

Master

by Steve Proctor



Raymond O'Neill

TKD-KMA: Firstly, many congratulations on your recent promotion to Master, how did you prepare for your examination?

Master Raymond O'Neill: Thank you. This promotion marked such a significant step in my Taekwon-Do life, so much so that I can honestly say that preparation for it began many years ago. GM Rhee, who I'm so proud to call my instructor has said to me before, there are those who hold the rank of 7th Dan but will never be Taekwon-Do Masters because they often don't understand what the word 'Master' means, it's not just a title it's a responsibility. Because of this I didn't just want to be a 7th Dan, I wanted to be a 'Master' too, and I have taken on board everything that GM Rhee has taught me, it hasn't been an easy ride, he is an impeccable teacher and will correct you on the slightest flaw, I don't mean just technically, but also in the way we present ourselves and the way we behave and act, this in the end has helped me become better at what I believe the Title 'Master' represents, and I have continued to study and will do my best to get things done correctly. As for the grading itself, how does one prepare for the unknown? never really knowing what your Grand Master will ask you to do, I'd practiced all the 24 Patterns, practiced many 3 & 4 target dynamic multi-breaks, and some hefty power breaking feats, mind you on the day my head was filled with so much emotion the sudden realization of what it was I was going for and who I was in front of. I have performed in front of GM Rhee on my own for so many years in the past without so much of a worry, however that day was something that will change me forever. The grading went fine apart from a few hiccups, after which the announcement was made, I quickly thanked my Grand Master personally, and had to leave to shed a few tears.

TKD-KMA: When did you start and why Taekwon-Do?

Master Raymond O'Neill: I started on Wednesday 13th September 1978, a day I remember so very well. I was very asthmatic at school and was unable to get involved in sport or PE, therefore I was the puny weakling, always the butt of every ones jokes, always the one to be picked on and bullied. At that time I could see no way of improving my lifestyle. Soon after leaving School I had hoped the bullying had fin-

ished, until one day after a local disco I was jumped on by a gang of 6 or 7 people, and for no apparent reason they decided that I was easy prey for them. As a result of this I vowed that this would never happen again, yet how was I, being such a 'Wimp' going to change my life. I remember being in the Boscombe Down Air Cadets when I glanced across at the RAF Gym, and saw people kicking about in white suits, Kung Fu, Karate, who knows? It really didn't matter to me at the time, it was at that moment I realised that this was the way I could change my life. I walked in and to my surprise the instructor was a fellow sergeant in the Air Cadets, he said hello Ray and asked me what I wanted, I said I want to join this Martial art and become a Black belt, (Quite a statement for such a so-called wimp) looking for a name I read the name TAEKWON-DO on the back of a jacket. He said to me "Ray, you'll never last in this art", funny that history now proves otherwise. From that day forward Taekwon-Do changed my life completely. I also vowed I would never be the victim of bullies or violence anymore and to this day I have upheld that statement.



A Master at last, standing with Master and Mentor Grand Master Rhee Ki Ha



TKD-KMA: Have you ever considered studying an alternative Martial Art?

Master Raymond O'Neill: As I said in the beginning, it really didn't matter what style of Martial art it was, but I soon began to realise that for once in my life I was good at something, and I was really adapting well to Taekwon-Do, I guess it true to say that had it have been 'Kung-Fu' or 'Karate' I would still be doing that instead. Over the years however I have been so impressed with what I could achieve through Taekwon-Do, the dynamics of the kicks really impressed me. I can remember saying to one fellow student that when I was in the Air Cadets I wanted to get my pilots license, my fellow student replied by saying "You've got one in Taekwon-Do", as I was forever flying through the air. As for studying other Martial Arts, it's true to say that I have been so satisfied with Taekwon-Do, my need for a different style has not been in such a way to waver my path. I do however respect all Martial arts, and feel that every martial art is good for what they are and what they are designed for; often it's the case that it's the practitioner that will either give an art credit or discredit. As our Grand Master said, we are all flowers in the same garden, to me the rose is Taekwon-Do, perhaps to others the rose is Karate or Kung-Fu, never-the-less, it is true to say that without each other none of us would appreciate what we have.

