

[A Crooked Path: On Taekwondo](#)



by [Steve Five](#) Jun 7, 2017

An Essay Submitted to Kukkiwon College in Consideration for 1st Dan Black Belt

“All things are governed by the law of Yin and Yang... Happiness can often stem from catastrophic moments.” Choi Hong Hi, who named Tae Kwon Do

I’m writing this essay to a little kid in Rootstown, Ohio, in 1986 — a 6 year old whose life was school, playing in the woods behind his house, G.I. Joe, He Man cartoons, and ninja movies. He loved The Karate Kid. More than anything, he wanted to ‘do karate’. He wanted to be a ninja. He wanted to be a black belt.

For his birthday that year, his parents enrolled him in classes at Park’s Karate College, in Ravenna, Ohio. Little did he know it would be something that would stay with him throughout his life — sometimes dormant, sometimes to return — but always there.

Park's Judo and Karate School
19988
Rank Registration Number

THIS IS TO CERTIFY THAT
Steven Panovich
Has Been Awarded The Indicated Rank In
TAE KWON DO

Present Rank	Date Issued	Approved
8th Yellow	12-9-1986	[Signature]
7th Orange	3-7-87	[Signature]
6th Green	6-6-87	[Signature]
4th Red	9-12-87	[Signature]
3rd Brown	3-88	[Signature]
2nd Brown	9-12-92	[Signature]

KIEL SOON PARK **9th DEGREE BLACK BELT**
Instructor Rank

The rank listed above is void unless official stamp is showing in approved column.

Rank Registration Certificate

My attendance card from Park’s Karate College

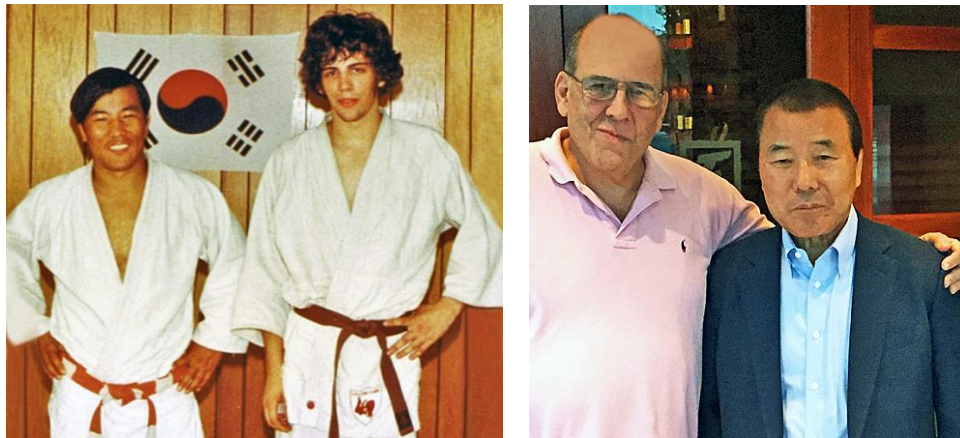
The dojo at Park’s Karate College was a retro-fitted old shoe store, founded by Mr. Park — a South Korean immigrant. Mr. Park did not permit outsiders to watch classes — there was a front room and an office. Inside the long, rectangular gym, one half was fitted with canvas flooring, cotton stuffed underside, a traditional Judo mat. The other side of the room had rough outdoor carpeting. There was a canvas punching bag in the corner of the room, a long full-length mirror stretching the length of the gym, and a row of slatted wood shelves where students put their class attendance cards.

Mr. Park had opened a couple of schools in Northeastern Ohio in the 70’s and 80’s. His main focus was Tae Kwon Do, but he also focused on Judo, Hapkido, and Aikido.

I always just called it Karate, because that's what Mr. Park had put on his sign: "Park's Karate College". It was the Midwest in the 1980's — people didn't know Tae Kwon Do, but they knew what Karate meant.

Mr. Park was a short, stocky man — all muscle it seemed, though not jacked, but toned. He usually wore a gray suit with a crimson tie, or a karate uniform. He looked a bit like one of the 3 storms from Big Trouble in Little China when he was in his suit. He was good natured outside of the studio, and firm inside it.

