

## My Taekwondo Story

I came to taekwondo rather late in life. I never thought of myself as a fighter rather more of a peacemaker and facilitator. I had played many American sports growing up, mostly basketball my favorite. When I was 46 or so, my wife began practicing aikido. She would come home and say, "Let me show you this!" I finally began taking aikido in order to defend myself against her! While aikido has a defensive philosophy, one practices dynamically with a partner. One night I was thrown awkwardly and was injured and on crutches for several weeks. About that time some of my colleagues at the university invited me to come to taekwondo. At the time I could barely touch my knees bending over, and although I'd run two ten mile races, was not in good shape.

My training began slowly. I teach at university and consult so I have a busy schedule with lots of travel. Gradually I began coming more often. I enjoyed the discipline, the exercise, the people, and the increased confidence I felt after training. I remember very well the red belt who taught my wife and me our first taekwondo class. Over the years, I came as often as I could, not nearly as much as many, but I continued to come. Red belt seemed SO far away, black almost impossible. I saw some of my new friends advance. I remember our chief instructor's first dan test when he gave his age in hexadecimal and my friend Gilbert's first class teaching adults. Gilbert's wife, Theresa, is tiny but she would kill us in class.

After nine years, in August, 2006, I received a letter from the kyosanim inviting me to test for first dan. It came as a shock and a surprise, but I was elated. It was one of my major goals in life and finally it was coming up soon. Kyosanim John also invited me to train with Master Kwon in Portland, Oregon, and I agreed to go. But first I had several professional activities involving my responsibilities in our MBA program and with my consulting clients.

On September 2, 2006, I was in Istanbul, Turkey. I had completed two days of consulting for a client and had spent an additional day sightseeing. The Topkapi Palace and the Blue Mosque were amazing. That evening out walking I was descending a flight of stairs and suddenly, my legs simply gave way. I heard a loud "pop, pop, pop" and my right knee collapsed. As I tried to catch myself with my left leg, it too collapsed. I was lying flat out, in a lot of pain, unable to move, and no one spoke English.

Eventually some bystanders sent me to a hospital. The next day the orthopedic surgeon did an MRI and confirmed that I had ruptured both quadriceps tendons. We agreed I would return home for the surgery. He fitted me with locking leg braces so I could with the help of a walker and pain pills "walk" stiff legged for a few steps. After two and a half days, I got home and saw my orthopedist. He had a busy schedule, so I had to wait a week for surgery; that was the longest week of my life waiting and realizing that every passing minute things were getting worse.

I'd never heard of this kind of injury before, so I searched on the web. I couldn't find much, so I began to post a diary/blog of my experiences hoping it would help others. About ten others worldwide contacted me with similar stories. One man ruptured his walking down a slope on a golf course. Another ruptured his playing tennis. Another did his simply by stepping off a curb. My experiences with some photos and background data living with this accident are presented in some detail at:

[http://faculty.darden.virginia.edu/clawsonj/HTML%20DATA%20and%20LINKs/Bilateral\\_Quad\\_Tear\\_Blog.htm](http://faculty.darden.virginia.edu/clawsonj/HTML%20DATA%20and%20LINKs/Bilateral_Quad_Tear_Blog.htm).

The doctors had to drill holes in my kneecaps, tap in titanium loops, and then suture my quadriceps muscles back down to my kneecaps. My doctor said it was a little like trying to connect the ends of two mops, just loose strands of tendon and muscle all over the place.

I was very sad that I could not visit Master Kwon's dojang in Oregon. Further, I could not test in October as planned. I spent the month of September and October in a hospital bed in my living room, very slowly learning to walk again. My legs were very weak and I was terrified of rupturing the repairs. My wife, Susan, was an absolute angel during this period. She was patient, attentive, kind, generous, enduring, persistent, good humored, cheerful, and an absolute god send. We grew very close during this period. I taught some of my classes from a wheelchair, some from my bedside, some on my leg braces. I came to both love and hate those braces. You couldn't take them off at night lest you twitch and tear the repairs so I hated them. At the same time, they allowed me to stand and begin to move around, so I loved them. I tried to keep my arms strong by doing 65 repetitions with an 18 pound bar every morning. That felt good, but I could tell that my legs continued to atrophy.

I went with my leg braces and walking sticks to the October testing when Master Kwon came and felt very sad that I could not test with the five or six people in my cohort. While watching in the lobby, I tried to do the hand techniques he was demonstrating, but it was SO frustrating. In November, I took my first ride in a car sitting up. Until then, I couldn't bend my legs enough to get into a car.

I began going to taekwondo classes occasionally with my leg braces on. I had been to class several years before when I'd had shoulder surgery for a torn rotator cuff in a sling, so I knew one COULD if you were careful, just do what you can. It's hard to remember that when you're in class and trying to keep up. With my braces and walking sticks, I'd stay in the back of the class and just do little movements with straight legs. I couldn't twist or turn or jump at all. My range of motion in my knees gradually improved from fifteen degrees up towards 120 degrees.

Gradually, with the help of my rehabilitation services (Kevin and Lisa), my legs got stronger and I found I could do more in class. By February, I was able to walk without my braces, but whenever I trained in taekwondo, I put them back on for fear of re-tearing the injuries. Again, I hated the feel of those braces, but loved them because with them I could train with much less fear. By this time I was able to play again some limited golf, another sport I enjoy a lot.

