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ART and the WAY, A Journey of 2 Brothers to Become ITF Taekwon-Do Masters

By Robert Greeff

2020 has become a defining year for contemporary human civilization. The entire world has been thrown into a state of imbalance. As such, the need for the teachings of Taekwon-Do is more relevant and necessary than ever. In fact it would seem that all countries are calling out for the core tenet of Taekwon-Do ITF philosophy: the development of a peaceful society. The “Hwarang” and its insights which call for “behaving rationally” and “understanding the change in the world” specifically with reference to “interaction and balance” is at the forefront of many great thinkers right now. Taekwon-Do Masters and brothers, Brannon and Jaren Phillips have spent over 30 years realizing the wisdom of the “ART and the WAY” along their journey to become masters and teachers of the martial art.

Born Into The Art, A Journey Begins, The Brothers Take On The Responsibility

The Eastern Arts and its wisdom has always been a companion to the lifestyles of the Phillips family. As Brannon says, “Jaren and I were born into the martial arts. We have a legacy, with our late grandfather, who was a third dan in Shotokan Karate, an uncle who was first dan in Shotokan Karate and my father, a black belt in judo. Inevitably, I began training at the age of 4.”



“It was years later, a friend of my father (via his textile business and dealings in Korea) would come to visit and change my life forever. She was a black belt and taught me a few Taekwon-Do moves. I was incredibly intrigued, and this sparked off a passion to return to martial arts again. Where I felt Karate was very mainstream, Taekwon-Do seemed very mystical to me. I immediately had an affinity to the art, as it resonated something that I had been searching for,” said Brannon.

A year and a half later, Brannon’s father found a Scottish instructor; Neil Muir 3rd degree Black belt, who taught in Johannesburg. Although he only took on adult students, he was persuaded to take on Brannon and Jaren, and this is how the brothers’ journey into the art of Taekwon-Do began.

“At the age of 12, I was completely enamoured with this art. As an adolescent it was a way to discover self-worth, but also to evaluate my growth, over the years there was clear awareness and correlation between my school work, sports, feeling more self-confident and physically stronger. It was so precious to me that it became so intrinsically wrapped up in my daily routines of school, homework, then a jog followed by Taekwon-Do patterns and combining a sense of discipline together with an indomitable spirit for training and development,” said Brannon.

Brannon was 14 years old when he won his first gold medal, a defining moment where their instructor began to invest more attention into the boys development; moving beyond just the physical aspect of Taekwon-Do but delving into the spiritual side. This included outdoor hikes and meaningful explanations into different philosophies and the moral culture of Taekwon-Do. This philosophical foundation would spur on both Brannon and Jaren to discover the depth and meaning of all the lessons their instructor imparted.

Brannon and Jaren trained with Neil Muir for 6 years. In 1998, their instructor returned to the UK. The 2 brothers now aged 18 and 20, were the most adept in the art and took over the Dojang in Johannesburg. For the 2 young men, this ensued another aspect to their journey of Taekwon-Do, that of responsibility and accountability to now “their” students. “It was daunting at first, but Jaren and I embraced the challenge and the

respected roles and we grew the school to 2 different locations,” said Brannon.

Meeting the founder of Taekwon-Do and receiving a special instruction

From 1999 to 2000 Brannon and Jaren would go on to be seeded for the ITF South African National team to compete internationally in Taekwon-Do. A prestigious accomplishment, although at the time they did not have the funds to compete. Despite the disappointment, it became increasingly more and more important for the brothers to attain a higher personal goal: to train with the founder of Taekwon-Do, General Choi Hong Hi. Everything they earned from teaching went into saving to facilitate their international journey to train with all the Grand Masters of Taekwon-Do.



November 2000, would prove a pivotal moment in the brothers’ lives. Both attended a 3 day Technical and Instructor Seminar with the founder of Taekwon-Do, General Choi Hong Hi, who at the time was the only ITF 9th degree Grand Master. In a seminal one on one conversation with the seminar attendees,

General Choi Hong Hi indicated that he at the age of 82 had taken 50 years to develop Taekwon-Do as it was known, through its physical discipline to be represented in 150 countries worldwide. Moreover, “Taekwon-Do” would only be finished in the next 50 years and he would not be able to do that. It would be people like Brannon and Jaren who would continue to complete the martial art. It would be up to them to teach the balance of Taekwon-Do, which is its moral culture (Jungshin Sooyang). It is this integral aspect that brings the martial art into fulfilment as a way of life, thus the understanding of the “ART and the WAY”.



The brothers returned to South Africa enlightened and renewed in their commitment and passion to Taekwon-Do as a martial art and its wisdom. This spurred on the next 2 decades of teaching their students moral culture in the physicality of the martial art, which specifically allowed them to nurture and protect their Taekwon-Do “flame”. Teaching moral culture became fundamental in sustaining a deeper passion for the art, serving as an anchor for the brothers, in comparison to many

practitioners, instructors and competitors that eventually gave up the practice after only focusing on the physical aspect.

