

# ONE MASTER'S HARVEST OF CHAMPIONS

By Michael McFarlane



**Five students from one school all qualified for the Olympic Team Trials at Colorado Springs last June. What special formula does Master Choi of Columbus, Ohio, have that yields this crop of champions?**

What does it take to become a national Tae Kwon Do champion? Maybe a quick roundhouse, a couple of head fakes and a balanced spinning wheel kick? How about a triple-somersaulting, double-twisting, front kick with a real loud kiap?

If it isn't fancy techniques, maybe it's superior athletic ability. Maybe the champions all have some mystical muscle fibers that allow them to deliver their kicks and punches faster than the speed of light.

Students at the Oriental Martial Arts College (OMAC) in Columbus, Ohio, seem to have discovered the secret of winning in competitive Tae Kwon Do. Five students from OMAC qualified for the Olympic team tryouts this year in Miami, Florida. Three of the five students, Chris Spence, Doug Baker and Helen Yee, earned gold medals at the USTU National Championship last April. Competing as an adult, Jennifer Gray, 16, took a bronze and Greg Baker (Doug's older brother), was invited to the tryouts because of his outstanding record in other national and international competitions.

**LEFT:** Five students from one school advanced to the Olympic Team Trials in Colorado Springs. Four of them will compete for a place on the Olympic team. From left: Chris Spence, Jennifer Gray, Greg Baker, Helen Yee and Doug Baker, who lost to finalists Jay Warwick and Mike Kim. **BOTTOM LEFT:** Master Joon P. Choi, instructor and coach. He has been selected to be the 1988 Women's TKD Olympic coach.

## THE COACH

OMAC was founded by Master Joon P. Choi who was a national champion in Korea in 1967 and 1968. (A Korean national champion in the sixties was the equivalent of a world champion today.) Master Choi came to the United States in the early 1970's and has since devoted his life to teaching martial arts.

Master Choi, now an eighth degree black belt, has taught over 15,000 students and has produced several national and international champions. He has practiced martial arts for over thirty years, and has mastered the additional fighting arts of karate and kung fu as well as several types of weaponry.

One of Master Choi's goals is to put Tae Kwon Do on the same level as other leading spectator sports. He said, "I have invested a great deal of time and energy pursuing this dream and will not rest until I see it come true. I am doing everything I can to raise the stature of Tae Kwon Do in the public eye."

Master Choi has developed a special training system that has been refined over twenty years. His students feel his coaching has made them successful. But he says, "My students' success is mostly a result of their dedication and the emo-



**LEFT TO RIGHT:** Chris Spence, Greg Baker, Master Choi and Herb Perez at a Tae Kwon Do summer training camp.

tional and financial support they receive from their parents, friends and sponsors. Our school maintains the Tae Kwon Do tradition of teaching and pursuing patience, modesty, determination and respect."

So how do you become a national Tae Kwon Do champion? Master Choi's states that it is through dedication, determination, modesty, respect and patience. Considering this question a bit further, it is equally important to learn how the championship athletes explain their success.

## THE COMPETITORS—CHRIS SPENCE

U.S. 1987 Olympic Committee Athlete of the Year Chris Spence, 22, is taking time from his studies at Ohio State University to train for the Olympics. He is a five-time national champion and has won

medals in several world competitions. In considering his success, Chris says, "I've come to realize that my athletic ability is not that great. The reason I win is because I'm dedicated. I work out six to eight hours a day. There aren't that many dedicated people in Tae Kwon Do. I'm not a great athlete, but I have total commitment.

"My philosophy of fighting is to try not to get hit. I'm pretty confident in my attacks. I've changed my fighting style. Before I was a counter fighter, now I do more attacking. In international fighting, the person who backs-up and scores a point doesn't get the point. You have to be going forward and you have to move your opponent back to score a point in international competitions. Nationally counter fighting works, internationally, it doesn't.

