



"In loving memory of my mother, Lana Fook Hing Slater who was taken suddenly from us on the 18th April 2001. She'll never read this, but I hope she is proud of me, and thank you for choosing me"

Interviewing and meeting anyone for the first time can be a very enlightening and enjoyable experience. Today was no exception. It was my pleasure to speak to 4th Dan Gordon Slater of Basildon Taekwondo.

Gordon (aged 40) is probably one of the best patterns exponents I have ever seen. He is also an amazing breaking technician and will stand toe to toe with the best of them on the mats when it comes to sparring.

He began his training in 1983 and is now a very successful instructor running his club as a member of Global Taekwondo International (GTI).

I found him to be a genuine, witty person to talk to and thoroughly enjoyed the time I spent with him.

At the end of one of his busy sessions I managed to talk to him about his life and times in TKD.

Dave Tapp: Gordon, you were raised in Hong Kong, did you do any martial arts training over there?

Gordon Slater: Not really, I lived over there when Bruce Lee was around and remember his untimely death being all over the news, but I only dabbled in a few kicks to show off at school.

Although you were not dabbling at the time, were martial arts as big in Hong Kong as in the Western World?

Martial arts in Hong Kong were always there, but being on your own doorstep people never seemed to go there, if you know what I mean. It was more of an underground movement, so to speak, as Chinese people in general are quite shy about their sports/physical abilities. It was still shrouded in some mystique. You had to know someone who had a teacher and be recommended to train with them. Not commercial at all, more of a disciple/teacher relationship.

To answer your question, it was bigger in the Western World to start with, but not anymore.

Flying High

The Gordon Slater Interview

By Dave Tapp



Achievements

- 1983 - Grading Award
- 1984 - Green Belt Patterns (Nationals) - Silver
- 1985 - Blue Belt Sparring (Nationals) - Silver
- 1985 - Blue Belt Patterns (Nationals) - Gold
- 1987 - Red Belt Patterns (British) - Silver
- 1990 - Black Belt Patterns (English) - Gold
- 1995 - Black Belt Patterns (English) - Gold
- 1995 - Black Belt Destruction (English) - Gold
- 1995 - Black Belt Patterns (South East) - Gold
- 1996 - Black Belt Destruction (English) - Gold
- 1996 - Black Belt Patterns (South East) - Gold
- 1996 - Black Belt Destruction (South East) - Gold
- 1997 - Black Belt Patterns (English) - Gold
- 1997 - Black Belt Patterns (South East) - Gold
- 1997 - Black Belt Destruction (South East) - Gold
- 1998 - Black Belt Patterns (English) - Bronze
- 1998 - Black Belt Patterns (South East) - Gold
- 2000 - Black Belt Patterns (Midlands) - Gold
- 2000 - Black Belt Patterns (British) - Gold

Profile

Name: Gordon Slater

Age: 40

Nationality: British (Chinese origin)

Style: Tae Kwon-do

Current Grade: 4th Dan

Association:

Global Tae Kwon-do International (GTI)

Commenced Training: 1983

Instructors:

Mr Roger Koo, Mr Albert Williamson-Taylor

Mr Clive Harrison and Mr Peter McLaughlin

Favourite Leg Technique:

Mid-section sidekick, followed by a high section turning kick, finishing with a back kick to the nose

Favourite Hand Technique:

Double front jab, followed by a cross, followed by a hook, then finishing with an uppercut

Favourite Pattern:

Choong-jang (2nd Dan pattern)

Favourite Self-defence Technique:

A wristlock followed a by take down followed by arm lock to restrain or finishing technique to damage opponent

Favourite Food: Chinese, of course!

Favourite TV Programme: Star Trek series

Favourite Film: Mission Impossible 2

Greatest Achievements: My two children, Benjamin and Rebecca and still being passionate about Tae Kwon-do after all these years.

