

Taekwon-Do: The Sport vs The Art

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Taekwon-Do... to interpret it literally, "Tae" translates into smashing or breaking with the foot; "Kwon" means to destroy using the fist and, importantly "Do" means an art or way.

This means that Taekwon-Do is more than merely a form of self defence or a sport, it is also a way of thinking and a way of life. The founder, General Choi Hong Hi says "...it can be considered a part of one's daily life, just as are breathing and thinking." This is why Taekwon-Do is often called the "art" of self defence, it has philosophies, principles and purposes that are set out in the charter of Taekwon-Do and its own set code of morals, ethics and standards learnt through the student oath and the tenets. All serious practitioners, from white belt level, are taught these things inside the do-jang and endeavour to live by them throughout their everyday lives. General Choi believes that it is this mental conditioning and discipline combined with the physical aspects of Taekwon-Do that set it above other ordinary sports. He believes that this separates the true practitioners from the idealists and instills within them an ideal of 'noble, moral rearmament', therefore helping to bring about a happier and more peaceful society. After all: "The utmost purpose of Taekwon-Do is to eliminate fighting by discouraging the stronger's oppression of the weak... thus helping to build a better and more peaceful world".

Although a relatively young martial art, it is a well established organisation in New Zealand and throughout the rest of the world. Like all martial arts competition is encouraged amongst students at regional, national and ever increasingly at an international level. Taekwon-do tournaments, as well as being contests of skill and power, are also useful for forging lasting friendships and bonds within the brotherhood of Taekwon-Do and for exchanging training techniques and methods. As Taekwon-Do in New Zealand is slowly becoming a larger and stronger organisation, it is also becoming more competitive; recognition and ranking at an international level is an achievable goal that competitors are being encouraged to strive for. New Zealand now sends competitive teams to every junior and senior world championships as well as various other international events. The last world champs was the biggest achievement to date for ITF NZ as the New Zealand team secured a ranking of Third best country overall. But, has this success come at a price? Are the Taekwon-Do students that compete at this level compromising the essential moral culture of Taekwon-Do in order to attain the ultimate sporting accolades or are they further enhancing the Taekwon-Do lifestyle and helping Taekwon-Do in New Zealand to grow and expand? In many other martial arts the competitive, sporting facet is frowned upon because they believe that it contradicts the beliefs of the art and turns it more into a sport rather than a lifestyle. Is this so with Taekwon-Do in New Zealand?

As Taekwon-do is a minority sport in New Zealand, it has previously been difficult for students within ITF NZ to make an impression amongst competitors from countries where it is a much more popular sport. For example, New Zealand's first world champs tournament in Canada, emphasised our inexperience and lack of international exposure. This was emphasised when the New Zealanders were compared to teams such as the North Korean team, where Taekwon-Do is the national sport or the Argentinian and Polish teams who have regular exposure to international

tournaments throughout Europe all year round. However since then New Zealand has learnt and grown and improved, we have begun to make an impression on the rest of the world and are now recognised as a competitive country to be wary of. The recent successes at both the last junior world champs in Puerto Rico and the senior world champs in Poland have obviously paid off, having a positive effect for ITFNZ both internationally and within New Zealand. Internationally New Zealand is now a team known to the other countries for both our skill and technique, as well as for our friendly and easy going attitudes towards the other teams. Within New Zealand, the successes at world champs level mean that Taekwon-Do is becoming a wider known sport with more people and businesses wanting to support and sponsor the teams. At the prestigious Counties Manukau Sports Awards last year, Taekwon-Do was nominated for four different awards and managed to win two of them, beating much bigger sports organisations such as gymnastics and athletics.

However, to get to this level competitors have had to become more driven to succeed. One of the most important lessons that past New Zealand team competitors have learnt is that if you want to do well and achieve a successful result then you have to have a winning attitude and "want" it more than your opponents. Previously, New Zealand teams were going to the world champs just for the learning experience. They came back with a much broader range of skills and tactics to practice and a knowledge of how different practitioners from all around the world trained and competed. This was invaluable information that was then taught and passed on to students making their way through the grades and aiming for bigger competitions. Our sparring and patterns style slowly evolved to keep up with the top competitors around the world. It got to the stage where going to a world champs for the 'learning experience' was no longer enough. It is very expensive to travel and stay overseas for the duration of a tournament, competitors want to come back with results to prove they have not wasted their time or their money in an exercise that is merely a 'learning experience'. The determination to achieve success and glory for the country through winning a world champs medal became too strong. The efforts of previous teams and competitors have paid off, shown by the most recent successes of the New Zealand teams. New Zealand now sends teams expecting to bring back glory and fame for themselves and their country.

Often, the best teams at world champs level stand out, they all have a similar attitude. They are focused, determined and willing to do whatever it takes to reach their goal. This is highlighted through an example of one incident that I witnessed at the world champs in Italy: a Korean fighter was halfway through a bout and had obviously injured his shoulder as he was not using the arm at all, he kept trying to call for a time-out but the coach would not let him. During the break he argued with the coach and was finally hit in the face before being made to get back into the ring to finish the fight. This shows the high expectation and determination of the coaches on their competitors. Another example that highlights the attitude of the very good teams was an incident at the junior world champs in Korea. The Polish team who stayed in the same hotel as the New Zealand team, were the most unfriendly yet professional team there. Before and during the tournament they did not speak to anyone other than their own team members and the only time you would see them was at meal times and when they were training. If they were spoken to by competitors from another country, they simply ignored them. This did not make them very popular with anyone, however as soon as the tournament was over they were completely different. They were as eager to meet and make new friends as the New Zealand team was. This

simply highlights the level of professionalism encountered at a world champs tournament. However, General Choi said that often competitors take the match far too seriously and that students should remember that the accolades and trophies are sometimes superficial forms of recognition.

Although competitions do tend to get very serious, especially at an international level when the competitors have been training for up to a year or more beforehand, I believe that competing in tournaments is an important part of Taekwon-Do. It has many benefits and in general only has positive effects for everyone involved. Competing at regional and national level gives students goals to aim for and rewards to strive for, it also helps to bring practitioners from all over New Zealand together, forming lasting friendships with a bit of friendly rivalry. It teaches students to work as a team and to perform under pressure. At an international level, although the competitiveness becomes a lot more serious it is still only bringing about positive effects for Taekwon-Do in New Zealand. From my point of view students in these teams come back from an international tournament with an amazing amount of information and knowledge to pass on, and goals to strive for. Achieving their personal goals and improving their performance is what drives the competitors, winning a gold medal is something that will follow for a student who is focused and determined. This in turn helps to generate interest in Taekwon-Do therefore helping it to expand and grow within New Zealand. General Choi also said, "It is the measure of respect felt by instructors and fellow students that holds far more value." I believe that for New Zealand competitors this is most important.

In conclusion, Taekwon-Do competitions only serve to enrich the art, adding an exciting and very different facet to it and making it a sport as well as a lifestyle.