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ON THE HILL

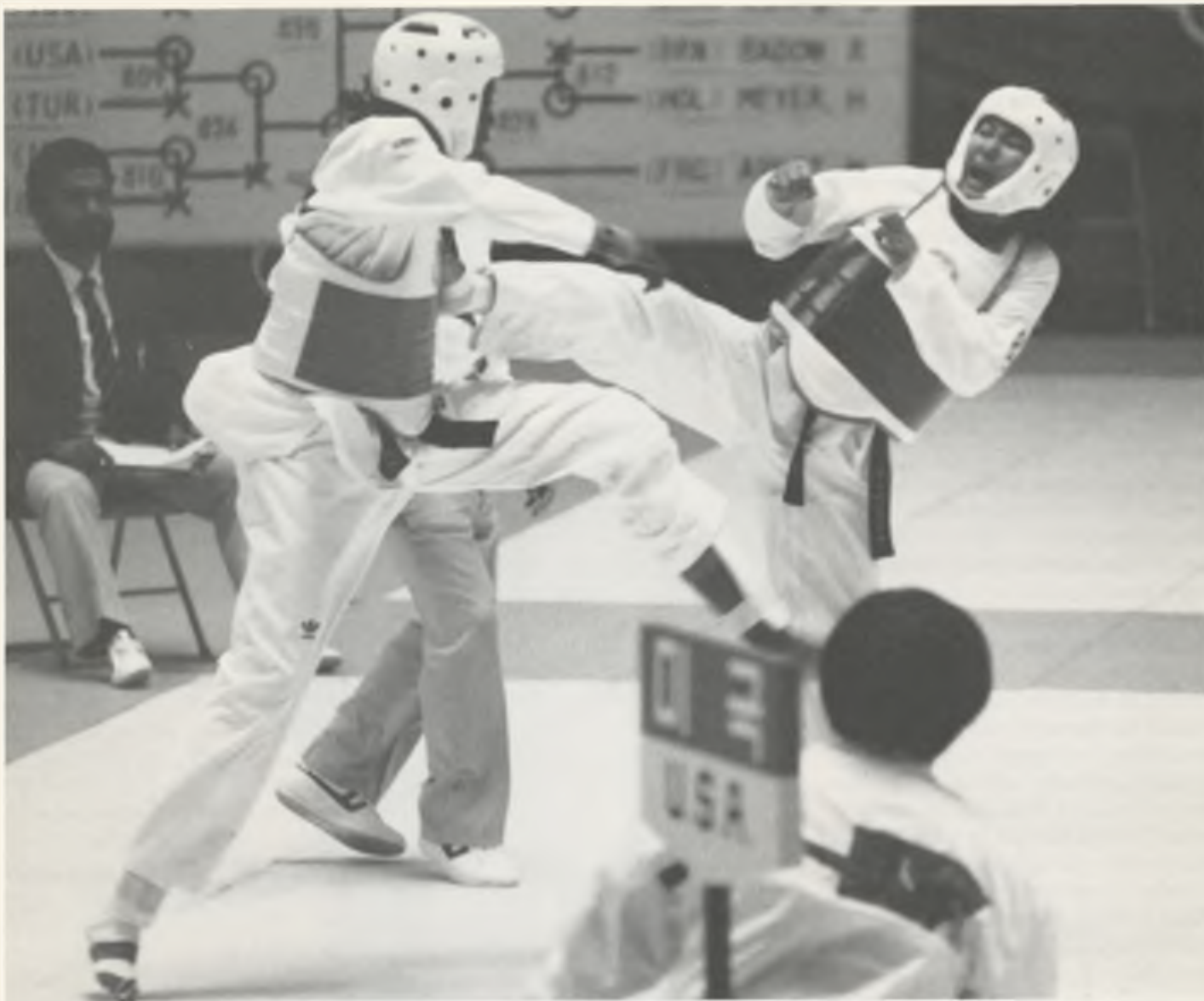
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“Howard University’s is the top taekwondo program in the U.S. No question about it. That’s not my word; it’s the word of the taekwondo coaches and instructors in the U.S.”