In fact it is probably more widely taught over here than it is in Hong Kong as having been over recently I noticed there aren't as many clubs advertised, and they haven't got as many facilities as land is scarce and sports centres/halls are not as common.

Do you think that the martial arts craze was down to Bruce Lee alone, or do you remember any other stars around then?

Bruce Lee brought martial arts to the forefront, the Chinese were proud of him, mainly for the stardom he achieved, as he was one of their own on the international stage. Hence, some people latched onto the stardom trip and then the other half of the population were on about his fighting ability. On the streets kids were always trying to imitate Bruce Lee, doing the screams followed by a few flashy kicks. Then suddenly it was surprising how people came out of the woodwork saying they had been training secretly for years under a master, but they couldn't show you the techniques as they were secret, but they did end up doing a few things to try to impress us, mainly, funnily enough, the same techniques that Bruce Lee used on his last film.

There were a few other stars, which mainly came to light in the late seventies. The most famous being Sammo Hung of *Martial Law* fame, he was into martial arts comedy even before Jackie Chan. His films were similar to Laurel and Hardy.

You were educated in an English school in Hong Kong, being one of only a few Chinese in the school. Were you ever bullied?

One fat guy bullied me at the very start. However, I saw him having a fight with someone else one day and thought I could do better, as I lived in a street area of Hong Kong and used to play with and fight the street kids all the time and was only scared of the Europeans at school because they were usually bigger than me. Hence, one day when this bully picked on me, even though I was scared, I thought I'd give it a go. To my joy I beat him up as fighting the street kids (who fought dirty) was a lot harder than the middle class English kids at the school. With my newfound courage no one ever picked on me again. I hasten to add that my fighting ability then was pure brawling with no martial art technique whatsoever.

Why were you educated in an English school and not a local one?

GS: Short life story: English soldier goes to Hong



Flying 1st dan wish I could do that now. 1987

Kong, marries Chinese girl and can't have children, hence go to an orphanage and see this fat little bundle (me) and adopt it. Consequently, I am your original Chinese take away.

That's why, although being one-hundred percent Chinese, I have an English name. People are quite surprised when I turn up for interviews. I consider myself to be Chinese although I have a British passport. I only call myself British when I am applying for a job or trying to get back into the country.

Therefore, I attended an English school because English was my first and main language. Cantonese was only fluent when I was a child, and today I am only half fluent and would need a year in Hong Kong to be able to speak it fluently again. Plus the fact the school I attended, Island School, was probably one of the best schools in Hong Kong. Like any parent you always want your children to get the best education possible.

So what made you start Tae Kwon-do?

Back in 1973 a Tae Kwon-do demonstration team came to my school in Hong Kong and did a lunchtime demo. The demo included jumping over ten people, breaking a piece of wood with a sidekick, smashing bricks and pounding six inch nails into wood with just a cloth on top of the nail, with open palm, back fist and finally their foreheads. This left quite an impression on me. I came to the UK in the early '80s and in 1983 I decided enough was enough and I should take up a martial art, because when people met me they always asked if I did Kung Fu or something similar and were very surprised when I said "no". I used to reply by asking if they played football, and if they said no, I said, "I thought everybody in England played football."

My girlfriend at the time was a black belt in Karate and encouraged me to take it up, but I remembered the demo I saw in school and wanted to do Tae Kwon-do, because like most people who start in TKD I wanted to do the fancy kicks.

The Gordon Slater Interview



cover story

With TKD being a Korean art, how was it accepted in Hong Kong and do you remember any rivalry between Kung Fu students and TKD ones?

That is a good question. The Chinese, believe it or not, are actually quite racist. Remember, the Japanese invaded China and bombed and invaded Hong Kong. The Koreans, Japanese and Chinese all want to out do one another. There were always rumours about one teacher challenging another teacher to see whose art was the best, but only rumours, no evidence to support any of the stories. It was about the same time that Muhammad Ali went to Japan and fought a wrestler.

