

# AshokKumar

## Aiming for perfection!

**S**tudying martial arts since the early Bruce Lee 'boom' years, Master Ashok Kumar has accumulated a wealth of experience and understanding that he now passes on to his Tang Soo Do students. Previous training in a variety of arts has enabled Ashok to fully appreciate and delve deeper into the traditional Korean art he teaches, as he constantly strives to balance the competitive and traditional aspects of Tang Soo Do in the minds of those he instructs. A successful business man, Ashok teaches for the love of the art and his cultured, dignified manner is reflected in his articulate and thought provoking answers to my questions.

*TKD-KMA: You teach 'Traditional' Tang Soo Do, what do you perceive as traditional?*

**Ashok Kumar:** If I take you back to the beginning, the reason we set up the Traditional Tang Soo Do Association was because I felt that a lot of the TSD taught in the UK at the moment was losing its traditional aspects. One of the things I wanted to do was follow the ideals of Grandmaster Hwang Kee. One shouldn't be static and you see many instructors who blindly follow a set pattern. What they do is say this is the way it's been taught, so this is the way we should practice. TSD is like any other art in that it is completely dynamic and it changes but change shouldn't be at the cost of traditional values and etiquette as laid down by Grandmaster Hwang Kee.

The TSD we practice is a living art and if it's alive it will continue to change and adapt and this gets forgotten by a lot of people. You hear a lot of people talking about modern martial artists not being as good as they were twenty years

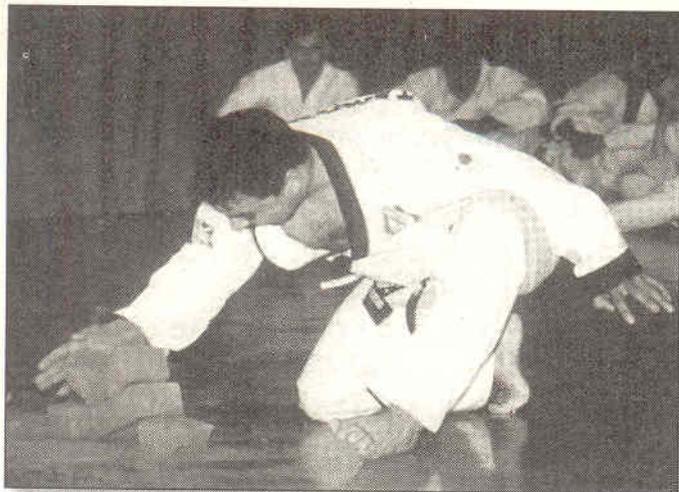
ago. Twenty years ago there were a small number of people, so it was very easy to see the people who were good. Now we have a lot of people training and I would go as far as to say that my members are probably a lot better than some of the members that I trained with many years ago.

*TKD-KMA: Traditionally there's always been the belief that TSD was very tough, almost brutal.*

