

My Taekwon-do journey

Introduction

On the eve of our black belt grading I'm struck how I seem to be walking a little 'taller' than I have before and my head is held a little higher. There's a sense in which I'm more aware of what's around me, less threatened perhaps and more in control.

Do I feel ready to take this next step?...no not really. I will always be a coloured belt at heart but when you run out of coloured belts there is only one colour left.

From here on in, I know there will be a continual striving to remain worthy of wearing a black belt; conscious, not just that others are watching and following my lead, but more so now than ever - I'm also acutely aware of how little I know and how much I still have to learn.

This 'apprenticeship' might be the best some can hope for; in the greater scheme of things though this is like reaching the Everest base camp or for those from Taranaki the Stratford plateau carpark. The push forwards and the gradual ascent still remains and the task seems just as daunting as the day I first put on a dobok and donned my white belt.

There is a saying that it takes a village to raise a child...if I could parody this I would say it takes a club to raise a black belt. A community of individuals from all walks of life and all personality types - they might be an Eeyore or a Rabbit, an Owl or a Tigger but each one, with all the life experience they bring, can be a source of learning and even a potential friend.

Being vulnerable to the point you allow someone to teach you and critique your performance is in itself a big challenge for many. Personal status or one's position within the community; whatever cultural or social standing one may have and the kudos that brings, all are left at the door of the dojang. This is where the clay yields to the hands of the potter and the magic of transformation begins.

The beginning of our journey

Whether by greater design or serendipity, my family's journey in Taekwondo started around 8 years ago when my daughter was invited to the kids class that was run at the scout hall after school on a Wednesday. Although my wife's friend and son did not continue with training, as parents of daughters we realised the value of girls being raised as strong independent people with skills that would embolden them giving them confidence to face any challenge that came their way.

We still maintain this is a valuable investment of time not just for the physicality but also the way it cultivates values of respect and dignity for oneself and those around us - all embedded in the art and culture of Taekwondo.

We've always been cautious never to make out the world is a terrible or unsafe place but realistically we recognise from world news and local news there are unsavoury elements in our society. We don't believe we would be doing our job as parents if we weren't in some way trying to equip them to deal with situations where their personal security was at risk or they were subjected to unwanted attention.

We teach them the rights and wrongs of life - how to care for themselves and make good choices, so why not an element of self defence?

I decide to 'have a go'

I should say that although I was keen for our daughter to learn Taekwondo, I myself did not want to get involved. I am by nature a bit reclusive - I like my own company and having a job where I'm surrounded by people all day/everyday - planning, talking and reassuring; giving up personal space would not come without a lot of convincing. I'm also a people watcher and don't place trust in others easily.

The review I wrote for Taranaki TKD a little while ago sums up how I felt about the prospect of taking up Taekwondo:-

...great for youngsters like our 5 year old and the fit, flexible people I thought. Participating was never on my radar: too old, too out of shape and too busy. Sitting, watching and listening for almost 2 years I was struck how this group valued each individual and made it their mission to build confidence and self worth that extended beyond the martial art and into everyday life...for adults as well as children. So with that in mind...I thought I'd give it a go.

That's almost 5 years ago now and with the addition of another daughter we're still here. To anyone whose curious why not come and have a go? At least you can say you tried it...

I remember the fateful day when my wife told me she had to work and would I take our daughter to training that Sunday. Hiding my reluctance I took her along.

Kids classes are quite different to regular classes by design...lots of fun and play but all the time intended to impart skills and knowledge.

It's hard to keep resisting friendly smiles and welcoming 'hello's'.

These looked just like ordinary people - people like me. No puffed up egos or machismo stereotypes. These were, excuse the cliché - genuinely nice people.

So the seed was sown...and putting aside my reservations I decided to 'have a go'.

Training as an adult...should I stay or should I go?

I remember at one of my first classes being asked by Master Kirsten if I'd be interested in learning some patterns and maybe working towards a grading. Although I'd seen our daughter grading, the idea of me doing something like that seemed fairly remote but wanting to make the most of the time I was there I agreed, not really knowing what I was letting myself in for.

