



Freestyle form has several functions

Yee Chuan Kung Fu students bring home multiple titles at Martial Arts competition

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It was the 2005 Taiji Legacy International Martial Arts Championship, sponsored by the World Chin Woo Federation, and competitor Kale Sanders needed something to help him concentrate, to calm his pre-competition energy.



Brad Ballesteros|West Hawaii Today Patrick Hamilton, 14, left, and Kale Sanders, 16, right, practice hand defense techniques.

Pitted against 800 Shaolin masters, well respected sifu (teachers) and the best martial arts students in the nation, the 16-year-old was nervous. "I'm going to mess up," he said.

His teammate did a freestyle form, executing every defensive movement that came to his mind. Watching the short dance-like routine, Sanders mentally recited a mantra: "Loosen up. Be fluid. Be aware."

These words replaced the anxiety and helped him win a gold medal in his division for traditional spear.

Yee Chuan Kung Fu students Sanders, Nadia Banning, Riley Rudd, Kala Holiday and their sifu Chee Johnson recently brought home multiple titles at the championship, held July 23-25 in Dallas. The Big Island team won eight gold and two bronze medals.

"We were the underdogs. I'm really psyched about the way things turned it," Sanders said. "We competed against people who had a lot more training. All we knew was what we did here (at Sonson's Progressive Martial Arts) and what we watched in movies. It's really cool that we won. I still can't believe it."

To prepare for the competition, the team trained consistently for six months in Yee Chuan Tao, a classical martial art form passed through generations that develops the students' ballistic movements and taps into their creativity.

Predating the Shaolin Temple by 3,000 years, it was developed by a one-armed monk/general. Yee Chuan Tao translates in Chinese as "one fist way," according to Holiday.

During the Cultural Revolution in China, Yee Chuan Tao was lost when many masters were killed, went into hiding or escaped to other countries. While underground, the masters only taught Yee Chuan Tao to family members or trusted Chinese families.

Seeing the possible extinction and hoping to preserve this ancient art of self-defense, Johnson now teaches Yee Chuan Tao to anyone who has the heart to learn.

A martial arts veteran of 30 years, Johnson was certified by Grandmasters Michael Vendrell and Rob Moses, who are internationally renowned and have been featured on the cover of Black Belt Magazine.

"Becoming a certified sifu doesn't make you the best," she said. "It means now you are learning and must do something with the art."

As a small girl growing up in Hong Kong, Johnson fell asleep watching "The Green Hornet" on the television and dreamed of becoming the next Bruce Lee.

Over the years, Johnson would compete in more than 32 national and international martial arts tournaments, earning eight gold medals in Kung Fu weapons, one silver medal in Kung Fu forms, 14 first place titles for forms and three first place titles for sparring. In 2000, she was named "Best Female Martial Artist" at the Hawaii Fitness Classic Championship.

Unlike the traditional Kung Fu taught by the Shaolin temple, Yee Chuan Tao is not rigid. Johnson described the martial art as creative, spontaneous and alive.

There are no belts, levels or set forms to memorize. Instead, students use weapons like swords, staffs, short sticks and canes to do defensive moves and understand their bodies.

Johnson often encourages her students to pick up a weapon and "go play," allowing them to openly explore the weapon, their ability and creativity.

Johnson's favorite weapon is a fan made of bamboo and paper, mostly because it can be carried anywhere. Although it appears harmless, she claims in trained hands it can cause unbelievable pain and damage.

Requiring amazing dexterity from its user, this weapon's form tends to have lots of spirals or circles. "It's like wings," she said of the fighting style.

Upon noticing a peer's skill was far greater than his, Holiday, 18, became upset. His sifu took him aside and said, "The only undefeated competitors are those who do not compete."

It was then that Holiday, a winner of one bronze and three gold medals, realized competitions were about testing his skills, not winning.

"I needed a humble mind to progress," he said. "Without it, I was being too overzealous."

Overall, Holiday said it was "pretty cool" to be in the presence of experts, some of which were 8-year-old children.

Once, 17-year-old Banning feared the mean-spirited remarks of strangers and what could happen to her walking down the street alone. Now, after taking two and half years of Yee Chuan Tao, Banning said she is confident, especially after hearing the crowd cheer at the 2005 Taiji Legacy International Martial Arts Championship after she earned a gold and a bronze medal.

Banning attributed part of her success to Johnson, who assured Banning of her ability and goal before competing.

"(Johnson) is really cool," she said. "She's not just my teacher. We have more of a friend-type relationship. She cooled me down so I wasn't so nervous and help me remember why we were there -- to have fun."

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