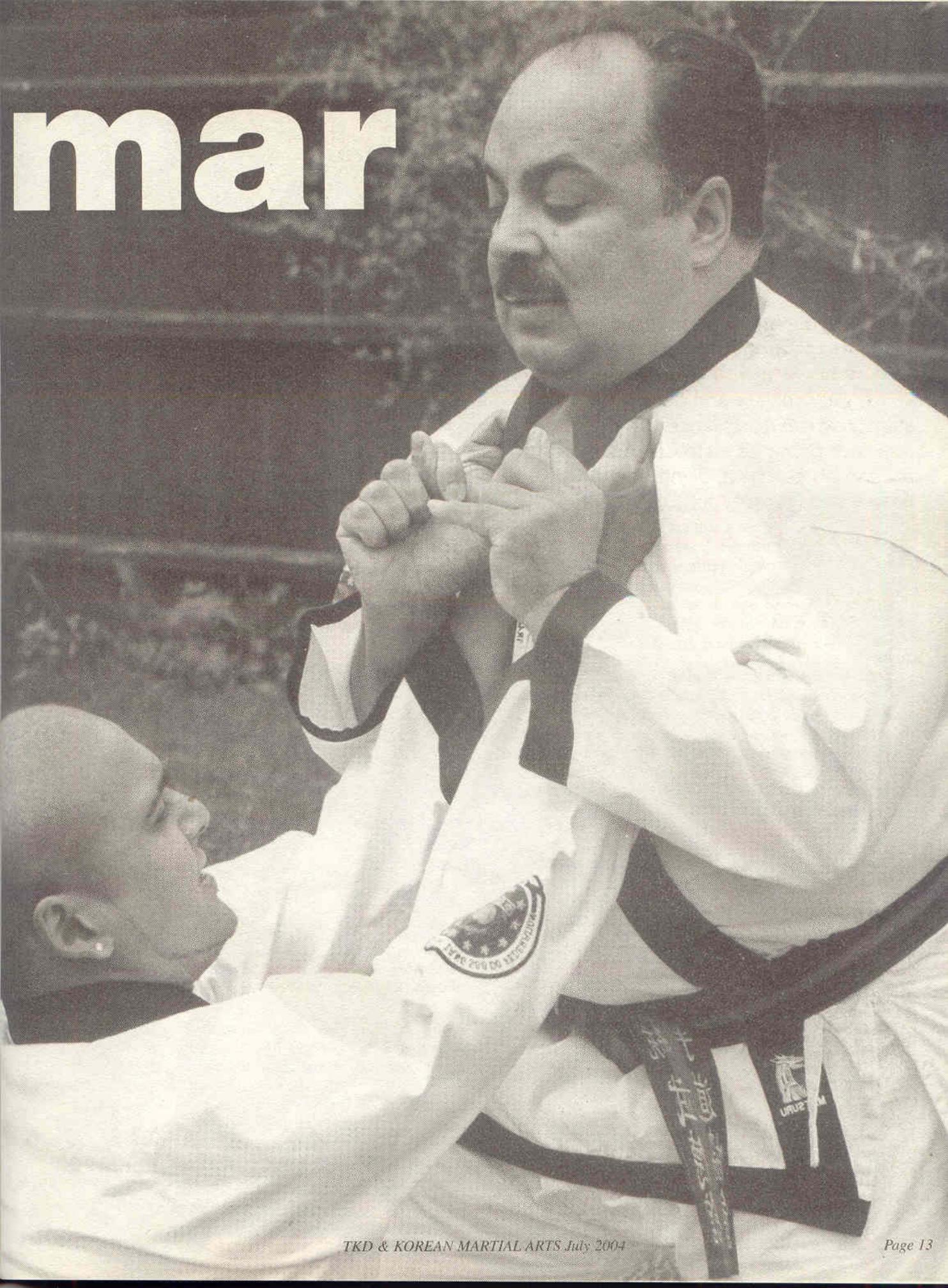
**Ashok Kumar:** I don't think that's only with regard TSD. TSD when we were training was hard because a lot of the instructors teaching then were less scientific. We once asked one of our instructors how we should condition our knuckles and his reply was that one of the things we needed to do was punch a brick wall until we broke our knuckles. The slightly more intelligent of us decided not to do that but one of the lads did, and his martial arts career finished a few weeks later-his hand never recovered. Nowadays we're a lot more scientific and you learn how to teach properly, the mechanics of the body and you're teaching a wide range of ages and both sexes as well.