Once were students, now teachers becoming Masters

A move from Johannesburg to Cape Town enabled Brannon to pioneer Taekwon-Do as an ITF Taekwon-Do instructor in the city, and open a Dojang. Jaren would remain in Johannesburg. 3 years later the brothers would unite to attend their first international tournament. They were then part of the first South African delegation to travel to North Korea to grade to 4th Degree under the technical President of Taekwon-Do for North Korea. They also competed at the first international martial arts games (IMGC), where the brothers won the bronze medal for South Africa in team events, a monumental triumph.



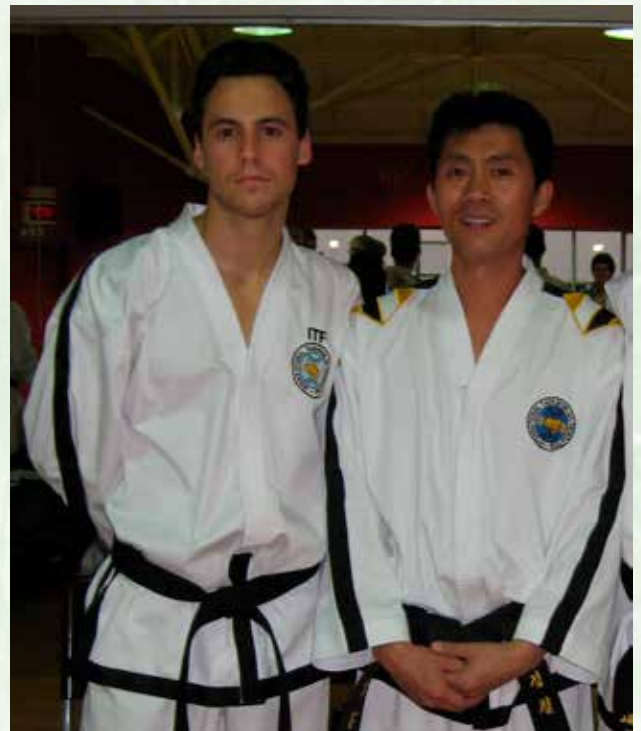
In a great honour, the brothers were requested by the former ITF President, Professor Chang Ung, to contract Korean instructors to South Africa which they did with the assistance of the South African ITF National Executive Board for Taekwon-Do, and together with members and donors, were able to bring 2 instructors from Korea. This was a wonderful opportunity, to have a master live in Cape Town and to teach Brannon and his students and the same for Jaren in Johannesburg who had a senior Master do the same. The result was a phenomenal acceleration of the technical levels of Taekwon-Do in South Africa.



In 2013 Jaren was appointed President of ITF Taekwon-Do South Africa (ITFSA) and Brannon, Senior Vice President. The brothers would govern and work to develop and improve the technical standards of Taekwon-Do across South Africa and the rest of the continent.

Brannon would immigrate to the United States in an effort to develop his business. “It was a challenging time

for my Taekwon-Do career when I moved to Los Angeles, who had few if any ITF instructors, and I was torn between opening a Dojang and giving my new business my full attention. I did maintain my training on a personal level however, as well as attend international seminars with the Senior Vice President of Taekwon-Do, and who is also the Chairman of the Technical and Education Committee, Grand Master and Professor Hwang Ho Yong. Professor Hwang Ho Yong also graded us to our next levels: 6th Degree. He would also grade us to what would be our 7th Degree and Masters level,” said Brannon.



In 2019, Brannon attended the ITF World Championships as a VIP and represented South Africa in The ITF Congress to helping formalise the ITF Disability Committee, in addition, the brothers were helping to take traditional text and Taekwon-Do



literature and digitize them for Kindle use and publication for Amazon.com.

The ITF President, Professor Ri Yong Son, requested Brannon join the ITF Public Relations Committee globally. This was in an effort to modernize and grow the art via digital media, assisting their websites and updating their marketing collateral. Jaren, based in Cape Town, was asked to be a member of the ITF Technical Committee, a huge honour for him to this day. He is the presiding Technical Conductor for Africa and conducts seminars and gradings in Africa on behalf of ITF.

A life-long dream

“It has always been a dream of us to fulfill our goal of becoming Masters. Our first instructor was a 3rd dan, the highest rank in South Africa when we

were teenagers was 4th degree. When we reached our 6th degrees we were the highest ranked in South Africa. A Mastership surpassing our teachers seemed an incredible accomplishment. On the 25th of August 2020, we were promoted to 7th Degree Black Belts for ITF Taekwon-Do. This made my brother and I the first 7th degree Masters in the history ITF Taekwon-Do of Southern Africa. Jaren and I are the second and third Masters in Africa for ITF Taekwon-Do, a monumental accolade and a historic breakthrough for the art,” said Brannon

For the brothers, aged 40 and 42, this has been a phenomenal journey, one of sharing and encouragement. A love for the art of Taekwon-Do, grew into teaching, further training and achievement, serving on the highest Taekwon-Do committees, teaching as instructors all around the world and to be fortunate to be young Masters and able to still grow the art in a modern era.

For them, their residing passion remains to promote the moral culture of Taekwon-Do to everyone they encounter, to see a world of peace and balance. As 7th Degree Black Belt and Certified International Instructor and Master in ITF Taekwon-

Do, Brannon says, “for those who practice the art, I would encourage them to study the ‘Do,’ it’s not just about hitting the pad harder, it’s a guide to living, a fulfilment of the ART and the WAY.”

