

Reflection as an Athlete: A Journey to the Top Isn't Easy

By Luke Thompson

Before I start I would like to state that my reflection is honest and personal. My intent is not to upset or "name and shame" anyone, but to share events that have had significant impacts on my life. Not all reflections are Taekwon-Do specific, but Taekwon-Do has played an important role in shaping the person I am now, and will be in the future.

In a profession as challenging as teaching, honest self-reflection is key. That means that we must regularly examine what has worked and what hasn't in the classroom, despite how painful it can sometimes be to look in the mirror.

The reflections I will be sharing are based on my experiences and learning about others and myself on New Zealand campaigns. A lot of what I have learnt throughout this process I have incorporated into my instructing and everyday life.

For the purpose of this essay I have decided to share:.

- My Background - a brief personal recount pre NZ Team.
- NZ Team
 - Experience on different campaigns
 - Money in TKD
 - Friendships & Relationships
- Who am I - how my experiences helped shape me into the person I am.

My Background

- I started training at the age of 14 under Brownie Kingi - United Taekwon-Do based in Pukekohe.
- Club joined ITFNZ to give students more exposure to tournaments and other activities outside the club.
- Was a member of the Auckland demonstration team for 4 years participating in many demos from have a go days to movie openings and opening Warrior games.
- Strong bonds and friendships were made during these years - many of those friendships are continued today.
- Mr Kingi left the club as an instructor when I was 17 a 1st gup and the organisation allowed me to act as the role of instructor until a replacement was found.
- First Dan black belt sat on 15 November 1998

NZ Team

1999 - Naive, full of life & excited... I was 18 years old everything was all about training and the up and coming chance to impress the NZ Coach Mr Andrew Salton and selectors to make the NZ team. I had to leave evening trains early due to work commitments and the information about the camps were given to the athletes at short notice. This meant that I wasn't able to make all the camps.

The Auckland coach only gave me a week's notice of the camps and I could not change my work roster. He told me it was fine and he would let Mr Salton know and inform him on my training and progressions. I played rugby on camp weekends as I thought I might as well get some kind of game/training in since it was a camp weekend, this happened on several occasions.

Mr Salton contacted me after the last camp before trials, he said he was impressed with what I was able to do, sparring, jumping, patterns. I remember

feeling excited and thought this was great. Months of training and working hard have been noticed.

Then he said "but..." what I heard next crushed me. The Auckland coach had told Mr Salton that I didn't want to go to camp because I wanted to stay back and play rugby. He also told Mr Salton that I was a lazy trainer and not committed and often left training early for no reason. Mr Salton told me not to bother with coming to trials as I wouldn't make the side and would be wasting everyone's time because of the reports he has been given from the Auckland Coach. I left the conversation feeling anger, disappointment and frustration.

Later it was discovered that Auckland based athletes were told 3 weeks before the camp and other information was always discussed and passed on at the end of trainings (that I wasn't there for). There were 2 of us competing for the one spot and the Auckland coach was very good friends with the other competitor and wanted to give his "mate" as much chance as possible.

After the truth came out Mr Salton offered a position in the team, but I turned it down as I was still angry about how I was treated. The offer felt like a peace offering rather than a spot I had deserved. I almost walked away from ITFNZ and contemplated joining South Pacific Taekwon-Do with Rua Kaiarau, I was too proud and stubborn to let anyone treat me this way.

It was Master McPhail who spoke with me told me that I shouldn't let one person, one decision leave a "bad taste in my mouth." He told me I had much to offer ITFNZ and that I could go far if I could get past the hostility I felt. He also said "at the end of the day it is your decision and you can only do what is best for you, but I would not want to see you go." I swallowed my pride and decided to work through the disappointment.

Reflecting on the situation - having the instructor walk out of club and feeling let down from the trial process, Master McPhail was the first person to show an interest in me, he obviously saw something in me as an individual and what I could possibly become. We often don't see opportunities that lay ahead due to inexperience, but it can take the influence of one person to shape and change your path.

2001 - 20 years old and bulletproof... was how I felt. I overcame the ill feelings and made the team. I spent time training and was the fittest I have ever been. Competition came and went I couldn't believe the whirlwind effect it had, I spent most of the time in awe of the other athletes and countries. My fitness counted for nothing in the ring I had great general fitness and strength, but a fast 5 kilometres running time was not specific enough for the events.

Lesson learnt I decided to focus on training for events that I could train specifically for and event I have had a better chance in medalling in.

I went off to university after World Champs and forgot everything I learnt and was planning on changing. "A vision without a plan and action is just a dream." Too much down time from training and socialising got the better of me when I came to trial for the NZ team in 2005 I weighed 127kg. I focused on Power.

