Kancho Gerard

Avi Nardia

Sensei on the road

Kancho Gerard Gordeau
9th Dan — The Greatest of All Times
Chief Instructor, International Budokai

"Simplicity is the ultimate sophistication."
— Leonardo da Vinci

A Teacher Like No Other

There are fighters, and then there are masters. There are instructors, and then there are visionaries. And then, standing apart from all of them, there is Kancho Gerard Gordeau — a man whose very presence in a room shifts the atmosphere, whose words carry the quiet authority of someone who has not merely studied the martial arts but has lived them, bled for them, and transcended them.

Sharing a training camp with Kancho Gordeau in Slovenia was among the most inspiring and transformative experiences one can have as a martial artist. What strikes you immediately is not the legend that precedes him — though that legend is formidable — but the humility with which he shares his knowledge. He is a teacher who speaks in simple words, yet those simple words carry the kind of wisdom that echoes in your mind long after the training hall has gone dark. He teaches with clarity, with purpose, and with a depth of understanding that only a lifetime devoted to the martial way can produce.

It is perhaps Leonardo da Vinci — that supreme genius of the human spirit — who most perfectly articulated the philosophy that Kancho Gordeau embodies in every movement, every lesson, every moment on the mat: "Simplicity is the ultimate sophistication." Anyone who has trained under Kancho Gordeau's guidance will immediately recognise the truth of this. His techniques are stripped of all that is unnecessary, refined to their essential nature, and executed with an economy of motion that speaks of mastery earned over decades.

"I have never regretted anything in my life. I do not care. We cannot change what is."
— Kancho Gerard Gordeau, 9th Dan

Gordeau

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These are not the words of a man who has led a comfortable life. They are the words of a man who has faced adversity since childhood, who has stood in harm's way more times than can be counted, and who has emerged from every trial not merely intact, but forged. Kancho Gordeau does not speak of regret because he understands something that takes most people a lifetime to learn: that every experience, however painful, however controversial, is a thread in the tapestry of who we become. He has worn his life with the same unflinching directness with which he has always fought — honestly, without apology, and without pretence.

To any martial artist who has not yet had the privilege of training with Kancho Gordeau — whether you are a seasoned competitor, a member of special forces, a practitioner with decades of study behind you, or simply someone beginning their journey — this is not a suggestion but a calling: seek him out. Attend a seminar. Stand before this man and train. Whatever you believe you know about combat, about discipline, about the martial arts, it will be broadened, deepened, and fundamentally changed.

Gordeau

Origins: Forged by Fire

Gerard Gordeau was born on the 30th of March, 1955, in The Hague, The Netherlands, the one of six children: 3 sisters and 2 brothers. His upbringing was one that would break lesser spirits. When Gordeau was just eleven years old, his father — a Jewish man of French heritage, a man whose own father had been shot at the Amersfoort concentration camp for his role in the Dutch resistance — passed away. The family's loss was not only emotional but immediate and practical: young Gerard was compelled to leave school and seek work to help keep his brothers fed. There would be no comfortable adolescence, no sheltered pathway into adulthood. From an early age, Gerard Gordeau was required to be harder, faster, and more resourceful than those around him.

It was the streets of The Hague — districts marked by genuine danger — that first forged the instincts that would later make Gordeau one of the most feared fighters on earth. He has spoken candidly of living under constant threat during those years, working as a bouncer and bodyguard for eight years in an environment where physical confrontation was not theoretical but daily. These experiences did not brutalise him; they sharpened him. They gave him something no dojo alone could provide: the unbreakable calmness of a man who has known real fear, and mastered it.

His martial arts journey began in 1970 with Judo. Two years later, at the age of sixteen, an Indonesian friend introduced him to Kyokushin Karate, and the direction of his life was set. He trained under Harry Couzjin at Dojo Kokoro, and there is a story from those early days that tells you everything about the kind of man Gerard Gordeau is: having challenged an unassuming Japanese training partner and been defeated twice, Gordeau did not make excuses or walk away. He trained. He studied. He persevered. After a year of dedicated work, he faced that same partner again — and this time, he won. That story is Gordeau in miniature: the refusal to accept limitation, the willingness to be humbled, and the iron determination to grow.

