

State of the Art in Tae Kwon Do: ITF Versus WTF

By Brendan Wilson

It is late in the final round of the men's black belt World Tae Kwon Federation (WTF) tae kwon do competition. The red fighter is on the offensive as he whirls spinning high kicks almost too fast to see. The blue fighter falls back, exhausted and rapidly losing his situational awareness. Finally, he is driven out of bounds as the match ends. The red fighter wins. It is another triumph for athletic ability and conditioning, right?

Maybe. Let's move to a different scene. It is sudden death overtime in the International Tae Kwon Do Federation (ITF) grand championships. The two black belts cautiously circle each other. The score is tied 1:1, and each fighter concentrates intensely, looking for the opening he needs to score the winning point. Suddenly, the blue fighter springs forward and snaps out a back fist to the top of his opponent's head. The strike was partially blocked, but three of the five judges call the point. The blue fighter wins. Another triumph for precision, focus and timing, right?

Not so fast! The two scenes described above are repeated across the country every weekend, and they point out major problems in the application of fighting techniques in Tae kwon do today. In the WTF match, the fighters are prohibited from punching to the head and kicking to the groin, the two most common attacks they would face in real combat. This encourages the use of rear leg high kicks,

spinning kicks, and axe kicks. Additionally, fighters tend to keep their hands low because the threat of a hand strike to the face is zero. These kicks, however impressive in a match with rules, would be near-useless against a street-smart opponent who could kick the groin or rock the head with a straight punch.

This gloomy picture is matched with an equally dim analysis of the ITF fighters. The image of two grown men literally playing back-fist tag is almost too much to bear. Some years ago, I watched a so-called ITF world championship in which the grand champion won in sudden death overtime with a technique that could not have so much as bruised a child.

The problem with these two scenarios is not just that they are unrealistic. All martial arts accept some restrictions in order to train safely. The real problem is that many, many schools train exclusively for tournament, and students are taught that these techniques are THE art.



*Because they need not guard against punches to the head, WTF fighters often keep their hands low
(photo: courtesy of USA-T)*

Thirty five years ago, when I first began training in the martial arts, we trained by using different types of drills in class, approximating various levels of realism. The difference was that we knew they were approximations, not the real thing. One-step sparring, patterns and free-sparring (with strict rules) were all recognized as techniques to improve ability and confidence. No one mistook tournament prowess for genuine martial arts accomplishment. When I won a state tournament in the mid-1970s, my instructor did not even mention it to me, just as he made no comment about my defeat in the nationals later that year. This was not due to some Eastern practice of reticence or understatement. It was because tournament performance was not significant.

Credit Due

Don't misinterpret the message. There are many fine martial artists who compete heavily in tournaments. And tournament prowess doesn't preclude true martial spirit. The problem is one of emphasis rather than activity. I have seen schools that train exclusively for tournaments. At least once a week the instructor would drag out an example trophy and parade it in front of the kids, raising their level of anxiety about tournament performance. What should have been a healthy addition to martial arts training became a singular perverse obsession.

Back to the Beginning

The "fix" for this problem is not necessarily a restructuring of tournament rules to make them more realistic. Tournaments are fine if put in perspective. But each of us who calls himself a teacher of the martial arts needs to re-examine how we present our program of instruction for our students. Some schools may legitimately emphasize one technique of instruction over another (for example, forms over sparring, or visa versa). But the super emphasis on tournament competition is certainly having a negative effect on the arts, and should be

pushed back in its proper place. What is needed however is a re-examination of what it is that makes Tae kwon do unique and formidable and, in doing so, a rediscovery what the WTF and ITF styles have in common.

Common Principles

We often read that Tae kwon do, as it was practiced in the early days after WWII and the end of the Japanese occupation, was very similar to Japanese karate with its longer deeper stances, emphasis on hand techniques, lower kicks and the general emphasis on the generation of power rather than speed or agility. We are told that the Ch'ang Hon forms¹ used by the ITF are closer to this original conception of the art. The Taegeuk poomse, used by the WTF, emphasize a smoother, more fluid movement, with shorter stances and a greater emphasis on kicks as apposed to hand techniques. This is perhaps true in some respects, but Tae kwon do is now, and has always been, unique and distinct from Japanese or Okinawan Karate in a number of areas:

1. Movement

The starting point for most forms of Karate is a strong stance. It is generally believed that the stance must be solid in order for either hand or foot techniques to be delivered. Thus if you watch the Japanese forms you will note the practitioner often moves to a new stance and then, from this position, delivers the strike, block or kick. This is not what we see in tae kwon do. In tae kwon do, the movement of stance, hips, shoulders, arms and legs all *move together* in one fluid movement and *stop together* at the moment of impact to deliver the greatest amount of force.

2. Extension

The biggest or at least most obvious distinction between tae kwon do and its predecessors is the extension, or opening, of the hip during the execution of the side kick. The supporting foot turns away from the point of impact and the hip is turned



Extended side kicks are an innovation of taekwon do (photo: courtesy of Damien Littre)

allowing the greatest distance as well as the generation of power. The back kick and jump back kick are variants of this technique that allow the hip to open more fully without having to ‘cock’ or ‘chamber’ the side kick before delivery.

