

Master Christine Young – New Zealand’s first female Master

by Fiona Simmonds 3rd dan

Master Christine Young was the first female in New Zealand to achieve the honour of reaching the title of “Master” in ITF Taekwon-Do, and this essay is an insight into the lengthy journey to reach this achievement. In writing this I have interviewed Master Young herself and obtained commentary direct from peers such as Master James Rimmer and Master Kane Raukura, both of whom have been involved in her journey. In addition to this I have had communications with Mr Nathan Bowden who was associated with her in the high-performance space and Ms Sheryl Chase a former student (now instructor).

I met Master Young initially as a work colleague and have gone on to become her student and assistant instructor at Hwa Rang BOP Taekwon-Do so additionally I draw on my own knowledge. She has been very inspiring and supportive not only in my own journey through the ITF ranks but to that of many women.

Master Kane Raukura, who travelled the journey from 4th dan to Master alongside Master Young, sums it up as follows:

“Taekwon-Do is a lifelong journey of self-improvement, both inside and outside the Dojang. Master Young has intrinsically made this journey part of her own life and through this example she provides inspiration and motivation to us all.”

“Being successful in Taekwon-Do involves a combination of physical skills, mental discipline, and personal qualities. These qualities I believe Master Young has in spades!” (1)

In all the amazing achievements that Master Young has accomplished, including winning numerous Taekwon-Do medals and body sculpting competitions, she acknowledges her highest achievement is becoming a Master in ITF Taekwon-Do. She proudly lists her black belt certification along with other academic qualifications and believes others should do the same. “It is a professional qualification, especially from 4th dan, due to the specialist knowledge that you have learned over the years”.



(Master Young receiving her grading result)



(Grading day)

Support Network

Progression through the ranks can only be achieved by having a great support network as evidenced by Master Young's story.

Master Young was born in Levin into a family of five children and was inspired by Jackie Chan movies at a young age to replicate the cool kicks she had seen. She was keen on learning Kung Fu, but the local Taekwon-Do club was closer and with so many siblings, she had to find her own way to training.

She began her journey in 1985 at the Levin Taekwon-Do club. Her first instructor, Mr Craig Beisel (5th dan) gave her the starting foundation skills and she was there for three years from the age of 15.

Master Young proceeded through her gup gradings, officiated by Master Young Ku Yun (7th dan Master and international instructor).

In 1988 she moved to Wellington to attend university. While there, she dabbled in Karate and Aikido, cross-training in different martial arts, whilst primarily training in Taekwon-Do.

She joined the Berhampore club where Mr and Mrs Ian and Lena Walton were covering the classes and found with Wellington students attending each other's clubs regularly, she had the opportunity to train with many different instructors.

As she wanted to find a home club in Wellington, she was always in contact with Mr Norman Ng (Pioneer of New Zealand ITF Taekwon-Do) seeking advice on where to train. Master Young describes Mr Ng as “a wonderful man who was always very encouraging” and she has a great appreciation of training sessions by him.

Mr Ng suggested she join Mr Richard Hall (3rd dan) a former student of his, (along with Mr Paul McPhail 3rd dan). Both Mr Evan Davidson (3rd dan) and Mr James Rimmer (1st dan) had recently left Wellington. Mr Hall guided her and another young student through the next phase of their Taekwon-Do journey. He oversaw a plan he had designed for students preparing for black belt whereby they were up at 6:00am completing a run, then patterns, and other preparation routines. This taught Master Young a marvellous training ethic from the beginning.

In 1989 Master Yun left ITF. ITFNZ had to regroup with an independently elected local executive. Without an overseeing Master for dan gradings the newly formed ITFNZ had to come up with their own dan grading system. Master Young was in the first group of candidates to sit the weekend black belt gradings instigated by the new ITFNZ executive. It was held in March 1990 and officiated by Master Paul McPhail and Master Evan Davidson.



(As a young black belt at the Brooklyn club)

By 2nd dan she was training at the Miramar club. Mr Hall had left ITFNZ to follow Master Yun in the new art of Yun Jung-Do. In 1995, Mr Brett Kraiger and Master Young restarted the Brooklyn club at the Brooklyn Hall. She feels very attached to the Brooklyn club (now renamed Spirit Taekwon-Do) and looks upon it as a home club.