A Champion Across Disciplines

What sets Kancho Gordeau apart from virtually every other fighter of his era — or any era — is the sheer breadth and depth of his competitive achievements. In a world where most champions excel in a single discipline, Gordeau became a champion in multiple arts, across multiple continents, under multiple rule sets. He did not merely dabble; he dominated.

From 1978 to 1985, he held the Dutch Karate Championship title without interruption — eight consecutive years as the finest Kyokushin competitor his nation could produce. He represented the Netherlands at the World Open Karate Tournament in Tokyo in 1979, alongside his brothers Al and Nico, and was part of the Dutch team that claimed the Karate Team Championship title. He returned to compete at the World Open Tournaments in 1983 and 1987, each time measuring himself against the finest fighters the global Kyokushin community could offer.

In Savate — the elegant, demanding French discipline of kickboxing — Gordeau became a European Heavyweight Champion in 1988, a title he held for three years. In April 1991, he became European Savate Champion at a tournament in Toulouse, and just weeks later, in Paris on the 25th of May, he ascended to the summit of the sport: World Heavyweight Savate Champion. He successfully defended his title the following year. His Savate Silver Glove at the 3rd Dan level stands as a mark of technical excellence in a system that demands not just power but precision and artistry.

In 1993, he added the Thai Boxing championship in Thailand to his collection, competing at Ramadajin and prevailing in a discipline that demands the highest levels of conditioning and toughness. The following year, 1994, he claimed the Seidokaikan Karate World Championship. By any measure — by any standard of competitive excellence in the striking arts — Kancho Gordeau's record is extraordinary. It is the record of a man who truly tested himself against the world, repeatedly, across codes and continents, and who consistently emerged victorious.

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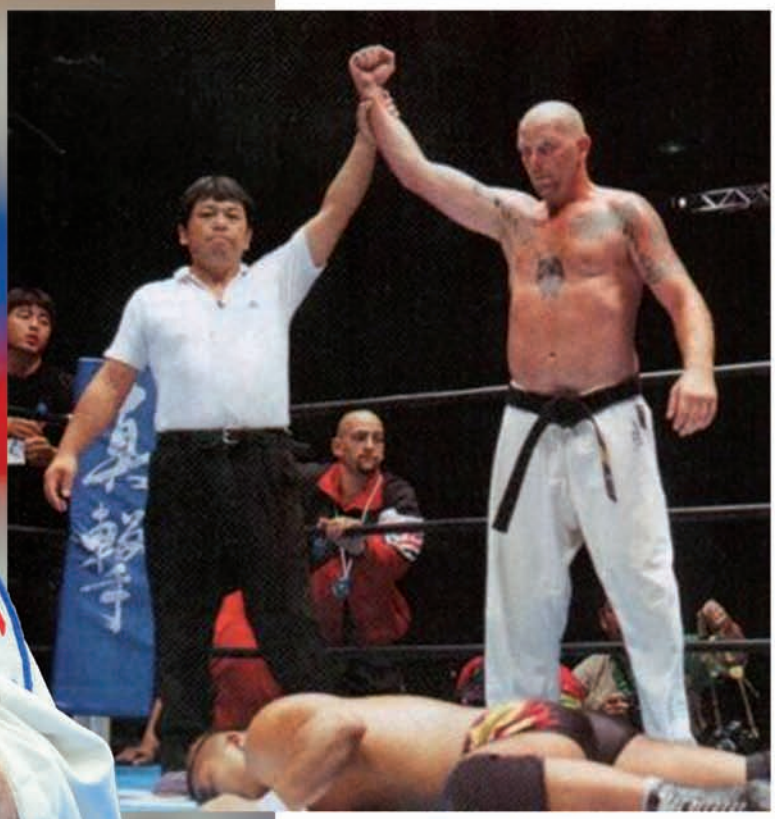
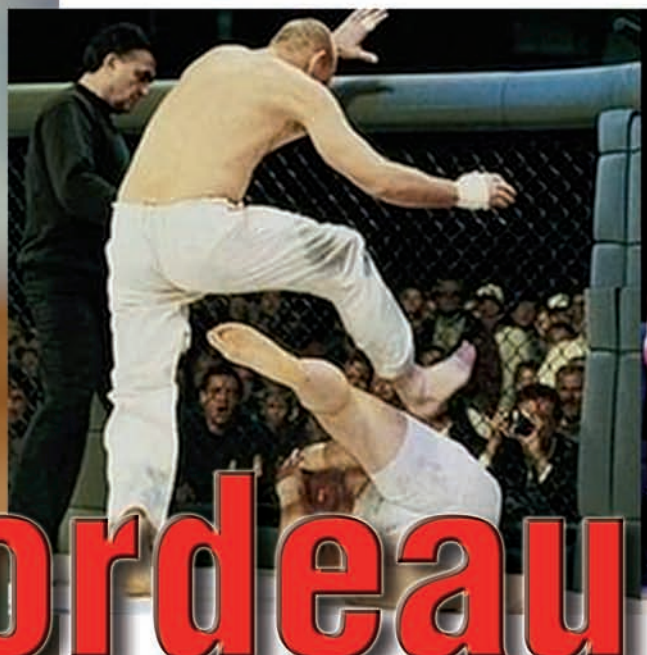