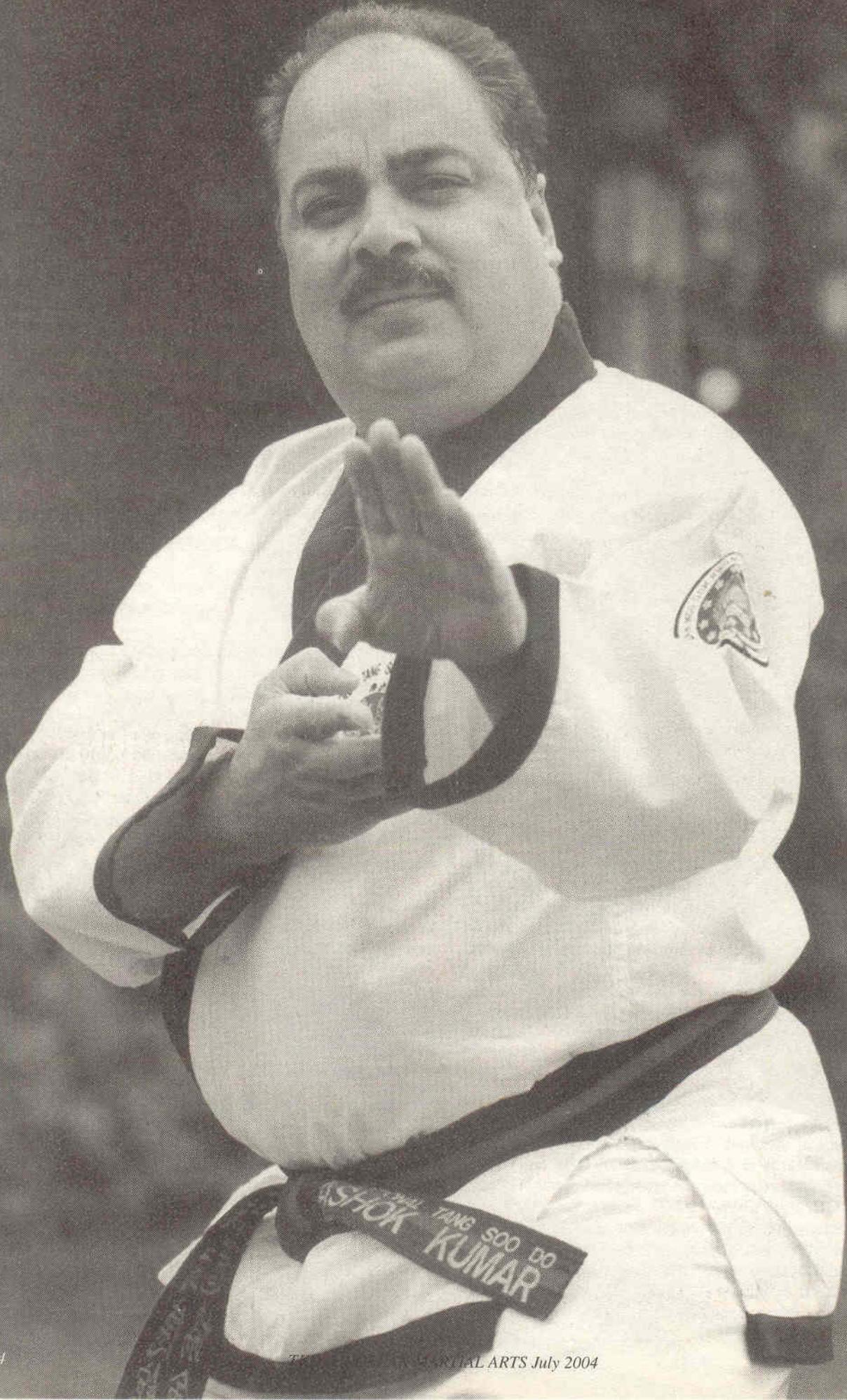
*TKD-KMA: You feel it's very important that martial arts should be community based.*

**Ashok Kumar:** I've always believed that and I've always said that I hold a privileged position heading up the Traditional TSD Association but it is an association of the members-the members are the ones who actually contribute to it, who make it grow. Hence, within the TTSDA we don't have any full time instructors, all the instructors are contributing to their local community and by doing that we continue to feed the ideals that Master Hwang Kee laid down in the first place-that TSD should be for development and that everything else should be secondary to it.



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*TKD-KMA: You stress that TSD is not a sport but it has a competitive element-how do you strike the right balance?*

**Ashok Kumar:** We have a mixed group of people who come into class and one of the first things we do when new members come to us is ask them why they want to train. They'll come in because of physical fitness, confidence, championships and self-defence. You have to tailor whatever you are teaching to your students. I competed in Championships right up until I was in my early thirties. They are a wonderful motivational tool because they allow you to be able to measure yourself against your colleagues and they give you a reason to put in a high level of training into your martial art.