(Brooklyn club with Brett Kraiger)

A Turning Point

In late 1995 she moved to England with her husband who had earned a scholarship to Oxford University. Master Young, who qualified both as a Lawyer and a Chartered Accountant, spent most of her time as a commercial accountant while in the United Kingdom.

While in Oxford she trained at OUTKD the Oxford University club where new white belts were mixed in with black belts from a multitude of countries. "It was like a UN Taekwon-Do club," she comments. The instructor at the time was Mr Gary Miller (5th dan) who was also the British National Coach.

Master Young admits that she was a "terribly below par coloured belt and didn't concentrate so much on the technical aspects of the art". She found the classes were generally more physical and the art more freeform than technical.

In 1996 Mr Miller encouraged her to grade to her 3rd dan. She began training with the British team and she learned quickly. She got to grips with the technical side and improved physically, being immersed in squad training. Master Young had no intention of being selected to the National squad and was there purely for the training; however, one of the coaches put her up against the English competitors for

practice and by chance she got selected for the 1997 English National team. The team ended up bringing home a gold medal in women's power breaking at the World Championships in St Petersburg, Russia.



(English team with coach John Taylor)

This is where Master Young met Mr Donato Nardizzi (5th dan). He was an international umpire in St Petersburg and when she moved to London in 2000, it was a natural transition to train at his clubs. In time, Mr Nardizzi encouraged Master Young to grade to 4th dan.

Master Young wishes that she had graded sooner between 3rd to 4th dan which took seven years. She dislocated her knee whilst preparing for 4th dan which added extra rehabilitation time into the mix.

Master Young spent from 2000 to 2005 in London where she competed in two more World Championship campaigns with England, winning a further three World bronze medals.



(English team that competed in Poland)

Master Young believes that she is very fortunate to have become a well-rounded student due to the various support elements of her training; being peers and instructors. Mr Beisel gave her the starting foundation skills. Mr Hall was very encouraging and taught her the difference between the mentality of a coloured belt and that of a black belt. Mr Miller (now 8th dan Master) taught her a passion for tournaments. She did find that Mr Nardizzi (now 9th dan Grand Master) was the most rounded of all her instructors and gave her a high level of technical expertise and understanding the value of attending International Instructors Courses.

During this time in London, Master Young split with her husband who had previously returned to New Zealand.

The Return Home

Master Young met Mr Roman Kirtoca a 4th dan black belt from Moldova (whose instructor was trained by General Choi Hong Hi). Master Young sums him up: “He was physically talented and highly detailed. He was able to show ITF Taekwon-Do sparring in full flight with spectacular flying and spinning kicks. It was a privilege to see a full clean scoring spiral kick executed by Roman on his opponent at one Scottish Open Champs.” He was very passionate about both the art and sport side and had a huge impact on lifting her training.

Together they returned to New Zealand in 2006 and opened the Hwa Rang Taekwon-do Academy in Tauranga.

Starting the club up, Mr Kirtoca was more passionate about teaching than she was, so he took on the major role within the partnership. “At the time there was less science around training, you taught how you were taught by your instructor; everything was passed from instructor down to student who then passed it down to their students. There has been a change in philosophy in that we are now focusing more on the students’ journey and what we can do to help them progress through the ranks. The dynamics have also changed the way we do such things as gradings; which used to be more a form of endurance due to the length of gradings and sometimes caused attrition of our student numbers” says Master Young.

Master Young felt her journey was well supported from ITFNZ (now ITKD). Grand Master McPhail was always there encouraging her and doing so much behind the scenes to help her with opening the club in New Zealand and providing great strength through maintaining connections within New Zealand whilst Master Young was overseas.

These connections allowed her to instantly re-connect with Master James Rimmer and Master Mark Banicevich when she was deciding where she was going to settle and live in New Zealand.

Master James Rimmer comments:

“My next connection with Master Young was basically a knock on the door when she returned to NZ after a stint overseas, mainly in the UK. She had an idea of setting up a business and importing a quality Dobok by the name of TOP PRO ... and did I have 20K? We did go into business, and it was successful.” (2)



(5)

(Master Young with Master Rimmer)

Upon her return to New Zealand, Master Young was appointed New Zealand Team Head Coach with Mr Ian Walton assisting. Together they coached the senior team in 2006 and 2007 and then went on to coach both the junior and senior teams in 2008 and 2009. The skills she had learnt by being immersed in the British National team were immense, and she was able to share tested training methods.

