

Interview with Master Kenneth Wheatley

Master Kenneth Wheatley began training in Taekwon-Do in 1979; over the course of his career he has reached the rank of 7th Degree Master, assimilated at level 3 Coach with Coaching Ireland and the Irish Martial Arts Commission (IMAC) and is President of the Irish Taekwon-Do Association (ITA). As well as this, Master Wheatley is the Instructor in Greystones School of Taekwon-Do and Technical Director of the ITA. Master Wheatley sat down for an interview with ITA PR Officer Carl Smullen, to give a look into his history of training and what Taekwon-Do means to him.



You are currently a 7th Dan Master and Technical Director and President of the Irish Taekwon-Do Association; can you tell us where, when and why you began your journey in Taekwon-Do and what attracted you to Martial arts initially?

As a kid growing up I was never a ball player, I never played in football teams like all my mates did, and when I was about 17 I was having some trouble socially with bullying it started in technical college and it reoccurred when I changed job and I was back with the same people from the technical college. I decided to try a Martial Arts class to learn to defend myself, I went to a karate class one night and even though I knew nothing about Martial Arts, other than the Bruce Lee film '*Enter the Dragon*', I went to a karate class paid all my subs before I went on floor and just had a bad experience of it, I thought this is not for me, I thought there has to be more to martial arts than this. So I cut my losses and never went back.

Then word got around the town (I'm from Newtownmountkennedy) that a new martial art was starting it wasn't Karate or Kung Fu, it was Taekwon-Do, so a gang of decided to go check it out. We went down to Greystones, not knowing what to expect. There were so many people, they had to split the group in two and do two sessions, so out came the first instructor, a Mr Jim Doyle from Gorey Taekwon-Do, this was the closest I'd ever been to a martial artist with the coveted black belt around his waist and the apprehension and adrenalin started to kick off, it was brilliant. The 2nd instructor came out who turned out to be Robert Wheatley, my cousin, I didn't even know he did martial arts; it was something he just kept quiet for whatever reason. So I thought to myself this guy looks familiar and then I realised that's my cousin Bob! I recall they split the group in two, I can't remember which group I was in, but I do remember floating home, I had never done the type of exercises or training that they had us do and it was fantastic, straight away I got the bug.



Master Wheatley has 33 years' experience in Taekwon-Do reaching the rank of 7th Dan Master in September 2009

Greystones was where the school started; the actual start date was the 2nd of December 1979. So I started training, I used to cycle down, I used to hitch down, walk down if I had to, there was no public transport between my home town and Greystones so it was a journey every time, twice a week, Monday and Wednesday I went training religiously.

My instructor was Robert Wheatley, he was the founding instructor in Greystones and was there for about 4 years, he gave me my basic grounding and foundation, people used to say to me it's alright for you, Mr Wheatley is your cousin, it actually wasn't alright because I always felt that he used to give me a harder time than anyone else!

As a colour belt, what aspect of Taekwon-Do interested you the most? Patterns? Sparring? Self Defence?

It's interesting you should say that because it was so different in those days than it is now, I didn't know free sparring existed, as a sporting aspect until I was a green belt. The philosophy in those days was if you have good patterns and good fundamental technique then automatically you will be a good fighter. I don't necessarily agree with that now, because we have evolved so much in the sport sciences, sport science was never heard of back then, a lot has changed in that time, we have evolved.

What interested me the most? I just loved it, I loved going training, it didn't matter what we did and every night was varied. I just liked training, the physical aspect and he was a hard physical trainer, he still is. I thoroughly enjoyed the patterns and fundamentals because from white belt up to green belt it was really all we knew, and when free sparring started it was like a new lease of life, it was a new interest, but that was at green belt, so at least a year down the road, which of course is so different from now.



Master Wheatley after being promoted to Master, Benidorm, September 2009

When did you receive your first degree?

My first-degree grading would have been March 1983. We used to do 2 nights a week and we did a lot of extra classes as well, Sunday morning sessions, so we did a lot of hours, some would say fast-tracked to blackbelt, but we earned it, oh god we earned it.