Dong Ja Yang

THE MAGNIFICENT OBSESSION OF DONG JA YANG



Love in action at the Olympics.

By Harriet Jackson Scarupa

Dong Ja Yang walks into his office in Howard's John H. Burr physical education building dressed in a conservative dark business suit and carrying the requisite attaché case. He checks over some phone messages and reviews some papers on his desk, looking very much like any mid-level bureaucrat in any office in the nation's capital.

Fifteen minutes later, he's dressed in his real work clothes: a loose white cotton v-neck shirt and white cotton pants worn with a wide black belt. And he's carried that now incongruous-looking attaché case into his real workplace: a closed-off space on the other side of a basketball court with a thick navy mat on the floor and

sky blue padded walls on the sides.

His work clothes are called a *dobok*, Korean for the pajama-like uniform worn in taekwondo, Korea's traditional martial art, and his elaborate belt serves notice that he has achieved almost the highest mastery possible (eighth degree) in this art. His workplace is called a *dojang*, Korean for training hall, and it's here he teaches the kicking and punching techniques that are so essential in taekwondo.

But taekwondo isn't really about kicking and punching, as he and his "disciples" will tell you again and again. It's about discipline and control and patience and persistence and respect . . . But that's getting ahead of the story.

This morning this *dojang* is the set-

ting for a class in elementary taekwondo, a one-credit course offered through Howard's physical education and recreation department.

In the beginning, the class looks little different from any calisthenics session with students doing jumping jacks, arm circles, push-ups, stretches, running in place. Then, to the accompaniment of a medley of guttural yells and rhythmic counting in Korean, they practice kicking and punching in the air against imaginary opponents as a stoic-faced Yang calls out commands, suggestions, observations:

"Hold the position so you can develop balance and form . . . Try to keep your body in a straight line . . . Try to keep the form . . . Extend your

walking stance properly . . . How fast you kick is not important now. You must go through the whole sequence. Speed and power come later."

Occasionally, he demonstrates a movement himself, swooping a leg towards the ceiling with a grace that seems to belie his stocky build, or stops to correct the line of a student's kick in much the same way a ballet teacher would in a different kind of *dojang* (a dance studio).

8 After asking the students to review the eight different kicks they have learned, he pauses to review something else. "At the beginning of class we bow," he says. "Why? To show courtesy, respect. Taekwondo means respect. At end of class we bow: student appreciates teacher; teacher appreciates student; we appreciate the experience."

That said, he bows to the students and they bow to him.

After class, John Butler, a freshman from Los Angeles, practices his back kicks. Glistening with sweat and breathless from exertion, he pauses to speak of why he signed up for the class. "I always liked martial arts," he says. "I was a Bruce Lee fan from way back when. But I didn't really have a chance to take taekwondo in L.A. Then I heard Professor Yang was on the Olympic Committee and that he was really good and a lot of people were telling me this was a really good class to get into, so I said, 'Let me check it out.'

"When I got here and I saw what the class was like I really liked it. And it helps my studies. After I leave here I'm basically all energetic and ready to go to my next class. Normally, I'd be half asleep in the morning. Now my mind's focused."

Those, like Butler, who enroll in Yang's elementary taekwondo class learn the basics of punching, kicking, blocking, moving. In the last three weeks of the semester they get the chance to try out these skills in actual matches. Then their *doboks* will get some new additions: plastic helmets, padded chest, shin and forearm protectors and, for men, cups. It's the same type of gear that is worn today in competition all over the world.

Taekwondo beginners wear no belts with their *doboks*. As they increase



Holloway in action at the Olympics.

their skills, they earn variously colored belts, culminating in the prized black belt.

