

# MY TAEKWONDO CAREER

Written thesis for the 7<sup>th</sup> Dan promotion

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Picture: *Originally a stiff boy, here in the age of 46*

## Introduction

I saw Taekwondo for the first time in 1985. The father of Taekwondo in Finland, HWANG Dae Jin, gave an unforgettable demonstration in the city called Pori. It was love at first sight. Taekwondo looked both effective and esthetic. To my great regret, I was not able to start the beginners' course at that time, but fortunately my best friend did. After every training session, he came home and enthusiastically taught me what he had learnt. Consequently, I happen to know the first four Poomsae and most of the kicks before I officially started training Taekwondo. Alongside our eager home trainings, I also practiced Ju-Jitsu and several other sports until I had a chance to participate Taekwondo trainings myself.

Originally, I was allured to combat sports to avoid the pressure of competition, which was strongly present in the other sports. I loved to practice hard almost every day, but without goal setting or medal expectations. I also liked the idea of being able to defend myself if someone attacked me on the street. These were the original motives to practice Taekwondo in my case. Later, motives have changed several times, from social connection to winning gold medals. Nowadays, I would say that the main source of motivation is to maintain my health and wellness, and naturally also to share my knowledge and experience with other people.

As mentioned, I enjoyed competition-free training for some time. But as it happens, I found myself in the Taekwondo National Championships in January 1991. I did not win. I got severe bruises, but I knew that I had found the sport I enjoy the most. From that tournament began my competition career in Taekwondo. I didn't know then that it would last for the next 21 years.



Picture: *My jumping side kick in 1992*

## Competitor

Since January 1991, I took part in all Gyorugi tournaments I could. I collected a nice bunch of medals from the National Championships as well as from the Nordic Championships and some international open tournaments. Perhaps the most memorable open tournament was the Wonderful Copenhagen in 1998, where I fought in the final (3-3 against Brazil) after beating three other opponents (one of them with Mondollyo knock-out). I also had the honor to represent Finland in the University World Championships in Mexico, but I could never make it to the Senior European or World Championships. I was very close, though, and finally, when I reached the necessary physical level and experience, I got sick. I was diagnosed with kidney cancer because of a genetic mutation. Due to a massive scar from the operation that saved my life, I stopped competing in Gyorugi at the end of 1999.

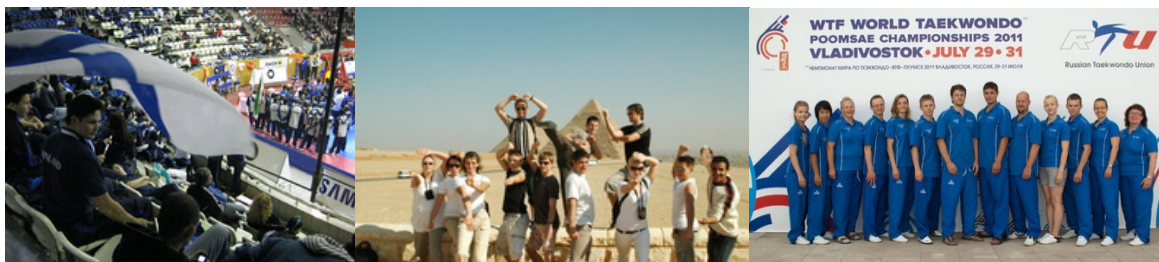


*Picture: Me against Croatia in the University World Championships in Mexico 1998*

I was lucky enough to have some Poomsae experience, even though my training had mostly been focused on Gyorugi until the operation. Namely, at about the same time, Poomsae European Championships were growing and getting some publicity. I became very curious about this second competition discipline in Taekwondo. I translated the competition rules in Finnish with my friend and colleague HWANG In Kwon, and without hesitation, we started to educate Poomsae referees in Finland. We also participated in the WTF International Poomsae Referee Course in Dubai in 2004, but I simply did not have time to take the referee career any longer (fortunately, In Kwon did!). Instead, a female competitor Inna Lindgren and I made Finland's first Poomsae National Team and took part in the Poomsae European Championships in Germany in 2001. Our result was not that good, but we learnt a lot for the upcoming years.



I competed in Poomsae for over 10 years participating in the European Championships 2001, 2003, 2005 2007, 2009, and 2011. I managed to proceed to the final several times, the best result being the 4<sup>th</sup> place. I participated in World Championships seven times as a player, namely 2006, 2007, 2008, 2009, 2010, 2011, and 2012. In the world level, I competed in the semifinal round several times, the best result being the 11<sup>th</sup> place. At the national level, I was Finnish Champion 14 times in a row.



