

Pioneer Tae Kwon Do Association

True gold does not fear the test of fire

By Marek Handzel

Many in the fighting arts are familiar with the adage *'it's not the art, it's the artist'*, when it comes to assessing whether a certain style can provide individuals with the necessary tools to defend themselves *'on the street'*. But when it comes to Tae Kwon Do, some martial artists choose to temporarily suspend their belief in this universal truth, referring as they do to training routines that focus on points sparring and dance-like routine patterns. Either that or they are not taught either the difference between the sport aspects of the art (as opposed to self defence aspects) or any self defence aspects at all.

In truth, it can be hard to counter this seemingly widespread viewpoint when many schools whether they be ITF, WTF or 'you-name-it-TF' affiliated, gear the vast majority of their sessions towards the sports element of Tae Kwon Do, never making any distinctions. Although there is of course nothing wrong with having a sports-focused mentality at a club that's up front regarding this, although there is a school of thought that regards this as a dilution of the martial side of Tae Kwon Do and one that could threaten the art's future potency.

This has led a small group of concerned instructors to form the Pioneer Tae Kwon Do Association – an alliance of like-minded

individuals determined to – in their own words – bring back or keep the *'Martial'* in the martial art of Tae Kwon Do. Although the Pioneer Tae Kwon Do Association does not disapprove of competition, it does want its importance downgraded in favour of back-to-basics, tough, effective training. The sort of training that equips people to deal with and even repel unwanted hostile behaviour.

In other words, the Pioneer Tae Kwon Do Association wants Tae Kwon Do to be viewed and respected as a martial art and not simply a martial 'sport'.

The Pioneer Tae Kwon Do Association claims to be non-political and shows no bias to certain forms of the style, be it Ch'ang Hon, Kukki or other style of Tae Kwon Do. In order to become a member school, adherence to a *'Key Stages'* programme is all that is required. This programme is one that should ensure that a student is well versed in the elements of Tae Kwon Do that form the basis of effective self-defence. It offers support and training for both students and instructors, senior Kup and Dan grade group training sessions and black belt gradings, as well as giving member instructors an equal say on how the association progresses, irrespective of grade. Apart from its stance on the sport side of Tae Kwon Do, the



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Putting the *"Martial"* back into the art of Tae Kwon Do

association differs from other Tae Kwon Do federations in a number of ways.

The association has only recently been formed by Stuart Anslow, 4th degree, (Rayners Lane Tae Kwon Do Academy, UK) with the help of Dave Melton, 5th degree, (Virginia Martial Arts, USA), Colin Wee, 5th degree, (Hikaru Dojo, Australia), Terry Stoker, 4th Degree (Twin Dragons Tae Kwon Do, USA), Elliott Walker, 3rd degree (Dartford Martial Arts, UK), Peter Whitehead, 3rd degree (Sutton Bonington Tae Kwon Do, UK), and Vikram Gautam, 2nd degree (Northwood Tae Kwon Do Academy, UK).

I recently caught up with two of these instructors, Dave Melton and Stuart Anslow to find out more about the Pioneer Tae Kwon Do Association.



Marek Peter Handzel (MPH): In some of your literature found on the Pioneer Tae Kwon Do Association website it is mentioned that the founders believe Tae Kwon Do is *"on a slippery slope and is losing its effectiveness as a martial art"*. When you say that are you referring to the all forms of the art or only the WTF, for example?

Dave Melton (DM): It is in the mindset of the new students who know nothing about Taekwondo mostly. It is not to put blame on a specific art necessarily, but when a student sees sport style of WTF or ITF, they think "that is Taekwondo".

Unfortunately, they do not see the martial side of it. However, it is also the responsibility of those teaching it to emphasize that sport is only a small part of the art, and that the sport is not a substitute for self defence.

Stuart Anslow (SA): I also feel that these days, often a good Taekwon-doist is gauged by how well he/she performs at tournaments and many clubs feel similar in that a good club is (incorrectly) gauged by overall performances at tournaments as well. Tournaments are all well and good, but they only cover one side of the art and in the rush for recognition in this area, the martial side, the side many a student starts the martial arts for, is forgotten or ignored as one caters to the ego and the other doesn't.

MPH: Why do you feel this has happened - is it a natural process of dilution as something becomes popular and is this not a problem for all Martial Arts? Or has Tae Kwon Do suffered more than most?

DM: I have seen all styles suffer, but since Taekwondo is arguably the most popular style of martial arts today, we see more watering down because we are exposed to it more often.

SA: Things have been watered down for years in the effort to increase organisations numbers; less contact, less things to learn if there's little or no self defence, less things to remember, less chance (if any) of



failing gradings; all this equals easier gradings, more money and faster roads to black belts but in this proliferation, the real essence of what it means to be a black belt is almost lost. If both sides co-existed equally this would be better, but they don't and in some cases, the martial side no longer exists at all, but Tae Kwon Do, is a martial art first and foremost after all.



