

Sensei Says

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Last issue I promised complete coverage of my recent trip to South Korea. That's a lot to cover in one column, so here is a recap of my first few days in what is known as the "land of the morning calm."

The trip started out on a good note. First, we received five bonus hours on the plane due to Seoul being fogged in. Next, we had a short trip to the hotel (okay, it was a hostel and the trip lasted 2 1/2 hours). Then, with ten full minutes in which to refresh ourselves and get dressed up, we went for a short bus ride to a banquet (2 1/2 more hours). Once there, we watched some beautiful demonstrations of Korean dance and Kumdo (sword fighting), ate authentic Korean food (our first meal in 14 hours), and got back on the bus to go back to the hostel. Traffic was light, so it only took about two hours to get back.

I won't torture you with any more horror stories of the bad accommodations and long bus rides. But, things did get worse. By the end of the first week some members of the group were actually overheard singing "Zippity Doo Dah" to keep their spirits up! Need I say more?

Korea is a wonderful place, and I don't want the poor planning of my trip to reflect on the places I visited. Unfortunately, it did sometimes make it hard to enjoy the beauty of the country.

The trip was sponsored by the Pan American Taekwondo Union. It was billed as a chance to complete an "official" Taekwondo Instructor's Certification Program and see the World Taekwondo Championships. For me, it just seemed like a great chance to finally see Korea. There were about 50 people on the trip, most of who came from South and Central America. I was one of only eight Americans. All of them were really great people to travel with, which was good, because I don't speak Spanish or Portuguese!

Our first day of training was with Kuk Hyun Chung. He is the most decorated taekwondo player ever - an Olympic gold medalist and five-time world champion (which is amazing, considering the world championships are only held every two years). Master Chung ran us through a typical workout for an athlete training for competition. We did three hours of footwork, kicking drills, speed practice, and partner practice. The main lesson I learned from the workout was that sport taekwondo training hasn't changed much since I quit competing ten years ago. Had they been there, all of my longtime students would have been familiar with every drill we did. It was a great workout, but, unfortunately, nothing was new. However, after the class was over I learned a new jump spinning kick from my friend Dennis Dallas!

The next training session was in Seoul at the Kukkiwon. Kukkiwon means, "institute for a national sport." It has been the seat of Taekwondo for almost thirty years, and it was wonderful to finally be there. Many great events have taken place at the Kukkiwon over the years. But, it was the toil and sweat of taekwondo practitioners, not the hard work of architects, that made it a historic place. As a building, it's not at all impressive. It is a big, cold, concrete building with a matted workout room, plastic spectator's seats, and a stark decor. There are offices and bathrooms along the concrete hallway that encircles the gym. What more do you need to practice taekwondo?

Okay, separate dressing rooms for the women would have been nice!

The Kukkiwon class covered taekwondo poomse (pronounced "poom say"), which is the Korean word for kata. What surprised me the most at this workout was the

number of people in our group who didn't participate because they don't do poomse anymore!

Many taekwondo practitioners in Korea and around the world have abandoned all traditional practice. They only do what is directly applicable to the modern sport of Olympic taekwondo sparring.

For the past ten or fifteen years I've been hearing people say that if you want to learn the sport of taekwondo you should train in Korea, but if you want to learn the martial art of taekwondo you should train in the United States. Unfortunately, now I think the statement is accurate.

In Korea, taekwondo has become a sport. Now, don't get me wrong. It is a sport that is rooted in the traditions of the martial arts. It emphasizes the values of courtesy and respect much more than your typical sport. But, deep down, it has become a sport.

Like most sports, it is practiced mainly by children. According to Richard Warwick, the Executive Director of the US Taekwondo Union, most children in Korea drop out of taekwondo at around 13 or 14 years of age, unless they are especially talented. Virtually no older adults practice taekwondo in Korea, except for those few that started when they were young and excelled at it.

It is, however, almost impossible to find a child who hasn't practiced taekwondo. They have after-school programs that bus the kids to the dojang (dojo in Korean). I saw children all over the place with their uniforms on. They wear them around town going to and from practice like any other sports uniform. We even saw a few kids in uniform during a great down-home meal at the Pizza Hut.

The training at the Kukkiwon was our last workout in Seoul, unless you count the late night shopping session in the famous shopping district of Itaewon where everyone will give you a deal!

The next day we hopped on a plane for beautiful Cheju Island, a popular spot for honeymooners and tourists — and the site of the World Taekwondo Championships.

To be continued ...

- Alan Best