Master Kiel Soon Park was a 9th Dan black belt in Tae Kwon Do, and at least as much in Judo. He was a 1967 World Silver Medalist Judo Champion, 5 time Korean Grand Judo Champion, 2 time World Judo champion, the 1984 Korean Olympic Team Coach, the 1986 & 1987 U.S. World Championship Team Head Coach, and President of the Korean Judo Association in U.S.A. He was also an assistant professor at the Judo College in Korea and a member of the Kukkiwon College. I remember hearing he was instrumental in helping the Korean Judo Team win several gold medals in the 1988 Olympics held in Seoul — for this he was given an honorary PhD. by Young-In University, which was presented in front of a packed stadium.



[Mr. Park with his well-known student, Sensei Gary Goltz](#) in 1972 and in 2015

And I knew none of Mr. Park's accomplishments — the ones I listed above — in the ten years that I studied in his school. In fact, the only thing I really knew was that he was a black belt, I often had trouble understanding his English, and I was very careful around him.



A young Mr. Park at the 1966 World Judo Championships. He took 3rd apparently

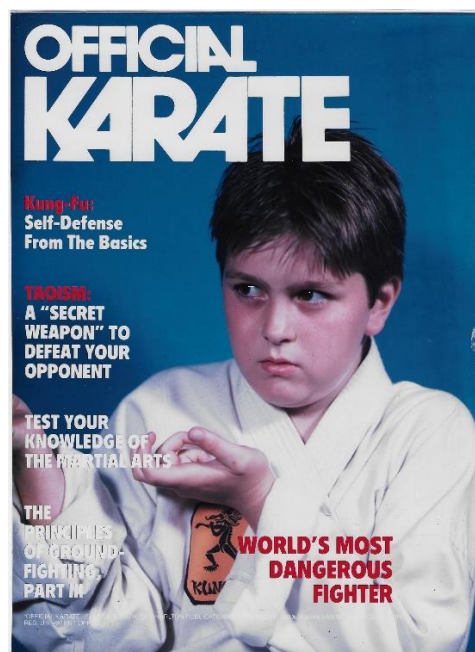
Our head instructor was Mr. Cortright. Ron Cortright. He was studying medicine at a local university while teaching classes. He was tall and lean, often very serious but funny as well, in his seriousness. My mother recounted a story where he asked her what to expect, or direction, on having a child, as his wife Maria, who was also a black belt, was expecting. My mother recounted the look of fear and uncertainty in his eyes, and his earnestness. She thought that was funny.

Mr. Cortright was very strict, but fair. There was a weird logic to his teaching — a brutal, militaristic introspection he demanded of his students, tempered with a deep empathy and joy in seeing their empowerment. That was palpable to us. My mother also told me he used to take his uniforms to Marshall's dry cleaners in downtown Ravenna to be starched and pressed . And I can't make a final edit of this story without thanking my mother for washing, ironing, and starching my karate uniforms all those years— it added a severe, almost comical snapping sound to the precision of movements done correctly and with force. Mr. Cortright's gi always made a crisp, firm *snap*. I sense he got a lot of his teaching style from Mr. Park. Dr. Cortright is now a post-doctoral fellow at Eastern Carolina University, researching exercise physiology.

After Mr. Cortright, Kenneth "Butch Mills" became my instructor. He was from Northeastern Ohio, though his mother was Japanese, and he later formed his own school in her name, which is still operating, Ogura Martial Arts in Ravenna. All of these instructors — Mr. Cortright, Mr. Mills, and Mr. Park — had one thing in common: they made sure I was taught correctly. Kicking, punching, blocking, moving, breakfalling, rolling — the most important aspect is energy, learning how to channel it and transfer it — learning how to throw your weight, move at will, and flow with your opponent's opposing energy. Proper technique and proper form, always. Always keep trying, and always try harder.

"Strong mind". As my current instructor, Instructor Alejandro, says.

I was 6 years old and interested in martial arts movies. My favorites were The Karate Kid, Chuck Norris in Missing in Action, and The Last Dragon.



The author as a young Karate Kid.

As a 6 year old, I was daunted by the level of discipline that Mr. Park and his school adhered to — looking back, Mr. Park was definitely from the Old School. Mr. Cortright was Mr. Park's head instructor, and just as strict. My dad and I had a running joke — "Cortright Do Karate", referencing "Miyagi Do Karate" from the Karate Kid.

Our gi's, or uniforms, were white canvas and opened in the front in the traditional style, with pull-string canvas pants, and our sparring gear was made of rubber and a heavy gauze fabric — not the flashy sparring gear offered today.