MPH: Do you believe that the Pioneer association can arrest this slide – or is it merely a 'safe haven' for like-minded practitioners?

DM: I believe it is a safe haven, but there is no way anyone or any one organization can change the slide too much in say the next 10-15 years. When someone sees a potential way to make an easy living, they will take advantage of every opportunity even if it means selling out.

SA: It is a safe haven yes, but it's also a message that will show the Taekwon-do world that the martial side of the art is still alive and thriving in some schools, that non-competition techniques, such as sweeps, throws etc. are part and parcel of Taekwon-do and should be trained the same as all other techniques; that fighting is different from sport sparring and needs practice; that anti-weapons training is important; that

a focus on self defence is important and then, maybe others will question why their own schools and organisations aren't doing the same, as to be honest, if they already covered all this, we would have had no need to form an association of this type.

MPH: There are a myriad of Tae Kwon do organisations around the world, from worldwide groups to small collectives, is there room for another Tae Kwon Do organisation and if so, what does it offer that the other organisations do not?

SA: Yes there are numerous organisations around, they have strong points and weak points, but most still miss the main point and that is that Taekwon-do is a martial art; Martial as in Mars, the God of war, not the God of sport or the God of over the top technical details with the exclusion of all else! Though there are many clubs under all the big associations that have a focus on self defence, as well as training the other facets of Taekwon-do to a good standard, this is the first time an association has made it their main focus, so it is the first association for those that think this way to work as a group, to push the boundaries further, to become accountable for this specific area of the art for their students, whilst not dictating other parts of the arts, such as what patterns are



performed, or what type of sport sparring you can train. If we are held to a difference standard, then we raise our own games to this level, adjust our training and methods to enable our students to accomplish this goal. Unfortunately, in the realms of how parts of Taekwon-do relate to self defence, no organisation that I know of does this.

MPH: Why have you limited the organization to TKD – or are there other associations similar to others in other arts that you can share ‘best practice’ with for example?

DM: I cannot speak proficiently enough about other styles. Taekwondo is what we have trained in and that is our specialty. I feel inviting other styles would mean watering down their style (or possibly vice versa) since Korean styles have fundamental differences in their practices than say Japanese styles.

SA: This goes hand in hand with my answer to your previous question. First and foremost we are students and instructors of Taekwon-do, we want to promote the art we study and the art we teach, but in its entirety. Most of the instructors are also members of IAOMAS anyway, so sharing and training with other styles isn't a problem and so we focus on the art we do. The self defence aspects are not the only focus, good standards in all other areas are also required to achieve dan grades; which include patterns, breaking, terminology (specific to the style), sport sparring plus more, it just that we have raised the level of expectations for the self defence side of the art, in line with the other areas that usually have prominence at gradings and this means it will be trained, it will be learnt and a student will benefit from that and the repercussions is that the martial art of Taekwon-do becomes more rounded, as it was meant to be.

MPH: Why did you found a formal group? Could you not maintain standards and share ideas without the need for an official

alliance?

DM: Sure, we could have done it informally. However, by having a formal organization it gives credibility to the public and promotes growth for others to commit to our cause.

SA: It also allows for accountability. From my experience as an instructor, I know words are cheap and accountably is king. To put it simply, if it's not in a syllabus, then it's often neglected or not trained at all, but by making it a fully accountable part of a dan grading, the equal to all other parts, it needs to be trained and not just by individuals, but by the whole club on their way to black belt. Knowing this, the worth of the grading is enhanced and in return it maintains the credibility of both the organisation and anyone who grades under us.



Stuart Anslow, 4th Degree, UK

MPH: I notice that Dave, being Kukki based, you refer to Tae Kwon Do in the WTF terminology (Taekwondo), where as Stuart, being Chang Hon based, you refer to Tae Kwon Do in the ITF terminology (Taekwon-do), however, the organisation uses neither and spells it Tae Kwon Do, why is that?

DM: In my experience, Tae Kwon Do or Taekwondo is not organization based. However, I have seen Taekwon-do almost exclusively to the ITF styles. I thought it should be put to a vote as to not seem that we are alienating anyone. We want PTA to be as neutral as possible.

SA: Well, the organisation is for Taekwon-do schools or any style, as ITF and WTF are arguably the most dominant, we wanted a name that didn't refer to either of these dominant styles and would be welcoming for all (including ITF & WTF based schools), hence following a vote, the term 'Tae Kwon Do' was decided upon.



*Elliott Walker, 3rd Degree, UK with
Master Willie Lim, 8th Degree, USA*

MPH: And why the "Pioneer Tae Kwon Do Association?