She had further involvement as a member of the high-performance board and Mr Nathan Bowden offered the following commentary of that time while he was New Zealand Team manager:

“She was always concerned with bringing access to the high-performance environment to as many people as possible to encourage participation and grow the base of talent as much as possible. She wanted to promote more regional and national access to trainings to give more opportunities for athletes to train, and to train under New Zealand level team coaches. She was all about athlete development and continuous improvement so as a country we could be stronger internationally and were providing pathways for anyone in New Zealand that wanted to follow the sports side of our martial art.”

He continues to say: *“She has also been a critical part of the international umpiring pool and has always been highly regarded, ensuring the standards of international umpires at world events stay high.”* (3)

She remained in Tauranga working as a Chartered Accountant, running the Hwa Rang club after Mr Kirtoca left to teach in South Korea in 2007.

Never one to sit still, she co-founded The Martial Arts Academy in 2013 with Mr Scott Coburn and ended her competitive career in 2018 winning five golds, one silver and one bronze at the ITF World Cup in Sydney.



(World Cup in Sydney)

During this time, she also continued through the dan grades alongside Master Kane Raukura.

“Master Young has been my friend for many years, and we have travelled the senior ranks together. Our journey as “stripes” began at 4th dan and continued all the way to Master on the 8th of March 2020.” (1)

Challenges

At times Master Young found Taekwon-Do all-consuming, especially as a black belt. She found balancing life, career, and numerous Taekwon-Do events difficult as there was always an expectation to attend everything. This is something she is conscious of with her own students. Master Young's teaching strategies can be somewhat different to conventional instructors, who may not agree with her philosophy on having a less strict structure in class.

As a coloured belt she also found injuries and learning techniques were her greatest challenge before she began to understand body mechanics. Master Young has always cross-trained while training in Taekwon-Do as she believes this is very important for longevity in the sport.

No Discrimination

“There were always women training and instructing, such as Mrs Rose Cherrington, Mrs Trish Rounthwaite, Mrs Lena Walton, Miss Barbara Ingles, Mrs Beryl Pimblott and many others, but less as a percentage of overall membership.” Master Young found the women very supportive of each other.

On reflection she found the men equally encouraging in terms of support to grade and to open clubs. In her early days as a new blackbelt/instructor she found Grand Master Davidson especially supportive and inclusive.

She noted that in earlier times people were less focused on gender bias and the males in the sport were “gentlemen” who were respectful and showed old fashioned etiquette, as well as ITF etiquette, such as opening doors for women (both literally and figuratively). This was more a sign of the times than anything else. “I believe women were shown due respect and encouragement. However, it was still up to us to seize the opportunities” says Master Young.

Master Young feels with the change of environment such as the “me too” movement, that today in some situations there is a reverse gender consciousness needed, that women need to hear the voices of their male counterparts too.

Master Young did not experience any outright discrimination due to her Asian ethnicity in martial arts, as the origin of many martial arts is founded in Asia. In New Zealand, Taekwon-Do pioneer instructors led the field with Mr Willy Lim and Mr Norman Ng. Worldwide, General Choi was travelling around the world and Mr Bruce Lee was very much in the public eye. Master Young reflects: “If anything, martial arts was linked to a mystical Asian culture and the perception was that if you were Asian, you somehow knew Kung Fu.”

Life Benefits

When asked how her life has benefitted from Taekwon-Do, Master Young rattles them off without hesitation. “Good health; understanding physiology to avoid injury; international opportunities to travel and compete; extending boundaries of leadership; meeting people overseas with common interests; seeing a common language that connects people from around the world; a grading system that provides personal growth; the ITF and ITFNZ gives students different pathways without necessarily going through the grading hierarchy to be part of a group; and continuous learning.”

Master Young exudes pride in our organisation and the benefits one can achieve just by being part of it.

Sacrifices

Master Young cited juggling family time, work, and sport as the biggest sacrifice during her training. She had to close the chapter on her professional career to be able to open The Martial Arts Academy.