In the fall of 1986, a few months into my lessons, I grew tired of going. The actual work of going to karate three nights a week became cumbersome to my little kid mind.

My parents, and Mr. Cortright, explained to me one afternoon before class that they, and I, had signed a one-year contract with Mr. Park, and there was no way out of it. Simply put, I was stuck. I had to continue for the next year. After that, one year turned into two, two into three, and so on. From white to yellow, to orange to green, to blue to red to brown III, brown II, and brown I, I ended up staying at Park's Karate College for almost 10 years.

Mr. Park, and instructors Cortright and Mills, were sticklers for good technique and form. If we were in joochoom sogi or "horse stance", Mr. Cortright would walk around the room, picking up the bamboo practice sword, and would 'thwack!' behind our knees, inside our calves, to make sure we bent our knees and kept our feet forward. Fists always had to be facing upright and tucked in when not punching. Stances would always have to be correct.

They were also very stern with discipline, among children and adults alike. When someone did something irresponsible or ill-advised, Mr. Cortright would say "Knock Your Head!", and that person would have to knock on their head as if they were knocking on a door. After this, one is aware of their surroundings, and particularly of themselves, and does not make the same mistake again. I remember one time during a promotional exam, crying in front of the whole class and families there. I would see other kids do the same, and realized it was part of standing up to the fear and pressure. It was about learning how to direct your energy.

There was also Terry, a black belt with a Tom Selleck mustache who weighed about 250 lbs. if I remember correctly (I was a child, so he looked like a giant, but indeed he was). That same promotional exam, Mr. Park noticed Terry's stance wasn't correct while showing students a technique, so Mr. Park swept him on the floor.

It was astounding. Mr. Park paled in comparison to Terry's size, yet he didn't seem to move more than the flick of his foot on Terry's leg, and the giant came crashing to the outdoor-carpeted floor. That was how masterful Mr. Park was at directing his physical energy — he had mastered a fascinating yet utilitarian mix of Tae Kwon Do, along with Hapkido and Judo — arts where he learned how to become aware of, and move and throw, not only his center of gravity, but the centers of gravity of others. He was a literal rock — a force of energy in a seemingly inert ball.

I can still remember the smell of the old gym — the sweat and canvas, the drafts of cold air in the winter. Within that, I remember the teachings. We were inundated with one main tenet — this martial art is only to be used as a last resort. Always walk away from a fight.

The other main teaching I remember came from Mr. Cortright. A young student was disappointed in not receiving a trophy after a tournament. Mr. Cortright made a strong point to the whole class. “Trophies don’t matter.” He said. “It’s nothing but a chunk of metal and marble. The real reward is within you. It is what you have learned.”

I had trained in Tae Kwon Do for almost 10 years, and by the time I was 15, I was anxious. At the time, Mr. Park and the Kukkiwon did not allow students under the age of 16 to become black belts. I had been a brown belt for years. Eventually, my interests changed, along with my adolescence. I began playing guitar and listening to rock’n’roll. I eventually quit Tae Kwon Do during my Freshman year in high school.



I received my 1st degree brown belt shortly before I turned 14. I wouldn’t be eligible to test for black belt for another two years, so I eventually started listening to the Ramones and playing guitar in a band instead.

I wouldn’t return to Tae Kwon Do for 20 years, after what seemed like lifetimes. I had graduated college at Kent State University, moved to New York City, started a band, toured the world, graduated with my master’s degree in writing from The New School, and recorded multiple albums, as well as working in the fine arts, political science, and academia. I learned what it means to struggle, move on, succeed and fail.

What brought me back to Tae Kwon Do wasn’t a desire, but a necessity. I have struggled throughout my life, back to early childhood, with major depression. Whole chunks of years in my teens, twenties, and thirties, had been intermittent black swaths of depression that created missteps in my life. After a painful breakup and a major depressive episode, and after trying all other outlets to combat depression, I finally decided to begin training in Tae Kwon Do again.

Tae Kwon Do studios and instructors like to tout Tae Kwon Do as a martial art that will give students the confidence knowing that they can defend themselves from attackers. What they often don’t mention, though, is how restorative and beneficial Tae Kwon Do can be to one’s own sense of well-being. It’s not a cure all, but there is a poetic irony and beauty in using a form of physical self-defense to combat psychological enemies. This, to me personally, is one of the greatest attributes of Tae Kwon Do.

