

The following is Master Cooley's report on his experience at the 7th World Taekwondo Poomsae Championships. The event was held in Tunja, Colombia from December 6 – 9, 2012.

The Country and the People

The people of Colombia were very friendly and engaging. I always encourage people to travel abroad if they have the opportunity. It is a great way to see different cultures and generally I have found people to be friendly and curious about the United States, many times eager to practice speaking English. This time was no different and I felt very welcome by all.

The country of Colombia is a beautiful place, particularly where we were competing (about 100 miles North of Bogota) in Tunja. We stayed at La Hacienda del Salitre, a ranch style hotel in the country about 30 miles away from the venue in the city of Paipa. The hotel was originally an estate back in the 1500s. It became a monastery in the 1700s and has a beautiful chapel. In the mid-1900s it became a tourist attraction due to its long history, and has evolved into a modernized beautiful hotel with the added amenity of a natural hot spring pool. The food was well prepared and the environment was peaceful. This provided our team serenity and allowed us to rest well to prepare for competition as well as wind down after each competition day. The management of the U.S. Team (over 30 people when you include all athletes, coaches, and family members) was well organized which made for great success this year.

It was evident that there had been a lot of promotion of the World Poomsae Championships in Tunja. One day before the competition began, we participated in the largest Opening Ceremony I have attended in a long time. All teams and delegations from around the world walked into a stadium with nearly 10,000 cheering Colombians! It was quite an experience!

The Competition

The venue for the competition was very open and accommodating with natural light and plenty of seating for both athletes and spectators. The organization of the championship was extremely efficient and athlete friendly with all divisions progressing on schedule or even ahead of schedule. There were several outstanding demonstrations by the WTF Demonstration Team (the best Taekwondo demonstrators in the world) throughout the event which was a great addition to the world class poomsae being demonstrated by the athletes. The WTF Demo Team showed incredible agility and flexibility with creative board breaking, advanced self – defense skits, and even incorporated a little Taekwondo dancing in between!

The United States recorded the best finish ever at the 2012 World Poomsae Championships – two gold, one silver, and three bronze medals. Overall the United States placed third behind only Korea and Iran. To see and be a part of the evolution of the United States Poomsae Team throughout the past seven years has been nothing less than extraordinary. Each year our country builds on the previous year's successes.

At last year's World Poomsae Championships in Vladivostok, Russia, I think we really hit the mark with seven divisions placing in the finals (top 8) and three placing fifth – just one place shy of a medal. At that time, we had all the components, but the scores were not quite enough to put our athletes on the podium.

This year was very special because the rest of the world really looked at us differently once the first day of competition ended. We won our two gold medals on the first day, and this inspired and brought the rest of those of us who had yet to compete an additional level of confidence. Personally, I was very confident already since we actually were competing in the same hemisphere for the first time in the history of the championships! Apart from being in the same time zone, it certainly did not hurt us to be competing in our own region of the world, and the five hour flight from Houston to Bogota seemed like two hours because some of the places we had gone over the past several years were over 20-hour trips.

This was the third time I represented the U.S. in an Individual category and I was eager to improve upon my most recent performance two years ago in Tashkent, Uzbekistan, where I lost the preliminary round by 4/100ths of a point. Each year the competition gets stiffer which I planned for and expected. I was able to advance past my preliminary round into the semifinals this year, which was an improvement. However my journey to the podium stopped there as I did not make the final eight. I think the scoring was fair and I feel I could have done better in my semifinal. Knowing this will provide me with a perpetual “itch” of frustration/motivation which inspiring me to work even harder moving forward. I learned a lot this year!

KTA’s Star Competitor of the Event

Four years ago, Kristi George’s husband saw me at a KTA event and asked me if I could try to convince Kristi to get back into Taekwondo after a 17-year absence. At that time, two of their children were training at KTA. Also at that time, I had just returned from the 3rd World Poomsae Championships in Ankara, Turkey. I had competed as part of a three man team and placed 7th that year. So, I talked to Kristi and told her about this experience. I told her that poomsae competition had both differences and similarities to the sparring competitions she had excelled in two decades earlier. I also talked to her about the various types of competition – individual, pair, and team. She immediately expressed interest in learning more and making a run at poomsae competition.

So in January 2009, Kristi started training again. There was a lot of review of several poomsae she had done years ago as well as learning several new poomsae that would be required for competition. Our goal was to compete individually as well as in the pairs division. We worked diligently for several months and we were able to qualify for the U.S. Poomsae Team Trials. Only one other pair beat us out for the team spot in 2009, and neither of us was able to make it individually that year.

We continued training, practicing, and improving. The next two years we both succeeded in making the U.S. Team in pairs. In 2010 we placed 6th and in 2011 we placed 5th at the World Poomsae Championships missing a bronze medal by 1/100th of a point.

Then came 2012 – Kristi’s year! She qualified for the first time to represent the United States in an individual category and she also qualified in the team division. At the World Championships in her individual category she was in 5th place going into the finals. I will never forget her words to our team, “I AM NOT placing 5th this time!” She did not disappoint. She was the fourth person to perform out of the eight in her final. Once she finished, her score was .2 higher than any previous score! Our entire team sat and watched fairly confidently that she would at least secure a bronze medal. We were thrilled to see that each performer after Kristi continued to post scores below hers!

There was just one competitor left – Korea. This particular athlete struggled last year and did not medal for the first time in her career. In fact, most consider her to be the most successful female athlete in

poomsae as she had posted five consecutive gold medal finishes at previous world championships. Not surprisingly, she was able to surpass Kristi's score to take the Gold. But we were not too disappointed with Silver! Kristi's team also did very well, placing 6th overall!

As remarkable as it has been to see the evolution of the U.S. Poomsae Team, I take great pride in being a big part of seeing Kristi return to Taekwondo and being able to achieve such great success in a relatively short period of time. What some may see as a quick and easy path to success when looking at Kristi, they may not realize the fact that she had developed a high level of skill during her past years of training prior to her long absence.

Starting in the early 1980s through the early 1990s, Kristi trained daily in her quest to make the 1992 Olympic Team in sparring. On that path, she won Nationals twice in two different weight categories and also won a bronze medal at the World University Taekwondo championships. Apart from being very talented and competitive, she also has an extremely strong work ethic that has spanned several decades and continues today. To my knowledge, Kristi is currently the only U.S. athlete who has won a medal in both forms and sparring at an officially recognized World Taekwondo Federation event.

Final Thoughts

Traveling abroad is always an interesting experience. In past years, several of us on the U.S. Team have encountered challenges getting to our destination, getting luggage, etc. This time the traveling went very smoothly with no significant challenges. This was a welcome change!

Each year the World Poomsae Championships offers a unique experience. The World Taekwondo Federation, working with the local organizing committee, improves this event which continually becomes more accommodating for everyone involved. Among the six World Poomsae Championships that I have been fortunate to be a part of, this one was the best ever from both an organizational and results standpoint!

Of course, regardless of how nice places are to visit and how enjoyable events can be, it is always nice to come home. I continue to have a great appreciation for our country and I feel fortunate to live in the United States regardless of where various events may take me. Despite several challenges we face in this country, the USA is without a doubt still the best place to be.