

Building an effective New Zealand Taekwon-Do Team

The success of the New Zealand Taekwon-Do Team is dependent on the ability of its members, despite competing individually, to train, travel and compete as one team.

There are many factors that can bring a team together which have been researched widely for many sports but ITF Taekwon-Do is unique in its structure and syllabus in New Zealand. This is one of the main reasons why, when adhered to, this can be one of the biggest influences on team unity and sets NZ ITF Taekwon-Do teams apart from others within the global organisation as well as from other sports. The high performance sport side of this martial art is sometimes thought of as operating outside of the syllabus to some extent however they are inextricably linked if this awareness is present among all involved.

The parts of our syllabus that can give Taekwon-Do teams their advantage are;

- Tenets

- Moral Culture

- Rank System

Added to this are the essential parts of team creation and function that also play a big part for many other successful teams. These include

- Cooperation and competition

- Travel as a team, stay as a team – the overseas experience

- Utilizing the strengths of the individual members for the benefit of the entire team.

The NZ ITF Taekwon-Do team incorporates all of these aspects. These teams also are invigorated every two years with trials that see changes in its membership. How it encourages new members to assimilate to the team culture and contribute to it is vitally important too. That's where the biggest secret weapon, unique to NZ ITF Taekwon-Do comes into effect.

This is the time the team spends rediscovering its roots, how they will represent NZ and who they are representing. They build a foundation of common purpose from a clear understanding of what makes them unique in the world coming from NZ as well as how they can use this knowledge to perform to their optimum ability at what is the largest event in ITF Taekwon-Do sporting calendar.

There is enormous pride in winning and the success of a team is often only measured by the number of medals won. But that pride cannot be matched by the privilege of living through the experience, representing the art and the sport itself, becoming part of the legacy of all those who paved the way for the team to be what it is today, and becoming a national team member.

It is more commonly a combination of all of this that makes a team successful long term. A sole focus on medals is short sighted and will not sustain success over many years of competition.

This thesis is a closer look into all these aspects and shows that successful NZ teams come from the process of advancing a group of talented Taekwon-Doists to come together to grow personally and to support and learn from each other in order to maximise their combined and individual potential.

The importance of our tenets, Rank system and Moral culture.

Many other sports teams and organisations have some kind of believe system or “ways or working” that help define the team’s purpose or culture. In the main these are used to motivate and bring a sense of combined reliance. Sayings such as, all for one and one for all and there’s no I in team are common in sport and work places seeking to galvanise a group in a common goal. Some invent team chants such as Tigers on three 1,2,3...Tigers! etc. These are generally examples of any junior league or Saturday team wanting to enjoy the fulfilment of the team atmosphere.

Then there are teams such as the All Blacks who are renowned not only for the Haka, but for having a “Black Jersey first” culture that they say is the reason for their success. It helps to eliminate egos and keeps the success of the team in clear focus above individual promotion/reward which is not the way the team operates. A couple of the All Blacks mantras are “champions do extra” and the team’s “Sweep the sheds” policy where even the most prominent team members stay humble by cleaning up the change rooms before they leave. Here if you were to be not only talented enough but the “right person” to make the All Blacks you would be inducted into this culture.

The main difference to this in ITF Taekwon-Do is that this same culture creating system exists throughout the organisation in NZ and is learned at the very beginning of everyone’s Taekwon-Do experience whether they be a white belt or a world champion. The tenets are among the first things that are learned in ITF Taekwon-Do.

They are:

Courtesy, Integrity, Perseverance, Self-Control, Indomitable Spirit.

These serve as the pillars of the ITF organisation and guide the behaviours that are expected at any Taekwon-Do event. In fact it is expected that Taekwon-Do people everywhere live their lives by these principles. This is demonstrated and encouraged by ITFNZ Taekwon-Do instructors in all clubs throughout the country. In a team environment when referred to and upheld by seniors, coaches, managers and the high performance advisory board these form a basis for the team behaviour that can be used to start to achieve the unity required by a successful team. They determine a culture of respect, humility, intense focus and effort that can be translated easily into each new team put together as an implied team behaviour.

Of course at a World Championships event it would be expected that athletes from all countries would be operating under the same guidance as they share the same teachings. In this case the countries that apply and live by these tenets the best are likely to have an advantage at competition time provided they utilize them effectively to build their teams ability.

The system of Rank also plays a part in cementing leaders, instilling respect and humility and the ITF syllabus referring to Moral culture is equally important to the formation and strength of an effective team.

Having a structure as an organisation that is closely modelled on the military the ITF utilizes the benefits of the ranking system to reward progress, to identify leaders in the organisation by uniform and behaviour, to maintain humility and to command respect. These are traits that can be found in successful teams also. Leaders are vital in sports teams especially where new team members join to demonstrate the behaviours and model the culture of the team. It's vital too where standards of excellence exist that these attitudes are demonstrated, learned and maintained.