3. Jumping Techniques



Jumping kicks have been an essential element of taekwon do since its creation (photo by Damien Littre)

Although taekwon do is rightly regarded for its innovative jumping techniques, this needs to be placed into perspective. If we look at the patterns, jumping techniques

are rare: for example, there is a jump side kick in Chung Mu, a first dan form in the Ch’ang Hon system; a similar move not seen until Iljeo, the 9th dan form in the WTF system². In most cases, however, the purpose of jump kicks is neither to gain height or distance, it is rather to allow the practitioner to fully extend the hip quickly thus generating greater power at both short and longer range targets. But for whatever purpose, jumping techniques have been part of taekwon do since its conception³.

Points of divergence

As we have seen above, taekwon do has distinct properties that are shared by both the ITF and WTF approaches and which have persisted from the beginnings of the art, distinct from its Karate forbearers. However, the ITF and WTF have clearly distinct application, even within their basic similarities.

1. Poomse

The Ch’ang Hon forms, used by the ITF, are characterized by powerful, direct movements and deep stances. Typically, but not exclusively, the pattern moves to meet an imaginary opponent by stepping toward the threat and executing a single powerful block, punch or kick. Motions tend to be linear and are executed with great forcefulness throughout movement.

The Taegeuk forms use shorter back and horse stances, a walking stance⁴ and a narrow front stance often termed a forward stance. These shorter stances are designed to more closely approximate the everyday usage of legs and allow a greater agility in movement and the delivery of kicks. Additionally, some emphasis is placed on engaging an opponent at close quarters and the generation of power with only slight movement of the stance, hips shoulders and hands. This close-quarters generation of power is seen, for example, in the first movement of Taegeuk Chil Jang where the practitioner moves from the ready stance to a tiger (cat) stance, executing a close-quarters palm block with

the right hand to defend against a blow coming from the left side. It is designed to simulate a 'surprise' attack where room to manoeuvre is minimal. The block is followed by a rear leg front kick which then resets into the tiger stance with a simultaneous inner forearm block. Conversely, in the Ch'ang Hon system, such attacks are almost always met with a step in the direction of the opponent, and kicks normally are followed by a step in the direction of the attack.

Thus we can see the relentlessly offensive nature of the Ch'ang Hon system: direct linear movements, stepping to meet the attacker (even when blocking) and an emphasis on power supported by precision and focus. The Taegeuk forms, on the other hand emphasize a smoother movement, a whip-like delivery versus the piston-like strength of the Ch'ang Hon system. Movements are designed on the principle that attacks must be met both at close range as well as at longer range. Another subtle but substantial difference is the philosophy of the fight itself. The ITF schools typically teach that every strike, kick and even blocks should be a 'fight-ending' technique, delivered with such force the opponent will be unable to continue his attack. The philosophy of combat embedded in the Taegeuk is that the fight is continuous. This is shown by the number of combinations of block-strike-block, as well as a number of defensive sequences in which actual fighting withdrawal is performed, something unthinkable in the Ch'ang Hon forms.

2. Sparring

Probably the most visible difference between the ITF and WTF approaches is the sparring.

WTF sparring rules, approved by the International Olympic Committee (IOC) and adhered to by 186 member nations of the WTF, provide for comprehensive rules governing allowable techniques, protective equipment, timing, penalties, athlete

qualifications and standards for coaches, referees and judges. Although sparring is full-contact, there is no punching to the head, kicking below the waist, sweeps or open hand techniques. Points are awarded only for techniques that shock the body sufficiently to displace (move) an opponent, and more points are awarded for kicks to the head than to the body. Additionally, matches consist of three sparring rounds lasting two minutes each with a minute rest between rounds. Sparring is continuous, corner judges calling points as they occur.



*WTF sparring rules engender high kicks
(photo courtesy of USA-T)*

In ITF sparring, competitors wear head, foot and hand protectors, but not the protective vest required by the WTF. Contact is typically less than full, although hand techniques, both open and closed fist, are allowed to the head if properly controlled. Referees will stop the match to allow the judges to call a point. Points are typically awarded for a clean, focused technique delivered to an allowable target. Contact beyond that required to score a point is considered excessive and can be cause for a penalty.

As with other forms of sparring, the techniques commonly used in competition are driven by the rules, rather than the art itself. For the WTF, what has developed

over the years is an emphasis on very fast, often head-high, powerful rear leg kicks. Additionally, the length of the rounds and the continuous nature of the competition tend to engender a high level of conditioning. Because the match is not stopped by the referee to award a point, competitors train for multiple techniques, rather than a single, fight-ending blow. Defensive strategy often includes a 'lure', encouraging an opponent's attack, with the aim to deliver a counter blow.