Physical fitness, psychological fitness, strength, discipline, empowerment, self-defense, accountability, and the tenets of Tae Kwon Do — Courtesy, Integrity, Self-Control, Perseverance, and Indomitable Spirit


— all of these make the art an integral facet of millions of people’s lives who study the art throughout the world. And make no mistake, they are artists, all of them, in practicing Tae Kwon Do. Yet, there are currently only around 100,000 Kukkiwon registered black belts in the United States. It is a rare and great honor to be considered for that.

The more I learned about the past and beginnings of Tae Kwon Do, the more I realized that no true history can be written without showing its dark underbelly. In Alex Gillis’ excellent book “A Killing Art: The Untold History of Tae Kwon Do”, it is revealed that the art form’s inception came from a poker fight among Korean fighters, adrift in Japan occupied Korea, and the forefathers of Tae Kwon Do were anything but angels. Some of them worked for the Korean CIA, were sent on black ops missions killing dozens of high level enemy agents in hand-to-hand combat. This was well before Tae Kwon Do was an international sport, giving Korean practitioners a tactical advantage and making them especially deadly.

Alex Gillis

The Ace Tae Kwon Do team and the Korean CIA... Before all hell broke loose with martial-arts-espionage activities in...

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Later, schools would split, and techniques and forms would differ. Politics aside, what remains is the art itself, the dedication of its practitioners, and the ideals which its students strive to embody. Tae Kwon Do has a fascinating history in how its techniques were created.

Seeing the changes in Tae Kwon Do as a sport, after returning from being away for 20 years, is fascinating as well, particularly how Olympic style fighting has evolved (that’s not proper technique for a roundhouse kick!) and how new styles like MMA have formed around it and been influenced by it.

The styles of martial arts I learned — Tae Kwon Do, Judo, and Hapkido/Aikido — are all modern, yet have their roots throughout the East and date back thousands of years. Each martial art itself is a hybrid of multicultural design passing teachings back and forth from China, to Korea, to Japan, and back again. Some say that these come from even earlier fighting styles developed in India.

Tae Kwon Do itself was created in the 1950’s in Korea by fusing Japanese Karate and Korean Taekyon. The Japanese had occupied South Korea for a number of years, so after World War II and Korea’s liberation, the Japanese influence on Korean fighting styles was full-fledged and deep-rooted.

Around 1000 years ago, the Chinese introduced an earlier version of Taekyon to Korea, and Japanese Karate itself has a known history dating back over 600 years. Judo was founded in 1882 and is a form of Japanese Jujitsu, which itself dates back to at least 1532 in Okinawa.

Hapkido and Aikido, like Judo, are modern martial arts derived from ancient ones, and were highly influenced by ancient Japanese martial arts, but evolved in Korea and elsewhere.

Learning the synthesis of Tae Kwon Do, Judo, Hapkido, and Aikido, have prepared me for a multitude of situations in which I can defend myself. On top of that, my continued training has included Boxing.

I came back to Tae Kwon Do at a time in my life when I needed it. I found a school close to me, making sure they were in the Kukkiwon style I had learned from Mr. Park. United Tae Kwon Do in Williamsburg, Brooklyn was a short bike ride for me. I began training under Instructor Alejandro, who is good natured yet firm, and knowledgeable — and displays the modern Tae Kwon Do techniques I never learned — the feel. The head of the school, Master Olga, asked me a few months after I returned if I wanted to earn my black belt. I honestly hadn't thought about it before that point. "Yes", I said.

And so it is, the same as General Choi Hong Hoi (who, provocatively, founded the ITF, Kukkiwon's opposing school) said, "Happiness can often stem from catastrophic events." If it weren't for the deep valleys of lowness and depression that I experienced, and the unfortunate events of my recent past, I may have never been lead back to Tae Kwon Do, and the happiness that arrives in the pursuit of the honor of becoming a black belt — the honor first instilled and suggested from my new school's master, Master Olga, and my instructor, Instructor Alejandro.

In some ways, perhaps I have been ready for 20 years, perhaps not, but a path does not always follow a straight route. Instructor Alejandro and Master Olga have reminded me, in the school's unique way, of the definition of Tae Kwon Do — it is first and foremost an art, one that seeks to empower total control of mind and body. It is about energy and directing or redirecting the flow of energy that you can't control. That, in itself, is control.