Other than Chinese Kung Fu and Judo, Karate was at the time the only other high profile martial art in Hong Kong.

TKD, as far as I can remember, was accepted quite readily as it offered something different. No other style had brought breaking/destruction to the forefront as TKD did, or not with as much variation of breaking technique. No other style then had the jumping, spinning and flying kicks as we did, and to be able to break tiles and wood with these kicks was awesome. That's what got me into TKD. I am not saying that other styles did not do it, it was just that TKD advertised/marketed it better back then.

How old were you when you came to England?

Nineteen years old and wearing flares. When the plane was about to land at Heathrow and the captain told us the temperature was twelve degrees Celsius I asked the stewardess to turn the plane round please. It was thirty-six degrees in Hong Kong at the time.

Describe in depth your transition from student to instructor?

When I joined my second club I was the highest grade there (black tag), so I would usually take the warm up and lower graded students. This gave me an insight to becoming an instructor. I then became the official Assistant instructor at 1st Dan.

Eventually, due to work pressures, the instructor was not able to attend many lessons, so I technically ended up running the club.

When we had a few more black belts to take over the club, I ventured out into Essex as a 2nd Dan to run my own club after passing all the qualifications that I needed with the organisation that I was with at the time. Unfortunately, I had to close the club down after eighteen months due to

my job taking on a nation-wide role. Over the next ten years I still trained on a regular basis with other instructors.

I wanted to open another club, but due to work pressures and other factors I was unable to. I did not want the same thing to happen.

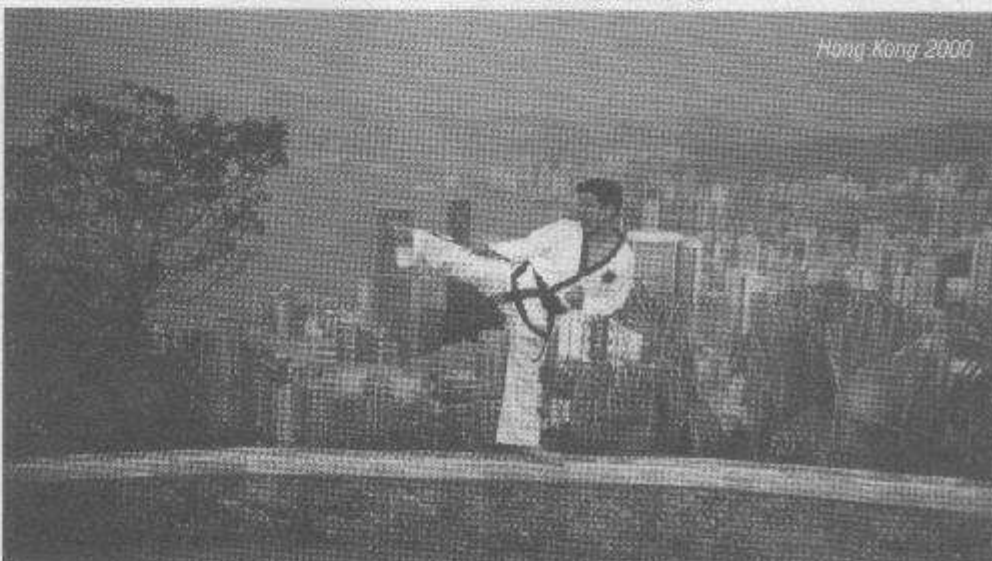
Over the years I have enjoyed seeing and coaching many students from white belt to black belt and beyond. I taught one young lad of ten, Stuart Hadley, up to his 2nd Dan. He is now twenty-four years old and a 3rd Dan.

Another student Roy Primus whom I taught from white belt, and taught how to break, beat me in belt destruction at the English Championships in

instructor courses for all its black belts who wish to coach.

You currently run a GTI club in Basildon. For your grade, most qualified instructors would have opened a club years ago. Why did you wait so long?

