

Taekwon-Do art versus sport

# Taekwon-Do

## Art versus Sport

Having participated in sports such as soccer, cycling, basketball and squash I decided that I would like to learn a martial art. That was in 1987. In those days there were not many martial arts clubs around so in a way it was sort of mysterious and I liked the idea of being able to defend myself if the need should arise. After finding a club and training for a while the principle idea of defending myself was no longer important. My top priority was to learn as much as I could from my instructor Mr Rimmer; perfect my technique, and train, train, and train.

To this day I can still remember my first grading and receiving a yellow belt. I felt a great sense of achievement and that of being a winner. How could this be though as there was no competition involved? That's right; it's a martial art not a sport. As Mr Rimmer pointed out on many occasions ***"Taekwon-Do is not about being better than anyone else. It is about being the best that you can be."*** This phrase has stayed with me to this day and I often use it with my own students.

As I prepared for writing this thesis I searched the Internet for any relevant information. With the search words **art versus sport** there is next to no information in regards to the sport side of ITF Taekwon-Do. There is however an abundance of opinions on ITF versus WTF. The most interesting article I found contained the following.

"It is common knowledge in martial arts circles that the WTF is the sport side of Taekwon-Do and ITF is the art side of Taekwon-Do". What are the differences?

### **If you ask an ITF practitioner to describe WTF stylists, you may hear:**

- They do not have real power in their techniques, just fancy kicks and quick footwork.
- Everything is geared to competition, so the emphasis is on speed and scoring. Thus the techniques have little use in practical situations.
- Hand attacks are seldom used especially to the head.
- WTF president is a political figure that is not a Taekwon-Do practitioner.
- Patterns have no aesthetic value and are not emphasized.
- Kicks lack power, which is why they do little breaking.

### **If you ask a WTF practitioner to describe ITF stylists, you may hear:**

- They use old-fashion kicks that are not useful in sparring, e.g. too slow, use too much movement, leave you vulnerable, and use too much energy.
- Since they use light or no contact sparring, they would not survive in WTF sparring.
- Use hard blocks instead of avoidance.
- Low, wide stances slow techniques and telegraph movements.
- Few aerial kicks and little innovation, which lead to lower skill levels.

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In 1997 I entered my one and only full contact WTF tournament. It was more out of curiosity than anything. The WTF always seemed to get plenty of publicity through the media and had a large membership. Was it the tournament scene that attracted people? I went to find out.

In my first round I won by default as the competitor pulled out for some reason. My next opponent was Richard Lister. Richard was the New Zealand champion for his weight division and had represented New Zealand overseas. If I wanted to see what all the fuss was about I might as well do it against the best. I found the sparring match a little frustrating as I was warned a few times for attacking the head with hand techniques. Richard scored with some good turning kicks. Very fast kicks but no power. Needless to say Richard won the bout. I can't say that I enjoyed the sparring but it was a good learning experience. On reflection I would say that I would agree to some extent to the above statements. However in those times the WTF and ITF had two distinct styles of sparring, which was governed by the tournament rules of each organisation. I now understood why the WTF had a distinct style of sparring. With hand techniques to head being illegal it changes the whole dynamics of free sparring. Throughout the tournament there seemed to be a general lack of etiquette and a lack of respect for the opponent. This was something that I was very much unaccustomed to. The pattern competition did not seem to have much value with only a small amount of competitors. It would be unfair to say that one style is



Neill (Right) against Richard Lister at the WTF tournament

better than the other. It's just different. I believe that there are practitioners from both styles that would compete very well in each other's tournaments. I now understood why the WTF had the label of the sport side of Taekwon-Do.

In recent years I have watched the sport side of ITF Taekwon-Do flourish and I believe that the presumptions about the differences between ITF and WTF are no longer applicable. ITF Taekwon-Do the sport has been responsible for greater exposure of the chang-hon style of TKD. Membership has increased and in certain areas a higher degree of technique has been achieved and continues to. However what effect has this had on Taekwon-Do the art and in particular those students who are not tournament orientated.

Before we examine sport versus art we need to go back to the beginning and look at a very essence of Taekwon-Do and there is no better example than the philosophy of Taekwon-Do as laid out By General Choi Hong Hi.

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### THE PHILOSOPHY OF TAEKWON-DO (Taekwon-Do Chul hak)

In recent years, there has been an upsurge in violence and a loss of morality in all levels of society, especially among the young. There are, of course a number of reasons for this.