UFC 1: The Night History Was Made

On the 12th of November, 1993, at the McNichols Sports Arena in Denver, Colorado, a new chapter in combat sports history was written. The inaugural Ultimate Fighting Championship brought together fighters from different martial disciplines in an unprecedented no-holds-barred tournament. The organisers had approached several high-level Dutch fighters, among them kickboxing legend Ernesto Hoost, but Gordeau alone was willing to step into the unknown.

The very first fight in UFC history was Gerard Gordeau against 400-pound sumo wrestler Teila Tuli. The contrast was stark: a lean, technical European striker against a colossal Pacific Islander trained in an ancient art of mass and momentum. It lasted twenty-six seconds. When Tuli launched forward with the explosive charge of his discipline, Gordeau — calm as ever, his nickname "The Undertaker from Hell" suddenly comprehensible to a worldwide television audience — stepped aside, allowing the sumo to crash against the cage wall, and delivered a right roundhouse kick to Tuli's face that ended matters decisively. Three of Tuli's teeth were knocked loose; two of them became embedded in Gordeau's foot.

What followed exemplifies something essential about Kancho Gordeau. A doctor attended to his foot, determining that attempting to remove the teeth would risk infection. They taped it. Gordeau had also broken his hand delivering the follow-up uppercut that cut Tuli's eye. He went into his next fight — against heavyweight kickboxing champion Kevin Rosier, who outweighed him by nearly a hundred pounds — with two of his opponent's teeth in his foot and a fractured hand, which by the semifinal had swollen visibly. He won that fight with complete authority, driving Rosier to the fence with leg kicks and jabs before finishing him with a stomp.



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In the final, he faced Brazilian Jiu-Jitsu practitioner Royce Gracie — a man whose grappling artistry was entirely new to the world's striking champions. Gordeau, fighting injured and exhausted, fell to Gracie's rear naked choke in a contest that would reshape the understanding of combat sports globally. He finished the tournament as runner-up, the first man to win a UFC fight, and the first to reveal, before a worldwide audience, what a lifetime of devoted martial arts study produces under genuine pressure: composure.

With his tournament winnings, Gordeau purchased a Harley-Davidson motorcycle — a characteristically free-spirited gesture — and, in a mark of the true martial artist, he immediately began studying Brazilian Jiu-Jitsu. To Gordeau, the loss to Gracie was not a defeat to be mourned; it was a lesson to be learned. In 2012, Royce Gracie visited Dojo Honbu Kamakura. It was the first time the two men had spoken in twenty years. "No hard feelings," said Gordeau. Of course there were not.

The Dojo, the Brotherhood, and the Legacy of Teaching

In 1981, Gerard, Al, and Nico Gordeau opened Dojo Honbu Kamakura in The Hague, teaching Kyokushin Karate. Over the decades, the dojo evolved into something remarkable: a crucible where Kyokushin Karate, Thai Boxing, Boxing, Wrestling, and Brazilian Jiu-Jitsu were taught together under one roof by men who had tested each of those arts at the highest competitive levels. The dojo became world-famous, drawing students from across the globe, producing champions, and serving as a testament to Gordeau's conviction that true martial understanding requires breadth as well as depth.