2005 - Excuses... Mr Andrew Niven was the NZ Coach for this campaign; I remember he was strict on nutrition. "No takeaways, fast food, no excuses" I was 127kg I was competing in individual power and team power I didn't need speed or to be fit I need mass and power. I had found my excuse to keep eating

rubbish and made excuses for fitness. I was mentally strong and believing in what I could do. I felt that was enough.

Competition was tough the first round saw three of us breaking the five techniques.

Playoff 1 - three of us broke successfully but the Polish competitor was disqualified for exceeding the time limit.

Play off 2 - only one of us broke it boards, I did not. I remember lining up the break and it just didn't feel right. The adrenaline wore off and I became mentally drained and not being physically fit did not help. I remember thinking...

"What if" - tried harder - twisted quicker - pulled faster?

It is the worst feeling an athlete can feel... not doing your best.

I had lost... I lost it for myself... the thing is with power no one beats you. You can only lose to yourself. After congratulating the Slovenian I walked out of the ring found a spot to reflect. Before I could I broke down, 45 minutes crying, despondent and useless the worst feeling an athlete can experience after losing. I was there to win - not compete. I had built up that everyone expected me to win and I knew I could to. I remember the feeling of disappointment and despair. I felt I had let down my team, my friends, my club; people back home but most importantly letting my family down. I had failed and having to make that phone call back home to my family was gut wrenching.

My family supported me told me it was ok, that they were proud of me that I was in the team regardless of the result. I knew they meant it but it didn't change the fact that I had built up the expectation for myself. I buried the feelings and carried on, my team needed me and I wasn't going to let them down.

For 6 months not a day went by where some aspect of that last break didn't haunt me. I was depressed but didn't know it. It took me 12 months to change my behaviour in how I train, 12 months to specifically change everything I do in breaking and my overall attitude towards competition. I told myself "I will not let myself feel like this again... no excuses."

2007 - Reinventing Myself... the biggest defining moment as an athlete was this campaign.

I changed my attitude and the way I viewed training. I had to change my behaviours.

I was number two in power breaking that was all the motivation I needed, I'm not good enough to be number one. This is what I reminded myself when I wanted to have a night off or was too sore or too tired to train. Attitude and belief is a powerful motivator.

I evaluated the expectations I placed on myself from 2005. All the expectations were external, friends, family, country, club, and team. The only person that the expectation mattered to was myself.

The expectation of self, it is a selfish act to focus on oneself, to be as good as you have to be there must be an element of selfishness to achieve. I had an expectation set for myself... No "what ifs" this time, no excuses. The only person that will be disappointed is you. This eliminated a lot of pressure I had previously placed on myself.

This was the most memorable world championship of them all. First Individual Power & Pre Arranged Sparring, and medals in team patterns and breaking. It was an amazing experience but after the hype of it all and when you settle back

into the normality of everyday life it's the small things that you truly come to appreciate.

One of my students and my brother made the team and were there with me. They knew how upset and disappointed I was from the last campaign. They had been there training with me, supporting me and to have had the chance to share that moment with them is something I will never forget.

I have come to realise that a shared experience, a moment, with people you love and care about are worth more than the excitement and hype of a tournament. Its fun while it lasts but the memories are special.

2008 - True Colours & Money... High Performance - SPARC and another tournament.

After the last campaign we were granted a fantastic opportunity, we received funds to facilitate our training and competitions. From previous world champs and knowing how much money is required to participate those who received it welcomed the funding.

Attitudes changed in the team environment, there was a feeling of "us and them" carded and team members that were not carded. We still trained hard and bonded with the team but there was the feeling that people saw us differently. We were the "elite" of the NZ team and this is where the problems started.

Yes we were getting funding with no real accountability for how funds were spent. My funds went on equipment weights, mats, pads/bags, and gear for training. The rest of it was spent on flights and accommodation for tournaments. But not all of us spent it wisely or had an understanding on the tax repercussions afterwards. Some ended up paying a lot of it in tax as they couldn't claim against their purchases, they felt the money made it harder. We were athletes not accountants, I wished we had more support in understanding the finances.

A few of us medalled and were asked to run seminars and teach at camps. We were offered payment for it as a thank you. This was great, getting paid for doing something you love doing. I can't remember how or when it all started. But I do remember seminars where we only did them if there was money involved. It usually worked out at 1 third to the club and two thirds to us. The problem we found was that if the seminar didn't fill enough we got less money. We then looked at a set fee. This was costly for the club, but at this point we were more concerned that we are "World Champs" this is our fee. Before the seminars died down I got this vibe from people that we were about the money and nothing else. I found myself disgusted at how I was behaving and acting, I never wanted to do this for money. All I wanted was to pass on what has worked for me in the hopes it would inspire and help others. What had changed? Money and ego. This is not who I wanted to become.