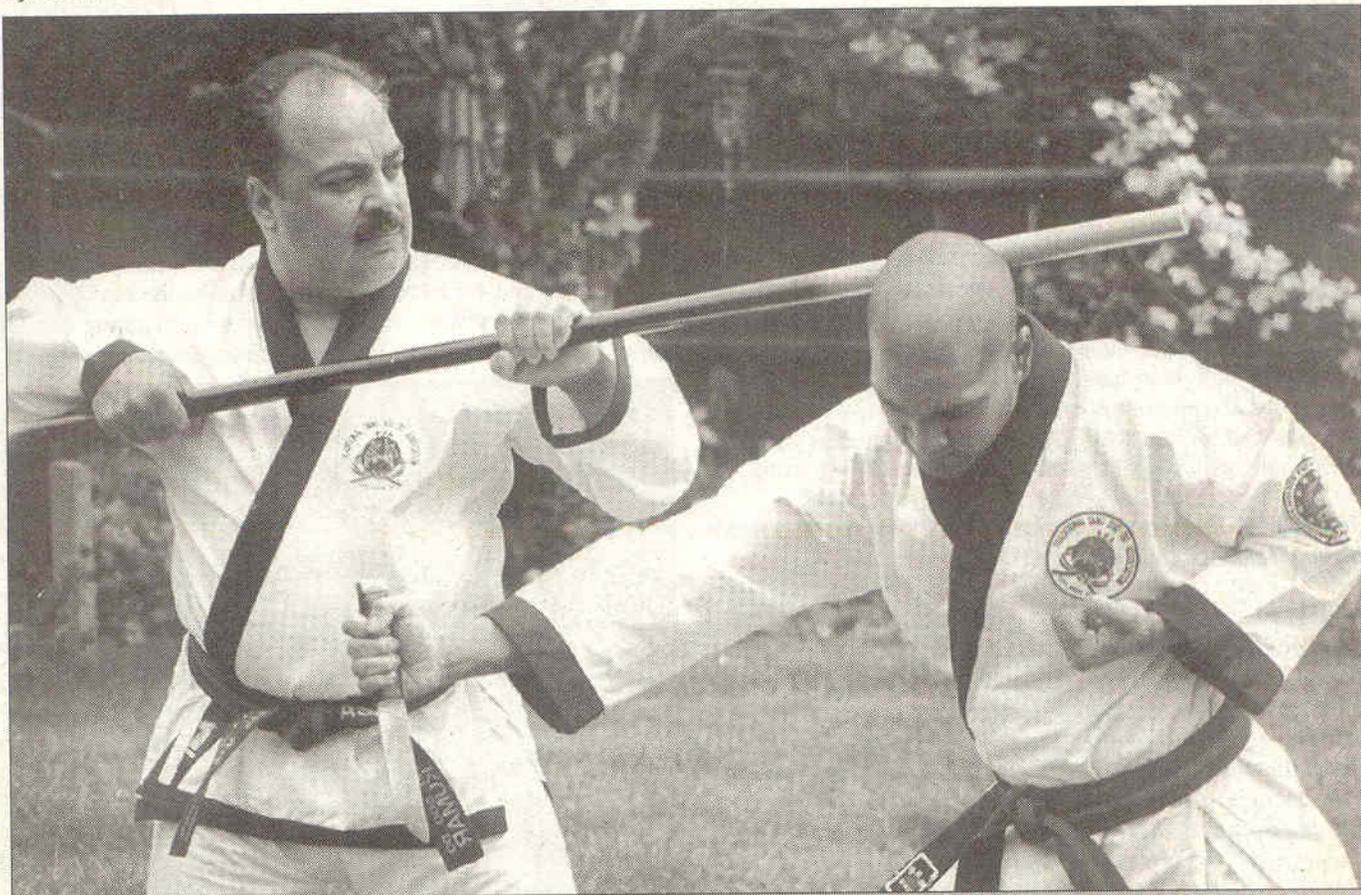
*TKD-KMA: Is there a fear that TSD might become almost exclusively competition orientated, say like Taekwondo?*