*Pictures: Poomsae World Championships around the planet*

### **Poomsae coach**

In 2004, I was selected as the Poomsae National Coach at the age of 30. I still liked to compete, and fortunately, the federation agreed that I could be both a competitor and the head coach. Since then, I have coached the team and also myself. We worked really hard and had a strong belief in our chances, and, step by step, we reached the international level. The breakthrough happened in the 2005 European Championships held in my hometown Turku. Krista Mäkinen, a member of the team received a silver medal. Krista and I also achieved 4<sup>th</sup> place in pair category, but it was not awarded by a medal at that time. To make sure the event was challenging enough for me, I was even the president of the Organizing Committee of this Championships.

I continued as Poomsae National Coach until December 2012. During this eight-year period, Mika Pihlman worked with me as a physical coach, greatly influencing the coaching methods and philosophy. During my time as a Head Coach, our team achieved several European Championships medals and created the roots for Finnish Poomsae training culture, which led later also to great achievements in the world level. Poomsae coaching taught a lot about the psychological side of competition. I learnt how to make a strong team and support each athlete's peak performance when it is their turn to step to the arena.

I still coach weekly some of the best Poomsae athletes in the country. Hopefully, I can offer some different perspectives into their training, although my coaching is nowadays mostly focused on Olympic Taekwondo. In the photo on the right, Christian Kamphuis, Olli Siltanen, and Frans Salmi celebrate their gold medal in the Beach Poomsae World Championships. Frans Salmi has also won Senior European Championships gold and Junior World Championships bronze.



### **Gyorugi coach**

Although I enjoyed my active time in the Poomsae world, I never stopped thinking about fighting. I kept practicing it myself and liked to teach it to others whenever possible. Towards the end of my Poomsae coach career, I spent more and more time on Gyorugi trainings. During the London Olympics, many parallel things happened in the Finnish Taekwondo Federation. Suvi Mikkonen achieved 5<sup>th</sup> place in London, and the Finnish Olympic Committee was willing to invest more money in Taekwondo. When Turku Sports Academy also was interested in supporting Taekwondo, the Finnish Taekwondo Federation decided to hire a full-time coach, called Youth Olympic Coach. I applied for the position and was selected. From the beginning, I realized that it is not going to be an easy job because many people openly showed their disbelief towards me. Fortunately, the number of these people has decreased year by year. In all, I am very grateful for this challenging opportunity.



From the beginning of 2013, I have worked as a Youth Olympic Coach in the National Training Centre. This is what I also do at the moment and hopefully, many more years to come. I work as a head coach of Finland National Team and currently preparing two male athletes for the Tokyo Olympics qualification tournament. So far, my athletes have won medals in the Cadet World Championships and University European Championships. In the senior category, as well as under 21 and under 18 categories, several athletes have already competed in quarterfinal closely missing the podium. There is much potential, but we need just a bit more time, I guess.



In addition to the Senior Head Coach position, my responsibility is also to lead a six-member team of the national coaches (Senior, Junior, Cadet). We rely on teamwork, shared knowledge, and active communication while heading towards the international top level. Our philosophy is that the national team is for the athletes, not the opposite. Our goal is to build the training standards that enable world level success and motivate athletes to do the necessary work.

### **Club level activity**

Taekwondo club of Pori opened a new club in my hometown Kokemäki in 1990. My mother was named as a founder because I was under-aged. From the beginning, I was active not only as a trainee but also as a trainer and general manager of the club. In less than five years, we managed to take the new club to the national level. We placed in Top3 among all clubs in the National Championships. Several persons from this era became key players in Finnish Taekwondo, perhaps the most well-known being Teemu Heino, who competed in Athens Olympics 2004 and was three times European Championships medalist. There certainly was something unique in this club located in a little town with less than 10 000 people.

When I started my university studies in 1994, I moved to Turku and joined a club called Budokwai Taekwondo. At that time, I already had Dan degree and I became one of the instructors of this successful club. When the years passed by, I became the head instructor of the club. A decade after my move to Turku, in 2005, I received the 4<sup>th</sup> Dan and started to organize Dan Promotion Tests. I take care of not only Budokwai members' Dan promotions, but also students from several other clubs come to our Dan test events. I have lost count, but there must be more than 300 belt test events that I have organized, including color belts. By now, I have more than a dozen students possessing 4th Dan or a higher belt.

Nowadays, Budokwai Taekwondo is one the leading Taekwondo clubs in the country consisting of more than 500 regular students. Our club has the best national team athletes both in Gyorugi and Poomsae. Our training facility is 1000 square meters and it is used also by the Taekwondo National Training Centre. Moreover, our club has been titled "Top-ranked Dojang" many years in a row by Kukkiwon. My philosophy as a head instructor is to share responsibility with other instructors, listen their ideas and work together for continuous improvement.