The NZ Taekwon-Do team is made up of individuals largely competing alone but who train in an environment where all competitors are together. Juniors and seniors together form the wider team and share the culture and training ethos of the entire team. This maintains consistency through the transitions of juniors to seniors and provides a standard for juniors to try to achieve and surpass. Rank plays an important part here as respect for grades, age and environment are implied through the ITF syllabus and the tenets so NZ team members have a head start on understanding and assimilating into the team culture.

Moral culture is equally as important in the training and travelling environments for the team. Where the tenets are covered for all participants Moral Culture is a way of living that explains ideas to better oneself continually and does not appear in the syllabus until 3rd Dan. It is essentially the study of humanity and the effect of an individual's choices on life's path along the way.

Some principles in the Moral Culture syllabus that pertain to the ways teams can benefit from the existence of them in the team environment are;

That to "become an exemplary person one needs to first find oneself and acquire a moral character which is respected by all. This can only be practiced by mental discipline".

Obviously mental discipline is a vital trait for any athlete. This is required to maintain the strict training regime required, the ability to push past oneself with determination and have an awareness of one's own development needs. This in a shared capacity would mean that the team culture changes for the better. For new members or for juniors that have yet to be exposed to this philosophy they can assimilate to the levels of those practicing these ideals.

"Respect the rights of others" is another example of how General Choi's Moral Culture passages benefit those in a team environment. It states "to criticise someone who is better, to covet others possessions and to steal the merits of others are the marks of an unscrupulous man." "To help others succeed in life is reward in itself and has a true value only if nothing is expected."

In a team context this can be applied to mean assisting team members and acknowledging other team members abilities, to not only learn from and respect others ability but to pass on what you have learned to others. It is therefore essential that seniors in the team share their learnings and enforce the behaviour they should expect by role modelling what is acceptable. Becoming someone who inspires and motivates.

Why would anyone in a team environment benefit from this? Because we not only learn more about our own skills when we teach them to others, reliving the process and understanding better why they work but we can also remind ourselves that there is always something more to learn. Exposing techniques and methods to scrutiny of others can help diagnose effectiveness and lead you on a path of trial and error and self-discovery.

This merges into the next aspect of “Building an effective NZ Taekwon-Do team”, Cooperation and Competition.

The idea of cooperating with a team mate can be challenging especially in the early stages of team selection but is something that should still exist in the culture of the team environment regardless of trials or once the team is named. Of course there is often fierce competition for limited positions on the NZ Team and this can lead to rivalries developing early on that can be toxic in a team environment later. Not only that but people who fall into these traps are missing valuable opportunities to grow personally and technically to better their performance overall.

So if positions are limited why assist your competition to get better? The answer is if you wish to succeed at a world event then you will need better and better competition to train with. The cooperative approach will help the whole team to better themselves as they are tested against rapidly improving competition. So the more you help your team mates improve the more you can learn from them. Even on a purely selfish level this is beneficial but more than that, an individual will benefit also from a more positive environment where everyone is encouraged as well as then being able to use the group to develop new ideas and applications of techniques etc.

So cooperation and competition are equally important factors when considering the development of a strong team. These attributes are usually encouraged by coaches but mostly kept alive by the seniors. They are responsible for ensuring they not only live this in practice but encourage others to train this way also. There is always much experience in each team. The only way teams can improve is if senior members expose their knowledge to others so that they may learn but also find ways to improve. If this is done well everyone can grow from the sharing and exploration that comes from this process.

These cooperative team focussed behaviours not only strengthen teams to perform better but they help to build the legacy of all NZ Taekwon-Do teams. This is part of the culture that can be passed on throughout generations however it's not just the syllabus and cooperative behaviours that make NZ Taekwon-do teams uniquely successful. Unity and identity are becoming more and more evident in recent times and help to galvanise a sense of belonging beyond just the name and brand that they represent. Discovering who they are and how to represent all NZ as a national team are vitally important too.

The importance of team identity and historical legacy.

In 2017 the NZ Taekwon-Do team went to train with the NZ Defence force in Waiouru at the Waiouru military base. From an outside perspective it could be seen that this was just a way of hardening up the team or bringing them together under some pressure of the unknown however these were not the main reasons for going there. It is well known among Taekwon-Doists that Taekwon-Do has its roots in the Korean military. What is possibly less known is that the NZ Army too had pioneers that were trained in Malaysia in Taekwon-Do after it had spread there from Korea and who were among the first practitioners to introduce Taekwon-Do to NZ. Pioneers from NZ military posts had returned and started to spread Taekwon-Do by opening clubs such as Franky Yeo, Tere Maorikava, John Tay and Padre Tairea. Padre Tairea is still well-known and talked about with current military personnel in Waiouru. The ITFNZ's own Master Evan Davidson who learned Taekwon-Do while serving in Singapore also came back to NZ and started a club in Porirua in the early 70's and is still active as an 8th Dan in ITFNZ.

