



Sometimes
you just
have to
Kiai*!



The martial arts as a healthy response to discrimination. Participants at the 2002 Gay Games share their experiences.

By Anthony Mohamed

I hated gym class throughout high school. The ‘macho’ comradery frightened me and I was concerned that others would perceive me as gay if I participated in the friendly banter. While dealing with my own sexuality, I sought the advice of my high school guidance counsellor who said that he wasn’t allowed to discuss sexuality issues for fear of going against the school board policies. The only formal discussion of homosexuality that I can remember was during my grade 9 health class, when the teacher said that, “*love has nothing to do with homosexuality, it’s just lust.*” As a result of the name calling, whispers and negative attitudes from my peers, my grades suffered and I quit high school in grade 11.

One evening two young men beat me up simply because I was wearing a pink triangle. The pink triangle was used by the Nazi Party to identify gay prisoners in the concentration camps during WWII. Today it is used as a symbol of remembrance and liberation. One of the guys approached me and said, “*isn’t that what Hitler did to fags?*” He proceeded to punch and spit on me. Luckily, I had a lot of support from my family and friends and was able to seek treatment, work with the police and take my case to court.

The Gay Games

For many lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgendered/transsexual, intersex and questioning (LGBTIQ) people, gym class in primary and secondary school was a horrible experience. For example, according to stereotypes, lesbians are expected to do well at sports. As a result, many young lesbians were careful about being too ‘tomboy’ like. Young gay men, on the other hand, were often afraid of being found out in gym class where male bonding is expressed in physical ways. As a result, they either focused completely on their sport or avoided gym class altogether. The Gay Games allows a new entry into the world of sports. It provides a place where some gay men can perform their sport to the best of their ability and do drag in the same evening, an act which for many is a liberating experience.

The Gay Games is an international athletic and cultural event that began in 1982 and occurs every four years in a selected city. It began as an act of resistance to the mainstream sports world that did not (and in most cases still does not) allow LGBTIQ athletes to be open about their sexuality. The main goal of the Gay Games is to provide a safe and inclusive environment for participants to achieve their “*personal best.*” It has played a key role incorporating sports and healthy lifestyles into LGBTIQ communities, as well as assisting participants to increase self-confidence and widen social circles. The Gay Games is open to everyone regardless of sexual orientation.

This booklet shares the experiences of eleven martial artists who participated at the Gay Games in Sydney, Australia during the week of November 2 - 9, 2002. It highlights the health benefits of the martial arts as they relate to discrimination reminding everyone that, “sometimes you just have to kiai!”

Profiles of Martial Artists from the Gay Games 2002



Name: Marion Green
Representing: Canada
Gender: Female
Sexuality: Lesbian
Ethnicity: European-Canadian (Jewish)
Age group: 26-40
Primary martial art: Shotokan Karate
Current rank: 3rd Dan Black Belt
Training for: 13 years

“Since I’ve been training, I got some muscle behind my confidence!”

Marion participated in her first Gay Games in Sydney in order to test her karate abilities. She also wanted to be in an entirely gay environment with other gay and gay positive people.

Concerning her martial arts training she notes that there are stereotypes of Jews in the diaspora being clumsy, non-athletic and not assertive in physically threatening situations. As a result, she sometimes feels she must prove her skills more than others. By contrast she has noticed that Black and Asian people are often thought of as being naturally better martial artists, which can also be a form of discrimination putting undue pressure on athletes from these groups. She has also felt discrimination due to her height, measuring in at five feet, just a few inches under the average for women.

The most difficult part of her training has been a fear of injury to herself or others. She said that sometimes she wonders if, *“this could be the day I lose my teeth in an accident.”*

She also notices that as she gets older her flexibility is beginning to suffer. As with some of the other participants interviewed, the time commitment can also be a major difficulty.

