

My Experience of the National Tournament 2003 in Dunedin

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The build up to the National Tournament started when Mr Jackson and I got together and discussed the idea of Coaching the 2003 Counties Manukau National Team. Together we came to the conclusion that it would be a great opportunity and experience for us both to take on.

Our first task was to be at the Regional Tournament on the 18th May 2003, held at the Franklin Sports Centre. Our goal there was to watch and take in all the competitors' talents and skills, and also to see how much interest there was from the students to go to the Nationals. From this we were able to see the starting of what made up an awesome National's team. At the end of the tournament we introduced ourselves to everyone and explained what our goals were (to take a winning team to Dunedin!!). We handed out information about the starting of trainings to all interested applicants.

The trainings started the following week on Thursday the 22nd May, at Papakura club; there was a good show of people for the first night, (a good start!). From there the trainings were held on Tuesday and Thursday nights as well as on Sunday mornings. The trainings at the beginning were mainly concentrated on fitness, before moving on to increasing technique and skills.

A couple of weeks in, the official team were chosen from the trials held on a Sunday. The team was announced, and unfortunately there were a couple that had to be turned down due to more than 2 people being in their division, But for the most it was good news. We now had a team of 38 members. Thinking back now, I think it looked quite daunting to try and take that many people all the way to Dunedin, but we didn't let that stop us. Now we had our 'team' we could zero in on just them work on them as a team.

Every training session there was a big emphasis on being a 'team' and encouraging the students to work as a team in most exercises. This was not too hard as the team members all mixed in great and became a close family. The atmosphere during the trainings was really positive from everyone and I think the parents watching enjoyed staying to see the team train together. Although the first couple of weeks of training were fairly hard on the 'not-so-fit' students, you could see it paying off as the students started getting fitter and faster!

Each training session usually consisted of; a fairly intensive warm up, lasting between 30-45 minutes. Moving onto Sparring drills and Pattern Techniques, which took up the last 1 ½ - 1 ½ hours. We tried as much to include some fun physical games, which I think the students loved the best. Everyone usually ended up laughing and having a lot of fun.

Getting closer to the Tournament date the trainings were taken a lot more serious and you could see the students improving, and trying to concentrate on every new skill that was being taught. You could feel everyone getting slightly more excited as the weeks went by getting closer to our departure date. A highlight training night would be the night that the team jacket arrived, as it is always a 'buzz' to actually put on the jackets and see the team as one. There was also a surprise

for the team as there were team beanies, scarves and gear bags for everyone. They all looked great in the uniform and ready to battle the cold of Dunedin.

Together with Mr. Jackson and his dedicated parents we thought it would be a really great idea to get a huge banner done to take down with us. Mr Jackson Senior was able to get a hold of a big sheet of red canvas for us to work with. We sat around together bouncing ideas between us. As we had already decided on a team name earlier, we wanted to include this on our banner. ('Redbacks' - we thought this was a good name as the spider matched our Counties Manukau colours and it was a vicious fared spider - just like our team was going to be!) We got the banner done working into the night (especially Mr Jackson Senior, but we won't go into that!) and it looked awesome! We wanted to present it to the team, and thought it to be a special occasion so Mr McPhail and Mrs Breen were invited to our training night to witness the 'unveiling'. Mr. McPhail spoke to the team and offered words of encouragement for our travels. The feeling I got was that Mr McPhail was impressed with our Team spirit and attitude going into the Nationals.

Our flight was booked for (early) Friday morning the 11th July. All team members meet at the departure check in gates. There was a sea of red and black, Counties Manukau team members and supporters all dressed alike. On the same flight as us, were the arch rival team members of Auckland North! There were a few jokes and comments made between teams, (seemed like the competition had already started!) Once all the luggage had been named and handed over, we all moved up to the departure lounge where families said their goodbyes and good lucks to their children, partners and friends.

The flight down was fine with no hic-ups. Once arrived, we had the mission of getting everyone's luggage sorted and out to the bus. This was the first step outside to the weather of Dunedin (the cold, cold, weather of Dunedin!). We had about a 40 minute bus ride to our accommodation, which I'm sure was on one of the steepest roads in New Zealand! Once inside and out of the cold we sorted out everyone's sleeping arrangements and allocated people to their dorm rooms to settle in to our 'home' for the weekend. It was a cosy backpacker's hostel with several dorm rooms leading off a main lounge and games room, with a fireplace and TV, felt very relaxing.