But a quirk in the rules often results in a strange farce. Because it is difficult to displace an opponent with a punch to the chest protector, close-quarters fighting with hand techniques is limited. As both pushing and grabbing are forbidden, competitors who find themselves at close quarters often 'clutch' each other, chests pushed together, arms embracing as if in a hug with hands extended to show the referee that they are not grabbing. Since they have no practical way to disengage, competitors often remain in this embrace until the referee separates them. One would hope this bad habit would not carry over into more realistic confrontations.



WTF sparring rules, which discourage close-quarters hand techniques, sometime result in a clinch
(photo: courtesy of USA-T)

The ITF rules engender more caution, because the first clean strike wins the point,

even where the counter might have been more devastating. Hand techniques to the head, such as a controlled back-fist, often prove successful. As a result, ITF fighters tend to keep their hands up, guarding their torso and head, rather than at their sides as is often the case with WTF fighters. close-quarters fighting is common and a clutch, as is often seen in WTF matches, would be unthinkable. Because there is no requirement to displace the opponent's body, ITF rules engender rapid front leg snaps kicks. And as there are no additional points awarded for head kicks, these techniques are used less frequently, or as part of balanced strategy to force an opponent to open up other target areas.

The Way Ahead

A case can be made for recognizing the complimentary aspects of these two types of taekwon do and advantages of both ITF and WTF approaches for any given school. Many instructors teach both Ch'ang Hon and Taegeuk forms to their students, thus ensuring a full range of techniques are preserved in the tradition of the organization. Likewise in sparring, some schools promote both types of sparring as they compete in a variety of tournaments using different formats. Even without tournaments being the driving force, martial artists capable of engaging taekwon do in its various manifestations would clearly have more depth than those who focus exclusively in their narrow specialty. One often reads these days about efforts to unify the ITF and the WTF into a single organization. I am not sure that this is feasible or wise, given the strong divergence of views. But clearly the two approaches share fundamental principles, while the differences in application could be complimentary rather than mutually exclusive.

¹ Ch'ang Hon is the pen name for General Choi Hong Hi, the founder of the International Tae Kwon Do Federation.

² Other examples include jump front kicks in Taegeuk Pal Jang, the eighth WTF poomse.

³ Many accounts of General Choi's skills in Karate are recounted in his autobiography 'Taekwon-do And I'

⁴ Chung Mu, which contains a flying side kick is part of the original tae kwon do forms and dates to the 1950's

⁴The walking stance is an abbreviated form of front stance. It is used in the early Taegeuk forms, and occasionally in the more advance forms, notably Korea, a 2nd dan form.

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Tae Kwon Do and is the head of the Belgian branch of the International Sungjado Association . A retired US Army officer and former Army Ranger, Mr. Wilson formerly coached US army competition teams and has trained the SACEUR's (NATO Commander's) close protection team in weapons disarming techniques. Mr. Wilson works at NATO headquarters in Brussels, Belgium as a defence analyst.

What's Your View?

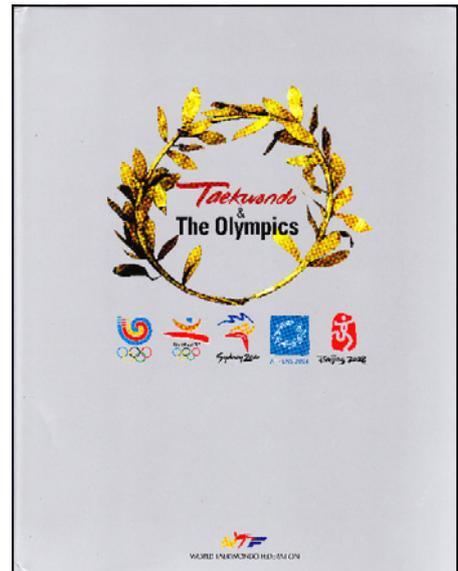
What would TKD be like for students/instructors if the ITF and WTF actually merged?
Send your view to letters@totallytkd.com

Book Review:

Taekwondo & The Olympics

By George Vitale

Although I no longer participate in Olympic Taekwondo nor do I train in Kukki or sport Taekwondo I do recommend a book about to be released titled "Taekwondo & The Olympics." This 2009 hardcover book is put out by the World Taekwondo Federation, edited by Il Sim with the text written by Kyong Myong Lee. It contains information on Kukki Taekwondo's rise to official Olympic status. What may be one of the best features of the book is a collection of photographs by Seok Je Lee capturing memorable moments of the 24th & 25th in the Seoul and Barcelona Olympics where Taekwondo appeared as an demonstration sport as well as the last 3 Summer games where Taekwondo has been an official sport, including the 2008 Games in Beijing. The book



George with Dr. Chungwon Choue

also contains the complete records of all the winners and the nations they represented. A pre-release copy of this book was signed and presented to me by Dr. Chungwon Choue at a very recent meeting in New York City where the WTF President confirmed that Taekwondo is set to be included in the 2016 Olympics at a still undetermined location. Dr. Choue advised all 26 sports that appeared as an official sport at the 29th Olympiad in China will be voted in as a block this fall.