As I mentioned earlier, I did have a club back in the late '80s but had to close it down due to work pressures. I felt so guilty about doing this as people invested time and money in me and if they can't find an alternative club it is time and money wasted. Consequently I waited until I was sure that I would not let this happen again. My aim is to one day perhaps go full-time and turn



Hong Kong 2000



I stopped before the wall

1998. We were the only two left after a few rounds of the event. To be beaten by someone you taught is an honour ... I think.

In summary, we are all taught from the very start how to do TKD, but who prepares us to become an instructor? The GTI recognises this and runs

professional, probably do a part-time day job at the same time to make ends meet, but at least I will be doing something I am passionate about.

The club has taken off quite well and I have a good core of students who train and support me. No matter what happens I am determined to



continue because I don't want to let people down who have supported me and I truly believe that if I had not closed the club down in the past I would probably be enjoying my aim now.

Do you think it is important to have stability when running a professional club?

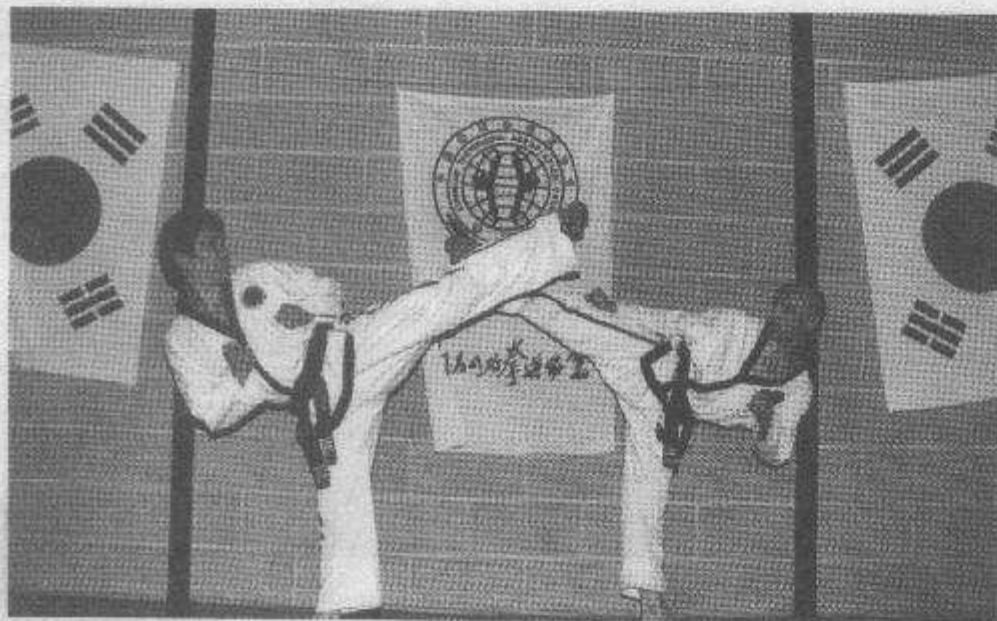
Definitely, yes. Whether a full-time or part-time martial arts instructor, how can you give quality tuition to your students if you do not have the basics of your own life sorted?

We all know how distracted we can be when buying, selling or moving into a house, the time

courtesy, perseverance, self control, indomitable spirit and integrity into one's personal and business day-to-day life. I am a very positive thinker and having been made redundant twice in my career, you have to be. I try to install a positive mental attitude into my students. Whatever life throws at you try and find a win/win solution.

I truly believe if you can balance the five tenets and use them individually or as groups as you go through life, you will be able to conquer anything that life deals you.

I have one saying that I feel can conquer all: "Knowledge is power, but only if you choose to use it."



and effort it takes to look for a new job or to keep your current job. We all have work and family responsibilities and needs. If you have a secure and stable job, a comfortable home that you are happy with and your loved ones to support you, then the road to success for both student and instructor is an easier one.

Is there any aspect of Tae Kwon-do that you specialise in at your club?