I had Grandmaster Rhee Ki Ha for my first grading 9th Kup (or Master Rhee as he was at the time) and Master Rhee for my 1st degree grading. 39 of us from Greystones tested for yellow tag and four of us went on to test for blackbelt in 1983. Just before we stepped on the floor to do our test, our instructor tipped us off, "if he asks you what's the difference between inside block and inward block or outside block and outward block, this is the answer". And low and behold that was one of the questions he asked, so we got tipped off just in time!

When did you begin teaching Taekwon-Do?

Mr (Robert) Wheatley was travelling forward and back to the United States I think he was training/visiting a Master Sabree Salleh and subsequently decided to emigrate to take over one of his schools. So he left the Greystones School in the hands of Mr Jim Doyle, who would travel up from Gorey to teach classes twice a week. He couldn't make every class and in that case, the four active blackbelts in the club would take the class. One night Mr Doyle said to us, 'Why don't you guys just take over the school between the four of you and work it out from there'. That would have been late 1984, when we started teaching segments of class, or taking it in turn. Two of the blackbelts went off on different paths in their lives, leaving myself and another black belt in charge as well as Stephen White who was coming up through the ranks. Later Stephen White and I ran the school together for a couple of years, then when he opened a school in my hometown of Newtownmountkennedy, I was left with the reins of Greystones, exactly when that was? It could have been 1986 or 87. So that's how it evolved, and I've been there ever since.

Who were your instructors and who has meant the most for you during your career?

Gen. Choi of course, without him we don't have Taekwon-Do, he created Taekwon-Do, I've every admiration for him.



Grandmaster Choi Jung Hwa, General Choi Hong Hi and Master Wheatley in 1999

In later years I have come to realise how good the foundation I received in Taekwon-Do was, and I have to thank Master Robert Wheatley for that. He always used to say to us, when you're building a house, if the foundation is no good the house will fall down, my house hasn't fallen down to date, so the foundation I got in Taekwon-Do was superb, I admire him for that and I admire him for his achievements in Taekwon-Do.

Who else? I met Grandmaster Tran Trieu Quan in Scotland in 2003, when I graded to 6th Degree. He just made such an impression on me, it was unbelievable. That was the first time I trained with the new ITF Technical Team, Master Trajtenberg, Master Bos and Master Marano who were instructing at the International instructors Course in Master Sutherland's Dojang. GM Tran was there as their guest, and when I listened to him and his vision for Taekwon-Do, and where he seen Taekwon-Do going, how he spoke about Taekwon-Do it was a whole new chapter opening up for me, it was just amazing. He was a major influence in the direction and understanding of my Taekwon-Do in recent years.

What was it about Grandmaster Tran's words that inspired you, what was his message?

It was the way he described Taekwon-Do, he shared his vision, of the future of Taekwon-Do, of progression and he called it a product and a service. He stood there in front of everyone and said I believe we have one of the best products in the world in martial arts and that was his driving force, you couldn't help but catch some of that. So here you have somebody who is enthusing us, giving us this different vision of where we need to go, what we need to do, it confirmed everything we needed to know. It is very hard to give you one thing master Tran said but it was just his whole presence, he commanded such respect from everyone, he was held in such high esteem, it was like he was walking on air. And when I saw him performing, he was walking on air, I'd swear his feet weren't touching the ground, he was

dynamite, absolute dynamite. When he passed away, I travelled to Quebec for his memorial service, it was a weekend journey to Canada, not an easy journey to make but it was the least I could do because he made such an impression on me.



In your time training, how do you think the public perception of Taekwon-Do has changed? Was it seen exclusively as an adult's activity?

Yes, it was seen as an adult's activity, I was 17 when I started and I was one of the youngest. It was like the public didn't know it existed, it was almost like it was secret stuff, for new people to come into a class was almost unheard of! It was the core group or nothing. I think the perception in the old days was those guys are crazy going around in their pyjamas, breaking boards, because that's all people knew, that's all they saw publically. When you did a demonstration, it was really only other martial artists, family and friends who would come and watch, so it was very hard to get it out there. I think the perception was: you were going there to fight, and an element of that was true but it wasn't all fighting as we know now. Thankfully these days because the age has dropped so much, children are getting involved, parents get involved, children talk about their experiences in Taekwon-Do and it just gets out there like a virus.