However, even with these disadvantages, she has noticed a dramatic increase in her fitness level, spiritual focus and ability to learn new skills. Her self-esteem and confidence have risen over the years but she’s not sure if this is due to her training or because she is getting older and acquiring a confidence that life experience may provide.

Profiles of Martial Artists from the Gay Games 2002

Name: Hao Thai
Representing: USA
Gender: Male
Sexuality: Gay
Ethnicity: East-Asian
Age group: 26-40
Primary martial art: Wushu
Current rank: Advanced (no formal ranking)
Training for: 3 years



2002 was Hao's first time competing at the Gay Games. He decided to come to, *"bring exposure to Wushu. It's the official national sport of China and will be in the Beijing summer Olympic games, yet no one knows of it outside of Asia."*

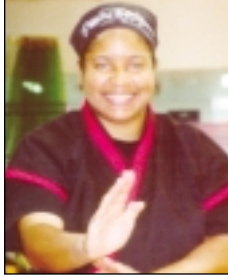
When asked about racism he replied, *"in secondary school I'd have Chinese slurs said to me. I grew up in a conservative, primarily white part of the US (Salt Lake City). However, because I'm Chinese, my classmates naturally assumed I knew martial arts. This "protected" me from violence. So I decided to actually learn it."*

Although it has been difficult to dedicate six to nine hours a week to training, as well as the physical and mental demands, he doesn't find this to be unreasonable. As in all martial arts, there is always a risk of injury both to yourself and others but he sees this as par for the course and the vast majority of competitors are not out to hurt anyone, including themselves.

Since beginning Wushu he believes that his self esteem and self confidence have really improved, especially knowing that he is, *"able to move in ways that others cannot."* He said that it's also a very good cardio workout, adding greater flexibility and balance to his life, both mentally and physically. Regarding the community of martial artists, he said that the *"pain and exhaustion of training brings team mates closer."* In addition, he notes that being a part of Wushu has given him a greater connection to and pride in his Chinese heritage.

"I need to show people that gay folks are in Wushu."

Profiles of Martial Artists from the Gay Games 2002



Name: Asa Lodge
Representing: USA
Gender: Female
Sexuality: Bisexual
Ethnicity: African
Age group: 26-40
Primary martial art: Kaju Kenbo
Current rank: Blue Belt
Training for: 4 years

“I want to encourage other deaf people to grow and be visible within the Gay Games.”

Asa came to Sydney for her first Gay Games to show that deaf people can participate in the mainstream sports world by demonstrating, “*a good spirit and love towards other participants.*”

In her life, she has dealt with issues of racism, sexism, homophobia and ableism. An on-going challenge is the frustration that she feels by the overall lack of sign language interpreters within the sports world and the community as a whole. (Editors note: An ASL interpreter was present during Asa’s competition and at most events at the Gay Games.) This leads to isolation, a lack of communication possibilities and limited education and training opportunities.

When describing her situation she felt that, “*Many hearing people do not know how to sign and they become uncomfortable around deaf people. I’m not sure if they are avoiding me because of homophobia, race, skin color, or because I’m a woman. I sometimes feel like who I am - deaf, Black and a woman - has made life difficult and frustrating. This stress that I experience from time to time is why I enjoy the community spirit of my martial arts school. Those who do not know sign language don’t necessarily need to learn but they should be willing to be respectful of members of many different communities.*”

Asa’s self-esteem, fitness level, spirituality, self-confidence and self-control have all increased as a result of her involvement in the martial arts. In addition she enjoys learning new moves and being able to perform them effectively. Even with all these new skills, she reminds herself and others that it’s important to remain humble.

Profiles of Martial Artists from the Gay Games 2002

Name: Anonymous
Representing:
Gender:
Sexuality:
Ethnicity:
Age group:
Primary martial art:
Current rank:
Training for:

One competitor decided to remain anonymous as s/he worried that the discrimination still faced by people living with HIV/AIDS might affect his/her chances to participate in future competitions.