Not really, being of Oriental persuasion I have the ideal physical build for the art. Therefore, I have been able to become a competent all-rounder. A good technician, decent breaker and half-decent fighter (never champion standard though, not with rules at least). I feel that I can offer my students expert coaching in whichever aspect of the art they wish. This includes physical and mental training.

When you say mental side of training what exactly do you mean?

How to combine the tenets of Tae Kwon-do,

How practical do you think Tae Kwon-do is, in a real life situation?

I can only comment on the GTI style of Tae Kwon-do. This is because we have a wealth of experience within the organisation and an open-minded policy. Many of our instructors have experienced other arts and styles and incorporated sound techniques into our syllabus.

I would say that the GTI style of Tae Kwon-do could be very practical in a street/pub situation. Although we train to kick high, this allows us to kick low when required. We emphasise hand techniques equally as strongly as leg techniques. Takedowns, sweeps, locks and throws are becoming more and more common. Our chairman, Mr Clive Harrison has concentrated on Pressure Point fighting over the years and shares this knowledge with the rest of us.

Although Tae Kwon-do, in general, is a kicking and punching style, we at the GTI are constantly adding practical/realistic techniques and drills to

our art. The world is forever changing and we will always be on the road to improvement.

Have you ever had to use it yourself and if so did it work as effectively as you hoped?

I have had the opportunity to use it on two occasions, but was unable to. The first occasion was when I was a blue tag. I was in a pub at an after work party, I was flirting with a girl and no one told me her ex-boyfriend was there. He waited until I was full of drink and bottled me from behind while I was sitting down. He used a broken bottle, hence I had three stitches in my right ear and three stitches in the back of my neck. He ran off after the incident and I was in no fit state to run after him. Since people knew who he was the police picked him up the next day and he got six months in prison and I got £250 compensation.

The second occasion was also in a pub in the East End of London. To cut a long story short I had a conflict with a member of the public and it turned physical. At one point I had him up against the wall with both my hands grabbing his collar and I was telling him to calm down. I suddenly thought, 'What am I doing, I am an educated man, let's talk this out,' so I released him and put my hands up in an open gesture and was about to say "Woah, what are we doing" and that's when he hit me with a solid right hook to my jaw. I went down, he slammed my head onto the pool table a few times and I was dazed. My friend, who was also there, jumped on my back to protect me. The culprit then backed off. I got up and looked at him and about six of his mates. Logic told me I would not win this and would probably end up with some holes in me, it was that kind of pub. I finished my pint whilst staring at his little gang and left.

I was a 2nd Dan then, but all my training was no good, as I did not have the right mindset as a reasonable adult.

I have since spent years changing my method of training, and I am glad I learnt this lesson, as I believe now I am much better prepared for similar situations. Part of my coaching now involves getting the mats out and anything goes. I teach competition sparring and real fighting ... the nasty techniques and more importantly the right mindset to deal with or avoid trouble.

Would you be happy to incorporate techniques from other styles, if they were practical and really worked, or are you rigid with your teachings?



No one martial art is fully complete. Also, other styles have better or different methods of a similar application. The wider your knowledge base the better you are prepared. I currently teach other styles' methods in my classes.

When I got my 1st Dan (I had a foundation to work on) I went to different clubs and trained with them. I always trained to their strengths so that I could learn.

At Ishinryu Karate I tended not to use my legs and used to leave my leg out for them to sweep so I could experience the technique and learn from it.

At Wing-chun I used to come in close so I did not use my legs and therefore they had the advantage. At the beginning I got hit a lot, but as time went on I got hit less, therefore I can only assume I got better with my hands.

Two years ago I went up against a professional boxer (a friend of mine), I broke his nose with a crescent kick and he broke a few of my ribs, I think with an uppercut. I hasten to add he was

What kind of self-defence techniques do you teach your students?

