

Why International Taekwon-Do is the Martial Art of My Choice

Mr Clint King

Ever since I was a child I've been interested in Martial Arts. But International Taekwon-do was not my first choice; in fact, it was my last. So the fact that I am now in my 17th year and counting shows that there is something about it that works.

When it all started I was 7 years old and my mum and dad had been heading off in the evenings for a while to this thing called 'Taekwondo' (WTF), and I guess it looked cool and I was allowed to tag along and join in. Mum and dad both achieved their black belt and due to injury and laziness I only got to green belt, and would only ever train every now and then. During this time I became aware that there was another form of Taekwon-do called 'International Taekwon-do', and that for some reason they didn't like us, and we didn't like them, and that they were basically our rivals. However this was never an issue for me until later in life. Also, while I was doing WTF it became a demo-sport at the Olympic Games which sparked a dream of Olympic glory when I grew up, even though I was being lazy at the time.

Going forward a few years dad changed his job to work at Waikeria Prison and we all moved into the prison village. While there, one of the parents opened a Kung-Fu club for the kids in the village. I didn't join straight away because at the time I considered Taekwondo to be my Martial Art of choice and would not do anything else. However after about 6 months I realised that I was the only kid in the village not doing Kung-Fu, so I relaxed my views on it and joined after all. I even ended up enjoying myself! This time, being a young teenager I wanted to be a black belt (because being a black belt was 'cool'). After about 12 months the club closed and myself and a couple of friends decided that we still wanted to go for our black belt, so we had a look around and found a club of a similar style where we could pick up where we had left off. Then, after a short while, this club closed also, which was very frustrating. I just wanted my black belt! I figured my best option was to find a club of any style that was well established and had been around for years, so that there wasn't much chance of it closing before I got my black belt. In Te Awamutu there weren't too many choices, in fact, there were only 2. One was a Karate club, and the other was International Taekwon-do. Having already seen the Karate style in action, I was pretty sure that it wasn't what I was looking for. So that only left Taekwon-do. The problem was of course that I was a WTF guy from way back, and it didn't particularly feel like the right thing to do to move over to the rival's side. In the end, after some contemplation, a club that had been around for about 15 years at the time, and considering something that my father had said years earlier, which was that 'All Martial Arts are equal', made me give International Taekwon-do a go. And the thought that I could soon be on my way to getting my black belt was quite attractive to me.

I remember my first few training sessions and thinking 'hmm... I don't know about this "breath control" thing, it seems pretty weird. And "sine wave" - two things I had never encountered before.' Most Martial Arts have a front kick, side kick, and turning kick (round house kick). But sine wave? So I did what any person in my position would do, and avoided sine wave for as long as I could to avoid looking 'silly'. I just carried on busting out my high kicks, showing all the other white belts how it was done. With all my experience over the years I figured I would be able to

cruise through a few gradings until I could be taught something that I didn't already know. I was wrong! I remember it clearly, Jon Sawden was taking the class and we were doing line work, such as punches, kicks, etc. When we got to side kick I was just doing it how I had always known to do it, when he told me that I was doing it wrong. I did a couple more, which looked alright to me, but apparently they were still not up to standard. Jon then went on to show me the whole thing broken down into intermediate positions, and straight away I realised that he was right, and I had been doing it wrong for years. It was then that I realised that I had far more to learn than I had previously thought. I also realised that in all the years of doing Martial Arts I had never really been shown how to do each technique correctly. It was always just 'copy the guy in front of you, and hope for the best'. There was no such thing as fine tuning of techniques. I soon found out that International Tawekwon-do was special and unique amongst other styles. I was able to find out anything I needed to know in order to perform the techniques to a high standard, which was never offered in my previous Martial Arts training.