TKD-KMA: What has been your motivation to devote so much of your life to Taekwon-Do?

Master Raymond O'Neill: My motivation has been that I simply had to find a way to change my life, I set myself goals, each one striving without fail to achieve, in addition to that my motivation dramatically improved when I first met GM Rhee, until then I trained with the Premier Taekwon-Do Association under Murray Walker who at that time 1978 was a 4th Dan, I remember watching him at my first grading, he started to spar with my Instructor and a few other Black belts, he gave them a real bashing, not sure at that time whether I was impressed or concerned as to why he felt it was necessary to do such a thing, anyway; soon after that we were told we were going to join the UKTA, and our next grading would be with a 7th Dan Master. When I first saw GM Rhee then a 7th Dan, I was simply bowled over, he inspired me and motivated me further, and made me even more so determined to reach my goals. Since becoming an instructor in 1981 as a RED belt, I began to enjoy the benefits of seeing others progress and enjoy the art as I do, and often witnessed how Taekwon-Do changes the lives of people, in most cases it's always been for the better, be it confidence, school education, social life etc, this too has motivated me to continue to offer quality Taekwon-Do to anyone.

TKD-KMA: How have you seen Taekwon-Do change over the past 20 years?

Master Raymond O'Neill: 25 years in fact, very dramatically. Taekwon-Do is so much alive, by that I mean that during most of my Taekwon-Do life the Founder Gen Choi has been alive and well, thus forever improving Taekwon-Do, I have been fortunate to always keep photo's and video's of my training years right back from the start, when I look back I cannot believe the way I used to train, and how far Taekwon-Do has moved on, often people have said that Taekwon-Do is difficult to learn because it's always changing, I try to educate them in realising that it's not 'Change', it's 'Improvement'. I am aware that in my day the average instructor was barely above 2nd Dan, nowadays students are fortunate to have 4th, 5th, 6th Dan's, and even 'Masters' as instructors, thus students today are far superior than we were in my day simply because the education standard is much higher. I often say that in my day as a colour belt 1978 - 1983 we were taught Taekwon-Do at a Primary Education level, whereas today instructors are offering Taekwon-Do at a University Education level, I know that Yellow belts today can perform and are educated in Taekwon-Do far better than I ever was as a yellow belt, this is not to discredit my early instructors, merely to say that the level of instructors, education & understanding has vastly improved.

TKD-KMA: Now that the work of Taekwon-Do pioneering Masters is complete, what role do you see for the next generation of Masters doing?

Master Raymond O'Neill: That's a good question, I know what I would like to see, Our Grand Master Rhee has taught us so well, so much so that especially within the UKTA he has taught us to a level that will ensure the future of our beloved



Flying twin front kick breaking two boards simultaneously

Ray breaking 4 1inch pine boards

Impressive 3 slab knifehand strike.

association. Trouble is we have a Grand Master who won't ever stop, and won't ever slow down, or relax, we keep telling him to sit back and relax and let us do some of the work, but he's stubborn and continues to work relentlessly, this is the spirit of Taekwon-Do that he inspires us so much with. But back to the question, I would like to be able to say that the next generation of Masters would be able to continue the work of our beloved founder Gen Choi, in maintaining the integrity of Taekwon-Do. I now do Taekwon-Do Full time, but have spent many years in business management, I know the benefit of investing in the people, and I feel that certain Masters have certain qualities that will benefit students in different ways, I feel that we need to harness these qualities and allow them to exercise them. Some Masters have spent a great deal of time around coaching & tournaments, these would be the best ones to educate the members on tournament rules etc, others are more technically minded, so therefore can educate members on Blackbelt course and or Instructors courses etc. I do feel that we cannot expect our Grand Masters to continue on their own, invest in the talents of those you have, will unsure quality and utmost integrity is upheld, after all their Blood is ours too.

TKD-KMA: What are your thoughts on the sad passing of the founder and the subsequent situation with the ITF?

