

## Getting in the Ring by Phil Webb, II Dan

There are so many benefits that come out of training in Taekwon-Do. The crossover of learnings from Taekwon-Do to home, school and work life is one of those positive aspects that, when I started martial arts, I hadn't considered. The reciting of our student oath has many positive affirmations, they can play a part in a better life for us all and those around us. I would like to highlight and discuss some of the benefits and apprehensions that I have experienced with my involvement with tournaments as a competitor and an official. I also hope to be able to encourage other Taekwon-Do members to get involved in competition, as a competitor or as an official, or both. To undo some of the apprehensions we all have about competition and getting in the ring. Or to encourage those who sit on the fence contemplating "should I or shouldn't I" to step out of their comfort zone and just give it a go.

We have just under 3000 Taekwon-Do members in New Zealand, yet in a competition like our 2014 Nationals, we only saw around 350 competitors and 60 officials. In terms of martial arts in New Zealand, a tournament with 350 competitors is pretty good, but, with only around 12% attendance, there is room for improvement. With only 60 officials, this makes for a busy weekend. For those who do attend tournaments regularly, in general, we see the same faces all the time, great way to catch up on old friends, but, where are the "up and comings"? I certainly understand and agree competing or officiating isn't the easiest thing in the world to do and there can be a lot of obstacles to overcome, mentally, physically and financially.

My very first tournament was in my mind, at the time, disastrous. Beaten by everyone in patterns, I was so nervous my walking stances turned into small steps and I struggled to remember Do San. For sparring, all my training went out the window, my legs were so heavy as I stepped in the ring I struggled to kick above the belt, my focus narrowed down to a small spot and I forgot to breath (2 minutes is a long time not to breath!). Having said that, the 2 x 2 minute rounds were over in a flash. I can remember my Instructor asking me "So, how was that?" My answer "Awesome, what a buzz", even though I didn't win. So once again my instructor was right. Your first tournament is just to gain experience and to get an understanding of what happens to our body and mind under stress. Although at the time in my own mind it was disastrous, in retrospect, as far as learning goes it was a huge success for me. I went on to take several regional titles and even a national title.

Why compete? What an amazing feeling it is putting yourself out there and stepping in the ring. The adrenalin kicks in, your heart is pounding, your legs turn to lead, the crowd is cheering (hopefully!), stony faced officials looking on. Talk about out of your comfort zone, awesome. One of life's greatest challenges is to put yourself out there, out of your comfort zone, not just for Taekwon-Do but for life in general. Many a great thing has been achieved by people who put themselves out there, not so much from those who don't get off the couch.

The role of a competitor in a tournament, other than the obvious, is to put on a good demonstration of Taekwon-Do for the spectators and officials, a demonstration of your skills, this is the best I am at this point of time. But before you do this, you must first step in the ring, nerves and all! Unfortunately there is no one thing to fix your nerves.

Hard work and training prior to competition will help your fitness, condition your body, tune your skills and give you confidence. Confidence is a must, that mind-set of backing yourself is essential. It was Henry Ford who said "Whether you think you can or think you can't, you're probably right" and in my experience, have found this to be true. If you think you are going to forget that pattern, chances are you will. If you think you're going to miss that board in specialty, chances are you will. If you think you are confident, you probably will be. The human mind is a powerful thing and the power of positive thinking will fair you well in Taekwon-Do and life in general.

As we get nervous and we put our bodies under stress, adrenaline kicks in, our breathing & heart rate increase, our vision narrows as we lose our peripheral vision, our legs turn heavy due to restricted blood flow, we sweat as our body prepares for action, and the world seems to slow down as our minds process information faster than normal. Understanding what's happening with our body will help with controlling and using the adrenaline to your advantage and to re-train our brains in a controlled environment. The learned experience we get from this is valuable in real life in regards to if it ever comes down to a self-defence situation, our bodies would go through the same stress. Think of what a valuable advantage it would be to have that learned experience in your tool box.

I mentioned conditioning our body, I can still remember the first time I got hit in the head at a training, probably from my highly respected instructor, I reeled back wondering what had just happened. In fact, I had just had my first lesson in Dallyon, thank-you Sir! Some hard but necessary lessons continued and as I toughened my body, mind, blocking tools and attacking tools. Things got easier, I don't think you ever get used to being hit, but I guess you could say my body was de-sensitised, I learned to keep lighter on my feet and also got faster at getting out the way!

There is much more to competing though. I find that I enjoy setting a target or a goal to work towards, it's a real motivator for me. Knowing when the tournament date is, planning and working towards it, training hard. Just like grading's. I find it gives my

training another purpose, a reason, something specific to focus on. I say “another purpose” as we all train for our own reasons, for fitness, for the sport, for safety, for the social side, etc, the list goes on, but to actually set specific goals to work towards helps me with focus and motivation.

I also find competing a great way to measure your own skills and development against your peers. Often in training, we are working alongside all walks of life, from the highly experienced “Worlds” level athletes, to the wee white belt who has just started their journey in Taekwon-Do, so it can be difficult gauge your own skills. So it’s great to compete alongside people a similar grade, age and weight, almost reassuring in a way, “Hey, I can actually do this!”