Sport and Art

Taekwondo, which literally means the art of fighting (do) with the feet (tae) and hands (kwon), originated in Korea 2,300 years ago. A fighter wins points in a match by delivering "trembling shocks" with the feet, and less frequently, with the hands.

Because 80 percent of the blows in taekwondo consist of kicks, and 20 percent of punches, it has been described as a kind of Golden Gloves of the feet.

Because of the mental concentration and cunning required, it has been described as a kind of physical chess.

And because of the elaborate rituals of courtesy and respect integrated into competition, it has been described as "nice" fighting.

But it is fighting nonetheless. In a taekwondo bout, opponents start out facing each other, their feet in a wide stance, their fists at the ready. What follows: they bounce on the balls of their feet in a kind of taunting dance, go into tight clenches to prevent each other from scoring, kick and punch with hurling force as each seeks to overpower the other, while the air resounds with piercing *kihaps* (yells) and the drumming of bare fists and feet against pad. A typical nine-minute fight (composed of three-minute rounds) leaves even the most well-trained athlete exhausted.

Today taekwondo is practiced in more than 100 countries in the world. "In the last ten years taekwondo no longer belongs to one nationality or one group of people having the same physical appearance," says Yang, a native of Korea who is now a U.S. citizen. "It is a universal sport."

In the U.S., where it was first introduced in the late 1950s, it has become the most popular of the martial arts, with more practitioners than karate or judo (which originated in Japan) or kungfu of Bruce Lee fame (which originated in China), he says. Elaborating on how these martial arts differ, he adds, "It's like speaking of a 'ball game.' You play baseball with a ball. You play basketball with a ball. You play football with a ball. You play vol-

leyball with a ball. But they're all very different. Karate, for instance, uses far more punching than taekwondo."

Championing Taekwondo

Explaining what taekwondo is and how it has expanded from the land of its origins comes naturally to Dong Ja Yang.

For this ever-polite, low-keyed assistant professor of physical education at Howard University is one of the world's foremost authorities on and popularizers of the sport.

Indeed, he has been instrumental in heightening the visibility of taekwondo and establishing the rules and standards of the sport/martial art not only in the U.S. but throughout the Western hemisphere. This he has done via holding such influential posts as president of the United States Taekwondo Union, the governing body of taekwondo in the U.S.; president of the Pan American Taekwondo Union, which plays the same role for 38 countries in North, Central and South America and the Caribbean; a member of the executive council and chairman of the legislative committee of the World Taekwondo Federation, the international taekwondo governing organization under the International Olympic Committee; and a member of the executive board and of the international relations committee of the United States Olympic Committee.

Among the specifics of his activities in behalf of these organizations:

□ He presented lectures and seminars at 69 U.S. colleges and universities on how to establish taekwondo programs in physical education departments and as part of students' extracurricular activities.

□ He traveled to 35 Pan American countries, some more than once, to provide guidance on developing taekwondo programs and to conduct technical seminars on the sport.

□ He directed and served as the chief technical authority for the taekwondo competition in the 1987 Pan American Games held in Indianapolis, the first time the martial art was included in such games.

□ He drafted and edited the constitution and bylaws of the United States Taekwondo Union and its official handbook on the rules and regulations

for competition and authored a frank report on the status of taekwondo in countries in the Western hemisphere for the World Taekwondo Federation.

But it's been his persistent lobbying for taekwondo to be included in the most prominent sports arena in the world—the Olympic Games—that has most cemented his reputation as a key promoter/advocate for the sport.

"Through his selfless efforts and devotion to the sport he was instrumental in having it become on the program of the Pan American Games and also an Olympic sport," says Col. M. Donald Miller, president of the United States Olympic Foundation and a former executive director of the United States Olympic Committee (USOC).

Likewise, Alfredo LaMont, USOC division director for international relations and protocol, credits the Howard professor—in concert with Korea's Un Yong Kim, president of the World Taekwondo Federation—with being responsible for the International Olympic Committee's decision to include taekwondo in the program of the Olympic Games last September in Seoul.