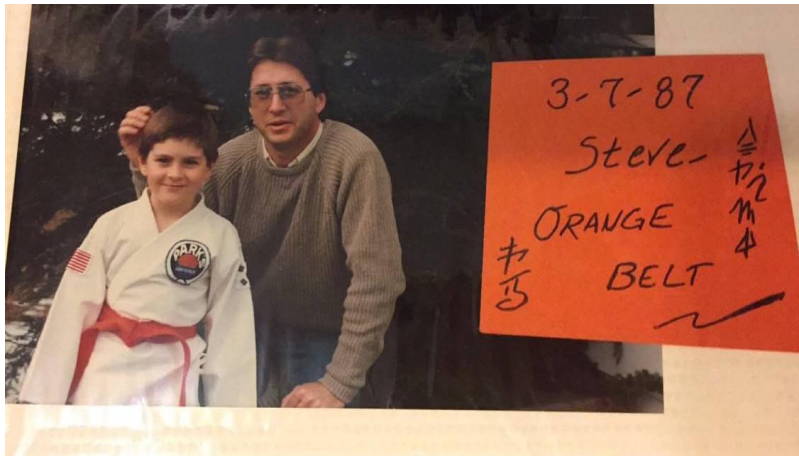
Coming back to Tae Kwon Do after all these years, I almost wholesale forgot my forms. But the week before my promotional exam, cramming to remember all my forms (even though I've been studying them for months), drifting off half asleep, I've noticed that I remember some forms that aren't used widely used today — the Palgwe forms. Only after studying the forms for a year and researching the history of the sport on the internet a week before my test, have I realized that I may have never learned some of the Taeguk forms, learning ITF forms instead. (I literally remembered a series of hand movements from [Wan Hyo](#) while drifting off to sleep less than a week before my black belt exam). Learning the Taeguk forms made me want to reconnect with my old instructors to find out what we learned back in the 80's and 90's, and how the sport has changed since I was young. I realize that Mr. Park cultivated a balance between WTF and ITF curriculum, which I think is admirable. In some ways, I am literally re-connecting with my old self while growing into the sport and adapting to it through maturation, from a very unique vantage point.

In the future, I wish to study Krav Maga as well as Gracie Style Jiu Jitsu, and possibly Muay Thai, for a well-rounded personal fighting style. But my roots in martial arts will always be with Tae Kwon Do. It is a point of pride and humility to be, like my father, accredited as a 1st Dan Black Belt in Tae Kwon Do from the Kukkiwon Academy.

On the night before my test, I find myself anxious. From my experience, I think of what I need to calm me down, and it occurs to me to put on Lou Reed's Hudson River Wind Meditations. I think of how he did Tai Chi, and how perhaps it will benefit me as well. Or David Lynch, with Transcendental Meditation. I come to realize we are all more beginners than masters. The world is rich, and mysterious, but there are many ways to tap into its harmony.

Tae Kwon Do has brought me closer to my family. After studying for a number of years as a child, my father began training at Park's Karate. He would eventually eclipse me (being over 16 years old) to become a 2nd Dan black belt himself. Jasmine Stanovich, my first cousin once removed, received her black belt in

Goju-ryu Karate a few years ago, and I have kept it in my mind. It was an inspiration to me, along with my father's black belt.



With my dad, who later went on to get his 2nd dan black belt from Park's Karate College himself



Doing a left roundhouse kick on our back porch, spring 1987

I look back to when I was a little kid who wanted to 'do karate', and I remember hearing a story, supposedly an ancient proverb, about how the white belt starts out with his belt completely unsoiled. By the time he makes it to black belt, his belt has become completely soiled, through years of work and tussling on the ground. And by progressing from the black belt, the sweat of the work and the fraying of the belt washes the soil and exposes new fiber, returning him again to a white belt. It is the idea that being a black belt is not awarded as some endpoint, but rather the continuation of work and humility after mastery. I later heard this proverb recently came from the West and was an urban legend.

But in the end, it makes sense. The idea is that, on both levels, it doesn't matter. The belt itself — like the trophy, Mr. Cortright told us — doesn't matter, it is what's in the mind. The facts of the story don't matter — [it's just a story](#) — there is a larger truth behind it. As the Buddhist teaching goes — there is never attainment of perfection, but only in the pursuit of perfection.

I try to keep this in mind, as I receive the honor of Black Belt. For me it is a lifetime in the making, so its importance is not lost on me. However, I understand that it is just the beginning of a circular path — one in which the master becomes the beginner.