

Taekwondo on the way up

The literal translation of taekwondo is “the way of the foot and the fist”. The Leisure Review took an alternative route to the 3rd British Open recently held in Manchester to see what all that shouting is about.

In the iconography of British sport a number of thoroughfares figure prominently. Wembley Way has been trodden by countless football and rugby league fans “up for the cup”, the London marathon could only finish on the Mall and, for the rugby union fan in Scotland, Rose Street is a pre- and post-Murrayfield magnet. Less well known and certainly less attractive is the Alan Turing Way, an urban dual carriageway that runs through Manchester’s Sport City passing international sporting venues on both sides as it eases the traffic through the still regenerating Eastlands. Chief among these venues is the football stadium but the velodrome has recently been sold out for nothing more prestigious than the British domestic championships and the indoor arena has hosted the very best squash and badminton players in the world.

Built either to attract the Olympics or to house the Commonwealths, these palaces of sport are in stark contrast to the tin shed behind the ASDA superstore that houses Britain’s assault on 2012 taekwondo medals. Forced out of their regular base, itself no more than an industrial unit, by a heating problem, the British elite squad have been offered a training venue by the retail giant in a building that Sir Chris Hoy probably had clear sight of when he recorded his breakfast cereal advertisement on the steps of the velodrome. However, it is what you do not where you do it that counts and the British squad is growing in confidence and quality, and has the target of three 2012 medals within reach. Three years ago as part of UK Sport’s world-class events programme the British championships went ‘open’ with competitors coming from around the world to compete. As a barometer of the British squad’s ambition this year’s event held in the warmth and comfort of the indoor arena pitched the likes of world number one Aaron Cook against the elite of the sport on English soil and was no disappointment.

Day one of the championships brought three golds for home fighters, with Cook delivering as expected with a one-point final victory over Iranian Farzad Addolhai. Cook was conscious of his audience’s expectations: “There was a lot of pressure competing in front of the home fans but once I got past the opening couple of rounds, I loosened up a bit and it got much better.” Also recording wins were Tony Grisman of Mansfield, who had to overcome current world champion Mohammad Bagheri Motamed of Iran in the final, and Bianca Walkden from Liverpool, who took her third British championship gold in the heavyweight category.

The Leisure Review, with the perversity and thirst for the alternate view that has made it famous, chose to avoid the Saturday football crowd and sample taekwondo first hand on a quiet Sunday morning. The sense of serenity engendered by a stroll over the Joe Mercer Way canal bridge towards the dormant giant of glass and marketing that is the City of Manchester stadium was soon lost in the feverish activity inside a building across the concourse; the clamour produced by athletes from over 50 national teams plus coaches, supporters and officials assaulted the senses.

First impressions count and, in contrast to the reverent hush of a squash or badminton event, this competition – or series of 96 different competitions – was taking place in a vibrant bazaar of colour, constant noise as the buzz of conversation was interspersed with the screams and shouts associated with the sport, constantly moving crowds, pungent smells, and even hawkers and vendors. It is not lazy racism to note the preponderance of oriental and Middle-Eastern faces in the milling crowd nor to suggest that taekwondo is not a naturally European sport. The sport has spread from its Korean heartland but its roots in the courtesies and ceremony of various martial arts is obvious. Although points can be scored with a punch, kicks to the head and body score more highly and the hands are held low as fighters circle each other in search of an opening with a rhythm that would be familiar to exponents of karate, kendo or aikido.

Ninety-six weight categories resolved by knockout bouts of indeterminate length on five rings with everybody involved squeezed into the same sports hall makes for a heady atmosphere. Teams of Manchester City-blue blazered officials come and go, coaches affecting detachment take their seats almost on the mat and fighters bob, bounce and bend with elastic ease. Despite the constant movement in walkways and bleachers, within each ring the principals are demonstrably focused. The Korean coach of the Bulgarian bantam weight Stamen Zahariev barely perched one



Aaron Cook on his way to gold on behalf of the British team

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buttock on his plastic chair such was his concentration on coaching, fighting and even refereeing every moment of his charge's first bout. Courteous but assured, he held the eye in the maelstrom of the five-ring circus and when his man strolled to a 4-1 win over the Israeli Buchbut every line of his body said "And quite right too".

As bouts and crowds ebb and flow – with British fighters attracting observers to every vantage point – it is the things which remain still that attract attention: the Syrian fighter sleeping beside a warm-up mat as his team-mates kick and stretch around him; the referee handing over to a colleague with an eternally held bow; and Jade Slavin. Welterweight Slavin is not in the British squad and may not have progressed past the second round but her first fight against Mandy Barbic of the Dutch national team showed how deep the vein of talent runs within British taekwondo. Trailing 2-6 with only two minutes to go, Slavin seemed to set herself to fight back. The Dutch girl, something of a drama queen, went down with a back injury in the face of a scoring assault from the six-foot-plus British youngster. As her opponent squirmed in real or affected pain Slavin rested her hands on her body protector and watched her. When the Dutch girl fell to the mat clutching her foot Slavin calmly waited for her and then strode into the attack. Her fighting style had become direct and brutal; if she felt any compassion for the limping, tearful Barbic she didn't show it. Three or four times the bout stopped for treatment on the injured foot and the Dutch girl, able only to stand or kick but not apparently both, saw her lead whittled away. Slavin ran out a winner by two points, bowed and walked off, a picture of elegant, unruffled efficiency.

They say that sporting competition shows character rather than forms it but the true nature of international taekwondo remains a puzzle. Hectic but mannered, violent yet graceful, an individual sport fought in teams, the Korean art exported as a multicultural sport is compelling but complex. It would take someone like Alan Turing, a Bletchley Park cryptologist, to work out the mystery of this particular Olympic sport but what seems fairly certain is that it will continue to grow in popularity fuelled by the successes of the young men and women working in a tin shed just over the way named after him.

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