"I usually win by being a smart fighter. I don't try to bang it out with my opponent. I try to out-think him. I can usually figure out my opponent quickly in the ring," concluded Spence.

## HELEN YEE

Helen Yee isn't ready to retire at age 27. She explains, "This is the strongest I've ever felt." She had to beat a five-time champion to win the gold medal at the USTU Nationals this year. "I'm very

*Master Choi coaches Herb Perez at a camp sponsored by the Oriental Martial Arts College. Greg Baker watches.*



# ONE MASTER'S HARVEST OF CHAMPIONS

excited about trying out for the Olympics. When I fight I try to keep in mind what I've learned from other people. Master Choi made a speech to the whole Ohio team before Nationals. He said, 'Put yourself in the frame of mind that you are fighting for your life.' That really helped me concentrate on doing my best.

"Nervousness use to hinder my ability...but I was told to use my nervous energy to my advantage. That set me straight. I don't workout six to eight hours a day to loose. I give it my all."



**ABOVE:** Master Choi has developed a special training system over the past 20 years. **RIGHT:** At the OMAC summer camp, Master Choi coaches Greg Baker kicking Herb Perez as Chris Spence watches. **FAR RIGHT:** Greg Baker (right) displays the form that has made him a champion.

## JENNIFER GRAY

At age 16, Jennifer Gray competed in the Nationals in the adult division. She won a bronze medal and qualified to try-out for the Olympic team. "Trying out for the Olympics will be one of the best experiences of my life. I've been working on endurance and speed. Last year I was dying during the third round. I'm also working on my mental attitude and my confidence."

Jennifer believes her success is due to the training at OMAC. "We train together. We're like a family. There's a lot of support here. Master Choi has put in a lot of time. My family and friends have also been very supportive."

## DOUG BAKER

Doug Baker, 19, has fought over 100 opponents in the welterweight division. He won his first gold medal in five years of competing at Nationals. "I feel one of the reasons I do well is because of Master Choi. I've got complete faith in what he tells me. If I don't do what he tells me, I'll loose."

Doug and his older brother Greg, a national champion, often workout together. "In the last year my brother and I have gotten very close. During high school, we weren't that close, but now I can say he's my best friend. We have fun together and help each other, not just with Tae Kwon Do. We fight each other harder than anyone else. Greg can do any kick from any position. He has more

power than anyone in the school and he has a lot of speed."

Doug's philosophy of fighting is: "You have to know what you're going to do before you step into the ring. Starting with basic techniques and then building. Most of the points are scored on basic roundhouse kicks to the body. I try to pickup the pace of the fight because I have a lot of endurance. I can usually read and react to my opponents quickly."

## GREG BAKER

Greg Baker, 22, is an internationally ranked Tae Kwon Do competitor and was invited to the Olympic tryouts based upon his winning record. Greg is currently taking physical therapy for his injured knee, and he reports that it is at 60% of its normal strength.

Greg speaks about his brother Doug with pride. "He really did well at Nationals this year. We've grown a lot closer. He pushes me when we workout and I push him. We help each other with techniques. The thing I really respect about Doug is his spirit. He puts 110% into everything he does. He is always attacking and is always aggressive."

Greg adds, "I win because of good coaching. I guess power and speed are my assets, but I have more faults. My biggest asset is my determination. Athletic ability helps but there are people who overcome their physical limitations with dedication, discipline and patience." In considering the Olympics, he states: "I feel pretty confident about the Olympics. I am thinking positive."