Having a family got pushed aside as she focused on work and training in her thirties. She didn't begin competing until she was 27 years old and then continued into her 30s. As Taekwon-Do training occupied much of her 30s, she was much older by the time marriage and children came to the forefront of mind.

However, she feels she has always been great at seizing opportunities and has been fortunate to train with excellent instructors who gave her great guidance. She was able to extract the greatest potential and take advantage of opportunities as a competitor, coach, and umpire.

Early in her career she saw her instructor's model this in their everyday lives, so she mimicked what she saw and has continued with it throughout her life.

Desirable Change in ITKD

Master Young would like to see the circle of influence in club culture change, that currently has a top-down approach to learning. She believes it should be a student-centred journey and would love to see the students embrace this by taking more responsibility for their progress. She wants students to see Taekwon-Do as a way of life, and ITF NZ an extended family to support them in life's journey, their personal development and well-being. "It should be a lifetime of belonging, friendships, and richness in life. It is that extra layer that you can't buy." says Master Young.

"There are so many opportunities to connect with people either in New Zealand or at an international level such as the Tul Tours."



(Tul Tour)

Master Young also noted that she would like to see a revamped format of competitions whereby there are more frequent, localised competitions that are cost effective such as local interclub competitions.

She loves the recent addition of a youth council with younger decision makers having an input as they did in the old days when ITF was young in New Zealand. Several of the young people who were making the decisions when they were in their early 20s are now in senior roles at ITKD and ITFNZ.

Other Achievements

“Christine is very passionate about her TKD, her student’s success and the Female role within it along with outside interests.

I’d go as far as saying she’s fiercely independent and once she makes her mind up, she pursues that decision choice to the end.” says Master James Rimmer.

At the time of writing, Master Young is currently training in Brazilian Jiu Jitsu which she has done off and on for 10 years and is currently a blue belt. She has concurrently been training in Gum Do for the last couple of years which is a Korean sword art and is a blue belt in this also.

Dipping her feet into politics, Master Young was the Tauranga candidate for the ACT party in the 2023 General Election.

Of all the challenges Master Young has set herself, the hardest she found was competing in bodybuilding. She did this for a year and won best overall “figure” category, and “best routine” in the Bay of Plenty Nabba competitions.



It appears when Master Young puts her mind to something she tends to succeed.

Master Young does believe her key to success in her Taekwon-Do training was that she “meandered through her training rather than rushing it, had a break in the middle while she was concentrating on her career and then came back to it.”

“Enjoy the journey, it’s not a race” is one of Master Youngs mottos.

An Inspiration to Others

As with many instructors Master Young has had an impact on many of her students and their achievements in life through the tenets. Whether it be by setting an example, a kind or supportive word, or by pushing a student to achieve their potential as a World Champ.

Ms Sheryl Chase made the following comments:

“I took my son to Hwa Rang when Master Young first opened the club in Tauranga. He was 11 and being bullied. He wanted to learn self-defence. I said I’d join in with him to support him, but I didn’t really have any intention of joining. I didn’t think it was for me at all. After a few sessions Master Young said to me ‘you should definitely join, you have more flexibility than a lot of black belts.’ I still remember it because it was the trigger that made me join. She was so positive that I could do it! A little bit of belief in someone goes along way. And my son and I ended up training together for five awesome years” (4)

Master Young has inspired many women and will continue to do so with her “If I can do it, you can do it” attitude and we thank her for this.

Ms Chase goes on to say: *“About 10 years ago a bunch of us walked the Tongariro crossing. When we got there, we played a drinking game. Except instead of skulling alcohol we had to do exercises! I know, so good! Anyway, Master Young accumulated 70 push-ups and she decided to whack them out in one go. On her toes of course!! With no breaks!!! At that stage I was still doing push-ups on my knees. I was in total awe (to be honest so were my male friends) and from then on started working on proper push-ups. True strength. I haven’t looked back.”*

Accolades from her peers

Master James Rimmer says:

“I only vaguely remember Christine as a Jnr grade ... about that Green Belt level. We weren't close at all; she was just a student in Wellington. I left Wellington for Tauranga in April 1987 and started TKD in Tauranga in August of the same year.

My next connection with Christine was basically a knock on the door when she returned to NZ after a stint overseas, mainly in the UK. She had an idea of setting up a business and importing a quality Dobok by the name of TOP PRO ... and did I have 20K?