Master Raymond O'Neill: The 15th June 2002 was a sad

day for everyone who studies Taekwon-Do; the loss of the founder was a great one to all. Fortunately I had the benefit of meeting the founder on numerous occasions, I feel sad for those who never had the chance to meet him. Sadly since his passing many paths have been taken, whereas we were all in the same train going in the same direction, it now seems that many have taken their own trains to separate destinations, although I'm sure that each train deep down wants to uphold the integrity of our late Gen Choi in their own way. As far as the ITF is concerned, which ITF? It seems there are now three of them, to me there is still only one, and this has been maintained with honor since it's formation on the 22nd March 1966 by the unshakable loyalty of our Grand Master Rhee Ki Ha to the uphold our Founders last wishes. I'm aware that there is much work to be done, but as in business fresh blood brings new hope, and I'm sure that following the wishes of Gen Choi, Mr. Chang Ug, along with our Great Grand Masters led by Grand Master Rhee Ki Ha, will ensure the ITF remains fruitful. "Though I may be crucified a thousand times, I will only serve one Master", this is a saying that has sprung to mind several times in my Taekwon-Do life, each occasion I have been asked to join other groups, my Loyalty to my Grand Master, is as his was to Gen Choi, because of this I have peace of mind that the ITF will again go from strength to strength, even though it has suffered recently.

TKD-KMA: Who has been your biggest influence in past years?



The ultimate in Taekwon-Do kicking
'The Split Kick'

Master Raymond O'Neill: I guess in my Taekwon-Do life many people have influenced me, My Instructors for one namely Steven Haskins, Lenny Pritchard & John Lyczba, then for many years I was helped by Master Raymond Choy, he influenced me tremendously and still to this day I have a great deal of respect for him, Master Paul Cutler, Master Orello Ellis and Tim Helstrip have all influenced me a great deal in my Taekwon-Do Life, but it goes without saying that Grand Master Rhee Ki Ha has been the biggest influence on me and I'm sure on others too.

TKD-KMA: To someone without any previous knowledge of Taekwon-Do or Martial Arts, what would you consider the main benefits are?

Master Raymond O'Neill: Ah! You want me to utilize my Sales & Marketing skills! Well Martial Arts as a whole offer excellent benefits, I don't really feel that it matters what style of Martial Art you study, as I said earlier all martial arts are good, so the benefits too are also good. Some of the benefits for beginners are entering a friendly environment where no matter who you are or what you are, you will be treated as equal, and with respect. It's true to say that many students benefit in different ways, some it has proven to give a new direction in a meaningless life, some it's helped school education improve, some it's self esteem in the realisation that results can be achieved with work, some the confidence to go out and enjoy a social life from a once sheltered life, some the benefit of being part of a recognized organization with prospects of a long future, some it starts off as a method of excitement, then turns into something more meaningful, some simply a place to make friends. Its also true to say that the biggest benefit is the impact it makes on you, I have never met anyone who has practiced a martial art for how ever long, fail to mention it with pride.

TKD-KMA: Are their any personal ambitions you still would like to achieve?

Master Raymond O'Neill: To be honest I would love to be able to teach more overseas, and even more nationally within my own association, I have been abroad several times with Taekwon-Do and have seen the need for Quality Taekwon-Do abroad, many places have not had the privilege we have had in being taught by such a great Grand Master, thus in Taekwon-Do our education is often superior in aspects of technical awareness, Taekwon-Do Knowledge and being martial artists. We have a great deal to offer, I personally would like to pass on the knowledge I have been given to others more widely than perhaps mostly just my area.

TKD-KMA: Any final last thoughts?

Master Raymond O'Neill: If I may quote my Grand Master by saying, "Life is short - Art is Long!" with that in mind I'll finish by saying that although we have lost our Founder Gen Choi Hong Hi, it is true to say that his spirit still flows in the Oceans that supply the Rivers that fill our Schools, to this end - Taekwon-Do will live forever.

Thank You.



Master O'Neill 7th Dan