I try to teach simple, effective techniques that economise the number of movements. What I mean by economy of movement is, I have seen other techniques that use a wristlock, then once in the lock they change hands on the lock to use a finishing technique. Why let go of something you already have?

To my mind, effective self-defence is mind conditioning. Know the technique, use muscle memory, as two years down the road in a dark alley, when attacked, will you remember or be able to react?

I normally teach my students three techniques for every one attack. I call them: Small, Medium, Large, because a technique that will work on a small person, may not work on a large person. Also you should be able to switch from small to large when necessary. For example, you are grabbed around the throat from the front by a small person, smaller than you are. One method of release would be to push your forefinger bent knuckle into their ribs and vibrate to increase the

I know most of the major players of ITF Tae Kwon-do in the UK and I know that they are all of a high standard. Techniques may differ slightly from group to group, but we are all cut from the same mould.

I feel that none of us are better than the other, just perhaps a bit different in our application, style and method of teaching or organisational structure. As long as what we all do achieves the same positive result, then it is a good thing.

The only negative thing that I would say, is that the GTI, TAGB, UKTA, GTF, ITS, UKTF and many other Tae Kwon-do bodies in the UK all started from one organisation. If the politics in that one body had not had its conflicts then Tae Kwon-do might today be the largest single martial art style in the UK or second only to the KUGB.

How do you think we can resolve the politics?

I don't think we can. People either develop bigger egos or because it becomes their sole income the commercial side takes over. This is understandable, who would want to step down as a director of a company and let some other body take control?

What about other martial arts or fighting sports?

I respect all other styles of martial arts and fighting sports as they all have their place. No one is better, we are just different. We may walk along a different path but it leads to the same destination.

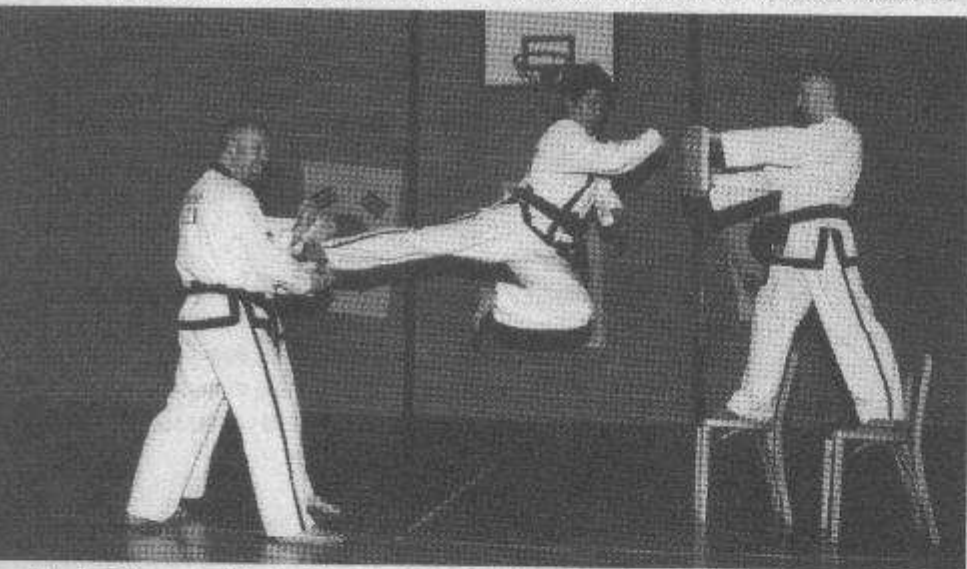
What do you enjoy doing most in Tae Kwon-do?

I enjoy all parts of the art, sparring, patterns, destruction and self-defence. As I said earlier I am lucky to be a reasonable performer at all disciplines of Tae Kwon-do.

However, I have entered a few competitions and since I can't really keep up with the youth of today in the sparring ring, I tend to enter the patterns and destruction events as these are down to precise technique and experience, not fitness. As any instructor will know, your fitness always decreases once you start teaching.