With all this new information my passion for Taekwon-do was fuelled, in particular my interest in sparring. In my colour belt days my long term goal was to get my black belt, whereas in the short term I wanted to compete in regional tournaments and become a national champion for my grade. Of course in the early days I had an unfair advantage of being a green belt with about 10 years of experience over other students at the same grade level. So I won my first gold medal at a national championship tournament back in 1996. It was around this time that I noticed how sparring in ITF was of a relatively low level and therefore I went on for around the next three years remaining undefeated. It is awesome to look back now and see how far NZ ITF has come competitively in the short time of about 10-15 years. Having such a drive to compete inspired me to want to compete at the World Championships from an early stage. I mean I could never have the Olympic glory that I had dreamed of in my younger days, but a World Championship was and is the pinnacle for any competitive ITF practitioner. I remember telling Master McPhail at my first Dan grading that competing at a World Championship was one of my main goals. I even made a development squad, as they had back in the day, and was training my butt off because I was still a black stripe at the time and needed to grade to black belt first. However things took a bit of a detour. Unfortunately communications were not as they are now, as not everyone had the internet and cell phones, so getting information was more difficult, and unfortunately I missed the trials for World Championships. When I found out that I had missed the trials, I was dejected to say the least, and pretty much stopped training for my black belt a couple of months out from grading. Lucky for me I didn't lose all my fitness and managed to pass. Funnily enough one comment in my results was that I lacked spirit, which was obviously true and clearly, it seems, showed. I gave up on training for the next World Championships as well, only getting over myself in 2003, when I trialled for Poland. I only just missed out on a spot in the team, which only made me want it even more. So I trained hard this time, and ended up making the New Zealand team to go to Germany in 2005. Of course I couldn't allow simply making the team be the highlight of my Taekwon-do career, I had to medal! Being a good all-rounder, I was ideally suited for team events. In Germany, my team won gold for Special Technique and bronze for Power. For me this was amazing... but what next? The best part of the whole adventure was the bond and fun I had with team mates, and so I just had to do it one more time! I only planned to do it one more time, because the cost to compete at a World Championship is a lot to say the least. People ask me why I drive a crappy car, to which the answer is quite simple: I have been to four World Championships, which means that something else has to be sacrificed!

After my third World Championship, I came up with a new personal goal: To win two gold medals at a World Championship and to become best overall team.

Seeing as that didn't happen in Canada or in Argentina, where we ended up just missing out on best overall team, the New Zealand World Championships became somewhat the last chance, and as most of us know, the whole team did extremely well and literally cleaned up at this tournament.

Now the dust has settled, and I finally want to grade more. In the recent past I have quite frequently been asked the same question: 'Isn't it time you retired and opened a club or something?' In actual fact, one of the best things about Taekwon-do is that there is something for everyone. Not everyone will be able to compete at the highest level, but I can/have, whereas others may referee or open a club. People will always tend towards what they are good at. Some love self-defence, others prefer patterns or power. For years now I have always believed that I will never be inactive in Taekwon-do for this reason. I know that when I do have to stop competing that there will still be a whole world of Taekwon-do for me to enjoy. In fact, if I hope to live till I'm 90, I still have almost 50 years of Taekwon-do ahead of me, and having been active with it for about 17 years means that I'm not even half way through my Taekwon-do life! Looking back now on the beginning of my Martial Arts career makes me wonder whether I could have found the same fulfilment with any of the other styles.

So why Taekwon-do? I'm sure if you asked anyone the same question, they would say that there is no simple or specific answer to the question. However, if I had to break it down into a few main points, these would be:

- Taekwon-do is very well established. Back when I was deciding which style to choose, I saw it as a large organisation that wouldn't close down and disappear like others, so I would be able to get my black belt!
- The huge amount of competitions on a number of different levels to suit everyone.
- The different options and pathways which are available to me in order to fulfil my love for Taekwon-do for as long as I was able and willing to do it.

Looking back on when I was doing Kung-Fu, I really loved it. However now, with the advantage of hindsight, I'm unsure whether it would have taken me around the world to compete as Taekwon-do has. Would I have been able to go anywhere in the world and find other people who do exactly the same thing as I do, and be able to train with them? Surely WTF could have offered me a lot too if I had decided to stick with it, but just like my father said to me not that long ago: 'WTF is great, but it doesn't teach you the specific details around techniques, whereas ITF on the other hand is very technical.' To me, this is one of the greatest things which makes ITF stand out from other styles.