This person has been HIV positive since s/he began training in the martial arts but decided not to disclose this status publicly. Even though no one has said anything negative regarding HIV or AIDS to this person, s/he expressed a concern that some people may feel uncomfortable sparring with him/her. The reality is that sometimes there can be a cut that bleeds and although the realistic chance of transferring the virus is next to none, others may avoid contact for this reason. As well, some countries have a ban on allowing HIV+ people to enter, even as visitors.

The medications that this competitor must take sometimes causes stomach aches, low energy and dizziness. This situation affects his/her performance from day to day.

This person said that, *“the martial arts has helped strengthen my body, mind and spirit. However, the social stigma of HIV can be overwhelming. As a result, I choose to stay quiet, keep my spirits high and hope that no one finds out.”*

“...the martial arts has helped strengthen my body, mind and spirit.”

Profiles of Martial Artists from the Gay Games 2002



Name: Marcos E. García-Ojeda
Representing: Puerto Rico
Gender: Male
Sexuality: Gay
Ethnicity: Latin American-Caribbean
Age group: 26-40
Primary martial art: Jujitsu
Current rank: Purple Belt
Training for: 6 years

“I love the feeling of competition and comradery at the Gay Games.”

Marcos believes that the martial arts keeps him in shape and more prepared for unpleasant situations. However the fear of injury to himself or others and the time he spends training can be hard.

Regarding discrimination Marcos remembered, *“I lived in the USA for 15 years and I have experienced discrimination for being Latino, male and gay. People used profanities in relation to my ethnicity and called me a ‘spick.’ I was made to feel worthless because of who I am. I would like to hang out with my women friends but sometimes I’m not able to participate in outings just for being male. Some bars will not allow men. I was also bashed for being gay and called many homophobic names.”*

He completed the survey stating *“the martial arts have provided me with increased self esteem and self confidence to deal with discrimination, at both the physical and mental level. I don’t feel like a victim anymore.”*



Profiles of Martial Artists from the Gay Games 2002

Name: Kathleen P. Webster
Representing: USA
Gender: Female
Sexuality: Lesbian
Ethnicity: North American
Age group: 41-55
Primary martial art: Kung Fu and Tae Kwon Do
Current rank: 3rd degree Black Belt
Training for: 15 years



Kathleen has been an active member of the past four Gay Games. She participates as an official and teacher, *"...because I believe it's really important for women - lesbian and gay people - to have opportunities to train, learn and achieve any goals we set in a safe environment of respect and inclusion. It's essential that Black Belts are visible role models, leaders and teachers - that we open doors for future martial artists - not just as competitors but also as officials, seminar leaders - we take that energy and achievement home to mainstream martial arts organizations and to all areas of our lives."*

Although the time commitment, fear of injury and demands on the mind and body can be challenging she felt the strengths of self-control, confidence, esteem, exercise, spiritual dimensions and learning new skills that she has gained from the martial arts greatly outweigh them.

Regarding discrimination she offered the following example. *"During an internship in my 2nd year of law school - I had the best appraisals, most billable hours, best results on matters on which I worked - yet someone else was offered a position with the firm. There was no direct proof of sexism or homophobia but I was out to everyone at the time."*

"The martial arts has given me the confidence to believe in myself, to know that I can work hard to achieve any goal I set and succeed - no matter what other people think, say or do. My training helps me focus my anger in a productive, healthy way rather than negative and self-destructive. It calms me, gives me visible proof of my progress towards goals. My training has gotten me through fears, loss, crisis, challenges - in many areas/times of my life."

"The martial arts has given me the confidence to believe in myself."

Profiles of Martial Artists from the Gay Games 2002



Name: Hao Nguyen
Representing: Australia
Gender: Male
Sexuality: Gay
Ethnicity: East-Asian
Age group: 26-40
Primary martial art: Kung Fu
Current rank: Yellow Belt
Training for: 1 year

“The martial arts... teaches you discipline, fairness and humility to help better understand differences.”