Be honest, what areas of TKD do you like the least?

Honestly? None. As long as there is constant variation in our training agendas. Doing the same thing all the time would eventually become



only toying with me, for if he had hit me with the power that he could, he would have no doubt broken my neck. I am 5ft 8in and just over twelve stone, he is 6ft 7in and twenty-one stone. I found that I could get to his kneecaps with a kick, but due to his reach advantage he still got me with a jab or cross. I lasted four rounds then went to hospital.

I have recently trained with a 4th and 5th Dan in Ju-jitsu and I have incorporated some of their street fighting skills into my classes. Also I currently train with Peter McLaughlin, a 4th Dan in Karate who is also a weapons instructor. I have reached blue belt so far, the equivalent of green belt in TKD.

pain received. But you don't, you use a large person technique. Why? Because it is the dead of winter and freezing cold and your attacker is wearing a t-shirt, fleece, and huge thick body warmer. Hence you might not even tackle him/her with the small technique.

To my mind, a good self-defence technique relies on two attributes that are also found in the best fighters.

1. Automatic reaction, via practice and muscle memory.
2. Thinking speed.

What is your view of the other Tae Kwon-do organisations in the UK?



The Gordon Slater Interview

boring. I have a passion for the art and enjoy every aspect.

What do you get out of competitions?

A good pattern practitioner normally has a more in-depth understanding of each technique to be able to perform the pattern well, but in the same breath they are also able to introduce some artistic changes to make the pattern look more spectacular. For example, the pattern choong-jang, the throat strike with arc hand followed by a front kick is usually performed with the foot kicking inside the arc hand as this looks more spectacular, whereas it is actually a mid section kick to the stomach.

What I get out of performing patterns is getting it right on the day, challenging myself to do the best I can under pressure, and hopefully winning a medal if all goes right.

And destruction?

Same reasons really, most of us can break what we do at competitions seven out of ten times in the club environment. But how many of us kick

world?

I have met a lot of good martial artists throughout my training. I respect quite a few of them. Sensei Enoeda of Shotokan has unbelievable power when performing kata and an aura that surrounds him. Master Rhee Ki Ha has a similar presence. Master Hee Il Cho has amazing technique and speed and in the early days was one of the few masters who would put on a dobok and sweat with you.

In the GTI I respect our chairman Mr Clive Harrison, as he is one of the humblest people you could meet. He still competes and leads by example by putting on a dobok and doing it. He will always listen to you and give you his time.

I would also like to take this opportunity to thank my fellow instructor and good friend Mr Dave Bonthuy (4th Dan) who has been very supportive with my club opening and is always on hand to give me help or advice. I would also like to thank his students for their time and I hope one day I will be able to return their generosity. Dave has recently been appointed as our area representative, a position that he deserves. Well done, Dave, and remember I am here for you too

... and perhaps one day I'll let you beat me (couldn't resist putting

for. So I am looking at 2004/2005 before my next grading as I have a lot to learn.

I know of others who were a 2nd Dan when I was a 3rd Dan who now are 4th or even 5th Dan and calling themselves masters. I agree with Mr Clive Harrison's philosophy, 'master status is not governed by rank, but knowledge'. So even if I get to 6th Dan, I will still have much to learn. It doesn't concern me what others are, as 'it is not noble to be superior to another man, true nobility is to be superior to your former self'. I think that Confucius saying rounds it up quite nicely, as perhaps that is what we should all be thinking to improve ourselves.

If someone is interested in joining your club, how would they go about it?

They can contact me on the numbers listed at the end of this article, or simply turn up:

Mondays at the Basildon Sports Centre, Nethermayne 8.00 pm – 9.30 pm

Wednesday at the Markham's Chase Sport Centre, Markham's Chase, Laindon 8.45 pm – 10.15 pm.

They can wear loose sports clothing or if they are from another style they can wear their uniform.