Taekwondo made its Olympic debut as a "demonstration sport," which means that the medals won by competitors could not be tallied in countries' totals. But the very inclusion of taekwondo in the Olympics at all marked an important milestone in Yang's long crusade to gain the stamp of international recognition for the sport he first studied—and loved—as a five-year-old in Pusan, South Korea's second largest city.

It was a love he carried through elementary and high school; through Kung Hee University, where he earned his bachelor's and master's degrees in physical education; through the University of Iowa, which he entered in 1966 to do further study; through his 21 years at Howard, where he joined the faculty of the College of Liberal Arts' physical education and recreation department to teach taekwondo and judo, and has since put the university on the map as one of the nation's "premier training sites for taekwondo," as journalists are wont to write. It was a love, too, he passed on to countless Howard students and to

his own four children as well. His two daughters are Howard alumni; one son is a Howard junior, the other a high school senior. All hold black belts in taekwondo.

Has taekwondo become an obsession for Dong Ja Yang? "Well, it depends on how you use 'obsession,'" observes LaMont. "Most people will use 'obsession' in a negative context. I would say, 'Yes, it is an obsession, but in a positive way.'"

10 Producing Champions

If it's an obsession, maybe it's all the fault of the tiger.

Yang talks about the tiger—and a lot of other things—in his trophy-filled Howard office one afternoon. His manner is courtly, his speaking style formal, his accent especially noticeable whenever he tackles a word beginning with "r" or "v," his aura one of a man for whom doubt has no meaning.

"There is a saying in Korea," he says, " 'The tiger leaves skin when he dies. You as a man what would you leave?' That's always in the mind of people of Korea.

"I'm a physical education educator and a sports oriented individual. I value very highly what sports can contribute to the betterment of human life. So, as a physical education educator, I saw taekwondo, this type of discipline that developed in Korea, as having a great potential to become part of the official Olympic program.

"Since 1967 when I came to Howard only one sport that originated from an Oriental culture was in the program of the Olympics. That was judo. There are 25 summer Olympic sports. There are 12 winter Olympic sports. Always I wondered why—out of the collective sports from all over the world—only one sport that originated from an Oriental culture had the privilege of being in the Olympics.

"On the basis of my analysis I saw clearly that taekwondo had a future as an Olympic sport and I made a commitment to see that it become one."

"In order to realize this dream," he adds, "I had to first develop a program here at Howard to exemplify what a taekwondo program can do, what taekwondo is as a sport and how valuable it can be."



Jewell in action at the Olympics.

Specifically, that has meant teaching about 300 students a year in the elementary and intermediate/advanced taekwondo classes offered through the physical education and recreation department. It has meant overseeing a thriving taekwondo club, composed almost exclusively of Howard students, alumni, faculty and staff, which has about 75 active members a year. And it has meant coaching Howard's taekwondo team, whose members are drawn from the ranks of the most talented members of the club.

Under his tutelage, team members have won 105 national championship titles, 35 international championship titles—and three Olympic medals. For three of the eight women in the first ever U.S. Olympic taekwondo team had been coached by Yang at Howard and each carried home a medal. Lynette Love, who has no academic connection to Howard but who came to Washington especially to study under Yang, won the gold in the heavyweight division. Alumna Debra Hooper Holloway won the silver in the bantamweight division. Alumna Sharon Jewell won the bronze in the middleweight division. [See accompanying story.]

In addition, two members of the Ivory Coast's Olympic taekwondo team were Yang protégés: Patrice Remarck, a Howard junior who was predicted to win the gold in the middleweight division but injured his leg two days before the competition and was unable to participate, and Alain Kouyate, a senior, who lost by one point to a Korean opponent in the lightweight division.

