at Furniture Row until Gibbs has a Cup seat for him.

Beyond saying JGR wasn't an option, Kenseth wouldn't

tip his hand.

"I probably already said too much about what I'm not doing next year, so I don't really have anything to talk about what I am doing at this point," he said. "At this point, I don't have anything going on next year and trying to get focused on running better and winning races."

Kenseth is 11th in points with six top-10 finishes in 17 starts. All four Gibbs drivers are winners in the Cup Series this season.

Jones is on a one-year contract with Furniture Row. He is 17th in the standings with four top-10s, but he's among a

current crop of young drivers poised to take over the Cup Series. He declined on Thursday to discuss his future.

"I'm just driving. For the most part, for me, I don't know where I'm going to be yet. They haven't let me know," he said. "Hopefully I know soon. You know it's kind of getting down to that point. I guess it's July now, so I'm sure we'll have an answer here soon."

Kenseth has 38 victories in 631 Cup starts. He joined Gibbs in 2013, led the Cup Series with seven victories and finished second in points that year.



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Clippers acquire Gallinari in three-team deal

BY THE ASSOCIATED PRESS
DENVER — The Los Angeles Clippers acquired sharp-shooting forward Danilo Gallinari from Denver as part of a three-team trade that also involved Atlanta on Thursday.

In the swap, Los Angeles sent Jamal Crawford, Diamond Stone, cash considerations and a protected 2018 first-round pick to the Hawks. The Nuggets

receive a 2019 second-round pick from Atlanta.

Gallinari joins a Clippers team that recently traded Chris Paul to Houston, but agreed to a five-year deal with Blake Griffin. Los Angeles also has DeAndre Jordan in the frontcourt.

The 28-year-old Gallinari was selected by New York with the sixth overall pick in 2008. He wound up in Denver as

part of the blockbuster deal in February 2011 that sent Carmelo Anthony to the Knicks.

A fan favorite, Gallinari averaged 16.2 points and made 535 3-pointers for the Nuggets. He missed the 2013-14 season because of a torn left ACL.

"Danilo has been a special player for the Nuggets organization as well as a prominent figure in the Denver community for the last

six years," said Tim Connelly, the president of basketball operations for Denver. "He was a consummate professional throughout his time with us and we want to wish him all the best as he begins this new chapter."

The Nuggets made a splashy move in free agency by adding four-time All-Star Paul Millsap on a three-year-deal worth \$90 million. The 32-year-old Millsap

gives the team a proven, defensive-minded veteran to work alongside up-and-coming big man Nikola Jokic.

Denver hasn't made the postseason since 2012-13.

Crawford played for the Hawks from 2009-11. He's captured the NBA's Sixth Man of the Year Award three times.

The 20-year-old Stone was acquired by the Clippers during a 2016 draft-night trade with

New Orleans. He played in seven games for Los Angeles last season.

"As we continue to focus on maintaining flexibility and adding assets, this deal accomplished multiple goals and made a lot of sense for us," Hawks general manager Travis Schlenk said. "First-round picks have great value and Diamond is an intriguing, young player to add to our group."

BUFFALO

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The responsibility of preparing Christian to fight fell solely on Kenny. He likens it to how Richard Williams trained his daughters Venus and Serena, only the U.S. tennis circuit was far more robust than the Kyokushin one.

"He trained under me and went straight to Wimbledon," Kenny said. "That's insane. He had to jump in the fire against world level competitors with no experience." He turns to Christian. "If you weren't my son or my student, I would still give you your props, because it's hard to fight like that."

There's some uncle spinning yarns at the country lunch counter to Kenny, but if he brags a little about his two greatest devotions in life — Kyokushin karate and his son — it's understandable. If he oversells their feats, it's not by much.

Founded in 1964 by Masutatsu "Mas" Oyama, Kyokushin karate quickly ascended to prominence in the world of martial arts. Myth and reality are equally stupefying — Mas Oyama may not have actually killed more than 50 bulls in his lifetime with his bare hands, but one of his students, Shigeru Oyama, did fight and defeat 120 men during his *kumite*, a Kyokushin test of endurance. To achieve a first-degree black belt, a Kyokushin student must complete a ten-man *kumite*, sparring and defeating ten fighters in immediate succession. Each degree up until tenth adds ten more fighters of equal or greater skill.

The style exploded in Japan, Russia and other Eastern European nations. Mas Oyama sent Shigeru Oyama to the United States as an ambassador for Kyokushin. He set up a dojo in White Plains, New York, where Kenny Buffaloe found him.

Kenny was born in Charlotte to a pair of Lumbee parents, but was adopted by a Cherokee couple from northeastern North Carolina looking for a child that looked like them. During the summer, Kenny would stay with his great-aunt in New York. One day his cousins came home showing off moves they'd learned from the new karate instructor in town. Kenny begged his grandmother to let him try it until she relented, and though his cousins eventually lost interest, he was engrossed.

He trained with Shigeru Oyama every summer from then on, with the difficulty ramping up each year. The rigor and brutality of Kyokushin proved too much for most Americans, and the style didn't take root in the United States like it did elsewhere. But for Kenny, Kyokushin lived up to its English translation — ultimate truth.

"I didn't want anything but Kyokushin, I didn't want anything else," Kenny said. "You don't stop driving a Mercedes and drive a tricycle."

Kenny eventually moved to New York, fighting in tour-



Logan Ulrich/Dispatch photo

Christian Buffaloe (left) trains with his father Kenny (right) in their dojo near their home in rural North Carolina. Kenny has trained Christian to be a champion youth Kyokushin karate fighter despite being more isolated and under-resourced compared to their competitors.

naments until he was 25. If it were up to him, he would have continued until his body prevented him. But his teacher had other ideas.