These days people put their children in to classes because they know it combines good discipline with good physical activity, they know our instructors are trained; they are not endangering their children or themselves. So there is a much more relaxed public view of Taekwon-Do, there is a lot more acknowledgment of the benefits of Taekwon-Do. The message is out there that this is a good thing, physically, mentally and morally



Master Wheatley gives speech, also in photo Roy Baker WAKO Anti-Doping Officer, Brendan Dowling IMAC President, Michael Ring TD Minister of State for Sport

What is your most memorable moment in your Taekwon-Do career?

There are so many and I have touched on a few of them already, but there are so many.

- My yellow tag test under Master Rhee, that was very memorable, the journey had started, I didn't even know at the time, the journey that has taken me to where I am now, had started.
- Meeting General Choi Hong Hi, the man who created Taekwon-Do and training with General Choi for the first time, in 1993 at a 5 day seminar in the Jury's Hotel Dublin.
- Hearing Grandmaster Tran, hearing his words and being inspired, at a time when there was so much uncertainty in our Taekwon-Do world.
- Being promoted to Master at the International Instructors Course (IIC) in Benidorm in September 2009, the fact that there were so many from Ireland out there for the testing and the whole goodwill that was felt about everyone's success. Here was Ireland en-mass being promoted to the next level, I was the first master in our group, that wasn't so important to me but it was important to a lot of people around me, that made me very happy.



The Successful Irish grading candidates at the IIC in Benidorm, September 2009

- Meeting the national team and the coaches and supporters at Dublin airport coming back from one of the major championships having been so successful and stating to the Taekwon-Do world that Ireland are here and very much in the running, having achieved so much, I am so proud of them.

There are so many memorable moments, nearly every month there are new, further achievements. We do not dwell on past achievements, a motto I often quote is “seek not to follow in the footsteps of men of old, but seek what they sought”, if there is a better way of doing something, do it that way and that’s what we are doing, that is who we are.

You are currently chairman of the Irish Martial Arts Commission, can you tell us the positive impact IMAC has for Taekwon-Do and martial arts in general in Ireland.

There are several positive aspects to being a member of the Irish Martial Arts Commission (IMAC). Firstly its government recognised, the Irish Sports Council gives its stamp of approval to IMAC. We have the coaching programme, what IMAC calls coaches, we call instructors. Our instructors can get educated to a recognised standard. In the ITA now it is compulsory for our instructors to take the IMAC coaching qualifications, because we value it so much. IMAC has also introduced anti-doping procedures, before we became involved in IMAC, anti-doping for us was non-existent and anti-doping is important in martial arts, in fact in some of the competitive martial arts if you don’t have anti-doping in place at an international tournament, it’s won’t be designated as an international event.

IMAC has also introduced the young people’s advisory (formerly called child protection) this is a quite strong aspect of being a member, anybody in martial arts who reaches the rank of blackbelt and becomes an instructor would have interaction with children, as I said earlier, the age profile of Taekwon-Do has gone very young, and the fact

we can have our people educated in the right protocols and procedures is excellent. Now we have gone a stage further in that all of our instructors are Garda-vetted. The only way you can get Garda-vetted to be involved in martial arts in Ireland is through IMAC, this is a particular type of vet that IMAC has set up with An Gardaí Siochana and that give us a really good handle on what is happening out there, the fact that instructors have to go through that process is healthy, it's very good for our society.



Master Kenneth Wheatley, Pat Hickey (The President of the Olympic Council of Ireland, and the European Olympic Council), Roy Baker (President of Kickboxing Ireland), Leo Varadkar TD, Irish Minister for Sport and Martin McMahon (Secretary of Kickboxing Ireland)

So they are the key positives of IMAC membership, the coaching development programme, the Garda-vetting, the young people's code of ethics and the fact you can produce an IMAC certificate and say I'm a member of the Irish Martial Arts Commission recognised by our government is a huge stamp of approval, because you have to work to get it.