Friday was weigh in day for all teams, so we got the scales out to make sure everyone was going to be ok for their divisions. Unfortunately all was not ok for about 6 team members who had to loose up to 3kgs each before weigh in. The day ahead for these 6 people was not looking good. Mr Jackson took these team members aside to 'sweat' it off! while the rest of the team were able to go to the local mall for a big lunch! Once all back at the hostel team members were left to relax while the '6' others were put into a small room with the heaters on full blast and clothing up to 6 layers deep in efforts to get them to their correct weigh-in weight. We found out in the end that our scales were reading different to the official 'weigh-in' scales but when all team members were weighed in, everyone passed alright. That night everyone needed to get an early night sleep as there was going to be a big day ahead, but getting an excited team to get some sleep proved slightly difficult.

The next morning was an early wake-up to get everyone showered (uniforms ironed!), fed and ready for a full day of events ahead. Once together with bags ready we went to meet our bus. The tournament was held at the Dunedin Town hall, only about 2 minutes around the corner from

our hostel. We arrived fairly early and assembled outside the hall for group photos, as we were looking pretty sharp in our team tracksuits! We also possibly woke most of Dunedin up with our echo of team chants. Especially when Mr McPhail arrived, everyone wanted to impress! We continued our chants into the hall, just to let everyone there know that Counties Manukau had arrived.

Once all teams had arrived, it was time to form up and officially open the tournament with all the formalities. We bowed out and team members warmed up for their first event, patterns. Already we could see that we were off to good start with a large number of members making it through the first rounds, and moving onto the semis and finals. By the end of the morning we knew we must have been near the top with a lot of member taking out a place in their respective pattern divisions. The morning moved fairly quickly, with sparring getting underway straight afterwards. There was a lot to do, with making sure all team members were at the right place at the right time with the right gear. It was hard to try and be in several places at once with a lot of team members sparring at the same time, let alone my own division as well. This I think, is the time when I decided that maybe next time it might be better to not compete as well as coach - for the individual sparring anyway. As it was too hard to try and get myself prepared before my belts as well as looking after junior members of the team.

The atmosphere during the day was just awesome, I don't think there was many times where I couldn't hear our whole team cheering from upstairs for any team member that was competing at the time, everyone was so supportive and I felt proud to be apart of the team. As the day drew to an end, there were a lot of tired team members, we all had a really awesome first day and felt pretty confident on our stakes to take the 'Best Region' trophy.

We got everyone back onto the bus, and back to the hostel to get changed and ready to go to the awards dinner back at the Dunedin Town Hall. The dinner was great and I think the 6 that sweated it out the night before were making up for the loss!! The awards were announced and speeches were made. There was a cheer when it was announced that desert was being served. The night grew long and we decided it was time to take the team home for another needed nights sleep.

It was another early morning to get everything packed up and ready to leave the hostel with ALL gear. When arriving outside, it was noticed that the bus was parked at the bottom of the hill, and not outside the hostel. We found out why when we stepped onto the footpath to find it was pretty much a skating rink! This, to some, was a lot of fun, as we had to try to get our luggage from the hostel down the steep, icy road and too the bus at the bottom of the hill. Although all had fun sliding down the hill, I think (and there is video footage as evidence!) the adults had more fun than the juniors.

Day two of the tournament had started. It was straight into the sparing moving through the divisions quickly and onto the Black Belt events of individual Special, Power Breaks and Team Events. Although we didn't have enough male black belts to enter a team, the female team was a highlight event to watch, as our girls gave it all they had and put in some awesome efforts! Watching them take out team patterns, and then team sparring was another real 'buzz' for the whole team.

Everyone had a real great day and we were so proud of all the team's efforts in all of their divisions. I could tell that every team member gave everything their all, and it felt good to see them proud of their efforts too. It now came down to the awards ceremony, with Counties Manukau being called up time after time. Only 2 out of our 38 team members were unsuccessful in getting a medal, with most walking away with more than one. Once the individual event medals had been awarded it was down to the 'biggies'! Firstly was the 'Best Overall' belts, Counties Manukau took out 'Best Overall Yellow Belt' and 'Best Overall Black Belt', next was team events with our female team taking out the 'Female team' trophy. And then last, but most certainly not least was the 'Best Overall Region' trophy. We sat while they read out the points for each region, starting at the least points and working the way to the top... "In third place....." we sighed with relief not us yet, we held our breath... "In second place..." again not us... we all started cheering as we knew there was only one place left for our name! Everyone was so excited and happy... "...and in first place... Counties Manukau!"

Mr. Jackson, Mrs Olsen and I went up to claim the trophy, we held it high and proud, we owed it to our team. Standing up there with the trophy made me feel really proud of the team, but what was a better feeling was walking back through the arrival gates with the trophy's and medals and the seeing all the smiles of the proud parents, partners and friends to see their loved ones so happy with their individual achievements and the achievements of the team.

The experience I had in the build up and during the tournament was just awesome and look forward to entering the Counties Manukau Team this year.