Many psychologists today feel that this problem stems from frustration. Analysts, on the other hand, point out that these misguided people are indeed a disillusioned segment of society searching for values and relevance in what they consider deceitful, materialistic, and absurd world of wars and decadence.

Unfortunately, however, instead of constructively channeling their extraordinary energy and potential, far too many strike out in blind anger, destroying rather than building, or merely running away from it all by isolating themselves with drugs and their own worlds of fantasy. Presently, the tendency of "the stronger preying upon the weaker" appears to be at its peak. Frankly, the present world closely resembles a "corrupt age."

It is obvious that this phenomenon of society is not merely because of the struggle for survival, but mainly because of an overdeveloped material and scientific civilization. The former misleads the young to the extreme materialism or egoism, while the latter seized human beings with fear, though playing an essential role in public welfare.

Then what would be the remedy? Needless to say it is the development of moral civilization - the proper mental states of a human being as the lord of creation, enough to prevail or at least keep abreast with the development of material and scientific civilization.

The utmost purpose of Taekwon-Do is to eliminate fighting by discouraging the stronger's oppression of the weaker with a power that must be based on humanity, justice, morality, wisdom and faith, thus helping to build a better and more peaceful world.

All men, regardless of age, have felt that death is a shame, and lamented that they cannot live as long as the pine trees or the turtles that seems to live a thousand years. Righteous men, on the other hand, deplore the fact that justice does not always triumph over the tyranny of power. However, there are two ways to deal with these problems: The former, through mental discipline, the latter, through physical training. It is my firm belief that through Taekwon-Do, anyone can garner enough strength to become a guardian of justice, to challenge social disunity and, to cultivate the human spirit to the highest level attainable. It is in this spirit, I am dedicating the art of Taekwon-Do to the people of the world.

The philosophy of Taekwon-Do is based on the ethical, moral, and spiritual standards by which men can live together in harmony, and its art patterns are inspired by the ideals and exploits of great men from Korean history. Korea's famous military and civil leaders who in nearly five thousand years of Korean history have never invaded their neighbor yet who fought bravely and made great self-sacrifices to defend their homeland against invading enemies.

I also include the names of patriots who willingly gave up their lives to regain Korea's freedom and independence from the Japanese occupation.

Each Tul (pattern) of Taekwon-Do expresses the thoughts and the actions of these great men, so the students of Taekwon-Do must reflect the true intentions

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of those whose name each Tul bears. Therefore, under no circumstances should Taekwon-Do be used for any commercial or political purpose whatsoever.

I have set forth the following philosophy and guidelines, which will be the cornerstone of Taekwon-Do and by which all serious students of this art are encouraged to live.

1. Be willing to go where the going may be tough and do the things that are worth doing even though they are difficult.
2. Be gentle to the weak and tough to the strong.
3. Be content with what you have in money and position but never in skills.
4. Always finish what you begin, be it large or small.
5. Be a willing teacher to anyone regardless of religion, race or ideology.
6. Never yield to repression or threat in the pursuit of a noble cause.
7. Teach attitude and skill with action rather than words.
8. Always be yourself even though your circumstances may change.
9. Be the eternal teacher who teaches with the body when young, with words when old, and by moral precept even after death.

There is no doubt that those who practice Taekwon-Do as an art can relate to the philosophy of Taekwon-Do but can those who practice it as a sport. Those who practice Taekwon-Do as a sport may say that the art is a living, breathing thing and is always evolving to meet the requirements of today's society. However many believe that practicing the art side of Taekwon-Do nourishes a student a life that is out of the mainstream of today's society which requires instant gratification. Perhaps this is why tournaments are as popular especially with young people as there are instant rewards as in medals and trophies.

I have practised Taekwon-Do for twenty years and an Instructor of a club for fifteen years. I have participated in many tournaments as a competitor, a judge and referee. I have also had roles of a coach and an organiser of events. I have experienced many things in regards to the art and sport side of Taekwon-Do. The following are my experiences and thoughts. They are neither right nor wrong but just my opinion.

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### **Taekwon-Do the Sport:**

One purpose of modern day sparring is to replace the older styled life-and-death fights. This develops technique, knowledge, and character. You never see yourself so clearly as when you face your own death. Competition can provide a safe, controlled glimpse at this kind of defeat. Fighting spirit can be developed only through fighting. Surely it is not the same as the battlefield, but it serves a similar purpose, and it is closer to a combat situation than any other form of training. Of course this can go wrong. Winning and losing can become too important and start to pervert the training process.

If we look at the elements that make up competition it can be broken down into three parts, patterns, sparring and destruction.

