

USA TANG SOO DO

Richard Byrne talks to TKD-KMA

Interview with some of North American most well-known traditional Tang Soo Do masters - Richard Byrne

Grandmaster Richard Byrne is President of the American Tang Soo Do Association and you can find out more about him by visiting www.tangsoodoworld.com, and www.grandmasterbyrne.com.

TKD-KMA: What made you take Tang Soo Do?

I was always interested in karate since I saw a karate demonstration in a movie theater as a teenager. I was sent to Korea for a 13-month tour and decided to take up karate offered on the Osan Air Force Base, where I was stationed. One of the black belts was in my barracks and introduced me to the instructor, and I joined immediately. Osan Air Force Base's most famous black belt is Chuck Norris. He was there a few years before me. The Osan club turned out many top martial artists who are still involved to this day.

TKD-KMA: What was training like then?

Training in Korea was very brutal. Classes were 3 hours long and I went every day at least once. Occasionally a class was held on Sunday and I went to that, too! Classes were held in a Quonset hut, so it was very hot in the summer, and very cold in the winter. It was not unusual for a student to be slapped across the face for doing something as small as wiping the sweat from his brow during line forms or forms. But as difficult as it was, it prepared us to overcome anything in our way.

TKD-KMA: Where did you go to live when you returned from your tour of duty?

I have lived in North Reading, Massachusetts for over 30 years.

TKD-KMA: What differences in training do you see in North America compared to Korea?

In Korea you were taught to follow without question. It probably helped that there was a language barrier between instructors and students - so it was hard to communicate. Training in the United States is different because Americans tend to question everything.

TKD-KMA: What are the major differences between teaching in North America and other part of the world?

There isn't really that much difference between teaching here and teaching overseas. The language barrier is, of course, a factor. On the other hand, Tang Soo Do is a universal language. We all study the same and know the basics the same way - so I can teach Tang Soo Do anywhere!

TKD-KMA: Did you decide early on to specialise in breaking skills?

What originally interested in me about martial arts was the breaking. A lot of breaking was done by the instructors so I had a good foundation for learning how to do it correctly. Returning to the USA I quickly realized that the public wanted to see breaking. They were bored with watching people just throw punches and kicks! But they'd always remember the guy who pounded the nail into the board with his head, or the guy who broke 15 boards with his elbow!

TKD-KMA: Were you interested in sparring from an early point?

In 1970, being able to spar effectively was a necessity! It was not uncommon for black belts from other styles to test their skills against me. I had a policy: anyone who managed to beat me in just one fight could take my school. That never happened! I entered my last point tournament in 1976. I had black belt students at that time and they were competing as well. Had we ever faced one another, then I know they would have bowed out of the fight.

I realised I had had my time and now it was my students' turn - so I retired from point sparring. I competed in shoot fighting in Japan during 1992. I made 3 successful tours of Japan. Shoot fighting is what UFC is today! Japan has had that type of competitions since the 60's when Muhammad Ali fought Antonio Inoki.

TKD-KMA: Do you enjoy practising the Hyungs?

Although I'm well-versed in traditional Tang Soo Do, the forms were a challenge because of my size (6'5"). I don't believe I ever looked as good doing forms as I did sparring - but forms are a part of our history and tradition.

TKD-KMA: Why did you develop your weapons skills?

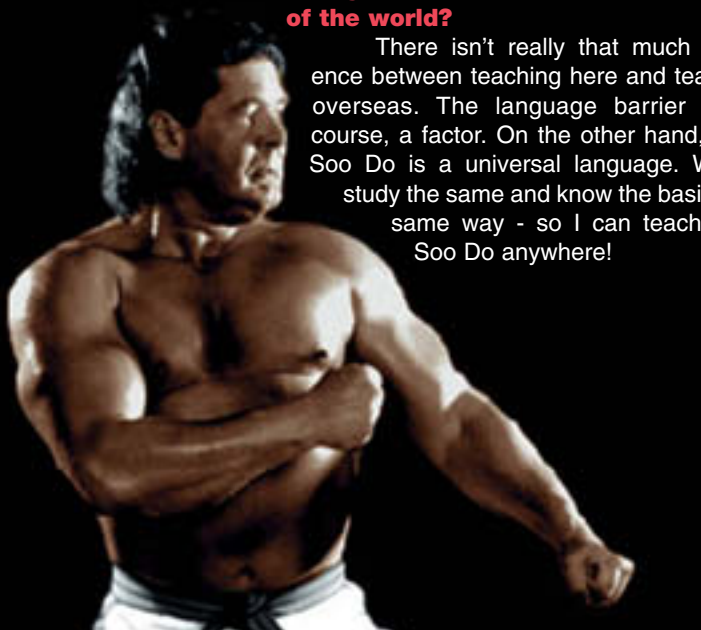
Weapons do not form a traditional part of Tang Soo Do. There were never any weapons when I trained in Korea. Many in the US teach weapons as part of training - but it is not a part of the Tang Soo Do I brought back from Korea. However, in saying that, Mr. Yu, a 3rd dan at Osan would occasionally use a pair of sai before class. One day I got there early, picked up the sai and tried to practise what I had seen. He came over and showed me how to use the weapon with basic blocks and strikes. Since then I've done a lot of work with the sword, staff and Chinese whip chain.

