

THE SOUTHERN KUNG-FU CHAMPIONSHIP

A Step Beyond Competition

By L. Illar

"The dark silence of night almost hid the two figures as they moved with fluid motion cautiously on guard. As their staffs circled with ease, the silence was suddenly broken by the din of the combat that their staffs momentarily felt. Feinting from one another, their dark Chinese garb nearly blended into the night, and in retreat each fighter appeared to mystically slip into the shadows. Suddenly, a gallant leaping advance was evaded by one of the combatants as he slipped under his opponent into a split. Quickly from this elegant position he circled his staff to the legs of his aggressor, toppling him and any hopes of victory."

The above narrative is not an excerpt from an old fable or novel, but is a colorful account of an unusual event that occurs annually in Louisiana, "The Southern Kung-Fu Championships." The title itself expresses some novelty but not nearly as much as the complexion of these annual games held in Baton Rouge.

The uniqueness of the Southern Kung-Fu Championships has gradually made it one of the more popular local martial arts tournaments. The event, like kung-fu itself, attempts to

Consistently, there are those who scoff at the high intensity of American competitiveness and question the practicality in this culture of tournaments that feed from this obsession. Can these events develop the artist as well as the sportsman? Six years ago a few Chinese stylists asked themselves this question and ended up developing The Southern Kung-Fu Championships, an event that steps beyond accepted competition to maintain some old precepts.

focus on personal growth and not merely on competition. The games played at this event are distinctly different from other tournaments.

Six years ago, three kung-fu instructors and

their schools, John Lee's White Leopard studio of Shreveport, John Redman's Kempo and Kung Fu studio of Pensacola, Florida, and L. Illar's White Crane Studio of Baton Rouge, agreed upon a set of games that each believed would further the development of their students. This common objective gave the Southern Kung-Fu Championships the impetus to turn away from a strict competitive format and to develop an event that rewards and promotes personal growth. This classical concept of kung-fu teaching has given this tournament four distinctive qualities:

The event has helped the needy. Annually, the highlight of the tournament has been its award-winning demonstrations. All spectator proceeds have been donated to charity.

The event has encouraged novice martial artists. It offers special divisions for the self-defense minded novice and grants them an award for a good performance rather than first, second, and third place trophies. All children who choose to spar also receive awards.

Written critiques are offered in black belt forms and advanced weapon demonstrations.



The action in the weapons sparring division of the Southern Kung-Fu Championship was fast and furious.

CHAMPIONSHIP

Through written request, each participant has the opportunity of seeing his evaluation. Judges are required to subject each participant to the same criteria.

The tournament offers a new array of martial art games that consider "soft" as well as "hard" stylists.

In recent years the popularity of the tournament has outgrown the high school gym syndrome and has placed it within the field house of Louisiana State University. Since its development, the tournament's philosophy has not only stimulated more kung-fu entries from across the

U.S., but Korean, Japanese, and Okinawan stylists have found these events to be extremely consistent with their goals and objectives.

Like most events of this kind, the tournament is generally divided into two classifications: sparring and form competition. However, any comparison to other events usually ends here.

The sparring games include staff sparring as well as empty hand, and all fighters begin each bout by either crossing their hand or, as in staff sparring, their weapons. If at any time action is halted within a bout, the fighters have to cross the reverse hand of their initial starting position.

This in-close, quick combat created a silent mood of cooperation from the audience. Thus, the audience as well as the players realize that these games mandate the utmost in relaxation and concentration. The overall tone of the tournament is comparable to the silence that pervades a championship putting green, or the pool stroke of Minnesota Fats. It is unusually calm, and each player seems to enjoy these tests of skill.

A point system is used to evaluate both sparring divisions. In empty hand sparring kicks, punches, knees, elbows, and takedowns are scored as points. Elbows and knees to the skull are outlawed, but clean sweeps or push kicks are scored as points, if they placed their opponent on the floor. The net result is that the close-in combat does not lessen the number of kicks thrown but merely lowers some of them, leaving a number of unsuspecting combatants on the ground wondering how they ended up there.

In preliminaries the black belt division appears to be the most exciting. In this past spring's tournament, Richard Spell, a middleweight, battled through bouts with some hard hitting kung-fu men. The semi-final competition pitted Spell against David Wientjes of Shreveport. In a close, tough fight, Spell emerged victorious and into finals, meeting past champion John Wynne. "Punches" seemed to be the technique that best described this battle. These two shotokan stylists "played hands," predominately at close quarters. When the time had finally ended, Wynne retained his middleweight title.

