

How do L. J. Smith's martial arts characters fight?

As many of you already know, Mr. Usok Choe, the genius Administrator behind this site, is more than just a brilliant computer guru. He's a Taekwondo champion as well. As I've told him, I don't see how he fits all that—and being a father and husband—into just one life, but he does . . . and more. He's a terrific writer, who has answered the many questions I asked of him, explaining this art that Rashel and Keller; Morgead and Quinn; Jez and Meredith and Dee all undoubtedly know . . . but *I* don't, or didn't until he explained it. This interview is filled with magic, from Usok's first answer to his final words on "why the black in black belt"? Taekwondo is a discipline built on a philosophy that is unexpectedly poignant—and shimmers with the beauty of both the night and the light.

L. J. questions Usok:

1) Where was your latest contest held? Could you describe the conditions in which you compete? (I mean, I know there's a mat, but could you describe anything else, and what kind of clothing you wear?)

- This most recent national level, black belts only tournament was held in Dallas, Texas on January 13-15, 2011. It has been hosted by this city for the past two years but I've heard that it might be moved to another city for next year. I am hoping that it comes back to California. One can only hope... ;-)
- The Nationals and Worlds are run by the American Taekwondo Association (ATA) Headquarter so they are very well organized, top of the line competition. As you've stated, they do have nice padded mats with Tatami texture for grip.
- Judges to these tournaments however are all volunteers and unfortunately judge-calls can be hit or miss at times. My hope is that they stay consistent on their calls to all competitors equally (good or bad) and not favor one or the other.
- The clothing we wear are called Do-bok (It is pronounced like the 'doe-boak,' boak like 'oak.') Mine is 100% cotton in all white with various patches. It is really thick to absorb sweat and it can feel heavy at times but I like it this way. When kicks and punches are thrown during the forms competitions, it makes this nice 'snap' sound that accentuates the power to each moves. Within this ATA organization, there are other types of competition and they each have different Do-boks and related gears.
- ATA has weapons competition too and there are many weapons to choose from: Bo Staff, Short Staff, Kamas, Katana Swords, Nunchakus, Tri-Sectional Staff, Cane and on and on. Personally I have not competed in any weapons but I am seriously thinking about competing in one in the next season. It seems like a great fun!

2) What exactly were the names of the competitions you won? What do they comprise?

• This most recent one is called ‘**2011 Black Belt Nationals**’ held in Dallas, Texas. In a single season of competition which starts from June and ends in following April, there might be close to hundred competitions throughout the country. They all get a specific tournament designation(AAA, AA, A, B and C) by the ATA Headquarter based on participant numbers. Bigger the competition, more points are awarded for winning since there are more competitors and presumably of higher caliber too. The one I have concentrated on for the past three years is called “Traditional” which comprises of “Form” and “Sparring.”

FORMS: Below is an information, I took from Wikipedia. Surprisingly, Wikipedia has a great amount of information on ATA. I think you should review their information for additional research. Here’s the link to that page:

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/American_Taekwondo_Association

A form (poome sae) is a series of kicks, blocks and other techniques put together in a set pattern. The pattern becomes more complex as students progress through the ranks. For example, the 9th grade white belt form contains eighteen moves. The 5th grade green belt form has 34 moves, the 1st degree black belt form has 81 moves, and the 9th degree black belt form has 99 moves. If all of the forms (eighteen in all) are done in sequence, they form the pattern of a nine pointed star (eight outer points plus a center point) referred to as the Songahm Star. According to the ATA, when the outer points of the Songahm star are connected, they form a circle which exemplifies complete balance. The ATA claims that forms create a contextual application for new material learned at each belt level.

SPARRING: The “Sparring” competition is based on “Point System” hence it is also called “Point Sparring.” These designated targets have certain point value when hit and any competitor get to 5 points within 2 minutes sparring time wins. Points are awarded as follows:

- > Head: Kicked with feet = 2 points. (Head or face can not be punched with hands.)
- > Front of Chest: Kicked or punched = 1 point.
- > If you hit these two target areas while jumping you get additional point. So, the Jump Head Kick is worth 3 points. And Jump Kick to the Chest Area is worth 2 points. Jump punch however rarely gets any more than 1 point which is odd.