The ITA has experienced tremendous growth over the past number of years, as well as unprecedented success on the international scene. What factors do you think have contributed to this continuing growth and success?

The fact that we are so transparent, what you see is what you get and there is no hidden agenda. The professionalism of our executive committee and of our sub-committees, they are the driving force behind the association. I am so proud to be involved with people who have the same kind of drive and like-mindedness and who do things to the best of their abilities. We have some incredibly skilled people out there, and it's the fact that we can bring all those skills together and make something happen, its like-minded people reaching a consensus and then driving that consensus all the way to its fruition, I believe that is why we are successful. Passionately I believe that. People and principles and doing it right, doing it right the first time.



Master Wheatley with students at his Greystones School of Taekwon-Do

Who are you currently inspired by in Taekwon-Do?

As regard to who I currently admire in Taekwon-Do? The elite and up-and-coming competitors, these people are incredible, the amount of training they do, seven days per week, sometimes twice a day and it can be a very lonely place, it takes an awful lot more than physical endurance, it takes a mental aptitude, I don't know that everyone could do it, so I admire them for that.

It's not just the competitors and the people who are working on the executive committee and sub-committee that I am inspired by; it's the people who come to classes, because without them, there is no association, no new future black belts and champions. I firmly believe that new students in a class are some of the most important people in Taekwon-Do because they are the future of Taekwon-Do. When they come to my class, I tell them you are the most important person in the class tonight because you have decided to put your first foot on the path of Taekwon-Do; it's going to be an incredible journey for you. I really admire people who are new coming into what we do, particularly as late teenagers and adults, it's not easy and I admire them for that.



Master Wheatley leading an ITA technical seminar

So when you ask me who I'm currently inspired by in Taekwon-Do..... I have to say everyone; there is no single person, everyone from the ITF board of directors to new students at their first Taekwon-Do class.

The ITA recently launched a 4-year strategic plan, what changes would you like to see come about as a result of this plan?

The strategic plan has given our instructors and the people in our group a voice that maybe they would not have had before now if they weren't in a position on the board of directors. It has created this complete openness and complete transparency, the world is welcome to read the plan, it states what we are going to do, because our people have told us to do it. I don't remember a time when as President of the group we weren't doing the stuff that is in the strategic plan, maybe we didn't announce it but it has always been on going. So the strategic plan from the outside looking in, I guess is like opening the book on the role of the executive, the function of the executive and the various committees in the ITA.



The Irish Taekwon-Do Association, Board of Directors 2012

We had a great bunch of people who created that strategic plan, Mr Adrian Byrne, in particular, analysed the data, put it altogether and out came this beautiful strategic plan. I really hope at the next strategic planning day in 4 years' time that we have everyone who is available to fill that auditorium and get their voices heard.

Finally, what advice would you give to a colour belt that has the ambition of becoming a black belt?

I think the quality of our instructors is very good, so basically all a student has to do is come to class and listen carefully and make sure they hear correctly, if they don't understand something, they need to ask. They must have a clear vision of what they are trying to achieve, from learning najunde bakat palmok makgi to the whole event of doing their blackbelt test.



Grandmaster Hector Marano with Master Wheatley at the IIC in Kerry, January 2011

Every student, white belt or colour belt should have a good understanding of what they are being asked to do by their instructor in the class and to do it the best of their abilities. I think that is all I can say: come to class and listen carefully, apply what you have heard and of course be passionate when training.



Master Kenneth Wheatley, ITA President and Master Brendan O'Toole, INTA President

People have different ways of learning, learning by listening, learning by vision, learning by doing, so we try to do all three. Tell them how to do it, show them how to do it, and then do it. We all will have obstacles that we need to overcome, such as flexibility or leg strength, our lives will take us on different paths but it comes down to perseverance. I know it's a bit of a cliché but if you apply the tenets of Taekwon-Do, you will be successful in whatever you do. Set your goal, go for it and that is what I believe.

I thank you for this opportunity to share a little of myself and our beloved Taekwon-Do.