

Taekwon-Do - Are the Sacrifices Worth it?

I started Taekwon-Do in 2010 and have been practicing for nearly 10 years. Over these years I have trained for hundreds, if not thousands of hours. I have competed in three International Campaigns, including two World Championships, of which have required some of the hardest work I have ever done. As a part of this, I have had to stick to strict dietary requirements and intense training regimes. With the commitment I made to Taekwon-Do came sacrifices. As I look back over the past 10 years, I have the opportunity to reflect and ask myself, *“Are the sacrifices worth it?”*

In the build up to all of my International Campaigns, and some of the National Tournaments I have competed at, the need for strict dietary requirements was evident. There were two main reasons for this. Firstly, for me to be able to stay within my weight category for sparring, and secondly being able to perform to the best of my ability while in prime physical condition. For the past 3 years (for all of my International Campaigns) my diet has consisted of three meals a day. My meals contained vegetables, protein, and a little bit of carbohydrates in order to prevent my body from going into the process of ketosis, as this cannot be sustained for a long period of time. I completely cut all refined sugars from my diet and stopped eating snacks (which was something that I previously did on a regular basis). With this I also had to drink at least 6 litres of water each day to maintain a healthy and hydrated body.

In the beginning, this was a very hard process. I used to come home from school and find whatever was in the fridge or cupboards, without any thought to whether it was healthy or not, and eat until I was full. However, before my first World Championships I reflected and analysed what I was eating on the build up to my selection. I saw that this was not the way that an athlete and martial artist who was going to compete at an elite level should be eating.

The main sacrifices for me were making the choice to eat healthy were not being able to go out for food with my mates, especially the quick stop for takeaways, and even having to bring my own food to family gatherings. Quite often I would watch my mates eat all of the foods that I loved, which was something that was really challenging in the beginning. Pressure from peers and temptations were always present. However, with determination, dedication and self-control, I was able to avoid the impulses and stick to my strict diet.

I have never had to restrict my food intake before as I have always been able to weigh in at my current weight at the time. However, when I was selected in the New Zealand team for a specific weight division, there was an obvious need to stay within that range. Constantly watching what I was eating, being tempted and feeling like I was missing out on a range of social situations.... *Was the sacrifice worth it?*

As well as a strict diet, I needed to increase my fitness in order to gain the most out of my training. This involved countless hours of research into different training methods, as well as analysing other fighters and fighting styles from a variety of disciplines including M.M.A., Karate, World Taekwon-Do and Boxing. After researching and talking to multiple personal trainers, coaches and instructors, I developed an extensive training regime. This involved three, two hour sessions of training each day. My first session was at 5.00am - 7.00am, before I had to go to school, and consisted of various strength and conditioning exercise. This session involved lots of core work in order to condition my stomach, as well as an intense leg strengthening program aimed to improve my leg control for both my patterns and sparring.

My next session was solely focused on sparring and fitness. I practiced numerous drills and techniques as well as doing multiple rounds on my punching bag. To finish this session, I would go for a run on the treadmill, either a long distance slower paced run, or a very fast paced run over a shorter distance.

My third session for the day was either my club training or a lengthier run up and down my street. Club training helped me to focus more on the technical aspects of my patterns, as my instructor (Master Mantjika), has an extensive knowledge of patterns and their application. The longer run was at a medium pace and was focused on improving cardio. Both sessions acted as an active recovery session getting my body moving without imposing any great strain.

However, along the way, I was subject to many injuries, both big and small. As well as this, I sometimes felt tired and fatigued, both mentally and physically. This was hard to combat as I was not able to have total rest due to trying to balance my school commitments. During the time I wasn't spending training, I had to study for various upcoming tests and exams, as well as complete internal subject assessments so I could pass my NCEA at secondary school and first year of university. A significant sacrifice during this time was not having a lot of down time, especially when I was preparing for the International Campaigns. *Was the sacrifice worth it?*

As a result of having to undergo the intense training regime, and having to travel to all over the country in order to get extra training, another sacrifice that I had to make was missing out on several events with my mates and school. I was unable to attend both of my Secondary School Balls, one was on the same weekend as a tournament in Auckland and the other one was on the weekend of a High Performance camp. These two events were no doubt filled with lots of fun times and opportunities to make lots of memories. When I went back to school after both of the school balls, the ball was all that was talked about for weeks. Having not attended these due to being at Taekwon-do activities, this was a difficult time for me. *Was the sacrifice worth it?*

Other less important sacrifices were the fact that I was also unable to attend several parties and gatherings with my friends. This was a result of many things that I prioritised over these events including going for my run in the evening, being in Palmerston North, Auckland or Wellington for training, if I had to study, or even just to avoid the potential confrontations and consequences that may occur if I was to go to these events. Often, people who have not been invited to gatherings manage to gain entry into the premises. This often resulted in violence as well as the surfacing of illicit drugs, an activity that I would never take part in. As there is a chance to get drug tested at an international competition, I was not willing to risk the inhalation of second hand smoke, or my drink getting spiked with something that could disqualify me from the competition. Because of this, I sacrificed being able to create further memories and sometimes alienating myself from the discussions that were held after the event. *Was the sacrifice worth it?*

In the build up to the World Championships, I conducted a lot of research into other aspects of my life with the purpose of maximising both my training and performance. One of the things that I looked into was sleep. Previously, I had no sleep schedule at all and only went to sleep when I felt tired. This was generally around 10-11pm on a school night. I did not have a consistent amount of sleep, something which I have found out to be exceptionally important. As I was waking up early in the morning for training, I often woke up feeling fatigued. This was not a good start to my day, especially as I had to complete my first session of training for the day. However, with some research, I developed a comprehensive sleep schedule, of which I adhered to strictly.