SA: Whilst trying to think of a name for the new organisation, we felt that all the major titles had been taken, International this, World that etc. We also felt that what we are doing, our aims and how we are going about trying to achieve them were new and ultimately a pioneering concept as far as Taekwon-do organisations go, furthermore, this is the direction many of the original Taekwon-do pioneers would have taken had they been free to travel their own

paths from the early days and thus its a reference to them, as well as a reference to what we are doing.

MPH: Speaking of Tae Kwon Do pioneers, I see the association has been endorsed by one Tae kwon Do legend already, how did that come about and being such a senior, does that make him the head of the organisation?

SA: First of all, there is no head of the organisation. We work on a 1 member, 1 vote principle that makes all member instructors equal and have equal say on how things are run. Regarding Master Lims endorsement, in September I held a seminar with him. I simply explained about the new organisation, what we were trying to achieve, showed him the details on the web site to expand further and he felt it was a good thing and offered his endorsement, the first of many of the original pioneers I hope. Many will know that Master Willie Lim was the pioneer who took Taekwon-do into New Zealand and he is held in extremely high regard by all, and thus his endorsement means a great deal and shows we are on the right path, more so, as he gains nothing monetary from it (as he offered it freely, with no conditions). Master Lims focus on Tae Kwon Do is also the martial side, he has a great depth of knowledge in Taekwon-do on many levels, so apart from his endorsement, his seminars will bring additional knowledge to the table should members wish to attend any (which are purely optional of course).

MPH: What do you ultimately wish to achieve as an organization?

DM: To get back to the roots of the Taekwondo pioneers. Keeping Taekwondo as a well-rounded martial art, rather than just a sport.

SA: And ensuring that all black belts under this organisation are well versed in self defence as well as the rest of what Taekwon-do requires and offers... well

rounded, as Dave said.

MPH: When you say 'martial' - what does that mean to you? Is it even possible to run an 'old fashioned' type of school in this day and age of health & safety and rampant litigation? Has real Tae Kwon Do gone underground?

DM: "Martial" to me means warrior-like. That means everything starts with yourself - your spirit, your mentality. Without either of those, you cannot have true martial training. What does "old fashioned" mean? Obviously we cannot beat students with sticks or make put them in a dark room for a few days, but then again is that considered "old-fashioned". I run a very disciplined and rigid curriculum, yet we have push-ups and sit-ups as forms of incentive to stay focused and still keep safety as the focus. Then again, I have no clue how things were done 50 years ago so I just do what I think is best by keeping the students disciplined, respectful and training hard.

SA: Martial, in regards to martial arts, is named after Mars the God of War, hence 'war arts' or 'fighting arts'... hence, that is what we (as martial arts instructors) are supposed to be teaching!

MPH: Do you think it possible that your type of clubs will be the norm in the future? After all, if schools produce students unable to defend themselves properly when under pressure then they will naturally blame their teachers and look for instruction elsewhere won't they?

DM: No, but they will always be sought out. Most people will never have to defend themselves properly but more importantly it is not just about the self defense. It is also about building the student to be a better person.

SA: Not sure if they will become the norm, though that would be great, though I believe that through this, other clubs and

organisations will be forced to re-examine what they require or what they do, as the association will certainly give a view through the window to students of other clubs to look in. That said, egos can always be catered for and nothing says that as good as a black belt, a trophy or a title and these things will allow current trends to continue as many love to stand in their own little worlds on their glass pedestals I'm afraid!



Colin Wee, 5th Degree, Australia

MPH: In your FAQ on the website there is a section where you state that you may run competitions "if and when the association grows large enough" Surely this is a slight contradiction as you would be encouraging the 'sport' element?

DM: There is a difference between "encouraging" and "replace/substitute". When you see Taekwondo schools (primarily WTF styles) training ONLY for tournament, then clearly that is wrong. However, Taekwondo has evolved to include (but not limit to) sport, and competitions should be included as part of the art.

SA: Sport elements have been part of Taekwon-do from its early days, its a decent outlet and also fun for many, as we said earlier, we are not promoting the martial side in exclusion of all else involved in Taekwon-do, simply giving it more prominence. Most Taekwon-do clubs are involved in the sport side and if the

association grows large enough to organise such events and the members want them, that's fine.



grows and incorporates more schools in the future and gains a good reputation then how can standards be maintained? Surely you would just become 'another' group?

DM: I do not believe we will just be another group unless all or most other groups incorporate our standards, in which case we have achieved our goal.

SA: I couldn't have said it better myself. The goal here is not to make a massive organisation, but to ensure Tae kwon Do remains martial, whether it's done via us or via others, then it's still done and that is our goal. Within the organisation, we have our own methods of ensuring and maintaining standards, details of which can be found on the web site. These methods will ensure the black belts worth, no matter how large or small we are.

To find out more about the Pioneer Tae Kwon Do Association – visit www.pioneerTKD.com

MPH: If Pioneer Tae kwon Do Association

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