

Jim Connolly's **Tae Kwon Do & Kickboxing Schools**

Black Belt 1st Dan Essay

By Danielle Charlton

I started training when I was fourteen. For a girl, it's a strange age to take up something like that, especially alone. When I started, I had very little confidence in myself, so the concept of entering a room, filled with people I didn't know, all of whom seemed so confident, so skilled. Still, there was something about it that was worth it. If someone had said to me that I would reach the level I have reached now when I had just started, I would have laughed, and told them they were lying. When I first started, the concept of training for a black belt was completely alien to me. In a way, it still is! It's hard to comprehend that I'm really at this point. That it's really been so many years, that it's really come to this.

As a girl, or as a woman, there is a huge practical aspect to wanting to learn a martial art. More and more women are taking up martial arts. When I started to train, I can only remember there being a few other girls there. In the time I have been training, I have seen considerably more women join the club, even if its only for a few months, a few, gradings, a few lessons, but the evidence is undeniable, women are taking more interest in martial arts. Not just girls, many girls do it as children, but teenagers and women. Tae Kwon Do is an excellent martial art for women. Before I started, I had already decided on take up a martial art. I looked at a variety of martial arts, and they were all either intimidating to me, or they seemed like they wouldn't really have any practical application. Then I watched a typical Tae Kwon Do training session. It had traditional aspects, self defence aspects, fitness, and most of all, it looked like it was enjoyable. In a very traditional martial art such as kendo, where the bamboo swords are so heavy, it's a martial art that isn't as accessible to women as Tae Kwon Do. As time has passed, and I have seen more and more women take up the martial art, I have also met many women who have done it or are doing it.

What is it about Tae Kwon Do that makes it so accessible to women? It's a sport; so it has physical applications, from a fitness perspective. It incorporates self-defence; so it's useful for women who want to learn how to take care of themselves. It incorporates tradition and history, exposure to a culture that is little known in the western world. I wouldn't pretend that I know a lot about Korean history and culture, but I know more than I did. It's only an hour or so a week, but it broadens your horizons, broadens your abilities, and broadens your way of thinking.

There were some aspects of Tae Kwon Do that I was dreading having to do, when I first started. Most notably, sparring. I'm not a particularly violent person, and the concept of having a physical fight with someone was so frightening. I thought I would get beaten to a bloody pulp. I progressed through the belts, and I got to a level where I was required to spar, and I hardly fought back. I took lots of hits, and I landed very few. Then it just clicked. It wasn't about fighting; it wasn't a fistfight, focussed on violence. I wasn't sparring against someone, I was sparring with them. I realised

that my skills couldn't develop, until I had overcome this boundary. Now, as I approach my black belt exam, I still dislike fighting, when it is a base kind of fight, without any kind of purpose, other than to damage the opponent, but I enjoy sparring because of the physical workout, the interaction, and also because it's the best way I can improve; just by doing it.

Tae Kwon Do is something that has altered my perspective; it is something that has altered my way of carrying myself, through life, as well as in a self-defence perspective. I feel confident enough in myself to be able to walk around at night, and I feel like I would be able to defend myself. Tae Kwon Do is not just excellent at strengthening the body but also the mind and the soul. I feel like I have progressed as a person having started and training in tae kwon do, progressing towards black belt. I feel like I have progressed, like I have accomplished something, no matter what the outcome of this grading is. I already feel like I have succeeded; though a black belt would be nice!

I suppose the time in which I started training was probably the worst I could have picked, as far as other commitments are concerned. Two sets of major exams, plus the production of a portfolio for my application to university combined with an intensive year long course. Here I am now, at university, miles from my home and enjoying all the regular clichés of university life, but I don't want to lose the commitment I have made to Tae Kwon Do. I've trained too hard, too long, to quit at the last hurdle, just because I've moved away. So I intend to continue. I'll find a new club. I'll keep training. I'll do my Dan grading again, if I have to. But hopefully I won't. Hopefully I will be able to pass. Perhaps then I can progress even more; perhaps I reach new levels that I can't imagine. How far will I go in tae kwon do? How far will this martial art take me as a person, in life? I believe it will take me as far as I want to be taken. I can progress as far as I want to progress. I can get as much out of tae kwon do as I put into it.