

The 8th WTF World Poomsae Championships were held in Bali, Indonesia from October 31 – November 3, 2013. For the seventh time, I represented the United States as a competitor at this event. One way or the other, I have managed to make the U.S. Team every year except for one (in which I did not try out) in at least one of three competition formats – individual, pair, and team - since the beginning of international poomsae competition.

Looking back over this incredible time, I have grown tremendously as a poomsae athlete, a student of Taekwondo, as well as a Taekwondo Master Instructor and leader. This has been largely due to the friendships forged and the camaraderie developed through training and competing with and against many good friends. I continue to learn a tremendous amount about myself and about Taekwondo through this positive and educational interaction with my peers.

By competing in a pair or team division, I feel it has made me more accountable to the others in the division to train very hard in order to meet their expectations. It is clear that they have also approached competition and training in the same way; which has yielded us great success despite the lack of an actual medal at worlds so far in these categories. In fact, as written in the past, I have come as close as possible to achieving a medal in a pair or team division without actually medaling – placing fifth in both divisions at the 2011 World Championships in Vladivostok.

When I first embarked on this poomsae competition journey, it was more out of curiosity than anything else. How would I stack up against people in poomsae after being absent from competition for over a decade? I was a decent kyorooigi competitor in my time, but back then I rarely made it into the top half of my division in forms at Nationals. About half the time I placed regionally or locally in forms. The main motivation for trying poomsae competition was to be part of “history” at the first-ever U.S. Poomsae Team Trials in 2006. Another thing that was appealing to me was that the “new” format determined the divisions by age and not by rank. In looking at the development of Taekwondo athletes after retiring from kyorooigi competition in 1995, I was fully aware and had no illusions that being able to even contend with those half my age in any type of world class competition would be a challenge at the very least. But competing against people relatively close to my age with virtually no risk of injury frankly sounded like a lot of fun!

As it turned out, I made the first U.S. Team and my first time at worlds I competed as an individual. Seven times later, after competing in Korea, Turkey, Egypt, Uzbekistan, Russia, and Columbia, I returned again to individual competition representing the U.S. in the Under 49 (1st Master) category. Granted, in 2010 and 2012 I also represented individually. However, this year felt a little different in one way because for the first time none of those I have been training and competing with in a pair or team format were competing. In another way, I felt very comfortable because some were there in other capacities which offered the familiar support.

The trip to Bali was LONG. I believe it is about as far as one can travel from Indianapolis unless you are heading to Australia, New Zealand or the South Pole. For me, travel entailed a sixteen hour flight from Chicago to Seoul, Korea followed by another seven hour flight to Denpasar, Bali. There is a twelve-hour time difference, so I arrived early Monday morning in Bali, after leaving Indianapolis on a Saturday morning to start the trip. It did not take two full days to get there, but it sure felt like it! Fortunately, this year all my travel went smoothly and “uneventful” unlike in some of the previous years traveling to worlds.

Once there and rested, I found Bali to be a beautiful place – much like Hawaii except hotter. Although this event was held in late October/early November, it was spring going into summer since we were in the Southern Hemisphere.

Our U.S. Team had about three days to acclimate before competition began. There are four days of competition at the World Poomsae Championships. The U.S. sent the largest team ever. With over thirty athletes along with coaches, staff and families we had a delegation of over fifty people. Below is one of our team pictures in beautiful Bali.



Even though we had the largest team, the turnout for the World Championships by other countries was considerably lower than normal. Almost all the divisions had ten to twenty competitors less than in previous years with nearly all individual divisions only having two rounds of competition. The way competition is conducted is through a maximum of three rounds. In my division, there are normally around thirty participants. After the first round there are fifteen, and after the second round the top eight are selected for the final round. In the final round the top four earn medals.

My competition was on the first day and I was excited to be one of the first to compete and “kick off” the competition! This year, in my division there were only eighteen competitors including me; however, all the well-known ones – Korea, Turkey, Iran, Italy, and several others – made the trip. So, although my division was smaller with only two rounds, it would make advancing into the finals that much more difficult. As it turned out, I was able to make the top eight and reach the final round! This was something I had never done before individually and I was proud to make it. In my final round, things could have gone better and I was able to identify a few areas where I can improve. I was not able to improve my standing past eighth place in the final round, but as always, I grew a lot from the experience.

Once again, the United States did extremely well this year – placing fifth out of over forty countries! I was excited to see many of my team mates reach the medal stand! For some, it was their first time at worlds and they made it to the podium. For others, they had been working for years and finally broke through and earned a medal! This is the second year in a row the U.S. made the top five in the world– placing third last year. We were expecting to have a tougher time as the event was being held in Asia this year, so we were very excited to finish in the top five! In 2014, the event will be back in the Pan American region – Mexico – so we are excited and looking forward to improving our standing – hopefully to #1!

Points of interest and experiences in Bali, Indonesia:

- It was the first time I had been to a country where the vehicles were built with the steering wheel on the opposite side AND they drove on the opposite side of the road from what we do in the U.S. I have been places in the past and encountered one or the other, but this was the first time both were in play.
- On the last day there after competition, we were able to take a tour of the island by bus. The traffic was incredibly congested and the “family car” was a moped. The father would be driving the moped and holding an infant or toddler in one hand and steering with the other hand; weaving around other larger vehicles. The mother would be sitting behind the father sometimes holding another child or another child would be in the back holding on to the mother. Typical for this part of the world, but something you would never see in the U.S. I never saw a single accident.
- We visited a temple with monkeys (small ones) walking around. You could feed them and they would jump up on your shoulders. As long as you stayed calm and did not excite them, then you were fine. We had no problems with the monkeys in our group. Below are pictures of the monkeys and a new friend I made!



- Bats! Yes, bats were also on display at the temple to hold and take photos with. They were huge! Since we were visiting during the day, the bats were hanging and sleeping as they are nocturnal. The people working at the temple would wake them up and open the bat's wings for those who dared to hold up in front of them. I had to get a picture! I mean, when else was I going to have this opportunity?! The wings of the bat felt like plastic. Below is a photo of me holding one of the bats. You may also be able to make out bats hanging on the branches behind me to the left.



I have no plans to return to Bali, but I am glad that I had the experience of visiting. I enjoyed my time there and found the people to be very gracious, but it was a very long trip. The food in Bali was okay, but it tended to become repetitive and, unfortunately, I struggled with some bad food the night before my competition. The beaches and landscape were absolutely fabulous! However, I have seen great beaches that are much closer to home and would opt for them; again due to the travel distance to Bali.

The opportunity to represent the United States is an honor and a privilege that I never take for granted. Admittedly, I would not have visited Bali or any of the recent places that being on the U.S. Team have taken me. Seeing and experiencing the people and the cultures of various locales has opened my eyes and been very educational. I realize that the people are generally friendly everywhere I visit. However, the way people live can vary greatly, and in general we have it much better here in the United States. I encourage anyone who ever has an opportunity to travel abroad and visit another country to take advantage of it. It will provide you with a new perspective and generally a greater appreciation for living here in the U.S.A.!