So the historical connections to the military for ITFNZ are strong as well as the Art itself being designed originally for combat. Taking a National camp to Waiouru therefore has special meaning for the NZ Taekwon-Do team. While there they had their unique history retold and discovered that they represent a far wider history than they were previously aware. So why would this make the team more successful? As well as gaining a strong sense of nationalism through their new found connections with the NZ Defence force, the team were now acutely aware that they are the best representatives NZ currently has in the tournament disciplines and have considerable history to uphold. The historical pioneers also had outstanding training regimes and intensity as well as dedication. This places special meaning to belong to the national team and garners a sense of pride and identity.

This experience was not only grounding and inspiring but the Army camp had another treasure to share with the team. Upon being welcomed onto the Ngati Tumatauenga marae the team was taught a new haka written especially for them. It was explained that once they had been welcomed onto the marae that it was to forever be their marae to share with all who had passed through. A home to belong to as a team.

The haka was written by Sargent Major Brent Pene who had taken the time to learn and understand Taekwon-Do and its history. The words are written specially for the NZ team and they were later to pick up the name "Nga Kaponga" (the ferns) as the team name.

Sargent Major Pene describes the team, its history and its meaning in the ceremonial haka.

Firstly bowing of their heads to acknowledge those who have gone before, then the winds giving energy, the gods of war, mischief and peace encouraging fearlessness, cunning and resetting of internal balance in the initial stages. The haka leads on to the reference of Nga Kaponga the ferns that represent family and the homeland.

Then at the end Te kura Takahi Puni which refers to a war party or form of attack in warfare where the attack is in a compact force referring in this analogy to General Choi preparing his troops for battle.

The actions throughout reference punches and belt tying again customising the haka to Taekwon-Do.

Nga Kaponga - English translation

Let us bow our heads

The Dawn arises

The breath of Tawhiri awakens

My comrades

Let us awaken

Let us stand

Let us be alert

Let us stamp in unison

Here in unison

Here in unity

Here we are

Bound together by the sacred ferns

From New Zealand

Alas!

My battle belt signifies

The power of Tumatauenga

The wit of Maui

The peaceful balance of Rongo

The pride of my family

Alas!

Sacred Ferns

Sacred ferns from above

Sacred ferns from below

Sacred ferns we are ready

Alas!

The Haka is not only unique to the team and personal but is a source of wonder and excitement to the rest of the world when performed at a World Championships. It is the team's challenge to the other countries and extremely well received. In fact every year a haka from the NZ team is requested but now this team has something that represents the NZ Taekwon-Do team perfectly.

The sense of pride, team unity and statement of intent at World Champs is something you can read on every team member's face coming off the stage from a "Nga Kaponga" performance. Haka is not unique to this NZ team but this particular haka is. It is galvanising and positive. Members of the NZ Taekwon-Do team remember this as one of the best parts of their representation overseas but it also prepares them for competition. The performance puts the anxiety, the stored up energy into action in the best possible way. It announces the arrival of the NZ team and sets the standard early for the team to perform in many ways. To perform as individuals but gain support from the performance for each other, to remember whilst on the other side of the world who they are and to compete to the best of their ability.

Other ways to build team unity are branding the team with their own NZ identity. The NZ rugby team has the "All Blacks" the netball team has the "Silver Ferns" and the NZ Taekwon-Do team now has "Nga Kaponga". The team wear Nga Kaponga on their team uniform to remind them and embed the identity. Like other NZ teams their uniform is the nation's black colour to further advance the NZ culture. The team will always travel and stay together for World Championship events. This is worthwhile for reasons such as safety and security, to look after each other ensuring all get where they need to be but it also helps foster team reliance. Positive experiences all adding up to give a team of individual's support and security within the team framework.

To conclude there are many ways in which a team can be built. Teams could simply be left to come up with their own identity with some stepping up as leaders and owning the task of creating a culture and defining the team's structure however this approach will invariably favour some and not others. It's possible too that those leaders may simply not bother due to wanting to concentrate on their own training.

The examples of great teams such as the All Blacks speak for themselves. A culture of "team first" is a proven winning formula which can be replicated into other teams. The NZ Taekwon-Do team is repeating its success year after year having established a solid culture and structure utilising the fundamental ways of interacting with each other which is written in the ITFNZ syllabus.

The unique history, links to the Art itself and the common purpose are the keys to uniting individual athletes into a team dynamic for mutual benefit. To compete and cooperate with each other to better themselves and to brand themselves to be identified and stand out amongst other countries at world events. And finally to understand who they are and who their opposition is.

In Sun Tzu's The Art of War, it is said "If you know your enemy and know yourself you need not fear the result of a hundred battles. If you know yourself but not the enemy for every victory gained you will also suffer a defeat. If you know neither the enemy or yourself, you will succumb in every battle".

So it is well worth knowing yourself and your team while you train to oppose the competition at home and the competition abroad. Those who train only for the competition will struggle against a well prepared and effective New Zealand ITF Taekwon-Do Team!

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ITFNZ: Techniques syllabus and handbook.

All Blacks quotes: "Team First" and Sweep the sheds" James Kerr – Legacy

"Champions do extra" (Brad Thorn) James Kerr – Legacy

Haka: "Nga Kaponga" Sargent Major Brent Pene NZ Defense Force

Art of War: "Know your enemy" Sun Tzu.