On a side note, this system of sparring is different than those of “Olympic Style” where competitors fight three, 2 minute bouts and the one with most points accumulated at the end wins. I actually came from this discipline back when I was in Korea but I’ve switched since then.

SAFETY GEAR: We are required to wear safety gears: ATA approved, soft head gear with clear plastic face shield. Padded hand pad, Cup (for men), Chest Protector, Feet pads. I go one step further and wear Arm Pads, Shin Guards and another layer of pads for Instep too and they all have to be the soft kind. The reason why I take extra precaution is because I get injured fairly easily, especially my feet. Sparring Taekwondo(TKD) is something like 70% kicks and 30% punches. The Olympic Style TKD sparring is almost 90% kicks and 10% punches in comparison.

3) Do the moves you perform really have special names, like in the movies? If so, what is your favorite or one you do particularly well? Even if they don't have movie-like names, could you describe a move you use often or favor?

- They do not have any fancy names like you see in the Kung Fu movies I'm afraid. The kicks have very practical names such as: Side Kick, Reverse Side Kick, Jump Reverse Side Kick etc... Very functional names. The one kick that I've always been really good with, ever since I was kid is called Reverse Hook Kick, rather than trying to explain how this kick is done I think you should see it for yourself in YouTube:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=d7g2gzoqK14>

BACK STORY: Thought this would be a good place to tell you how I've gotten re-started on TKD again. Back when I was a child in Korea(1968-1980), my parents, who were pretty poor some how scrounged up enough money to provide me with piano lessons because I begged them. Well, needless to say, I did not enjoy piano lessons which took away from my playing with friends. I think this was during the kindergarten years. When I went to Elementary School I've begged them to buy me a Violin. Again they obliged but it too did not last long. Then my little brother decided to take up Taekwondo and I've begged them to let me join. I distinctly remember the threat that my father laid on me, "Twice in the past we've try to indulge your wishes with very little to show forth. This would be your third wish and if you quit without getting your black belt, DO NOT EVER ASK US to do anything for you!" So, that is how I got started. I think I was in my 2nd Grade and my younger brother was in a kindergarten.

I can still remember the first day I was at the TKD school with my brother, this unassuming kid, who couldn't be much older than I was wearing a tattered black belt. He can kick, he can spar, he looked awesome when he did his forms and I was so envious of him! We did these pre-warm up exercises, one of which was doing the leg splits. Take your hand, hold it up and make a widest "V" with your fingers, looking very much like the Japanese tourist and that is how my legs looked when I try to do splits. But this kid, he could do a full 180 degrees split. Wow! I wanted to be like him...but it was going to take me more than 100 years to get there. I think he was our teacher for many months there after, he taught us the basic stands and kicks. We went everyday to the TKD school, rain or shine, blazing Summer heat or freezing ice and snow Winter. There were many times when I wanted to quit but my militant father would have none of it. Thanks to his persistence, I think I received my black belt by the time I was in 4th Grade. I was close enough to test for 2nd Degree black belt two years later but we emigrated to U.S. in 1980. I think we found and attended a small hole-in-a wall of a TKD school in Campbell, CA when we lived there in 1982 but the school owner was hardly ever there and I ended up teaching the class, without pay. It did not last and I tabled the TKD for years there after.

Fast forward to September 2007. After about 15 years of playing adult league ice hockey in San Jose, we moved up to Lincoln, CA. The only ice rink was 20 miles away and I didn't feel like driving that distance every other day. I needed another sport hobby and my wife suggested that I should pick up TKD again. That is how I got started back on TKD again after 28 years of hiatus. Initially, I just wanted to do it to keep in shape but old habits die hard and the competition bug bit me hard and I've been on it full tilt since 2007.

4) What did it feel like to win both the events? Can you even describe it?

- Of course it feels great to win! Especially the hard fought ones. Most of these National tournaments (there are three) tend to draw in the most ambitious competitors who are hunting for points to stay within the World's Top Ten Standings. And if you are able to stay on this Top 10 list by end of the season, you are invited to compete for one final championships competition in Little Rock, Arkansas in June. Should one be good enough to beat the best then you can be called "THE World Champion."

