

## Japanese active in teaching kendo in Italy

Jitsuro Kihara

ROME — Kendo, or Japanese fencing, is becoming popular among Italians thanks to an eight-year-long effort by a Japanese who teaches the martial art at a school on the northern outskirts of Milan.

Masafumi Katsukawa, 42, from Takarazuka in western Hyogo Prefecture, teaches kendo to about 20 Italians twice a week in a training hall in a primary school gym surrounded by lawns in Monza.

After finishing graduate school in Kyoto, Katsukawa, a fourth-dan holder, came to Milan to study postmodern design at the Milan Institute of Technology in 1984.

Upon graduation from the institute, he first found a job at a design office and is now working for an illumination company to develop designs.

When he opened the kendo school eight years ago, neighbors, surprised at the shouts coming from training, called the police and officers rushed to the gym, Katsukawa recalls.

At that time, kendo was not known to Italians, but now kendo enthusiasts number about 1,000 — a mini-boom, especially in Milan and in Sicily. A nationwide kendo federation also exists.

Especially enthusiastic at his school are people in their 20s and 30s.

There is even a man who drives 150 kilometers from Parma to the school every week.

"Italy is now gripped with an Oriental boom. Kendo is a martial art, rather than a sport, and there are many people who come to my school, attracted by something spiritual from the old days," he says.

A 35-year-old Italian says, "I don't mind whether it is Japanese or Western. There is only one spirit. The training of the spirit is what I'm attracted to."

Practitioners are required to adopt a proper sitting position and meditate before and after training.

The Italian students, wearing "hakama" (long, pleated skirt worn over a kimono) and clad in "dogi" (a plastron), sit erect with their legs folded underneath for meditation.

Silence dominates, and you feel as if you are at a training school in Japan — a bracing atmosphere. After meditation ends, the Italians put on "men" masks and fight against Katsumata with bamboo swords. The training lasts for 90 minutes.

Katsumata, married to an Italian and father of a son and two daughters, says, "I would like to help Italians understand what the martial art spirit is."

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