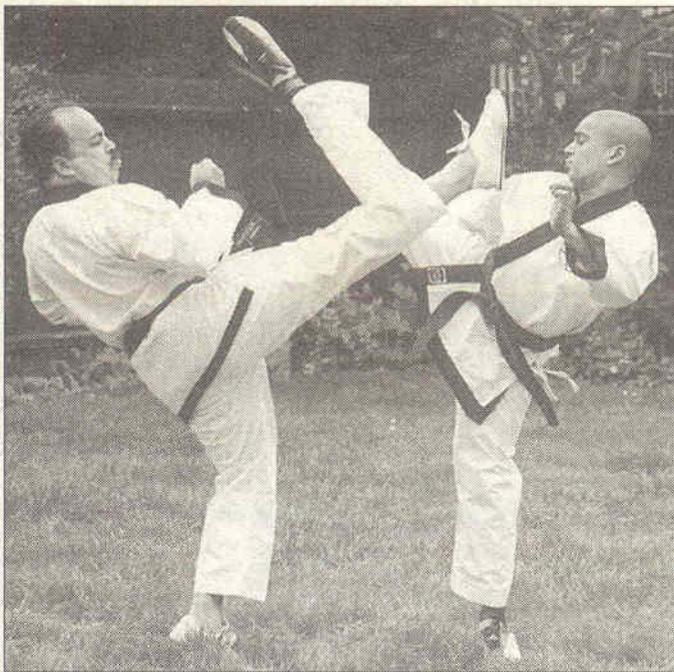
**Ashok Kumar:** TSD will have some instructors who start to focus on competition but if you look at the traditional instructors, the TSD syllabus is so strong and we've seen a lot of development-in the past twenty years I've seen it develop from a very angular style, with the introduction of Soo Bak Do into the system and it has given the system a lot of depth and breadth, taking people away from the competitive side, more into the traditional side.

*TKD-KMA: Does TSD still hold water as a self defence system?*



**Ashok Kumar:** Absolutely. TSD has stood the test of time. If you look at the last thirty years, in TSD itself, with any self defence system you need to have some basic training, people need to be able to learn to block and kick and punch. A lot of the reality based arts do that very easily but inspire a false sense of confidence. If you want to learn how to fight, go into a pub, find the biggest guy and go and hit him and once you've been battered two or three times, you'll learn how to defend yourself but that's not the essence of martial arts. When we talk about self defence, we're talking about technical self-defence, learning how to kick and punch properly and if we follow the philosophy of Moo Duk Kwan -the school of martial virtue-as you become more skilled, you'll become more highly aware and you won't allow yourself to get into a situation where conflict will arise.





*TKD-KMA: You also stress that TSD is an intellectual activity. Can you expand on this?*

**Ashok Kumar:** The physical element is right at the beginning, when we take students in we can make them physically strong and more confident in the use of their arms and legs but in order to truly master TSD and to understand Moo Duk Kwan, one has to take the elements that you learn in TSD and be able to incorporate them into day to day living. How do you incorporate physical movement into that? I was reading an article recently that said if you look at the hyungs alone, they will be able to show you where your faults are within your system and your free fighting.

I believe that totally because there are a lot of reality based and new styles that say that forms are no longer useful, that they shouldn't be practiced, but forms are talking about technical movement, technical correctness, you are aiming for perfection and this is where the intellectual side comes in. If you start to aim for physical perfection-very much in the Indian and Buddhist systems-where you are aiming for enlightenment, you can use TSD in exactly the same way. If you continue to strive, then you will move on and you start to fight with your own intellect and as you fight with your intellect, your intellect will grow within itself.