This past Nationals in Dallas was the #2 "Nationals" for the season, the #3 and the last Nationals will be in Las Vegas this coming March. In events like this, you tend to see many familiar faces from many different states; Texas, Arkansas, Montana, Florida, Arizona, North Carolina... you get a good geographic diversity to the mix and everyone seems to be really nice. However, many times I have felt that people resented my presence, they are there to gain additional points for State and World rankings themselves and my presence mean, at least by this one competitor in Dallas, "are shooting to take home the second place." I bowed and told him that I did not deserve such a praise but he stated it again matter-of-factly. Like it or not, if you win more than you lose, you become a marked target. They quietly relish when you stumble and share strategies with each other so that they can enjoy when the top guy falls. It just goes with the territory so you just keep your head down and continue to move forward.

I have been to 10 tournaments this year so far and at each of these tournaments, I compete in two events so that's 20 events. I've taken first place in all but one tie-breaker in forms which I ended up coming in second place. That's 19 first places and 1 second place. It is humbling to be in such a good spot this year and with few remaining tournaments left I hope to stay within top two in the World's Top Ten Standings for June. This would give me a good spot to observe and learn. With right amount of luck and effort I hope to take home the World Championships this year. Actually, I'm shooting for two World Championships: one for Forms and one for Sparring. It is truly difficult to win both but I am going for it this year.

5) Do any/all of your children take after you in this sport?

- My oldest son Eiden who just recently turned six in November has competed but he doesn't quite have the physical height or the ring smarts to truly shine, not yet at least. My hope is to have Father and Son(s) World Champions in the future for this household. Eiden did everything well since he was young. He started walking and talking when he just turned ten months old. He is an extremely quick learner in just about everything. He is a Red belt now and likely will get his black belt later this year. He is still young and up to now I've stayed clear so that he can have fun. If he feels the inner urge to win and wants to put in the time and effort then I will certainly guide him to be successful.

Also in due time, my other two sons will likely be in TKD as well. Adrian, my three year old seems to be least athletic of all three boys but he is built like a Mack truck and he is very methodical and creative in everything that he does. Creativity is what I've been doing for a living for the past 22 years and many times I had to scratch my head and say,

“Wow Adrian! I didn’t realize that you CAN eat a French fries through a straw?!” Should he decide to get into TKD I think he would rule the ring, Sumo wrestling style. ;-)

Skyler will turn two in May and he is already showing a great hand and eye coordination. He can really throw the ball and his ball kicking motion is really good. He sees everything his older brothers do and wants to be part of it so like it or not, he too will be in TKD. We got Eiden into TKD when he was around mid Three years old. He took it really well and excelled at it but I am going to wait until other two boys are past their 4th birthdays before they will enter their first TKD class.

6) How old were you when you started, and why did you start?

- I was something like 7 years old when I got started in TKD back in Korea. I got started because my younger brother had just joined a TKD school. I thought that would be fun at the time and it was great after school activity program for us. My brother and I were always at each other’s throats but we still did everything together.

7) Any tips as to how to win? (Is it like: practice, practice?)

- With full time job, wife and three boys it is really tough to find time. Any “free” time I have is automatically allocated to the family so I do not practice as much as I should. I attend the normal TKD classes on Tuesday through Thursday nights.

Three weeks before a competition, I will go more often to keep the cardio up. For Sparring competition, I am not too worried about learning anything new at this time, just keeping the conditioning at peak level. But for Forms competition you cannot fine-tune your form enough. Correct stances, correct hand placements, proper chambering of blocks and kicks before and after, mixture of fluidity and power to all motions, it’s tough to concentrate all these in front of many spectators. The muscle memory through many hours of practice is how you achieve your best.

About a week before the competition, I take extra care on not getting injured. I avoid any sparring or self-defense classes. This is one of my key strategy; not getting hurt before the competition. There is nothing worse than having to compete with injured body. No fun at all.

Due to my long hours in front of a computer, I tend to have consistent shoulder and lower back pains. Many times a day, I get on an Inverted Table to stretch my back and neck. If the lower back pain is too much to bear I also get on a Roman Chair to do the lower back exercise. I’ll be 43 in March, certainly not a spring chicken anymore. Before in my twenties, I hardly did any warm ups but now that I’m into my mid forties, it is taking twice or more time to get myself ready. If and when I get injured, the recovery time seems to be triple that of what it used to be in my Thirties. Getting old really sucks... ☹

[L. J. interrupts: Usok has some very specific strategies for winning, but these are TOP SECRET, and if he shares them with you, I have to kill you (or get Jez or Rashel or Meredith or Dee to do it for me.) Hey, I bet Damon knows it, too! For fighting other vampires! You do not want an angry Damon with a Black Belt standing behind you.]