The lightweight finals opened up nearly every legal technique in the books. In an explosive, furious bout Rick Toy and Warren Jones used low and high kicks, furious punches and knees to impress an audience of about 1,000. Nearly every clash resulted in a knock-down. Midway through the bout Toy began to tire and Jones proved to be the dominant fighter, and the new lightweight champ.

The heavyweight division pitted Lee Mac Dowell against Drew Marshall. Marshall's low kick proved to be the most frequently employed technique, sending Mac Dowell downward a number of times, and at times confusing the judges as to what point to call. In the long run, Marshall's kick proved to be the key factor as he edged out his opponent and retained his title.

Form judging had a new slant, as each judge had to formally evaluate each contestant with a developmental critique. The critiquing instrument, developed by co-promoter Illar, takes the form of a ballot, and clearly indicates two primary areas for evaluation, "combativeness" and "artisticness." At the combat level, all forms were to be perceived as exercises that displayed a weapon. If the form displayed punches, kicks, blocks, or mere energy the judges would apply this criteria to those elements as if they were weapons. At the artistic level the style, or form composition was evaluated as presented. Each area of evaluation was scored from 1 to 10 with each ballot clearly indicating the



High kicks, furious punches and flying knee strikes held the interest of the crowd, numbering about a thousand. The injury rate was surprisingly low, according to the promoters.

numerical definition of good, average, and so on. The ballot is still being studied as to its overall effectiveness, but thus far after three years of usage at this event it appears to have reduced disagreements between judges and enhanced the level of performance.

This past event featured Russel Sauls finishing first and Gary Lewandowski taking second in black belt form competition. Weapon form results placed David Wientjes first and Henry Ho second.

After three years of development, the staff sparring competition provided some of the most exciting techniques of the tournament. Ducking, dodging, leaping and kicking their way through one bout to another were two kung-fu men from Pittsburgh, James Terry and Lewandowski. This division was regulated by a standard point system similar to empty-hand sparring, with additional points awarded for removing a staff from the opponent's hand and also for striking the foot or leg. Contact restrictions prohibited head, face and hand contact. The competitors were not burdened with any cumbersome protective gear, and there were no serious injuries.

Maximum controlled movement and technique were the objectives of the event, and surprisingly, it proved to be a realistic objective. Throughout the day, James Terry picked up a large number of points through kicks. Lewandowski, through side stepping and ducking, cleared most of his matches.

In the end, the staff event left everyone with two impressions. First, that the event had developed over the past three years some rather competent competitors and second, that this was very much a spectator event. In the final contest, Lewandowski changed his defensive tactics to an aggressive in-and-out fencing action, obviously, hiding from Terry's feet. Surprisingly, Terry counteracted his opponent with a dazzling array of evasion tactics of his own, at one point ducking Lewandowski's head strike with a split and staff counter. The audience was enthralled with the action and stood up in awe at Terry's strike. Terry won the bout and this final staff battle was the most applauded and best received bout of the evening program.

Raising nearly \$2,000 for charity and providing martial art students with an opportunity to personally grow as well as compete, the 6th Annual Southern Kung-Fu Championship has slowly shown growth and has, through its presence, affected the refereeing and judging of other local tournaments. It has served as a bridge of communications between martial artists, and has gradually attracted participants from Pennsylvania, California, Florida, Texas, Louisiana, Tennessee and Mississippi.

In the past, the tournament was a Chinese stylist's attempt to change within the martial art trends of our time, and to grow without losing all classical form. Today, however, this kind of event has created a trend, influencing the growth and perception of martial arts in its region.

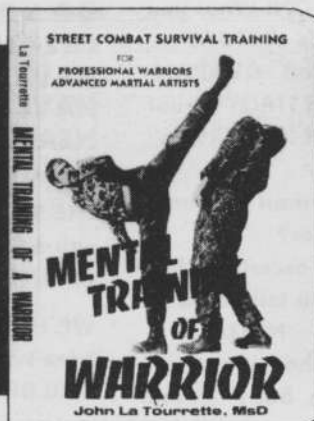
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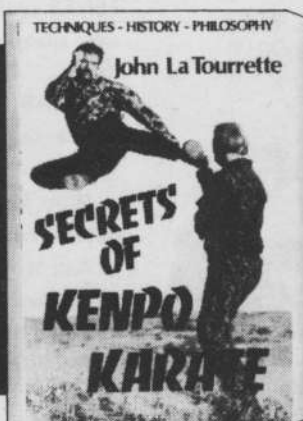


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