Riva del Garda a beautiful place that managed to show peoples true colours. The venue was small and packed. There was a diverse range of talented athletes ready for competition.

One of our team members had lost his individual event, and had to perform in team events. He was not physically hurt just disappointed. Understanding his frustration and being in his place a few years earlier having a moment is perfectly fine, but when you have not finished competing and your team needs you, you bury those emotions and finish your job. This person chose to be selfish he chose himself over the team, in a team event you do everything you can for them, last person you think of is yourself.

Everyone has a breaking point no matter how strong you think people are mentally, but to act selfishly and not carry out your job is not acceptable. I lost a great deal of respect for this athlete, and I'm sad to say over the next two campaigns he again put himself first and pulled out or chose not to compete for the team on the day of the event. I see this as a huge mistake that damaged this person's integrity.

Mistakes are actions, negative actions that say a lot about what kind of person you are. But to learn and build on from those mistakes, your actions will define you, as a person as a leader.

2009 - Love & Friendships... New relationship, team trainings, team bonding, work, something has to give. After competing with the team for the last couple of years you develop a real bond with some members and the reason we are successful as a team is largely because of that bond and trust. After the incident in 2008, some of that trust was gone and little did I know the rest was about to fall away.

I tried to find a balance in all I did. My partner moved in we had a family; I stopped spending a lot of time after training hanging out with the team. My partner supported me in all I did. It was difficult to come to terms with the training and how much time I needed to spend away but we got through it. The team understood and were happy for me. Until the end of one training a team member who I had a lot to do with inside the dojang and outside approached me. He accused me of not being focused, that what I was doing with my life he didn't understand. What is there to understand I thought? I'm focused on training, in love and happy. Wouldn't a friend support this? I tried hard to spend some time after training with the team to keep that bond. But when news came to me that this team member resorted to belittling my partner to other team members and outsiders, it was the straw that broke the camel's back.

This campaign was the most volatile environment I have been in and everyone could feel the uneasiness at training between us. There were many times I almost walked out on it, but I still I had the drive and wanted to compete.

I would like to thank Master Steve Pellow for his support and guidance during this time. His words and support made it easier. Do the job leave it here and enjoy your life. I came to realise Taekwon-Do is not my life, it is a part of it. A part of who I am.

The moral culture of how to act and treat people is meaningful and valuable. It is what I strive for... To be a good person.

The campaign went well more medals and more recognition, but the drive for competing was all but gone.

2011 - Retirement... my last and final campaign. I was never going to do this one; it was my wife who convinced me. One more she said it's at home we can all come and watch. I had her full support. I knew if I was going to do this I had to do it right. I had to stay focused, my attitude and belief in what I wanted and had to do, I could not have any doubts this campaign. The issues from the last campaign were not resolved and had to contend with them, it would be too easy to walk away if I couldn't be bothered with it all.

I set a goal, a vision, to finish on top in power breaking. The first time in 2007 was for me, the second in 2009 was to prove to everyone I could do it, the third time was going to be icing on the cake.

I walked away from being a competitive athlete happy with myself. I enjoyed the competition and still could have done a few more years, but it was time to put family first. I didn't want to look back on my life and have regrets that I was selfish that I spent too much time away from my family training, that I was selfless spending time away from my family by training others. I want to look back on my time as an athlete and remember what was and be happy.... I am finished.

Who am I... In the ten years I have competed, as a New Zealand representative there has been much learning, change and growth. There are many aspects of the moral culture we try to live by, but I had to go through these experiences and make mistakes to gain personal growth.

I was...

Young, arrogant, thought everyone owed me, the world was unfair and unjust. I was all about what I could get and receive about myself. As I have said I did not like this person.

I am...

Someone who practises what they preach, and leads by example. Be sympathetic and show empathy towards others. We are all different and need support at sometime. I make sure I have no hidden agenda when I am working with students or team members - what you see is what you get, I must stay true to myself.

I have made a conscious decision to respect athletes as talented competitors for what they can do. But some of their actions leave their integrity and moral character in question and as a result, I do not respect them personally.

I will train everyone and anyone that wants extra help. I do not "charge fees" for offering assistance and I do not expect anything except for them to train hard and show respect when they are with me.

This brings me to an end I have kept my thoughts and feelings open and honest. I have not named anyone in the campaigns, as I wanted to focus on my journey and gave just enough details to set the scene. Thank you for your time.