

Improving ITFNZ for Juniors in Taekwon-Do

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Introduction

Having spent fourteen years as a Junior, I have witnessed the growth and development of the International Taekwon-Do Foundation of New Zealand (ITFNZ) in terms of what it now has to offer its Junior members, for example, the opportunity to compete at Junior World Championships. I feel the topic of Juniors is one I am able and interested in writing about, as Taekwon-Do has been such a big part of my life and as a new instructor and former Junior World Championships assistant coach, it is something I feel passionate about.

I would like to share some of my own experiences as a former Junior and also from the perspective of a new instructor, as well as someone who has been with the organisation for eighteen years, in order to highlight some important aspects. These include some of the reasons why young people are interested in Taekwon-Do, followed by some of the factors contributing to whether they decide to stay or leave the organisation and Taekwon-Do. In regards to this, I would like to offer some suggestions of how it may be possible to help retain more Juniors. Lastly, I would like to offer some more general suggestions as to some aspects of ITFNZ and training, which I believe are important not only to retain juniors and attract more members, but to improve the standard of Taekwon-Do for those members, including their demonstration of the tenets, for example courtesy.

Role Models and Goal Setting

My first memory of Taekwon-Do was of walking into a hall with my parents at five years of age. I was a relatively young to be starting a martial art. There were 77 new people in the class that night, of which eventually 15 graded to 1st Dan, two graded to 2nd Dan and one to 3rd Dan. It was not an easy thing for me going through the grades as a child. The drop off rate was huge in the teenage years. Now why is that, you might ask? The goal for many people when they start training is to obtain their 1st Degree Black Belt. That is a good goal to have, but most black belts will tell you that they feel as though they are still a beginner at 1st Dan. If I think of what I knew as a 1st Dan to what I know now, there is no comparison. For me 1st Dan was a goal, but only a short term one. I saw a young man part of the 1994 World Championships team who amazed me. I had never seen anyone move like that. He had stripes down his arms and legs. Now for a young kid I didn't understand why he had the stripes, but all I thought was that if that's what stripes on your dobok do, then I want them. His name was Mr Mark Rounthwait, son of recently promoted Master Rocky Rounthwait. Later on down the track, I was lucky enough to be a part of a training squad taken by Mr Mark Rounthwaite. He taught me a lot about patterns and sparring. Not only that, but one of my instructors, Mr Steve McQuillan, was one of Mr Rounthwait's top students and he brought a wealth of knowledge to my Taekwon-Do career.

Between these two people, Mr Mark Rounthwaite and Mr Steve McQuillan, I managed to stick with Taekwon-Do. By saying this, I would like to highlight how important it is to have role models

within the organisation, which juniors can look up to and aspire to be like. In addition, I feel that goal setting is very important, and needs to be an ongoing process where it could include attaining 1st Degree Black Belt, but also needs to look beyond this. Juniors may need help learning how to set goals and how to adjust and progress with their goals as they move through the grades.

Factors Contributing to Staying With or Leaving ITFNZ

When juniors see what they could have in other sports, they are naturally attracted. I personally have played several other sports at a representative level, for example, athletics, rugby union, touch rugby, rugby league and soccer. The reason I chose to stay with Taekwon-Do is because it is a martial art, not just a sport and offers something which other sports do not. For example, it offers a family environment, different options within competition, including several individual and team event and similarly, diverse elements in training. The friends I have made in Taekwon-Do are the best and I guarantee I will carry those friendships with me throughout the rest of my life. For this reason, these aspects of Taekwon-Do as a martial art should be encouraged.

On the other hand, I feel Taekwon-Do could learn something from other sports that are competing with our organisation in terms of retaining members. In rugby for example, they really look after their top players. They realise that people look up to the likes of Ritchie McCaw, Tane Umanga and Dan Carter, so they show case them as role model. ITFNZ is a non-profit organisation, and therefore doesn't have the same funds Rugby Union has, but there could be similar potential benefits if some of that money was spent supporting its top athletes, as rugby does. If someone like Mark Rounthwaite could keep people training and amaze spectators, in my opinion, by looking after our top students, we could grow further as an organisation.

There are many reasons why juniors leave ITFNZ, one example as mentioned previously; it is competing against other sports, such as rugby, cricket, golf and tennis, just to mention a few. A difference with these sports is that they offer something that Taekwon-Do as yet, for the most part, does not. If you are good enough, you can earn a good living, for example by playing rugby. New Zealand is a very small country and known internationally as a rugby mad nation. At times it is upsetting that so much money is being put into these sports, while successful minority sports are largely ignored. The New Zealand Female Junior Team was the best overall team at the last two Junior World Championships, 2004 in Italy and 2006 in Honduras, yet they would be lucky to get half of their trip paid for.