"You know what, you need to go back to North Carolina and represent us there," Shigeru Oyama said out of the blue one day.

Because etiquette demanded it, Kenny responded with a quick "*Osu!*" and bowed despite the rebellion in his head. He returned in 1980 and opened up a dojo. Though he found many students at first, once he started teaching Kyokushin, they all dropped out. With hopes of a return, he called his master with the report.

"You called me to tell me you failed?" Shigeru Oyama's voice boomed through the phone and Kenny turned three shades of red. "You crazy? You figure out how to make it work, don't call me anymore and tell me you failed."

Sufficiently chastened, Kenny gritted his teeth and went to work. Eventually, he cobbled together enough students to make a living, and grew to enjoy teaching after seeing the influence Kyokushin had on his students' lives. Then in 1999, his son and greatest student was born.

Christian had barely started walking when he followed his dad out to the dojo next to their house.

"As a kid, I would just copy or try to imitate him, cause you know, I was trying to be like him," Christian said. "After the first formal training session, he said I made it okay, and I've been going ever since."

At first, Kyokushin karate was just something fun and cool for Christian to do. As he got older, though, his talent started to shine through. At a showcase when he was seven, another sensei approached Kenny and told him he thought he should enroll his son in a tournament scheduled for a few months later.

Kenny wasn't ready to subject his son to Kyokushin's viciousness right away. He bore the sole responsibility of preparing Christian for the physicality of the sport, which entails learning how to endure punches to the torso, kicks to the legs that feel like someone's whacking away with a Louisville slugger and regular blows to the head.

But Christian wanted to do it, and in the end, their shared love for the sport won out. Kenny turned down the upcoming tournament and trained Christian for a year and a half to be on the safe side. Then when Christian was eight, he entered him into a tournament.

"I had complete confidence in his abilities based on the training I gave him," Kenny said. "He was ready, trust me. He was totally ready."

While Kenny knew his son's capabilities, Christian snuck up on the rest of the Kyokushin world. The reputation of American fighters, even in tournaments hosted in the U.S., is less than stellar, and Christian's first opponents bulldozed forward thinking they could overwhelm their foreign opponent. He won his first two matches, including one against the son of a Japanese arm-wrestling champion. Though the boy hit Christian with a move Kenny had only seen adults do, Christian landed a knockdown hit at the buzzer to win.

When he came back and won the same tournament the following year, his star was launched. In 2011 at the International Kyokushin Championships, Christian won the Fighting Spirit Award — an honor previously reserved for adults — after beating a larger competitor from Kazakhstan.

In 2012 at the same tournament, Christian battled an opponent from Bulgaria who was the European champion. Youth bouts only go to one overtime, after which a decision has to be made. When Christian and his oppo-

nent battled to a dead even through the extra period, officials made an unprecedented decision to add a second overtime.

"Today, both of them are men," said Kenny recounting the fight between the two 12-year-olds. "Call another extension."

Christian ended up winning the match and the championship in his age group, and when the time came to present the Fighting Spirit Award, Kenny thought his son was more deserving of it that year than before — even though the tournament traditionally never awarded the same person more than once. But yet again, Christian took home the award for a competitive fire far beyond his years.

"I've never been more proud of you in my life," Kenny told him.

Practitioners of Kyokushin love to trumpet the practicality of the style as compared to other martial arts styles. Mas Oyama designed it to be effective in a street fight situation, which is why while Kyokushin youth tournaments are separated into different divisions by age, there's no weight or rank classification. One never knew who their opponent in the street would be and Mas Oyama wanted his fighters to be ready for anything.

"A Kyokushin guy has to stand there with his guts and take on that 150-pound difference, if that's what's called for," Kenny said.

That meant Christian regularly overcame a size disadvantage in his bouts, making his success even more remarkable. But it also capped his potential. To compete further, Christian will have to fight in the adult division, spanning everyone from 18 to 35.

According to Shihan Katsuhito Gorai, the U.S. branch chief for the International Kyokushin Organization and one of Christian's mentors, it wouldn't be impossible for Christian to compete as an adult. He would have to over-

haul his technique, though, to focus on speed. And at the top level, his size and training disadvantages would be magnified.

"Extra weight with that power is very dangerous for a smaller man," Kenny said. "The reality of the situation is that most of our little guys get the hell beat out of them."

As it stands now, Christian and his family don't have any further plans to compete. He's a year away from college and is hoping to attend N.C. State for business. He also plays guitar and wants to explore what could happen in the arena of music if he gave it the same dedication he gave Kyokushin.

"(I'm) always training to progress," he said. "Even if there's nothing else, if there's no other goal, training to get better."

That doesn't mean he's done with Kyokushin karate, though. He plans on teaching at some point and wants to earn his black belt. If he can find strong enough training, either in the U.S. or abroad, competitive fighting is still an option. Kyokushin karate is growing and will be an event at the 2020 Olympics in Tokyo.

"He has a lot of opportunities not just staying there," Gorai said. "I hope he's going to venture himself not just to New York, but to European championships and elsewhere. Not just for karate, but as a human being. He should be exposed to more worldwide competition so he can grow as a human being."

Despite all of Christian's accomplishments and the odds he defeated, when Gorai is asked about his mentee's legacy, he laughs.

"He's just started, no legacy," he said. "He can make a legacy maybe ten years later."

For now, Christian's only legacy is his future. Patience. Determination. Endurance. *Osu.*

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