We did go into business, and it was successful. And during this time is where we crossed paths again, eventually selling the business and running clubs in Tauranga joining forces with TMAA in late 2021 ... or was it 2020?

Christine is very passionate about her TKD, her students success and the Female role within it and outside interests.

I'd go as far as saying she's fiercely independent and once she makes her mind up she pursues that or decision choice to the end.

Her Master degree is well earned. She had a set training regime and was diligent until the end goal was achieved.

Her technical ability is great, and knowledge is excellent. She's motivational and has a no-nonsense approach to teaching with a wide range of skills."

Master Kane Raukura says:

"Master Young has been my friend for many years, and we have travelled the senior ranks together. Our journey as "stripes" began at 4th Degree and continued all the way to Master on the 8th March 2020.

In my time knowing Master Young, a few things stand out that make her the consummate Taekwon-Do practitioner and Martial Artist.

Being successful in Taekwon-Do involves a combination of physical skills, mental discipline, and personal qualities. These qualities I believe Master Young has in spades!

1. **Technical Proficiency:** A strong foundation in Taekwon-Do techniques, including strikes, blocks, kicks, stances, and tuls (patterns). Consistent practice and mastery of these techniques are crucial, and this is something that I know that Master Young takes very seriously.
2. **Physical Fitness:** Being in good physical shape is essential for Taekwon-Do. Strength, flexibility, agility, endurance, and balance are all important components that Master Young has strived to achieve and continues to do so.
3. **Discipline and Dedication:** Martial arts require dedication and discipline. Regular practice, commitment to training, and a willingness to learn and improve are fundamental and are clearly in evidence with Master Young.
4. **Respect and Humility:** Master Young has a healthy respect for herself, other instructors, training partners, and opponents. Master Young clearly demonstrates Humility. Humility helps in being open to learning from everyone, regardless of their rank or experience.
5. **Mental Strength:** Master Young truly epitomises mental strength. Through Taekwon-Do training, she has built mental toughness, has faced difficult challenges, overcome obstacles, and stayed focused under pressure.
6. **Ethical Values:** The tenets of Taekwon-Do, including courtesy, integrity, perseverance, self-control, and indomitable spirit, are essential not only in training but in Master Young's everyday life. This is very clear in Master Young's interactions with her friends, her colleagues, and the wider community.
7. **Continuous Learning:** Master Young is a great practitioner because she never stops learning. She seeks to broaden her knowledge, explore different techniques, and understand the philosophy behind the art on an on-going basis.
8. **Adaptability and Creativity:** Being able to adapt techniques to different situations and being creative with applications demonstrate a higher level of mastery. Master Young has explored this in depth, especially when branching out into other martial arts such as Brazilian Jujitsu.

9. **Teaching and Leadership:** *Sharing knowledge and guiding others in their martial arts journey is a hallmark of a consummate martial artist. Being a mentor and a leader within the Taekwon-Do community is highly regarded and Master Young meets this criteria 110%.*
10. **Competition:** *Opportunities to test skills, gain experience, and foster sportsmanship are chased by Master Young. Her fitness passion, body building challenges, exploring politics and continued Taekwon-Do journey is proof that continual growth and improvement is constantly sought by her. This is one of her most admirable traits.*

Taekwon-Do is a lifelong journey of self-improvement, both inside and outside the Dojang. Master Young has intrinsically made this journey part of her own life and through this example she provides inspiration and motivation to us all.

I am proud to call her 'Master', but even prouder to call her 'Friend'."

Master Raukura's comments sum up the inspirational person that Master Christine Young is and the qualities that she exudes that have seen her achieve such success in the art of ITF Taekwon-Do. She is truly an inspiration to others.

So far, Master Young has made Taekwon-Do a journey of fulfilment not a race to the end. She has enjoyed the ongoing journey of enlightenment and growth and will continue to pursue all the aspects the art has to offer. In the words of Master Young: "Trust the process."

References:

- (1) Email from Master Kane Raukura (7th dan)
- (2) Email from Master James Rimmer (8th dan)
- (3) Comments from Nathan Bowden (4th dan)
- (4) Comments from Ms Sheryl Chase (5th dan)
- (5) Photo compliments of Kris Herbison (6th dan)