"We've grown as a school. We have discipline and dedication, but Master Choi is very hard to please. He's a perfectionist. We've been around him a long time. He understands us. He knows what



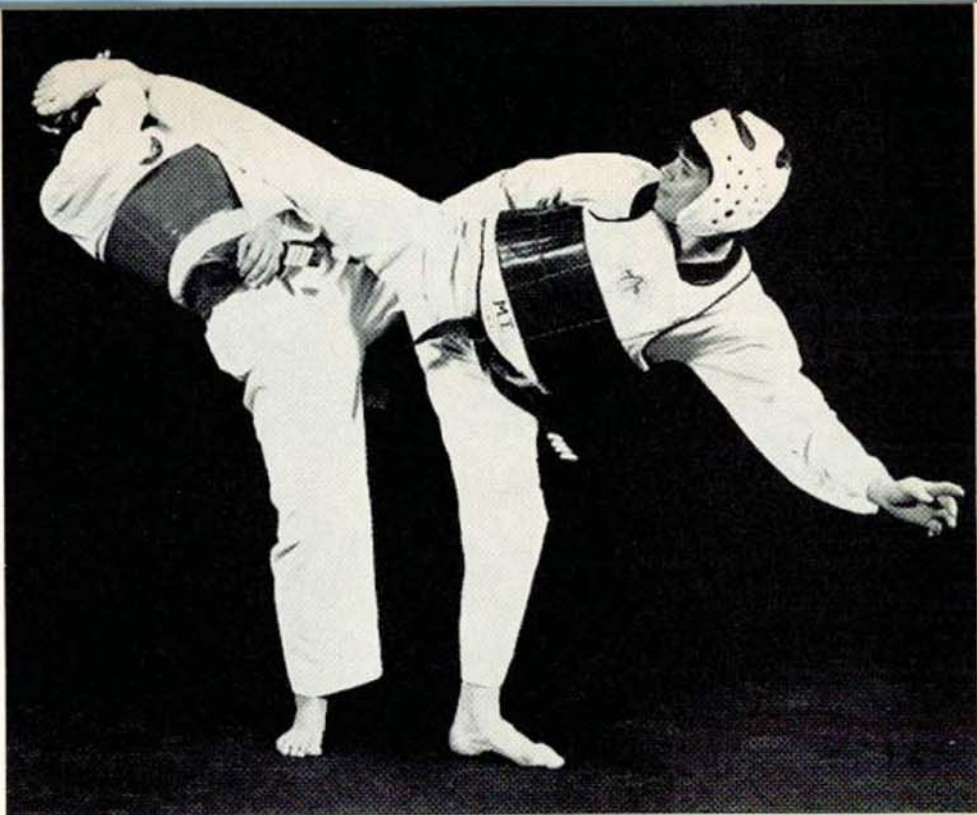
we can and cannot do. He is a very wise man. He expects us to adapt to any situation or fighting style. He doesn't accept any excuses."

Greg tries to keep an open mind about his Tae Kwon Do training and education. "I keep in mind that I can learn from anyone. I've learned about being a counter-fighter from Chris Spence and about being aggressive from Doug. I'm working on my reactions now, trying to figure out my opponent."

How do you use nervousness to your advantage? Greg says, "Nervousness and butterflies should be used in a positive way. Use nervousness to get yourself pumped up before a fight and while you're fighting, give yourself more enthusiasm, more spirit. Release it, don't hold it in. Learn to control it. Don't let it prevent you from doing your techniques."

#### SPORT TKD ROOTED IN TRADITION

It appears that success in the modern sport Tae Kwon Do is rooted in the most traditional teachings of respect, modesty, discipline and determination. The champions from OMAC feel that physical limitations can be overcome and that dedication fosters success. We can't all qualify for the Olympics, we can't all workout six to eight hours a day, but we can always make improvements in our discipline and dedication—not just in Tae Kwon Do, but in life.



Master Choi is a Tae Kwon Do master and obviously a great coach. He still participates in demonstrations. His kicks are unbelievably fast and powerful, but his success goes beyond kicking or coaching. His mastery of Tae Kwon Do has

helped him to become successful in life and in the business arena. "We must constantly try to improve from the moment we are born to the moment we go," said Choi. "If we do not grow, we die. It is our obligation as human beings." ■