**Patterns:** With the development of tournaments I have watched the style of patterns change over the years. I have noticed that Taekwon-Do now has two distinct styles of patterns; One being that I would call the World Champs style which is very robotic in its action. It is performed with a great deal of flexibility and gracefulness however at times it lacks power and the human element, which I would regard as being very important aspect of the art. Some might say that the world champs style of patterns look different because they are being performed at a higher level. To some extent I would say that this is true however it is a martial art based on self-defence and techniques whether performed in patterns, self defence or free sparring need to be seen to work. Changing the style of a technique to make it look pretty or breathing in a different manner to get the judges attention is perverting the training process and therefore taking away from the art.

**Free Sparring:** Earlier in this article it was mentioned about the differences between WTF and ITF sparring. I now believe that we are very close to WTF style sparring if not slightly better as we can rely on our hand techniques in competition. In the old days we saw a lot of crash and bash style sparring. ITF competitors now have better speed, footwork, and ring craft than those of yesterday.

**Destruction:** There is no doubt that the tournament scene has increased the standard of breaking in New Zealand. In the early days if you were seen to break two boards it was regarded as being very impressive. These days with the introduction of board holders for power breaking and special technique we are jumping higher and breaking more boards than ever and we are continuing to improve. This has had a very positive effect on the art as the destruction at demonstrations and grade testing has moved to a new level.

Competition has the ability to bring out the best in people in regards to good technique, perseverance, indomitable spirit, regional and national pride etc but unfortunately it can also bring out the worst in people also. The lack of etiquette and respect that I had experienced at the WTF tournament has now crept into the ITF tournament scene in New Zealand

I have seen a lot of things that go against everything the philosophy of Taekwon-Do stand for. There seems to be a win at all costs attitude from both competitors and coaches and sometimes from parents of children that are competing.

Sending a team to a world champs can be a very costly exercise and this has created a lot of commercialism in Taekwon-Do as in sponsorship deals, major fundraising activities, and financial levies being placed on an organizations

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membership. In some cases this has caused some resentment from those who practice the art. One area of competition that very much a concern is the introduction of tournaments that offers prize money. Again I believe that this is going against the philosophy of Taekwon-Do.

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As competition continues teams and athletes are always looking for that edge over their opponents such as high altitude training, gym work, special diets, studying video footage of opponents etc. It would certainly be a sad day if Taekwon-Do competitors were to start talking drugs to enhance their performance to win prize money. It has happened in other sports with financial reward for success and I pray that this will never progress into Taekwon-Do.

### Taekwon-Do the Art:

As an instructor, even though I do encourage my students to enter tournaments what keeps me enthused is teaching the art. I have had students who have been very successful in competition but it is not as rewarding as seeing a student develop and do things that they never dreamed of. This can range from developing a certain degree of flexibility, confidence etc right through to attaining a 1<sup>st</sup> degree black belt.



As I look back over my years in Taekwon-Do I have many fond memories. One that I feel deserves a special mention is Ms Dale Copeland (62 years of age) grading to 1<sup>st</sup> Dan and then to 2<sup>nd</sup> Dan black belt. This achievement by someone of this age and her attitude towards that art is incredible and she inspires me to do better. Ms Copeland believe it or not has participated in tournaments but no longer. Not because of her age but as she points out how can we build a more peaceful world if we get into a ring and fight with the possibility of hurting someone? Even though the competition rules state that it is touch contact we all know that this is not the case.

Ms Dale Copeland (60 years old)  
Breaking roof tiles at her 1<sup>st</sup> Dan  
Grading

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### Conclusion.

Many people believe Taekwon-Do is a spiritual art and do not consider it a sport. Those who practice it as art don't recognize any rules for combat, while those who engage in Taekwon-do as a sport regulate the activity for safety. Taekwon-Do as an art concentrates on its philosophy, values and spirit, while the sport side focuses on the body's physical abilities. Together, the art and sport concepts focus on the physical and mental aspects of the participant to achieve a healthy, physically fit and balanced life. Weather you practise Taekwon-Do as an art or sport there is no doubt that Taekwon-Do has a lot to offer and will enrich ones life beyond expectations

There is no reason that Taekwon-Do cannot exist in the world as both a sport and an art. However as instructors and guardians of the General Choi Hong Hi's Legacy it is important that Taekwon-Do sport does not take precedence over Taekwon-Do the art. This way we can ensure that Taekwon-Do is suitable for all mankind regardless of age, physical ability, religion, race or ideology.

Taekwon  
Neill Livingstone  
IV Dan Instructor  
Taranaki Taekwon-Do