"Howard University's is the top taekwondo program in the U.S. No question about it," says Yang. "That's not my word; it's the word of the taekwondo coaches and instructors in the U.S."

And what kind of coach is *he*? "He reminds me a little of my father," says Jewell. "He's a strong father figure in terms of discipline and repetition—making you do the same thing over and over again until it becomes like breathing. So even if you're mentally fatigued or physically fatigued you automatically do the techniques because your body has gotten so used to doing them."

Adds Holloway, "He really wants to help to build a person's character so you become responsible, very focused and develop a certain amount of discipline that allows you to meet different challenges."

Obviously, then, Yang believes taekwondo is about a whole lot more than kicking and punching. He eagerly details the appeal the ancient art

Taekwondo, which literally means the art of fighting (do) with the feet (tae) and hands (kwon), originated in Korea 2,300 years ago.

has for those who take up its study:

"Practicing taekwondo develops physical fitness at the highest level. It involves all the motor areas. It is also a form of self-defense. And it teaches self-control because if a student aims to kick an opponent with a malicious purpose he can seriously injure his opponent or if his opponent is malicious he can be injured. So there must always be the proper courtesy and supportive attitude and understanding.

"In addition, to reach a higher technical level, students must concentrate physically—and mentally. Without concentration, they cannot perform. In order to perfect the techniques they have to overcome many, many difficulties and that develops patience over and over again."

Asked how all these attributes can be linked to a sport that to the uninitiated spectator may well look like a more graceful, exotically costumed form of brawling, he says: "Yes, the actions in taekwondo are aggressive. But that's why self-control is developed, self-control beyond the normal level."

The Academic Connection

Like the true believer that he is, Yang contends that young people can especially benefit from taekwondo. For one, he believes taekwondo can help them academically. "Study, like taekwondo, requires patience and concentration," he says. For another, he believes the self-control and discipline acquired via taekwondo can help them withstand some of the destructive forces in society.

Indeed, he goes so far as to say, "I personally guarantee that children with about two years experience with taekwondo will not be involved in anything like drugs or any other bad temptations they may run into in society. So this taekwondo is a real drug fighting weapon too."

Some might greet such claims with skepticism. (After all, how can they really be proved?) Yet Yang's is not an isolated viewpoint. Consider, for instance, what Anthony Ferguson, a mathematics instructor for Howard's Center for Academic Reinforcement and a four-year member of Howard's taekwondo club, has to say about the link between taekwondo and academic achievement:

"With studying generally—and I'm not just talking about math—what makes some students excel rather than others is that they have the discipline, they set goals and they work hard. I don't believe in 'bright' and all that stuff. I believe in hard work. I believe if you work hard you'll be able to achieve. That's in taekwondo also."

Despite Yang's obsession—if it is—with taekwondo, he knows that its place in a university must always be subordinate to that of academics. "When it comes time for you to be promoted to a new rank—I don't care if you're the greatest kicker and puncher in the class—if your grade point average is not up, he will not promote you," says Sam Alpha, one of the club's two assistant coaches. [The other is Yang's son-in-law Kung Young Lee.]

"He always talks about the three levels—or three priorities—when you become a member of Howard's taekwondo club. The first priority is academics. The second priority is taekwondo. Everything else is consid-

ered as miscellaneous. The only excuse for not coming to practice is studying."

Always, too, he adds, Yang emphasizes that members of Howard's taekwondo team must never forget that they are ambassadors for the university. "Whether we're going across town to compete or going to another country, we tell them that they're not just representing themselves but they're representing the Howard image," observes Alpha, a Howard alumnus who works as office manager for the United Black Fund during the day and says he gives [unpaid] "full-time service" to Yang in the taekwondo program in the evening.

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"Because most of the time when we go places we're the only Black team and we're always the one winning, there can be animosity," he continues. "So it's especially important for our students to set down a good impression. That's why we always say, 'For success to be appreciated it must go hand-in-hand with the appropriate manners.'"