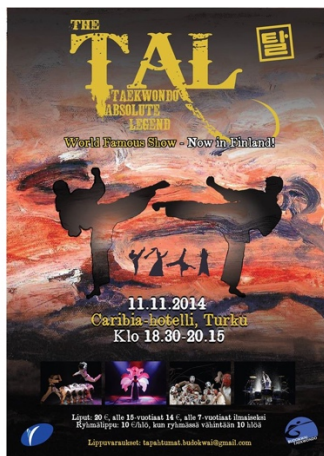
I graduated from University in 1997 as a Master of Education. Also, the following 10 years were academic time. I earned a PhD in 2003 and had several different researcher positions. However, my typical day at the University began with morning training with both Poomsae and Gyorugi athletes. We had a wonderful chance to use the University gym for free. Several world level athletes practiced among this unofficial training group, such as Olympic candidate Juho Kostinen and Poomsae World Championships finalists Roosa Närhi and Inna Lindgren. Regardless of a rather realistic vision of professorship in the University, I came to a conclusion to finish my academic career in December 2006. Then I made one of the biggest decisions in my life and decided to become a full-time Taekwondo professional.



### Federation level activity

The Finnish Taekwondo Federation has had a very significant role in my life over the years. Hopefully, I have also been able to make a positive influence on the development of the Federation. First, I was selected to be a teacher of the instructor courses. Then I was elected to the Federation Board as well as to several Committees. In addition to the committee activity, I have written nearly 100 Taekwondo-related texts and articles for educational purposes and to the Federation Taekwondo Magazine.

I have acted as President of the Organizing Committee for Finnish Open tournament 14 times and President of the Organizing Committee for the international Taekwondo Festival 15 times. I have invited a remarkable list of well-known masters (e.g. KANG Shin Chul, KANG Ik Pil, HWANG In Sik, PARK Soo Nam...), Olympic coaches and athletes (e.g. Dragan Jovic, Abdel Mkadmi, Jesus Ramal, Milica Mandic, Levent Tuncat...) and demo teams (e.g. WTF Demo Team, The TAL...) from other countries to Finland and hosted their visits. Organizing these international exchanges has been one of the most enriching parts of my Taekwondo career.



After my decision to leave the academic world, I became a full-time Secretary-General of the Finnish Taekwondo Federation. I was very proud of this position and put all my energy into the job. I had a great honor to work together with Federation President Markku Murto in numerous international events, meetings, and assemblies. Many obstacles were met, and difficult moments faced, but afterward, I can say that it was a really rich and eventful period. During my service, the Federation got a strong position among other Olympic sports, and our financial support from the Ministry of Education grew 250 %. After six years, I felt the Federation was economically stable enough, and admittedly, I was willing to have new challenges. Finnish Taekwondo Federation awarded me with this golden decoration (picture on the right).



### **International level activity**

My long-time dream came true when I participated in the Kukkiwon Foreign Instructor Course in July 2005. It was great to see Korea, Seoul, Gangnam-Gu and of course, the legendary Kukkiwon building. I really fell in love with Korean food culture and enjoyed it ever since. Also, meeting other Taekwondo instructors from all parts of the world was an eye-opening experience. Since then, I have worked hard to educate my students according to the guidelines set by the Kukkiwon.

Later, I was invited to participate in the conference called Taekwondo Leaders Forum in Seoul. It was a very good experience. I have represented the Finnish Taekwondo federation numerous times in the General Assembly of both World Taekwondo Federation, WTF (nowadays WT), and European Taekwondo Union, ETU (nowadays WTE). I had the honor of visiting both Kukkiwon and the head office of the World Taekwondo.

One of the most challenging positions in my Taekwondo career was being the ETU Technical Committee Chairman. During the Committee time, I launched the Poomsae ranking system in Europe and took care of updating the scores. Also applied once for the Council of the ETU, but did not get enough votes.

Recently, World Taekwondo opened ONLINE courses for international level coaches to keep up with the rule changes and other issues. I have participated in the level 1 (eligible for G1 and G2 level tournaments) and level 2 (eligible for G4-G12 tournaments) courses. I like this opportunity to get further education without traveling far away.



Picture: *One of the many visits to Korea*



## Other Taekwondo-related activity

Alongside teaching and coaching normal Taekwondo classes, I have organized self-defense courses. Basically, I hate the idea that people could reach any improvement in self-defense in a short time, but still I think it is better to educate them about potential risks and the real nature of violent situations. I have given courses in several institutions, supermarkets, etc. I always recommend to the participants that they would start to practice regularly to really make a difference in their readiness to act in a dangerous situation.