Junior Development Squad Training

I have competed in a lot of other martial arts, and I must say that ITFNZ are on the right track. Generally we are a step or two ahead of the rest, in our technique and in our presentation and organisation. I think an idea we could try, is an ongoing junior development squad. Students would not necessarily need to be black belts, but should have potential. The idea has been used before, in a camp situation for example, the Development Camps, but once every two years is too far apart. All you need to look at is the first Development Camp and see how many people who attended are still training. It needs to be a weekly training night, and the right kind of training. If you can imagine what it would be like if we helped these kids to set goals, and helped them to believe in themselves in order to achieve these on a weekly basis. No doubt the results would be

amazing. You have to give the youth of today something to look forward to, because nowadays there is always an easy option out.

There is another type of youth that you get in Taekwon-Do. Parents often view the martial arts as an activity which can be used to teach their children discipline, for example, children who have difficulties or problems at school or at home. The majority of these children, from my experience do not tend to last long in Taekwon-Do and those that do, I have seen turn into top competitors. Having started at a young age, and 18 years later, having recently started my own club, I have been asked a few times, why I have such high expectations of juniors. I will always be hardest on two types of people. Those that need discipline to achieve great things later in life, because if you take it easy on them, they will walk all over you and not appreciate and respect their martial art. The second are the people who I see talent in. These are the people I will work the hardest. They are not necessarily the best, but what I mean by talented is that they are generally the ones at training who are somewhere in the middle, or near the bottom of the class, who turn out to be the top students. I see so many times, natural athletes who come and go, but it's the person who has had to work hard, who is ready and warmed up at the start of training, stays that extra 15 minutes at training and curious to ask questions. It is with these that the future will be built on.

The Importance Of Courtesy

One thing I have always noticed about ITF NZ, is that it is always the same people running around and doing the organizing. When I was a junior we were delegated tasks, not asked. It was expected of you as a junior. A big thing I have noticed in our organisation today is a lack of courtesy. In training for this grading I attended a lot of other club trainings and realised that we have lost a lot of the firm discipline that used to exist. Although we have the correct uniform and our belt is tied accordingly, there is a lack of vocal discipline and courtesy. For example, students failing to respond with 'Yes Sir' after having been given a command. At my first club, Hobsonville Taekwon-Do, I was so scared of what might happen if I neglected to say 'Yes Sir', that I would scream this at the top of my lungs.

After recently attending Master McPhail's Club, I went back to my own club inspired by what I had seen to teach my students to be courteous, in the same manner. The students gave me feedback after class and many thought it had been a tough session. In my view, it was a normal class, but when the students failed to show the courtesy expected of a Taekwon-Do practitioner, they were made to do, for example, press-ups. Political correctness seems to have taken over and people seem to see Taekwon-Do as a commodity where lessons are bought, rather than as the martial art that it is. Another example is grading, where people think if they are able to pay for the grading and want to grade they are entitled to do so. As a whole, we are becoming a bigger organisation and we are doing well, but if we got a little bit tougher at a club level, we could improve the atmosphere in general of the organisation.

Even little things count, for example, if a new person attends club, it is courteous to introduce them and make them feel welcome. If a senior attends club, it is courteous to bow to them. These aspects should never be forgotten and are important for maintaining a high level within the organisation and with the juniors who will be the future.

Instructing – Club and Juniors

Earlier this year, I opened a club as co-instructor with Mr Carl Van Roon. It has not been an easy task, but one I am glad to have undertaken. Before this, I was an assistant instructor to Mr Steve McQuillan at both Takapuna and City Taekwon-Do Clubs. I used to think it wasn't that hard to teach and could do so whenever he asked me, but after getting this club up and running, I realise what a huge undertaking the role of instructor is. I am very lucky that I have a great partner in Carl van Roon. The amount of behind the scenes organising that goes on is unbelievable. Last year Carl and I had the idea of opening a club, for likeminded people, for example, with a particular focus on a high level of tournament preparation. This is not all we do, but it is an element we enjoy and are driven towards. We have had people turn up that have had different training needs and aspirations, and I feel it is a great thing that we were able to recommend them to another club down the road, which we knew would be a better fit for them. That is one of the great things about the diversity of Taekwon-Do and of ITFNZ.

