

Tae kwon do combines grace and power



Photo by DAVID LEYENDECKER

Tae kwon do instructor Steve Powell warms-up with some head kicks on student Carol

Dunton. Tae kwon do means literally the way of the hand and foot.

By JAN PERRY
Sports Writer

True to the name martial art, tae kwon do combines the strength and stamina of a demanding sport, and the beauty and grace of dance.

Tae kwon do is the Korean system of self-defense that literally means the way of the hand and foot. It is sometimes confused with karate, which means empty hand.

Steve Powell, the president of The Texas A&M Tae Kwon Do Club, said the main difference between tae kwon do and karate is that the Korean's stress hand and kicking techniques while the Japanese stress hand techniques. The Japanese use a smaller number of kicking techniques than are used in tae kwon do.

"A lot of people know what karate is because it was here first — because of the war (World War II) with Japan," the fifth-degree black belt said. "The first national organization (the United States Karate Association) was set-up in 1949."

"Then, the Koreans actually came over in the late 50s," Powell said. "Everybody knew about karate, but not too many knew what tae kwon do meant."

"So, a lot of people said, 'What's tae kwon do? I want to take karate.' Well, tae kwon do is...just a Korean karate," Powell said.

Powell practices a system of tae kwon do developed by Jhoon Rhee. Powell said Rhee faced some hostility from his Korean associates when he first came to the United States when he adapted traditional tae kwon do to suit Americans.

"It seems silly because what he's done is something like what Bruce Lee has done with his style of Kung Fu," Powell said. "(Lee) took the best out of every system you can think of, regardless of what self-defense system it was, and utilized it if it worked."

"Bruce Lee took ideas from fencing, boxing, wrestling, judo, karate and tae kwon do," Powell said. "Anything, as long as it was useable. Mr. Rhee kind of did an adaption to that (tae kwon do). He took western boxing philosophies and tae kwon do and put them together."

Powell said he teaches both the

traditional Korean and the American aspects of tae kwon do to his students.

"The traditional aspects of tae kwon do are the old forms...what the Japanese call cada," he said. "Cada is a combination of gymnastic routines with karate techniques, only you don't do the flips. Some people do (flips), but that's a little bit more of a showmanship-type thing...most of it is doing kicks and punches in the air against imaginary opponents."

Powell, who is working towards a doctorate in biomechanics, said he combines the things he learns in his classes with the tae kwon do classes he gives to find better techniques to prepare for competition.

Tae kwon do has two types of competitions — forms and sparring. Cada falls under the forms division. Actual fighting against an opponent is in the sparring division.

"In the sparring competition," Powell said, "they have to have the foot gear and the hand gear and other protective equipment. 'The guys have to have groin protectors, and everybody wears the mouthpiece.'"

The tournaments are divided into age and rank categories. The two most common rank categories are brown and black belts.

Powell, who also has a tae kwon do school in Brenham, said he encourages his students to compete in tournaments. Powell said tournament competition is important because it helps to teach people how to deal with stress.

"A lot of instructors say competitions aren't important and that practice is enough," he said. "That's not true."

"That's like saying Sugar Ray Leonard could of won his title by just getting out there and punching a bag," Powell said. "You can't do that, you have to spar and work on your timing."

"If you are exposed to stress, like a street situation is (stressful)...you're not going to perform like you do when you punch on a bag," Powell said. "You have to know how to handle the stress, and tournaments will help out."

"Granted, tournaments are not close to a street situation as far as

contact goes because it (a tournament) is pretty much controlled," Powell said.

Powell has applied his classroom techniques to real-life situations by working as a security guard in Houston. His job was to protect musicians during their concerts.

"I protected people like Paul McCartney, John Denver, Kiss, Neil Young, and James Taylor," Powell said.

"Lots of times you have to get out there and duke it out with the fans," he said. "When they (the fans) started showing up with knives and guns, I quit."

Powell, who has consistently ranked highly in Texas for the past 10 years, is competing extensively this year to retain his title.

Powell has won the tae kwon do title every year since 1974, except the year he broke his back in a car accident.

In 1982, Powell regained the best all-around title in fighting forms and specialty cada.

"Specialty cada utilizes music," he said. "That's where we really get to be like the gymnasts. But, I don't do any flips because of my accident."

This year, Powell has won five tournaments. He was named grand champion four times.

In the grand champion division, the four winners from the black belt weapons, specialty, and women's forms competitions all compete against each other. The winner in this division is named the grand champion.

A&M's Tae Kwon Do Club will be having its own competitions March 30, in G. Rollie White Coliseum.

"It will be a moderate-size tournament," he said. "Probably moderately small because of the location."

Powell said there are few women competing in tae kwon do. He said A&M's club is probably only 18 to 25 percent women.

"I teach a self-defense course for the P.E. department, and it aggravates me that about 60 percent of the class is guys," he said. "The class is really geared towards women—guys can't really use the techniques. Women ought to be out there first, and make the guys wait."

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