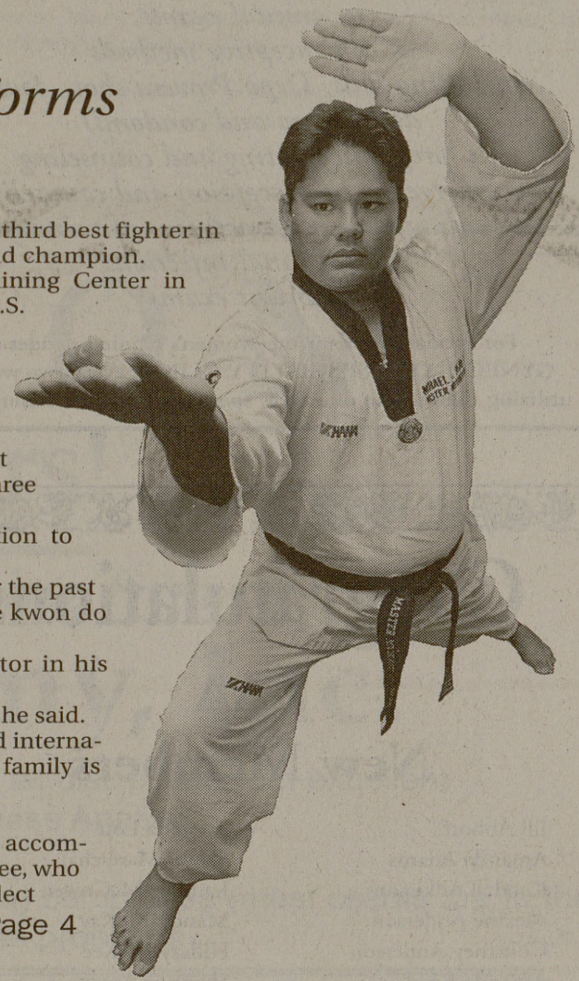


Getting a

KICK

out of life

Tae kwon do powerhouse Michael J. Pejo forms students into tomorrow's leaders.



Story by
 John LeBas

Photos by
 Dave House

Trophies, medals and mounted newspaper clippings convey a sense of accomplishment from the walls and shelves of the tiny lobby of the Martial Arts Center in Bryan. Master Michael J. Pejo II enters from the blue-carpeted work out room, looking more like a weight lifter than a martial arts champion.

But the speed of his hands, feet and mind demonstrate his tae kwon do skills. A swift roundhouse kick by Pejo bats down a target pad held above his head. He knocks a gun from his temple and secures the "gunman" in an arm lock before a shot can be fired.

Is this magic or some divine power? Not at all, Pejo insists.

"It's really pretty easy," he said.

His martial arts mastery comes from years of intense practice. "Easy," Pejo said, means the martial arts should be simple and fun to learn. This philosophy has guided him through 18 years of training, coaching and champion status.

He began training in the martial arts at age 11. "I got hit by a bully," he said, "and I never hit him back. My father didn't like that too much."

Pejo's father, a former boxer, tried to teach his son how to fight, but Pejo hated boxing. He wanted to learn kung fu.

His mother told him kung fu was not an option, and tae kwon do was his other choice.

Tae kwon do, an ancient Korean martial art, is a punching- and kicking-based self-defense form. It has grown from obscurity in the past few decades to become the most widely practiced martial art in the world.

The national sport of Korea, tae kwon do is now the only full-contact martial art in the Olympics.

Pejo quickly found a love for tae kwon do, and began to master the art of the sport. From ages 11 to 17, Pejo was the U.S. Junior Olympic champion and the New

York State champion. At 16, he was ranked the third best fighter in the country, after defeating the collegiate world champion.

In 1986, Pejo moved to the Olympic Training Center in Colorado, and was an alternate for the 1988 U.S. Olympic team.

He won a bronze medal at the 1989 Pan-American World Games, and was ranked third in the world later that year.

Pejo was again selected as an Olympic team alternate in 1992, and represented Texas at the U.S. national championships for the next three years.

In 1995, Pejo moved away from competition to devote more time to coaching.

He has been a state Junior Olympic coach for the past two years, and now coaches the Texas A&M tae kwon do team, ranked third in the country.

Pejo said family support was a critical factor in his success during his competitive years.

"I believe in a really strong family structure," he said.

His brother and sister were also national- and international-level tae kwon do champions, and the family is based on mutual respect and support, he said.

"They went to every tournament," Pejo said.

He also said he was lucky to train under an accomplished instructor, Master Sang Chul Lee. Chul Lee, who was undefeated for 10 years, is now president-elect

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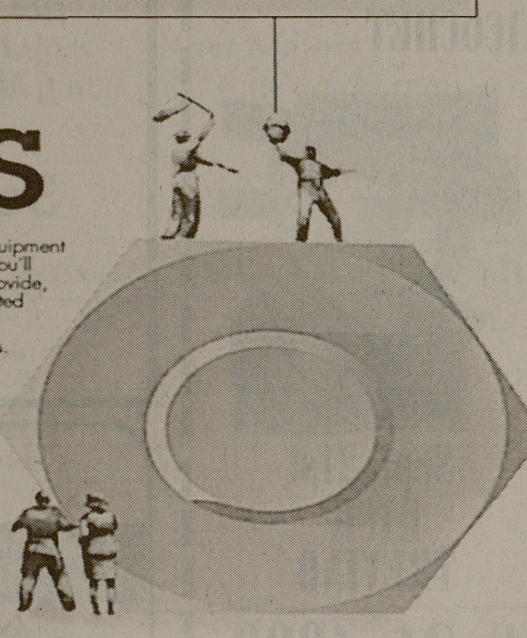
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