This was Hao’s first time participating at the Gay Games. Being a ‘Sydney-Sider’ (how Sydney residents refer to themselves) this was his opportunity to show ambition and commitment to the martial arts. He also wanted the world to know that Australians know how to put on a party!

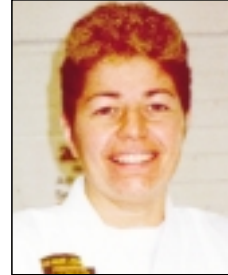
In high school, Hao recalls some homophobic teasing. *“He called a friend and I names like ‘poofa’ and I told the bully to back off...he didn’t and started to get physical so I kicked him, which scared him off. He actually thought I already knew martial arts!”*

The financial cost of his training, the demands on his body and the time commitment required have been difficult but he agrees that the exchange is reasonable. Since beginning Kung Fu he has noticed his self esteem and control have increased. He enjoys learning new skills and has noticed his fitness level and spiritual focus have also improved.

“The martial arts gives you self confidence and awareness of possible dangerous situations that you might be able to avoid or deal with. It also teaches you discipline, fairness and humility to help better understand differences.”

Profiles of Martial Artists from the Gay Games 2002

Name: Adelina Santiago
Representing: USA
Gender: Female
Sexuality: Lesbian
Ethnicity: Latin American
Age group: 41-55
Primary martial art: Tae Kwon Do
Current rank: 1st degree Black Belt
Training for: unknown



Adelina has participated in numerous Gay Games events. She said that, *"it is an opportunity of a lifetime to compete against other martial artists from around the world."* There are many committed competitors who continue to impress her.

"The martial arts help me center, especially when the journey to peace is helping people understand and respect you as a person. I am confident that if threatened I will protect myself, family and friends."

"...martial arts help me center..."

Name: Jez Martin
Representing: Australia
Gender: Male
Sexuality: Gay
Ethnicity: Caribbean
Age group: 26-40
Primary martial art: Kung Fu and Karate
Current rank: Yellow Belt
Training for: 1 year



Living in Australia made it relatively easy for Jez to compete at his first Gay Games. When asked for an example of discrimination he has experienced, he replied that, *"...isms of all types occur all the time. Often these things are very subtle but their presence is still felt."*

Since beginning Kung Fu a year ago he has noticed that, in addition to his fitness level, his self control, confidence and esteem have all increased, especially when he can actually learn and apply new skills.

"...isms of all types occur all the time."

Profiles of Martial Artists from the Gay Games 2002



Name: Jui-Hsuan Tang
Representing: United Kingdom
Gender: Male
Sexuality: Gay
Ethnicity: East Asian
Age group: 26-40
Primary martial art: Jujitsu (Ishigaki)
Current rank: Black Belt 1st Dan
Training for: 5 years

“Gaining my black belt really strengthened my confidence!”

Sydney 2002 was Jui-Hsuan’s first gay games. He participated primarily to see and compete with people from different forms of the martial arts and to exchange experiences and knowledge. He feels that the martial arts helped him by increasing his self-confidence, self-esteem and overall fitness level. The only disadvantage he identified was the time commitment, although he didn’t find this unreasonable.

Although he is a gay Asian man living in London, he doesn’t feel he has experienced much discrimination in his life.

For him, one of the best things about being a martial artist is belonging to a friendly and encouraging martial arts club that puts on the best parties!