TKD-KMA: I believe you hold a black belt in Shotokan karate and in taekwondo in addition to your 8th dan in Tang Soo Do.

Yes, I do have black belts in Shotokan and taekwondo. When I first came back from Korea, I discovered there were no Tang Soo Do schools to continue my training. So I kept my standards up by training in both those systems. Finally I found a Tang Soo Do school in Connecticut and went there for training.

TKD-KMA: What differentiates Tang Soo Do techniques from others?

In general, utilising the twist of the hip behind blocks, punches and rolling the hip over in kicks such as side kick. Tang Soo Do is also known for its jump spinning kicks. I believe Tang Soo Do has the most versatility with regards to leg techniques of any martial art.



TKD-KMA: Why do some people practise Tang Soo Do techniques but appear not to want to affiliate with a national Tang Soo Do group?

Everyone has their own personal reasons. Most individuals I talk to have had bad experiences in the big organizations. Many are discouraged by the politics and all the funds they are asked to contribute to. But a Korean Tang Soo Do master once told me that Tang Soo Do will take care of itself. He meant that Tang Soo Do will always survive and it will clean out the corrupt, the dishonest, the dishonorable. Tang Soo Do in its truest form is a wonderful martial art!



Grandmaster Richard Byrne (centre) with The Masters Of The ATA (September, 2006)

TKD-KMA: Do Tang Soo Do martial artist maintain traditional values?

If they are teaching traditional Tang Soo Do then they have to teach the values that go along with it. These are not separate - they are one and the same! We must be wary of those who put Tang Soo Do on their school sign but teach 5 other martial arts along with it. The reality is that if you want to really learn Tang Soo Do, then you need to find a school that is dedicated only to traditional Tang Soo Do.

TKD-KMA: Do you think that today's instructors are better educated than their predecessors?

In some ways they are better educated - but not necessarily better trained. There were no manuals when I was in Korea! The only book that was available then was the Grandmaster's book, which was in Korean! I have a copy and can easily see the photos - but what is missing is the delivery of proper technique, history, etiquette, philosophy and the variety of terms, etc. That was all missing in those early days!

TKD-KMA: Is Tang Soo Do practice good for character building?

Only if you devote yourself to it. Then it will build your character and help you develop leadership skills. It works the same way that the military trains and develops their leaders.

TKD-KMA: What is involved in being a good teacher?

Patience and understanding! Be patient when a student does not perform to your expectations. And understand that no two individuals are the same. Some students may have mental and/or physical limitations that may not be evident on the surface.

TKD-KMA: Do you teach classes in your own school?

Yes, I teach as often as my schedule allows. As the Grandmaster of an organisation I do a great deal of travelling and spend much time with school owners in helping them.

TKD-KMA: There seems to be some confusion and controversy surrounding the history of Tang Soo Do. How do you see it?

This is a difficult question to answer because some of us were originally taught a fairy tale for many years: that Grandmaster Hwang Kee was exiled to China during the Japanese occupation of Korea. He supposedly learned the Tang method whilst in China, returning to Korea when the Japanese left, and opening his first club on November 9th, 1945. Now we know that is not true! He was never exiled.

TKD-KMA: Has Tang Soo Do changed much in the last 20 years?

Of course Tang Soo Do has changed! All martial arts have changed over the years. During the mid 70's and 80's my school was 80% male adults and 20% women & children. Then movies like 'Karate Kid', 'Ninja Turtles', and 'Power Rangers' came about and the children's classes exploded. Now enrollment is 65% children and the other 35% divided between women and men. Nowadays contact equipment is required because of the insurance risk but if I had my way, there'd be no equipment because it interferes with the purity of the technique and using it, you don't get to experience true combat between two individuals the same way!

TKD-KMA: What is your philosophy of Tang Soo Do practice?

The Philosophy of Tang Soo Do practice according to Grandmaster Hwang Kee is that the practice of Tang Soo Do is primarily to make you into a better person and secondarily, to teach you a means of self-defence.

TKD-KMA: If you had one wish for Tang Soo Do, what would that be?

My one wish is that everyone could be introduced to Tang Soo Do. Tang Soo Do has a positive effect on everyone who trains in it - even if it just for a short time!

TKD-KMA: Who has had the most influence on your Tang Soo Do training?

My original instructor at Osan gave me the most motivation. He taught me the basic skills. Many others have helped along the way. Legends like Bill 'Superfoot' Wallace and Joe Lewis (with whom I've become very good friends) have influenced me greatly.

TKD-KMA: What are your ambitions for the future?

To help other Tang Soo Do school owners become successful without being dragged down by the politics that affect most large organizations.

TKD-KMA: What words of encouragement could you give to aspiring young Tang Soo Do students?

That they are the future! I represent Tang Soo Do's past and a little of the present. They hold the future in their hands. They will be the new leaders, the Masters and the new Grandmasters. It is my hope that they continue!

TKD-KMA: Thank you for taking the time to give this interview!

No - thank you!