

The Importance of Gaining Competition Experience

Wharfedale School of Martial Arts, Emelia May, writes about the ITF Union Open English Cup and the benefits of having such a competition of their doorstep.

Saturday 16th November 2019, 10 of my students and I went along to the ITFU competition. This is the 2nd ITFU Open Competition that TSX Martial Arts have hosted, however, the first one I've been able to attend.

It's unusual to have a national event on our doorstep. Most competitions are 2-3 hours away at least. This makes it difficult or puts many students/parents off entering and therefore, lose out on gaining the valuable learning.

Being held at the Richard Dunn Sports Centre allowed 6 areas to be running. With more areas a smooth continuous flow of events is more likely achieved and not so much hanging about. Also, the venue being in a central location close to the motorway for a quicker journey makes it easily accessible to those traveling from further afield. This meant competitors travelled from the Midlands, Manchester, Derbyshire, Liverpool, Nottinghamshire, Preston, and of course all of us that are local.

Now planned to be an annual ITF Union event hosted by TSX means greater opportunity for our students to embrace this field. With around 200 competing this time around, it has the potential to keep on growing.

TSX Martial Arts comprises of Master Chris Beanland, Mr Philip Downing and Mr Dave Fairley. I started my Taekwondo journey with Master Beanland, with Mr Downing then becoming my instructor, which means knowing them, their intentions and standards that I am happy to encourage my students to attend.

As a Taekwondo Instructor, I see incredible value in students making the competition world part of their journey, even if only to dip their toes in and have the experience once.

It's easy to get lost in the idea of winning medals and 'losing' if you don't get one! Whereas it's about being challenged so that you can; grow into your potential, understand yourself better (competition can bring out aspects you weren't aware of or that don't show themselves as much in class) and recognise where you can improve.

Not everyone likes the competition environment. The passion I have for teaching martial arts, both Taekwondo and Infinite Tai Chi as well as Meditation comes from a desire to assist students in being skilled, centred, able to 'keep space' around them and feel safe in all ways. Those who are confident in their ability to defend themselves physically and navigate/manage conflict are much more balanced and on the road to becoming the empowered peace bringers.

The competition environment and psychology of competing is fascinating and has the ability to facilitate this balance. Before competing, during and whilst coming away from competition are times to gain greater awareness of how the body reacts and responds both mentally and physically. All hold value in improving more and more each time. Figuring

yourself out is half the battle. It is also the nearest you can get to a self-defence situation and seeing how you respond to the adrenaline.

The unknown creates fear for the majority. The competitor is just another person in a dobok, but the mind likes to play tricks and creates stories. It is in facing the unknown that one learns most about themselves.

Aristotle once said, "Knowing yourself is the beginning of all wisdom".

During and after the competition I observed and discussed with others their stories and reactions.

In writing this piece and sharing the observations and conversations I am hoping students will realise that **everyone** has their own disposition and that their reasons for; competing, never competing again, returning to compete again etc all come from various perspectives and mind sets.

For me, I don't like to compete, if I am competing it's because I know I shall benefit from doing so. Nerves build and build and all I think about is just getting it over with. "let's just get on the mat and back off the mat" is the dialogue in my head. I prefer to do patterns, however, ironically, the medals I have are for sparring.

Most students have a preference. The 'spot light' of patterns makes people incredible nervous. Being watched and the idea of making a mistake is highly daunting for the majority. Talking to my students before the competition and discussing the benefits, I was saying that really there is no reason why everyone couldn't stand and do a pattern. After all they do them in grading and that they know they won't get physically hurt. I said, "In fact the worst that could happen is that your ego is hurt" to which one of my students replied, "but Miss, that's pretty bad". She then went on to say that when she competed, she finished the pattern facing the wrong way and that she was never doing that again! Officials see this, due to competitors simply losing their bearings and making a wrong turn. Which then becomes the beauty of competing and practising a greater level of focus, concentration and of being in the moment. Skill acquisition indeed.

Master Beanland says, "It took a while to start winning at patterns as there is a technique to winning with them." Master Beanland first competed as a Green belt, age 22. Entering patterns, sparring and breaking and won the breaking. Over the years he has continued to compete and still does when he can.

Other experiences were.....

"At my first competition, I didn't win but had an amazing time, learning and pushing myself out of my comfort zone. I like the challenge and feel good for having risen to the challenge. All morning I think, what am I doing, panic, and then after I am on a high for having done it. I like that I can get over the panic and do something that most people don't. I also love the team spirit and camaraderie of competition and feel an increase in confidence each time".

Another student says, "Before, I can feel I am nervous. My tummy feels nervous and I feel sick, but I know I'm not going to be sick. I practise a bit before patterns and start to feel more nervous just before going on. I hate patterns so just want to get it done. I don't like being

watched and seen getting it wrong. With sparring I want to win. I find myself thinking the other person is being cocky and so I get annoyed. I don't want to hurt them but want to score the points and win".

One Instructor has done loads of competitions from a junior through to adult. He found adults were being too egotistical when he fought them as a junior, as though they went hard so as not to lose. Now he finds he can just 'hone' in. The bigger they are the more focused he is.

He says, "I get nervous the night before, my mind says I am going to die and get myself killed. I do patterns to get my feet of the mats. I go into fight mode when sparring. I want to take on the biggest, broadest tank of a guy. I get this serpent stare and want to get stuck in. However, I have also experienced the 'flow'. I always seem to feel calm and composed when sparring. I've learned that I deal with things under pressure. I'm not a team player (goalie in football) and find success with one on one. In life it appears the same, the bigger the challenge the more success. I have an, I'll show you attitude".

Then I spoke with one who didn't realise they were competitive. They realised that they look at competitions as a place to see how good they are and feel 'miffed' if they are not challenged or don't do what they know they are capable of.

Within competitions there are too many variations and experiences to name and write about here. I'd just like to say, that each time skills are advanced.

On the physical side - The drills, the physical skills, the endurance and fitness are challenged. Pattern comprehension, technical ability and performance standard increases. Knowing where you were challenged and what to work on back in class is key.

On the emotional side - Controlling the emotions and understanding the role of adrenaline on how you feel, react, respond is essential learning.

On the mental side - seeing the 'mind games', noticing how you talk to yourself, creating untruths that are self-sabotaging. Or what the mind says to switch you on to win.

Finally.....

We never get there. The journey within taekwondo means we are constantly learning and there is always a platform that will push you 'out of your comfort zone' towards growing and advancing. Competition's create opportunities for students to; learn to umpire, referee, coach, run a ring, run a competition, learn the variations in styles/rules/ways and so on. The list is extensive.

And, of course to 'give back' to the art that is Taekwondo.

To share the love, passion and gift that it is.

Emelia May ~ 17/11/2019