However, as a consequence of this sleeping routine, I was restricted to any extra activities during the evening. I was intent to stick to what I had planned, which resulted in having to leave early from family gatherings, events, and social activities in order to be able to be asleep by my desired time. More sacrifices with this new regime heavily impacting on my

social life and resulting in me missing a lot of memorable moments within both my friend group and with my peers from school. *Was the sacrifice worth it?*

With my diet restrictions, I found that after a month, I was no longer feeling the temptation to eat unhealthy foods and I was feeling happy and healthy within myself. My mates came on board with what I was trying to achieve and avoided eating specific foods when around me, something that I would never ask them to do.

With this change in my eating and drinking habits came the change in the amount of work I was outputting. When training, I was able to work much harder for longer, and also my recovery time between each training was significantly reduced. Although the diet put a strain on my life in the beginning, it was clearly needed and had a great effect on my training and life in general. I now have slightly altered the diet after doing hours of research on what it takes to have a healthy body and am feeling in the best condition I have ever been.

Despite the sacrifices that I felt were necessary to maintain my strict training regime, I believe it resulted in me being able to compete in prime physical condition. I do not regret my choices and decisions. The increased training allowed me to compete at the best of my abilities and I can honestly say that I competed with everything I had. I also excelled in my schooling, something of which resulted in gaining a scholarship to study at Victoria University.

I do not regret the choice to avoid some social events throughout secondary college because as a result of my actions I was able to avoid unsafe situations. I knew with 100% certainty that if I were to be asked to undergo a drug test that I would pass without anything illegal or prohibited in my system.

I will admit, at first I was skeptical as to the effects that the new sleep schedule would actually have on my lifestyle and training. However, I found that this truly improved my lifestyle dramatically. After a month of this plan, I was no longer waking up tired, even though I was getting up early. Consequently, I was able to have a better training in the morning without feeling fatigued. I felt even better after my morning workouts, and throughout my day at school I felt awake and ready to learn. I had no idea of the effects that a meticulous sleeping schedule could have, not only on my training, but on my life in general.

However, if I had neglected my sleep, as I once did before, I would not be in the position I am today. I do not regret the sacrifices I have made and the choices I made to willingly remove things from my life, temporary or permanent, in order to achieve my goals and perform to the best of my ability at an international level.

Throughout all the struggle, the hard training, the sacrifices, I can honestly say it was all worth it. The feeling of winning a gold medal at the 2019 World Championships is second to none. After an early exit in the 2017 World Championships I had two options. Either believe that that was it and that there was nothing left to do. Or to put in more work and make more sacrifices to ensure that my performance could improve.

Though there were many sacrifices that I made, there were so many positive moments throughout the entire journey. Being able to train at an elite level with a team who you regard as family is a very special feeling. The memories and experiences that I missed out on back in my hometown were more than made up for throughout all three of my international campaigns. Representing my country with some of my best mates who share my passion and drive has resulted in so many memories and experiences that I would otherwise not be able to experience. At the age of 18, I have visited 14 different countries, something that many people only dream of doing. Being able to experience different countries and their cultures

is incredible, and I owe it all to Taekwon-Do and the sacrifices I made in order to get me into the position that I am currently in.

What's even better, is being able to do it all alongside my family. Taekwon-Do has kept us as a tight knit unit and has resulted in us being able to experience things that some people will never experience. I have been able to meet people and make friends from various places around the world as well as strengthen connections with my New Zealand team mates throughout the entire journey.

I would encourage any striving and passionate Taekwon-Do practitioner to undergo the journey that is an international campaign. I would encourage them to not be afraid of making sacrifices in order to achieve a bigger goal. There are so many friends to be made from all around the world, not to mention the experiences that are available from the journey. Not only that, but the improvement in the martial art is clearly evident as a result of the intense training and hard work.

SACRIFICE is defined as *'giving up something of value, for the sake of other considerations'*. While I believe the sacrifice of spending time with my peers, and diet and exercise consuming copious hours of my life, I have been able to live a lifestyle that I am proud of. I have not been involved in activities that some of my peers have been pressured into including smoking, alcohol and drugs and I feel safe and confident in my abilities as a martial artist to defend myself if the need ever arises. I owe this all to the source of my passion and motivation; Taekwon-Do. If I were to go back in time, I would make *every sacrifice* again in a heartbeat, as the impact they have had on my life overall, is a conclusively positive one.

So, *"Taekwon-Do - Are the sacrifices worth it"*, I would say without any doubt, *"YES!"*