Among those who have trained under Gordeau's guidance are Dutch K-1 fighter Mourad Bouzidi, Romanian champion Daniel Ghiță, Cem Senol of Dojo Osaka Netherlands, and Robert Pepels — founder of the Ashigaru Ryu style and co-director of Gordeau's International Karate Organisation. His influence extends far beyond the walls of his own dojo, rippling outward through the students of his students, through seminars conducted across the world, through the lives transformed by an encounter with his teaching.

In 2010, at the age of fifty-five, Gordeau formally retired from competition. His record speaks for itself: eight years as Dutch Kyokushin Champion; European and World Savate Champion; Thai Boxing Champion; Seidokaikan World Champion; pioneer of the UFC. But it is in the teaching hall, not the competition arena, where his greatest contribution to the martial arts is now being written. Today, as Chief Instructor of International Budokai, he travels the world conducting seminars and training camps, giving to the next generation what he gave to the first televised fight audience in UFC history: the sight of true mastery in motion.

Rank and Credentials

Kancho Gordeau holds the following ranks, each earned through decades of study and tested in competition at the highest levels:

9th Dan — Kyokushin Karate | Chief Instructor, International Budokai
7th Dan — Seibudokai Karate
4th Dan — Oyama Karate
3rd Silver Glove — Savate

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The Man and the Philosophy

Those who know Kancho Gordeau only through the highlight reel of his competitive career — the thunderous kick that opened UFC 1, the fearsome nickname, the complex controversies of a warrior who fought at a time before the rules of modern MMA had been written — know only a fraction of the man. The figure who stands before his students today is one of profound complexity: a man of remarkable warmth who has made peace with the totality of his journey; a philosopher whose insights cut to the heart of what the martial arts are for.

Da Vinci wrote: “I have been impressed with the urgency of doing. Knowing is not enough; we must apply. Being willing is not enough; we must do.” Kancho Gordeau has lived this principle completely. He has not merely studied the martial arts — he has applied them, at the highest level, against the finest opponents the world could offer. He has not merely been willing to test himself — he has done so, repeatedly, with broken bones and borrowed time, on stages both grand and intimate. He went out and happened to things. And now, in the fullness of his experience, he shares what he has learned.

The training camp in Slovenia offered a glimpse of this in its purest form. Here was a man who could claim, with complete justification, to have been one of the finest all-around fighters the world has ever produced — and what he brought to the mat was not ego, not nostalgia, not performance, but service. He taught. He corrected. He demonstrated with the patient precision of someone who understands that the transmission of true knowledge is as noble a pursuit as the acquisition of it.

Art is never finished, only abandoned, wrote da Vinci. Kancho Gordeau has never abandoned his art. He has refined it, expanded it, and — most generously — shared it. The dojo he built with his brothers in The Hague stands today as a monument not merely to competitive success but to the martial life fully lived. The students he has produced carry something of his understanding into their own schools, their own competitions, their own lives. This is the truest measure of a great teacher: not the trophies, but the transformation.

The Greatest of All Times

The title of GOAT — Greatest of All Times — is often applied carelessly. In the martial arts world, it is usually reserved for those who achieved dominance within a single era, a single organisation, a single set of rules. By that narrow standard, many could claim it. But by the standard that matters — breadth of mastery, depth of understanding, longevity of excellence, and the quality of what is passed on to those who follow — there are very few individuals who genuinely deserve the designation.

Kancho Gerard Gordeau, 9th Dan, is one of them. He earned his place in history not in a single moment but across fifty years of relentless dedication to the martial way: as a champion of Kyokushin Karate, Savate, Thai Boxing, and Seidokaikan; as the man who threw the first punch and the first kick in UFC history; as the founder and chief instructor of a dojo that became world-famous; as a teacher who has shaped martial artists across continents and generations.

To train with him — even once, even for a single afternoon at a seminar — is to understand something about the martial arts that cannot be found in books or videos or the accounts of others. It must be experienced directly. And those who experience it carry it with them for the rest of their lives.

“When once you have tasted flight, you will forever walk the earth with your eyes turned skyward, for there you have been, and there you will always long to return.”
— Leonardo da Vinci

This is the gift of Kancho Gerard Gordeau.
He opens the sky.
https://gerardgordeau.weebly.com/

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