Susan came with me on several consulting trips, one to Cairo, to help with my bags and to ensure I didn't do something stupid. Her support physically and emotionally were invaluable to me during this period. I was blessed and fortunate to find such a wonderful companion in life.

Master Kwon came again in the spring, and I was hopeful, but no message came. I came to the training in my braces and did what I could. I decided to leave when they did a bunch of exercises on their knees. That was just not possible. Plus, I was in such poor condition after all the bed rest, I couldn't keep up.

But I went, and I did what I could. Master Kwon was kind enough to come shake my hand and sign my red belt. The scars on my knees were still an ugly purple at that time.

I continued to train as much as I could while resuming my teaching and consulting practice. I'd fallen way behind, so we didn't take a vacation this past summer—perhaps that was a mistake. My summer executive education and consulting travel continued. In August, I turned sixty. Then in September, Kyosanim John asked if I was going to be here when Master Kwon came on October 28<sup>th</sup>. I said I was, but that I had committed to be in the Middle East for the ten days immediately prior. A week before I left, he told me they were planning on my testing. All of the instructors in the school have been very kind to me and encouraged me to only do what I can do and not too much. As I noted, that's a challenge, **and** good wisdom.

I arrived home from Dubai on Saturday the 27<sup>th</sup>, and spent the afternoon doing errands with my wife, getting reacquainted. The next morning, I arrived at the dojang after the first hour (with the young students) thinking I was not strong enough to do all three-four hours of training. I had not yet done any double class days since the surgery. I fell in and in due time Master Kwon asked me to come forward. Perhaps you all remember that feeling of intense focus, of how your senses dial up, and you become at the same time tight and calm, intense and relaxed. Sometimes instructions register, sometimes they don't, sometimes you hear them but forget to acknowledge them.

My test included seven breaks, three with free fighting techniques. I had not yet broken post-surgery with tolyo-chagi since I wasn't sure how strong the kneecaps were, but I felt confident with pandaes. In fact, a month before I'd broken five boards in pandaes speed breaks in a class with Kyosanim John. Perhaps then, he was testing to see if I could. At any rate, the first three breaks all went fine. Master Kwon set up a ka-pek test with a middle punch in front, an elbow behind, and down punch through two boards on the floor. He asked me to show and then asked me to kneel for the down punch, but I still couldn't and can't kneel, so I just went down to within a couple of inches of the floor without actually touching. I showed three times until the spacing was right and Master Kwon was satisfied. The double board on the floor would be tough, I knew, and I didn't want to do it more than once, so I steeled myself to hit just beyond the boards but not hit the floor. I kiyupped on all three breaks, 1, 2, 3, and fortunately, all went well.

It was a tender moment for my wife as she was terrified I would re-injure myself. When the test was over she burst into tears. I, too, felt weepy realizing how long the path had been, and how many times I never thought I would be able to continue to progress. For a bullied, geeky school boy, getting a black belt was a very big deal. Master Kwon was kind.

### **Why I practice taekwondo**

After my test, Grand Master Kwon asked me in front of the group why I practiced taekwondo. My mind was still reeling from the test and focused on that psycho-physical zone which we sometimes get into, so I said something rather inane and senseless. After thinking about this more, I wanted to write a more coherent answer.

*I practice taekwondo because of the way it makes me feel.*

First, I feel humble because everywhere around me are people who can do the techniques or exercises better than I can. Training with Master Kwon in New York was the hardest physical thing I've ever done—and I've climbed mountains and played various sports since I was small. Second, I feel proud because I haven't given up and I'm still there and learning. Third, I feel amazed because in most classes I see something I've never seen before. Fourth, I feel cautious because I've been taught the hard way you can hurt yourself or others if you're not careful. Fifth, I feel fitter. After training, I feel physically more capable. Sixth, I feel better posture. Taekwondo teaches me to stand up straight, to look straight, and to hold my body in balance. Seventh, I feel connected, part of a community. I've met a wide variety of interesting and engaging people at taekwondo who are all more or less dedicated to the same kind of training. Eighth, I feel intrigued. What new thing will they come up with next? Taekwondo is ever-changing and evolving and that stimulates my brain and intellect. Ninth, I feel confident. As a child I was emotionally timid and often felt bullied by others. Now, while I don't look for dangerous situations at all, I feel more capable of dealing with others regardless of the situation. Finally, I feel calm. Taekwondo calms my mind and my body and helps me maintain a balance between the professional, physical, personal, emotional, and social worlds. This is why I practice taekwondo, because of how it makes me feel.

I don't know if this small part of my story will help you in any way in your training and enjoyment of taekwondo. If it helps even a tiny bit, I'll be happy. I hope that your training wherever you are will be blessed with the kind of friends, colleagues, instructors, and companions that I have enjoyed. And that if adversity crosses your path, you'll take heart and resolve to continue by doing what you can. It never stops. In one of the breaks during my test, an outside left hand jakusudo, I tore something in my left shoulder. It looks like I'll have to have it repaired. When I do, I'll have surgery zipper scars on all four corners, both shoulders and both knees. And then I'll be ready to train at full speed again.

Respectfully,



Jim Clawson

Web: <http://faculty.darden.virginia.edu/clawsonj>

e-mail: [JimClawson@virginia.edu](mailto:JimClawson@virginia.edu)