Although my job requires a lot of walking and being on my feet a lot, it's not the same as doing vigorous physical activity. This plunge into a world of purposeful movement required a degree of energy and stamina which were sorely lacking. There were many times where I felt faint or nauseated. Turning up to class was one thing; the effort of learning even the most rudimentary skills was exhausting - a really steep learning curve getting my body to do things it was unfamiliar with. But patterns? Step sparring or self defence? This was taking brain gym to a whole different level.

Being out of shape to begin with didn't help me. Slow recovery and fatigue from working at funny times of the day and night didn't help either but then neither did my age. Coming to Taekwondo having just passed my 50th birthday there weren't many classes where I didn't think about giving up or wishing I'd started Taekwondo much earlier in life; maybe then I'd have had a better chance of performing at a level I can really only dream of. Giving up was never really an option though... aside from how I would feel I was also concerned this would set a precedent for my daughter and I didn't want her to stop going.

The gradual 'climb' and what inspired me to stay

Moderating my expectations and dealing with the disappointment of not being able to perform skills or defy gravity is a constant battle but...and this is a really big 'but' - my journey is not dissimilar to many others in our club. For that reason I suspect, this is why there is such a pragmatic approach to what the encyclopaedia demonstrates versus what an individual is able to achieve.

Knowing this doesn't stop me trying or pushing myself but it is a great source of encouragement and inspiration that spurs me on.

Just on that note I must mention the youngsters in the club, in particular the junior black belts. The way they conduct themselves: including my daughter in their chats; encouraging her and pushing her on, as well as the incredible respect they have shown me. They are a real credit to their parents and the club. They have such great ability and discipline - explained and demonstrated in ways seasoned with patience and respect.

The cumulative nature of ITF Taekwondo sets it apart from other martial arts. Whatever rank held, there is still the expectation of proficiency in skills learned since their Taekwondo journey began. And not just skills but theory as well - the intellectual challenge...producing practitioners fully grounded in the art they represent. I couldn't help but be impressed.

Getting back up when you fall down

Adding to these levels of skill has come with a number of injuries...a broken toe, a torn gastrocnemius muscle (x2) as well as numerous sprains, strains and bruises. Each time I've injured myself I've questioned whether doing Taekwondo was such a good idea? Even when I haven't been injured, the thought of going to training after a busy day on my feet has been like another pin in an already deflating tyre.

Self awareness and taking care of yourself are important parts of training. Knowing when to keep pushing or when to take time out. Battling lethargy and not letting it dominate our feelings does require a lot of honesty, but recognising fatigue and the risk of injury it poses when you're not on top of your game is also important.

It would be easy to stop training because of the toll other demands take on us but somehow we have to strike a balance...honesty and integrity.

If not Taekwando-do then what?

So a surreal time for myself and my daughter as one chapter ends and another begins. So many people to be grateful to, without whom this day would never have been possible. Personalities who've inspired and those who have challenged...or been a challenge. Each on their own journey.

As I conclude this snapshot of my journey so far, two people come to mind. The first is Rick Warren - author of the book; 'The Purpose Driven Life'. His philosophy is that we should live our lives on purpose. My interpretation of this is that time passes so quickly and before you know it the limitations of age or circumstance prevent us realising our true potential. Find a purpose, find your purpose. Better to invest time in something rather than nothing. Better to have a dream and a goal to actively aim for than waste that time waiting for something to come along...because it may never come along.

Lastly I'm reminded of a quote by Sir Isaac Newton:

"if I have seen further [than others], it is by standing on the shoulders of giants."

I realise that I stand at the end of a very long line of people who owe a great debt of gratitude to General Choi Hong Hi, the founding father of Taekwando, and all the dedicated masters and instructors who have taught his art over the years. In Taranaki that mana rests with Master Neill Livingstone QSM VII Dan someone who dared to dream and went on to make it a reality. Respect!

So I (we) continue the climb to explore all that the art has to teach, facing each challenge as it presents itself. Hopefully along the way we'll also encourage and inspire others on their own journey.