Another activity outside my weekly schedule has been School Demos. I simply go to different schools to introduce Taekwondo to the students. When they have a chance to try and feel it themselves, then they have better probability to start to practice it regularly. Over the years, thousands of school kids have gotten their first taste of Taekwondo via these demos. Besides school kids, I have been teaching and promoting Taekwondo in Turku University Sport (Campussport) since 2003. Taekwondo is a well-known sport among the students, and also some other Taekwondo-based classes, such as Just kick, has been included in the Campussport schedule.



During the last years, I have been thinking about how to promote Taekwondo through the internet. This spring Covid-19 virus and global pandemic forced me to take these thoughts into action. Budokwai Taekwondo opened ONLINE-service to its members. The service is available also people outside the club with a reasonable price. Even after pandemic time, ONLINE teaching is an excellent method to reach people who live too far away from the Dojang.

In addition to this Taekwondo ONLINE, I have started together with my colleague an internet site to share physical training drills and knowhow from the professionals to anyone interested in the topic. The site can be found with the following address:

[www.exercisemaster.fi](http://www.exercisemaster.fi)

## Afterwords

Obviously, my life would have been very different if I had not seen Master Hwang's impressive demo in 1985 and gradually become a Taekwondoin. I have practiced Taekwondo for most of my life. Moreover, I have made major life decisions so that the Way of Foot and Fist has always been at the core of my life. Someone might say that I have sacrificed a lot, perhaps missed something, but personally, I feel almost the opposite. I have always done what felt right to me. My belief is that in order to gain real benefits from something, you need to give all you got. Merits and achievements are nice, but their real meaning lies in the genuine efforts you have put in. Respect and polite behavior among people is important, but I have learnt that the strongest reverence is not composed only of good manners, but infinite commitment and hard work.

I have met dozens of wonderful instructors and coaches during the years. I am thankful to all of them for sharing their knowledge. Still, one person has clearly had the greatest influence on my Taekwondo path. For the last 23 years, I have been privileged to be a student of master MUN Dong Kun of Andorra. Aside from his technical excellence, he is a role model of a real Taekwondo Master. He is very demanding when it comes to technical details or realistic functionality of the technics, but he is demanding because he really cares about his students. He does not emphasize discipline as such but rather preaches the importance of self-discipline and everlasting will to develop. His presence has helped me, again and again, to see Taekwondo with a beginner's eye and, consequently, to learn the same things on a deeper level. No matter what my own belt level is, he will always be the master. I hope I have learnt rigorously enough under his guidance to be able to transmit his valuable legacy to younger generations.



Finally, Taekwondo has taken me to amazing places around the world and to exotic locations. I believe without Taekwondo I would not have been able to visit majority of these countries. I have been in Andorra, Azerbaijan, Austria, Belgium, Canada, China, Colombia, Croatia, Cyprus, Denmark, Egypt, Estonia, France, Germany, Great Britain, Greece, Hungary, Iceland, Ireland, Italy, Korea, Latvia, Lithuania, Luxemburg, Mexico, Moldova, Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Portugal, Russia, Serbia, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, Taiwan, Tunis, Turkey, United Arab Emirates, USA, Uzbekistan...and many of these places have been the stage of Taekwondo events several times, offering repeated chances for amazing international Taekwondo friendship. Taekwondo truly is a global sport offering an exciting international lifestyle, and I am very grateful to have all these chances to live it.

CONCLUSIVE TABLE (“Timeline”)

YEAR	EVENT / CONTENT
1985	1 <sup>st</sup> time seeing Taekwondo
1990	Founding of Taekwondo Kokemäki
1991	1 <sup>st</sup> time competing in the National TKD Championships
1994	Promoted to 1 <sup>st</sup> Dan
1994	Moving to Turku and joining Budokwai Taekwondo
1997	Promoted to 2 <sup>nd</sup> Dan
1998	1 <sup>st</sup> time training with master MUN Dong Kun in Andorra
1999	Last time competing in Gyorugi
2000	1 <sup>st</sup> time competing in the National Poomsae Championships
2001	Promoted to 3 <sup>rd</sup> Dan
2004	WTF Poomsae Referee seminar in Dubai
2005	Promoted to 4 <sup>th</sup> Dan
2005	Kukkiwon Foreign Instructor Course in Seoul
2007	Full-time Secretary General of the Finnish TKD Federation
2009	Promoted to 5 <sup>th</sup> Dan
2012	Last time competing in Poomsae
2013	Full-time Youth Olympic Coach (Training Centre Coach)
2014	Promoted to 6 <sup>th</sup> Dan
2019	Senior National Team Coach
2020	Applicant for 7 <sup>th</sup> Dan