*TKD-KMA: Should we be cross training or looking more deeply into our own art?*

**Ashok Kumar:** I sit between both arguments. I regularly cross train in the Japanese systems, the Chinese, Korean, Indian and Philippine systems and one of the things I had missing in TSD was grappling and I spent quite a lot of time learning to wrestle with the Sombu wrestlers. One of the things that did for me was to actually allow me to raise my own awareness. My own awareness allowed me to go off and research the TSD we practice. In fact, if you look hard enough in your style you'll find that those systems are already in there. We were in class a couple of weeks ago and

someone was referring to trapping and locking as self defence and I was trying to explain the difference and as I was explaining I realised it was (the explanation) actually coming from the Filipino system I had been training in. Self defence is based almost entirely on awareness and your awareness will allow you to utilise the physical skills you have developed-without that awareness, no matter how strong you are, the big guy will always land the heaviest!

*TKD-KMA: When did your own interest in the martial arts start?*

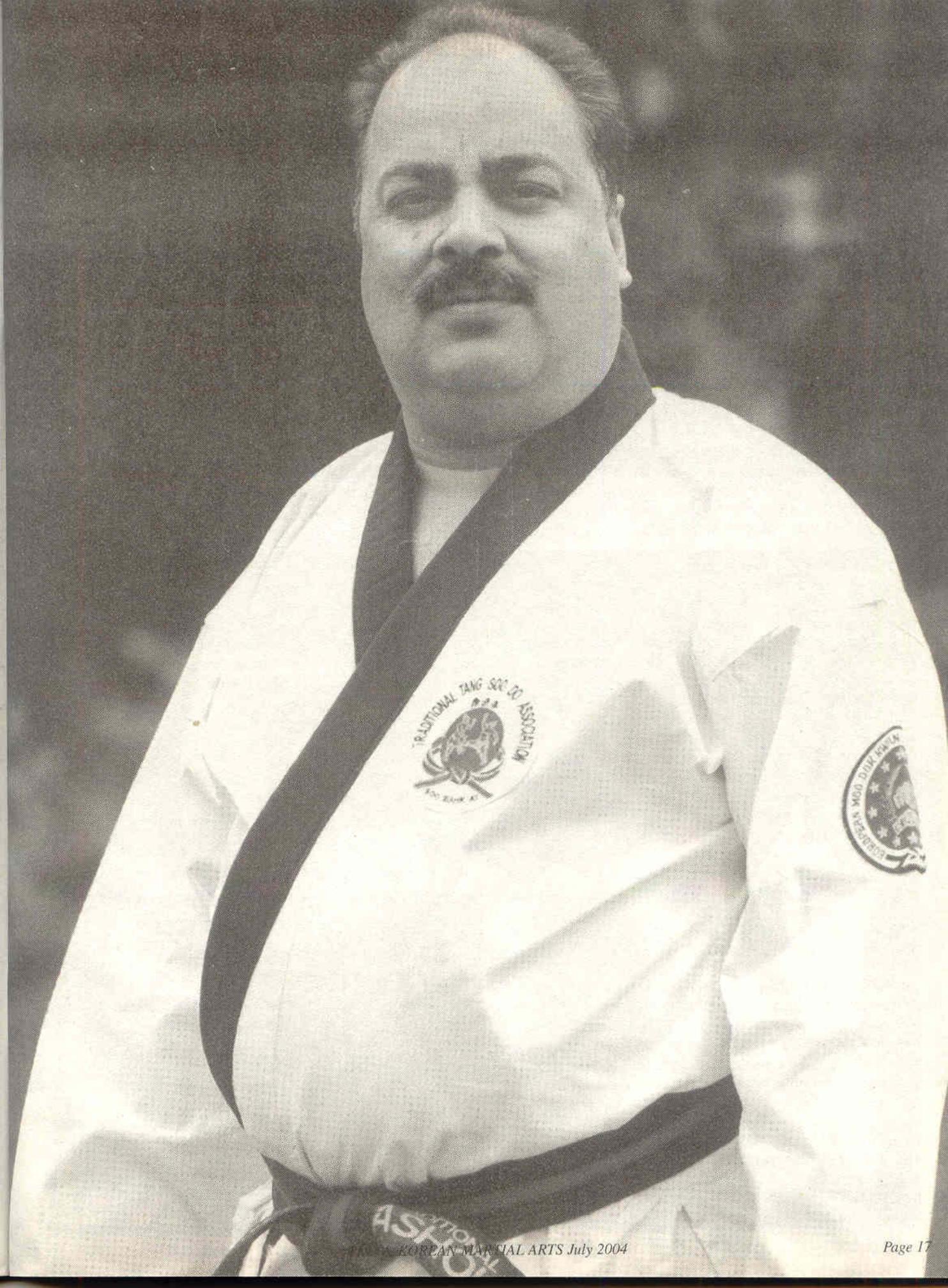
**Ashok Kumar:** When I was ten years old. I practiced Judo for probably two years. My true interest in martial arts probably came at the age of fourteen, when my cousin introduced me to Shotokan Karate and I became hooked, training with Sensei John Van Weenan. 1976 came up and Bruce Lee hit the scene and everyone went Kung Fu mad-I tried Wing Chun, Hung Gar and several other styles of Gung Fu but couldn't really settle in them. It was at the time when novices were teaching the little bit that they knew, nothing complete. I did Wado Ryu for three or four years in Bedford, so my base system had always been heavily Japanese.

