

Sensei Says

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Ah, the Olympic Games! As Taekwondo makes its official Olympic debut this week, it brings back memories of 1988. That was the year Taekwondo was first a part of the Olympics, though only as a demonstration sport. There were eight weight classes for men and women (this year there are only four). Korea dominated the field and won gold in every category, except for one. That gold medal went to an American named Jimmy Kim. Jimmy is still talked about as being the greatest heavyweight the sport has ever seen. The speed of a lightweight in the body of heavyweight. His technique was as close to flawless as you ever see. He really was poetry in motion. So, how good was he? Well, consider that Olympic taekwondo is a full-contact sport. Points can only be scored by hitting the opponent with enough force to cause "trembling shock." Each match lasts for three, three-minute rounds. The ultimate goal is a knockout. So, how good was he? Jimmy crawled out of bed with the stomach flu and a high temperature to defeat all of his opponents, and win the Olympic gold medal.

I had the privilege to fight Jimmy two times during my career. The first was in the spring of 1987. Jimmy was the reigning world champion; I was walking with a limp from three consecutive roundhouse kicks to my knee during the Montana State Championships the weekend prior. Before the match my teacher said, "The only way to beat a world champion is to knock him out, otherwise the judges will give the decision to him." I believed my teacher... but he was wrong. At the end of the first round I buckled Jimmy over with a jump back kick to his stomach. The stunned referee didn't know what to do. Just as in boxing, the fight is over if the opponent doesn't recover within ten seconds. It took the referee about 15 seconds before he started to count. The end of the round came during a very slow ten-count. Jimmy worked hard to put on a good show in the second round trying to accumulate points. I had knocked out the world champion, but he still won the decision.

The next year was an Olympic year. To be invited to the Olympic Trials in 1988 you had to either be the defending national champion, the winner of the previous year's U.S. team trials, or place in the top four at the US Nationals. Being neither of the first two, most of us had only one chance - placing in the top four at the U.S. Nationals. Nationals is a single elimination tournament, meaning that if you lose one time you are finished. Each weight division is divided into four brackets. The winner of each bracket is guaranteed a spot at the trials. No two people from the same bracket can make the top four, regardless of how good they are. (This is a serious flaw with the system that athletes have complained about for decades.)

Three weeks prior to the Nationals I was in the best shape of my life - that's when I severely jammed my big toe! I couldn't jog, bounce, or stand on that leg to kick. My physical condition began to deteriorate; I wasn't sure I would even be able to fight. The first day I could bounce without intense pain was the day before the competition began. Unfortunately my muscles had slowed down from the decrease in training. But I was moving again! I breezed through my first three fights to make it to the quarterfinals, only one fight to go to make the Olympic Trials.

In order to avoid injury before the Olympic Trials, 15 of the 16 members of the U.S. team chose not to compete at the U.S. Nationals that year. Only one did. He was in my division. He was my next fight. He was Jimmy Kim.

Jimmy had taken a year off of school so he could train full-time at the Olympic training center in preparation for the Olympics. As for me, 1988 was to be my last year as an uchideshi (apprentice). I trained daily in karate, judo, hapkido, kendo, and, yes, taekwondo. I taught the kids' classes, cleaned the dojo, and was running nearly all of the day-to-day operations of my teacher's dojo. Jimmy made the sacrifices to be an Olympic champion; I made the sacrifices to be a sensei.

In the years since, I have been told by many top U.S. fighters that my fight with Jimmy that day was the best anyone gave him that year, even at the Olympics. I consider it to be the best fight of my life. No, I didn't win. It was losing that made it great. I was beaten by a truly great fighter at the prime of his career - but I made him fight for it.

- Alan Best