Something else to consider as a competitor, the longer you leave it, the harder it gets. Or what my instructor would refer to as “the deep pool”, meaning to start competing as a white belt, early on in your Taekwon-Do career, when you are up against others with little or no experience is somewhat simpler to gain that valuable experience before you step in the ring with more senior grades who are already competition savvy. That’s not to say it’s too late to start competing as a senior grade, it’s just a steeper learning curve, or, a deeper pool.

It’s also an advantage to have an experienced support person on the day, to help you warm-up, get in the zone and to guide you through the workings of your competition. For sparring, make sure you pre-arrange an experienced second. As a second, don’t underestimate your roll, not just pre match warm-up and words of encouragement through-out the match, but also post-match. Things to watch out for post-match are the adrenaline dumps, or headaches, de-hydration, injuries and even concussion. It’s a requirement for all our tournaments to have a First Aider on site, they are there to help and advise us. Make the most of it, if you’re not sure of something medical or notice something not quite right with the competitor you have just seconded, just ask a First Aider.

There is also a financial aspect to consider when competing, the equipment, the entry fees, the travel and time off work. For sparring, most equipment can be borrowed, you will need to have your own mouth guard and I wouldn’t want to borrow someone else’s groin guard! Although it’s nice to have your own gloves, boots and headgear, it’s not essential to invest in them all at once. Talk to other club members to see what can be borrowed. As my own kids grew out of their gear, I passed it on to other club members to use. The entry fees are pretty reasonable and are only there to cover costs, not to make a profit from. Something to be mindful of is that spectators have free entry to our tournaments, other martial arts charge an entry fee for everyone. With the travel and time off work, well, that’s just part of the commitment you make when you’re hooked on Taekwon-Do.

I also find competing and officiating a great way to support ITKD. We are lucky enough to have professionally run and organized tournaments, from Peewee level right up to an International level, let's make the most of it. Our officials have all been professionally trained and qualified through the Tournament Advisor Group. The T.A.G. run excellent training and development seminars to bring our officials up to a high standard, we are also lucky enough to have several internationally recognised and sort after A grade official's to help keep our standards high and for the C & B grade officials to learn from. The officials play a critical role in competition with keeping a tournament running smoothly, being consistent and fair in all aspects of competition to find the better performer. They are there to look after the competitors. I highly recommend learning competition from an official's point of view, it will give you a definite advantage as a competitor.

As with any sport, there are rules and regulations to adhere to for all disciplines of Taekwon-Do competition, because without rules there is chaos, but I'm not going to list the rules and regulations here, we follow the "ITF World Championship Tournament Rules 2013" which can easily be found on our ITKD website. I highly recommend reading and making sure you understand the rules if you are going to compete. As with the physical and mental training we do, it's just as important to know what you can and can't do in the ring. Knowing and understanding what's happening and why also helps with confidence, remember, knowledge is power. Also, if you know the rules, you can also use them to your advantage. How many competitors in sparring actually take their one meter they are allowed when they step out the ring, or jump out the ring rather than stand there slugging it out losing points? Or the kicks in specialty disallowed because of an incorrect measure for one reason or another, the list goes on. Remember, those with an understanding of the rules will have the advantage over those who don't. It also makes for a smoother running tournament.

Luckily, in Taekwon-Do, we don't often see the bad behaviour seen in some other sports, but it is an element of sports that we all have to be mindful of. We aren't there to win at all costs, there are rules and regulations to adhere to and they are there to keep us all safe and to be fair. In sparring we use points to win, not just seeing who can smash their opponent the hardest. One of my favourite sayings from a certain highly respected instructor from Midlands is "We are there to beat each other, not beat each other up". In some martial arts you win by knocking your opponent out, in Taekwon-Do you may get disqualified. We also have our Tenants to guide us, there is certain competition etiquette to follow and we have the "Do" part of Taekwon-"Do".

I'd would like to finish off with a disclaimer that in no way am I claiming to be an expert on competition, I'm just putting across my observations and ideas from my point of view and experiences I've had that have helped me, so far. (Many thanks to my instructor for sparking my interest in this area and getting me off the couch!) That said, I do have several years of competition experience both as a successful competitor and an official. I've found it's one of those challenges I've grown to enjoy. In my later years I've found it takes longer to recover from hard trainings and actual competition. So with still having to turn up to work on Monday's it is something that has slowed down over the years, which is why I like to still immerse myself in competition as an official. For me, it was just another pathway, another way to keep involved and support Taekwon-Do.

If you're contemplating "Should I or Shouldn't I?", talk to your Instructor, have a look at our "Events Calendar" on the ITKD website, get yourself along to a tournament, something like a Regional Tournament, or for the youngsters the Under 18's or Pee Wee tournaments are a great place to start for competitors and officials, even just to have look to see how things work and to immerse yourself in the excitement of a ITKD tournament. Train hard, be positive and good luck.

Tae-Kwon.