8. What do the different colored belts mean?

Following information was pulled directly from ATA's Website. It is very educational for those who might want to learn further about Songahm Taekwondo, which is the martial arts that I have been training for the past three plus years and counting:

<https://secure.ataonline.com/taekwondo/belts/index.asp>

- The concept of belts and rank is probably one that most people associate with Taekwondo and martial arts in general, even if they only have a passing interest in the subject.

In Songahm Taekwondo, our belts reflect a member's proven level of competence and (just as importantly) the progression of colors reflects an inner journey that never truly ends. Each belt achieved is truly an accomplishment worthy of respect.

It is also worth noting that achieving a belt isn't just a matter of "spending enough time" in a previous belt. In order to achieve their next rank, a student must demonstrate their proficiency in their current belt's techniques, to include [Basic Moves](#), [Sparring](#), and [Forms](#).

- **White Belt**

"Pure and without the knowledge of Songahm Taekwondo. As with the Pine Tree, the seed must now be planted and nourished to develop strong roots."

The student has no knowledge of Songahm Taekwondo and begins with a clean (pure) slate.

Purity is often signified by the color white.

- **Orange Belt**

"The sun is beginning to rise. As with the morning's dawn, only the beauty of the sunrise is seen rather than the immense power."

The beginner student sees the beauty of the art of Taekwondo but has not yet experienced the power of the technique.

Orange is found among the many colors of the sunrise.

- **Yellow Belt**

"The seed is beginning to see the sunlight."

The student begins to understand the basics of Taekwondo.

The sun appears to be yellow.

- **Camouflage (Camo) Belt**

"The sapling is hidden amongst the taller pines and must now fight its way upward."

The student begins to realize his/her place in the world's largest martial art. The student must now begin to spar in order to promote in rank.

Camouflage (greens) is used to hide among the trees in the forest.

- **Green Belt**

"The pine tree is beginning to develop and grow in strength."

The student's technique is developing power. The components of the basic techniques are beginning to work in unison.

As the pine tree develops, it sprouts green pine needles.

- **Purple Belt**
 "Coming to the mountain. The tree is in the mid-growth and now the path becomes steep."
The student has crossed over into a higher level of Songahm Taekwondo. The techniques, poom-sae (forms), and level of gyeo-roo-gi (sparring) becomes more difficult, creating a "mountain" that must be overcome.
 Mountains are often depicted as being purple.
- **Blue Belt**
 "The tree reaches for the sky toward new heights."
Having passed the mid-way point, the student focuses his/her energy upward toward black belt.
 The sky appears as blue.
- **Brown Belt**
 "The tree is firmly rooted in the earth."
At this point the student has mastered the basics and developed deep roots in Taekwondo.
 Brown is known as an earthy color, such as dirt.
- **Red Belt**
 "The sun is setting. The first phase of growth has been accomplished."
The first day (the period of time from white belt to red belt) of growth is coming to an end. The physical skill has been developed but lacks control; therefore, physical and mental discipline must now be achieved.
 Variations of red are found among the many colors of the sunset.
- **Red/Black Belt**
 "The dawn of a new day. The sun breaks through the darkness."
The previous day has ended, giving way to a new dawn. The student must begin a new phase of training; that of being a black belt.
 The red is the sun (in a sunrise) as it breaks through the black of night.
- **Black Belt**
 "The tree has reached maturity and has overcome the darkness... it must now 'plant seeds for the future.'"
The color black is created when all the colors of the light spectrum have been absorbed into an object. That object has "taken control" of the colors and retained them. If one color was to "escape", the object would no longer be black but would appear as that color. The student has mastered the nine geup (grades) of Taekwondo. He/she has "absorbed" all the knowledge of the color ranks and overcome or "mastered" that level or training.
 The colors of the spectrum are bound together and are not reflected off an object, resulting in the absence of color which we call black.

[L. J. again: Doesn't that just give you the chills? Good chills, I mean? Wow. Damon is definitely a black belt.]