For our club, a priority is to provide tournament opportunities and as much competitive exposure as possible, and this includes open tournaments. After nine months of having a club of my own, I am pleased to have endeavoured, throughout all the challenges. We made it, and to see the look on one of my student's faces when they achieve something they have wanted is in a way more satisfying than if I had achieved it myself. I guess it started with the Junior World Championships Team in 2004, when I attended a training session with recently promoted Master Willy van de Mortel. He asked if I would be interested in assisting him with trainings for the Junior World Championships Team, so of course I did. Training along side them and helping out from time to time, I began to think to myself that I would be interested in helping Juniors in an ongoing fashion, the same way that many people had helped me in the past. When it came time for the 2006 world championships team to go to Honduras, I was the first to put my name forward for the assistant coach position. After being accepted for this position, I went to work with the group from the Auckland North Area.

To see the improvement in those Juniors I consider to be a huge accomplishment for me, although they will tell you at times I got very frustrated with them. I sincerely believe I learnt more from them than they did from me and I feel I develop as a coach. Mr Van Roon and I decided it would be great to help the younger Taekwon-Do generation by offering them the opportunity to train at a club with the world championships style of training, which we wished we could have had when we were that age.

A great thing about ITFNZ is that we have so many instructors that have a huge range of specialties. One thing which we could work on as an organisation, is developing instruction for our instructors, for example, an instructors camp for a weekend, with a focus on discussion and sharing of ideas and areas of expertise. I know myself I would love to learn more about self defence and ground techniques, as I'm sure other instructors would like to learn more about sparring and special technique. I had a great arrangement with Mr Mark Banicevich. If I helped his club with sparring, he would help me with the technical aspects of my patterns. The more of this we can do, the more opportunity we have to grow as instructors.

Through increased international exposure, I feel people have become more knowledgeable and open minded, after having seen what the world stage has to offer. As instructors it is necessary for us to be aware of our own limitations and I have great respect for open minded people who

can acknowledge this and seek help in areas of weakness and in return offer their own time and expertise in their strengths. I realise I am very new to the area of being an instructor, but already I have ambitions to see my students open clubs of their own too one day.

Promoting Taekwon-Do

I watched a video before I wrote this, of when I was a peewee. How ITFNZ has grown and matured as an organisation was strikingly obvious in both technique and presentation. I believe a big part of this is related to how we present ourselves in public. From the ages of ten to seventeen I was a part of the Auckland Demonstration Team. This was a great way to promote ITFNZ to the general public. In the summer, if not every weekend, at least every second weekend, we were practising or giving demonstrations and I believe this helped ITFNZ a lot and people start remembering the name Taekwon-Do.

Over the last four or so years, demonstrations have been fewer and far between. I think this may have been because it was a lot for one person to organise. It would be great to have this back up and running. Because of the support we had in those days from ITFNZ, members did not mind giving up their time. Mr Mark Banicevich did a great job organising and running the demonstration team, which had a real family atmosphere. If we all put a little effort in, we could have this again. It is a lot of work, but if the responsibility were more spread out, it would definitely be a worthwhile endeavour.

When I was young I wanted to be a part of something big. For most young boys in New Zealand Rugby is the way to go, they have big games, huge crowds of people watching them. That is what I wanted, but I was too little, so I stuck with Taekwon-Do. With the Demonstration Team we got the chance to perform in front of a crowd of around twenty thousand people at Erickson Stadium. It was at the half time break of a rugby league game. Such a large number of people saw us perform and I'm sure there would have been beneficial outcomes from that. Now ITFNZ has moved onto another way of promoting itself, via television, I think this is the best idea yet. I have already had a couple of phone calls of students wanting to join after having seen it on television.

The way they have filmed what we do and made it an entertaining piece to watch will be of great benefit to ITFNZ in the long run. To achieve the future goal of ten thousand members by 2015, then the money spent on this type of promotion is well worth it. I really hope that it doesn't end there and that we will continue to have television time in the near and distant future. At the same time, we need to remember how we started and the Demonstration Team was a big part of that, so if possible, we should keep presenting Taekwon-Do from these two different angles.

Conclusion

I would like to thank ITFNZ for helping me through the good and the bad times. Without the support of everyone from the organisation, I know I would not be the person I am today. Also thank you to my family who have supported me my whole career and they also have made life long friends through ITFNZ. Having been involved with Taekwon-Do for 18 years now, ITFNZ is like my extended family and it is a very hard thing to be away from. I feel lucky to be able to say that I have been a part of Taekwon-Do for this many years and I hope there are many more to come. I have found that the more you do and are involved, the more you love being a part of it.

ITFNZ, through Taekwon-Do has created something for everyone, young and old, male and female. If I was to say anything about ITFNZ, it is an organisation which gives a complete martial art to its students. I think we are right up there with the world's best martial artists. It is an organisation I am proud to belong to. With hard work and dedication, which included looking after and offering the best sort of training to our junior members, who are our future, we will only get better.