Profiles of Martial Artists from the Gay Games 2002

Name: Adori Bubble
Representing: Australia
Gender: Female
Sexuality: Ambiguous
Ethnicity: Australian
Age group: 26-40
Primary martial art: Tae Kwon Do (freestyle)
Current rank: Brown Belt (1st grade)
Training for: 2 + years



Adori came to her first Gay Games to have fun and meet other martial artists from around the world. When asked about her sexuality she said that, *“I really want to leave my sexuality ambiguous as I do not feel an affinity with any particular group and feel that it is a very fluid thing that can not be categorized.”*

In her life she has experienced sexism, homophobia and abuse related to her appearance. Regarding why she began taking martial arts, she said, *“I was physically attacked due to the nature of my sexuality at 9:30 in the morning. The attack was sudden and I was struck to the face by a large male attacker. I, at this stage, did not know how to fight. It was a motivator for my beginning martial arts.”*

Concerning potential injuries, she said that they can be prohibitive but it’s not necessarily a fear, just a reality of training. Noting other challenges she replied, *“It can be hard sometimes to pay the fees. It can also put a strain on my personal relationships as the time commitment is difficult.”*

“I feel that the inner self assuredness that martial arts provides makes you more aware and less vulnerable. The boost to your self worth allows you to have the strength to not worry about, and at the same time not stand for, discrimination or intimidation that may have threatened you in the past. I would strongly recommend martial arts as a valuable life building experience, as well as a fantastic form of exercise. Inner strength I’ve gained from the martial arts filters into all sections of my life. I also have a sense of community which really helps my self esteem.”

“ I was physically attacked due to the nature of my sexuality... ”

Conclusion

The martial arts have a positive influence on the health of those who choose to pursue them. Apart from the obvious benefit of being able to protect oneself, each person emphasizes the positive impact on his/her outlook on life. The martial arts helps address everyday problems, including acts of discrimination, increase fitness levels and provide a sense of pride and achievement. For some Asian participants a renewed connection to their heritage is another benefit, as many of the martial arts originated in Asia.

The comments from the HIV positive martial artist highlight some of the complexities of illness, stigma and sport.

Asa's profile also provided a unique perspective on the isolation felt by martial artists who are deaf and the sense of community she found in her school.

When I began my karate training in 1996 I surprised myself. It was something I never had much interest in and thought of it as violent. I noticed a sign for the karate class at my gym and decided to attend out of curiosity. Due to the teachers' encouragement during my first few classes I began to see myself performing techniques I never thought I could do. This resulted in increased self-confidence, a sense of pride in my abilities and self-discipline. As time went on, I also recognized that my spiritual well being, the balance in my life and my overall fitness level were being positively influenced. Without any formal realization, I had committed myself to a process of mental, physical and spiritual growth eventually leading to my choice to compete in the martial arts at the Gay Games.

It is my sincere hope that this booklet will remind readers that there are healthy responses to discrimination and that the martial arts is only one excellent example.



International Resources for LGBTIQ Martial Artists

International Association of Gay and Lesbian Martial Artists (IAGLMA)

www.iaglma.org

Federation of Gay Games (FGG)

www.gaygames.com

Gay Games VII (Montreal) Rendez-Vous 2006

www.montreal2006.org

International Lesbian and Gay Association (ILGA)

www.ilga.org

International Gay and Lesbian Human Rights Commission (IGLHRC)

www.iglhrc.org

International Association of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgendered Pride Coordinators, Inc.

www.interpride.org

About the Author



Anthony Mohamed was born in Trinidad and Tobago but has lived in Toronto, Canada for most of his life. He currently holds the title of Black Belt (1st Dan) in Chito-ryu Karate-do. Sydney 2002 “*Under New Skies*” was the first time he competed at the Gay Games, winning a silver medal in the Men’s Advanced Forms division.

Engaging various popular education techniques, he has been working with the staff of Toronto’s St. Michael’s Hospital on issues of diversity since 1995. His extensive background in community health promotion, international development and equity issues has led to many opportunities for personal and professional growth. Working or traveling throughout all seven continents has provided him with first hand experiences of environmental, social, linguistic and economic integration.

He is thrilled to be earning a Masters in the Faculty of Environmental Studies (MES) at York University. MES continues to be a highly respected programme among those working towards social justice, equity and the development of healthy communities.