Such an orientation has helped the team serve as a valuable, albeit unofficial, public relations tool for the university. This, plus the popularity, value and caliber of the taekwondo program have earned it an important measure of financial and other support from Howard's Vice President for Student Affairs Carl E. Anderson and Vice President for Development and University Relations Roger D. Estep.

Because the taekwondo club and team have no budgets of their own (in the early days, bake sales were a chief fund-raising activity), Yang has been especially appreciative of this support. In fact, he is careful to cite it at any available opportunity. Example: When asked what went through his mind in Seoul when three members of the Howard team won medals, he says, "I just bowed my head, I praised the Lord and deep in my heart I appreciated the support I have been given from Dr. Anderson since 1970 and the additional support Dr. Estep has given me the past five years."

As for what else went through his mind on that emotional occasion, he adds: "I felt that it was a fulfillment of the dream that I had in the deeper part of my heart when I first came to



Holloway in action at the Olympics.



Howard. But at the same time I felt a greater sense of commitment that I have to fulfill to see that taekwondo reach its potential as a full Olympic sport."

In March, the International Olympic Committee (IOC) is to formally decide whether taekwondo should move from being a "demonstration sport" to a full Olympic sport. Based on responses Yang has received from IOC members, he's predicting that by the 1992 Olympics in Barcelona taekwondo will achieve that coveted status.

There is sensitivity within the IOC to charges that the Olympics have not paid enough attention to sports that originated outside Europe, says the U.S. Olympic Committee's LaMont. "I agree there should be a wider representation of world sports in the Olympics," he says. "I'll give you a good example. Softball is widely practiced in the Americas, Asia and Oceania—but not in Europe. So what happens is that because it's not well-known to Europeans, it has not been received by the IOC as an Olympic sport. Whereas some of the European-originated sports that are in the Olympics have very very small, very limited participation."

This kind of European bias is on the way out, LaMont believes, and he sees efforts to make taekwondo a full-fledged Olympic sport as an indicator of that future trend. "I think [IOC President Juan Antonio] Samaranch is very conscious of this situation [the domination of the Olympic sports program by European-originated sports] and will do his best to try to compensate for it."

Already the XXIVth Olympiad in Seoul has brought taekwondo greater visibility than it's ever had before. So, too, for Howard's achievements in taekwondo. "We used to refer to the taekwondo program as one of Howard's best kept secrets," remarks Ferguson, who says he was initially drawn to taekwondo for exercise and then became "hooked." "With the amount of interest that has been generated by the news media—*The Washington Post*, *USA Today*, *Voice of America*—our Olympic athletes appearing on the "Today" show and making it clear they were from Howard—I think the 'best kept secret' has been unveiled.

"And I feel very good about that not so much for myself so much as I cheer for Professor Yang, considering the amount of work that this man has put in over the years and continues to put in. All the glory that we're getting from this success at the Olympics really should be given to him. And I think the Olympic athletes will tell you that to a man and a woman."

Not one to rest on his laurels, Yang is already pursuing new dreams. "In the 1992 Olympics," he says, "it is my dream that at least 40 percent of the U.S. Olympians in taekwondo come from Howard University."

Another dream: "I would like to develop a martial arts division in the department of physical education and recreation so that students may study physical education as a major and martial arts as a minor. There are a great many recreational centers, Boys Club facilities, YMCAs, YWCAs and other community centers in the United States interested in having this type of program to teach discipline and leadership to children and to help steer them away from drugs. Many of our graduates would be able to contribute to such programs."

And still another: "Even though taekwondo originated in Korea, I have a dream to develop Howard University as an international center in taekwondo, a place where athletes and especially coaches and instructors from all over the world can train."

Farfetched dreams? Perhaps. But don't tell Dong Ja Yang that. He still carries in his consciousness that saying he first heard in the land of his birth: *The tiger leaves skin when he dies. You as a man, what would you leave?* □

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