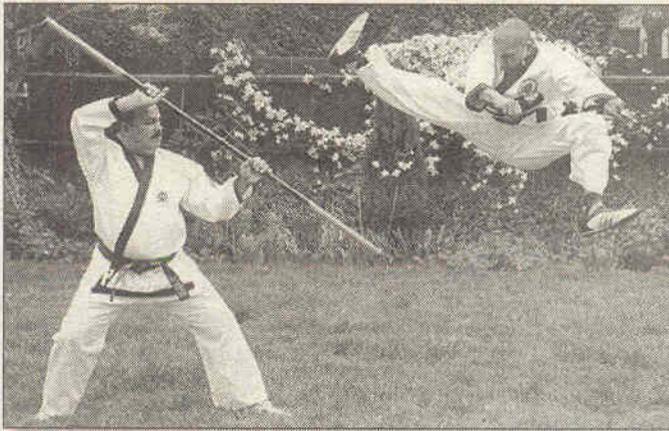
*TKD-KMA: When did you settle into TSD?*

**Ashok Kumar:** TSD had started to enter the UK at that point and I remember going to a class and training but it was so different to what we had been practicing that I didn't really venture back. It wasn't until I finished college and was looking for my old Wado Ryu instructor, who had moved, that I went along to the local leisure centre and asked about the classes-there was a TSD instructor there and that's where it all started.

I stuck with TSD because of the instructor and the students who were there. The same class I was in saw a number of (future) instructors that are still around. The time we all started seems to have been a very good period because a lot of the very senior instructors teaching now all started at the same time, namely, Master Khan, Robert Hedges, Soresh Nah, the list goes on and we were all coming through the ranks at the same time. Every week we went in we were learning something new, there was very little repetitive work going on.







**TKD-KMA:** *Who were/are influences and inspirations to you?*

**Ashok Kumar:** I would say, without a doubt, my greatest inspiration must come from my first instructor, Grandmaster Kwang Kuk Lee. He is the one who taught me the fundamentals and I respect him very highly for that. In recent years I've had a very strong friendship with Master Khan—we've trained and worked together, and we've kept in touch. More recently, the one person who has re-inspired my TSD

has been Grandmaster Salm from Rotterdam. He was the first European Master and has been around a long, long time and I had the privilege of joining him to set up the European Moo Duk Kwan TSD Federation, nearly two years ago now and that really has been the essence of Moo Duk Kwan because it's an association where there's no membership, no one dictates that you should be teaching in a particular way, it's truly a brotherhood.

**TKD-KMA:** *What are your future aims and ambitions?*

**Ashok Kumar:** For myself, I continue to do what I've always done, disregarding any politics, the whole reason we put our dobok's on is to train in TSD and it's the one thing we should never forget. I still maintain that whenever we have any of our national or international meetings, they are always started with a training session and then we discuss business. I just want to continue training and with the traditional systems they take a lifetime to learn and I am only halfway through that. We have started the ball rolling with the European Moo Duk Kwan Federation in the UK and we are looking forward to the European championships in Germany and that'll just bring more and more people in.

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