

# A Mature Student's Journey in TKD.

Mrs Florinda Petterson

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## Why TKD?

I must admit, TKD was not the first thought that crossed my mind when I started looking around for something to do for a personal interest.

I had crossed "the big four-0" threshold; my children were becoming increasingly independent, and my thoughts were that soon they would not need me around so much. So - find something that I can do just for myself. I had considered joining some dance clubs, to get fit and have some fun while at it. May be getting back to social badminton would not go too badly astray. Or why not take up tennis?

During a session of house cleaning, I came across an old TKD dobok that I had kept since the early 70s. That was the time when, I now discover, TKD was vigourously promoted in Malaysia. My company had subsidised our social club to pay for TKD lessons at the suggestion of one of our salemen who was a 1st Dan Black Belt. Unfortunately, when the Korean Instructor left, after a year, there was no one to take his place, and my dobok got pushed to the back drawers, unworn for about 20 years.

On seeing my old dobok, I decided to get back to TKD, my rationale being: I could try to get fit and learn self defence and the same time.

## First Day

On a Monday night in March 1996, I put a diffident foot across the door of the Pakuranga Dojang. There was quite a big group of people training that night, with an impressive number of people in black belts. Looking around, I noticed four others not in dobok, and I heaved a big sigh of relief as I deduced that they were new students like me, although they were all very much younger than myself. I kept very close to them as the training session progressed into a confusing jumble of blurs. Everything seemed so confusing, and nothing seemed to stick in my memory bank. I began to doubt my sensibilities as my co-ordination went haywire, my limbs refused to co-operate, my lungs threatened to burst and my muscles decided to solidify. Oh boy, what on earth was I doing here?!

## Physical State

Not having done any physical training for about twenty years, even a young body would need quite a bit of time to acquire some elasticity. When the body had reached the mature age of over forty years without any physical training, the body had settled into a static state that seemed reluctant to unravell.

Characteristic beauty and grace when doing Chon Ji? Excuse me? What there was, was a robotic figure, with my face, going through movements that was supposed to be Dan Gun! "Er...is she alive? Why is she not breathing?"

I looked at Amanda, in her early twenties, pirouetting gracefully as she did the twisting kicks and side piercing kicks. There was Anthea, in her teens, going from vertical torso into the splits effortlessly; not to forget Matthew, of tertiary student age, reaching such heights doing the flying side kick. Need I mention Haydn and his jumping reverse turning kicks? I needed to achieve my stationery reverse turning kick yet, never mind the jumping!

Ah Bob, you and I would have protesting muscles and limbs the day after the night of attempting the various jumping techniques. "Tuck your non kicking leg when you do a jumping kick," said Haydn. "Er...like this?" "Try again....", "..again...", "...again...". Oh boy!!

"Turn your body at the apex of your jump," said Matt Breen one time, at one of the special techniques sessions he conducted. Trouble was, my feet were already back on the floor by the time my body turn was complete, because at the apex of my jump my feet were only a foot off the floor. "Middle side piercing kick" was the call from Mr Bhana, but I only managed to kick the garden gnome. I wonder why the gravitational pull got stronger as the years piled up.

## Psychological State

Did you get the feeling that I had already decided that gravity was going against me because of my age? It was an intimidating wall that sprang up in front of me when I saw those black belts jumping, kicking, sparring, doing patterns facing AC or BD, or some such seemingly obscure directions. Would I ever really be able to reach that stage? There were TKD members I had come across who were of mature years and I had a lift of spirit, thinking " Aha, these are people in the same boat as me," only to discover that most of them were senior ranking members who had had years of training under their belts, since they started at the age when they still had the flexibility of mind and body. What were the chances of me achieving what they had achieved when I had a very late start? Such was the state I was in when faced with the awareness that I had my limits.

With age came caution, the ability to see ahead and anticipate danger or consequences of certain actions. A mature person would be able to realise that the body was not so flexible any more and could therefore see ahead and anticipate that doing a turning kick would stretch the muscles in such a way as to cause pain and discomfort. Therefore there might be a certain element of holding back when learning new techniques, for fear of ache, pains or injury. As a result, a mature student might take a longer period of time to overcome caution and fear when learning new things. A younger person might not see further than the present, so they put their all into what they were doing at the present and so get to do it right faster.

As an example, we were taught to do a free fall from a height one time. There were one metre thick mats under us to cushion our fall, so we would not have been hurt. Well, the young ones went to it fearlessly, relaxed and without reticence. This mature student recognised the unnaturalness of falling from a height, inspite of all the thick padding of mats, and she could not

relax, and thus suffer sore muscles in the ensuing days because of all the tenseness when attempting the free fall.

When a mature student faced a setback, it would take a longer period of time to get back on track because the incident causing the setback would instill further caution and element of holding back. Two instances in my training history illustrated this point.

After a certain time since starting TKD training, I had managed to coax myself to sparr with a little less reticence, and did attempt some jumping techniques. However, at the end of my second year of training, during the last day of class, I fell from a height of about six feet, in a situation where I had no control over breaking the fall, flat on my face, breaking a front tooth. Well, after that incident, I have not been able to overcome the fear of being airborne, and consequently, do less jumping techniques when sparring.

Another instance was when I dislocated my thumb while blocking a front kick, the consequence of which is my reluctance to go hard out because of fear of another injury.

It would take a long while to overcome these setbacks, and this would hamper progress and improvement. I daresay a younger student would jump right back into things with little concern about a repetition of injury-causing actions.

## Overcoming Barriers

How have I overcome those barriers, both the physical and psychological? Well frankly, I won't say that they have been overcome, but that I am in the process of trying to overcome them.

Psychologically, it has not been easy, because sometimes it is hard to carry on when you feel inadequate. However, the encouragement and patience I received from the seniors and instructors enabled me to keep trying. I can remember very clearly the end-of-the-year club function in the first year of my training. I was awarded a certificate for "Perseverance" by our then Head Instructor, Mr Travis. I can tell you, that was a tremendous booster that encouraged me not to quit.

So, by persevering, there have been some improvement in the physical aspect of training - not perfect, but not too shabby either. By attending seminars and camps, I gleaned useful tips that helped to make the execution of various techniques more manageable.

## Where I Am At Now

When I restarted TKD, I had completely forgotten the lessons from over 20 years ago. Everything was as new: I had no idea how to punch, block, kick, thrust and so forth. Talk about unconscious(ly) unskilled! Well now I am very conscious about how much I am unskilled, and how much (or little) skill I have managed to achieve.

I know now what I am supposed to do when doing a twisting kick, for example, even though the old body still refuses to obey the brain's commands. I recognise that doing a combination of turning, back and reverse hook kicks would look impressive during sparring, even though I lack

the speed to execute the moves. I also realise that I may not be able to jump high to do a jumping kick, but I could instead aim to do the correct technique at a lower height.

Where I am at right now is trying to link that realisation and recognition with the ideal TKD outcome. That realisation and recognition act as a spur to push me forward.

### Where To From Here?

It would not be easy to overcome these barriers. We mature students could not help but think ahead regarding actions and their consequences. So how to progress and improve? I have no pat answers. In my case, I suppose a stern talking-to to myself might help. It was a long road I travelled to reach this stage, and it would be a pity to let setbacks get the better of me, so why not soldier on and persevere? Somewhere along the line tenacity has to pay off, right? I mean "Perseverance" is one of our TKD tenets, so why not practise it?

Therefore, with "Perseverance" in mind, I am setting my sights for that third level in the TKD learning journey - that is try to be at least consciously skilled. That "unconsciously skilled" level seems just a bit too far away right now.