

TAE KWON DO TIMES

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By Jane Hallander and Terry Heaps

Kuk Sool's "Iron Butterfly"

"**She breaks the stereotype of women**, particularly strong women, in our Western society. She can direct her strengths to the demands of being both a mother and housewife and, at the same time, bring these same strengths and determination to her martial arts training. She has found a comfortable balance between her yin (her soft, caring role as mother in and out of the dojang) and her yang (the fiery, passionate side which fuels her training). This is not easy as most people feel a need to personally identify with one or the other -- women most often embracing the yin elements with men more freely giving expression to their yang nature. Only a confident sense of self could allow a person to think "outside of the box" and challenge these roles head-on."

"Being strong-willed she embarked on an unconventional life for a Korean woman. Beginning with her martial art training, she flourished in a field largely dominated by men and their perceptions of what strength is. Bucking convention again, she married outside of her culture and then immigrated to another land with very little knowledge of either the American language or its culture. Think of the courage it took to make and act on these decisions, but she had her belief in herself!"

"Today, she is the highest ranked female martial artist in Kuk Sool. She has assimilated into an American culture and she has taught herself the language. She is a model for all of us...that with a strong belief in yourself, you can truly accomplish whatever you set out to do. I consider Master Harmon a person of great courage and view her as a great role model for women and men alike. She teaches us what real strength is all about!"



Master Frank D'Amato Fifth Degree / Kuk sool Won, California

Women are a fairly recent addition to the martial arts world. In previous centuries men exclusively dominated martial arts. The old adage, a

woman's place is in the home, couldn't have been truer. Warriors were men. Men did the fighting. Not only were men the warriors, but martial artists weren't always the nicest people and some even leaned to the criminal side. No self-respecting family wanted its women involved in the street fighting that often characterized martial arts practitioners. Only in the past twenty years have women started to gain prominence in martial art circles. Women are now drawn to the fighting arts because of its' emphasis on the more honorable and technical side: the "art" of martial arts.

There are some women who stand as role models for others who long for a career or training in martial arts. One such woman is Jade Choon-Ok Harmon, the highest-ranking woman master in the Korean art of Kuk Sool Won.

You are Kuk Sool Won's highest ranking woman having achieved seventh degree black belt in 1996. At what age did you begin your training?

I started when I was 14 years old but I remember seeing Kuk Sool Won when I was about 11 or 12 years old.

It must have been unusual for a Korean girl to train in the martial arts, what was the reason that you started?

My sister is married to Kuk Sool Won Chief Master In Sun Suh and when I visited them I would see a few women practicing in their dojang. I thought it looked interesting and I wanted to try it. So, I just started.



Were you always athletic and strong, maybe a little bit of a tomboy?

Yes. I remember when I was a little girl about six or seven-years old, I would always follow my older brother everywhere and want to do the same things he did. He is five years older than I am and when he would go into the mountains or anywhere else, I went too. At that time many of my mom's friends would say that I looked like a tomboy. I liked activity. I wanted to have something to do all of the time.

You said that there were other members of your family involved in the martial arts. What did they think about you wanting to train?

My older brother is a Kuk Sool Won master but at that time he was just a black belt. My sister is married to Chief Master In Sun Suh who was at that time already Chief Master in Kuk Sool Won. I didn't have a lot of problems but, in the beginning, my mom really didn't like the idea of my practicing martial arts. My brother and Chief Master eventually gave me a lot of help but they didn't make it easy for me to start training. I wanted to begin but they told me to wait and think about it for a while. They said "once you start you can't stop." They gave me the choice. They made it a little difficult for me to start but once I did choose they gave me plenty of encouragement and support.



You were trained in a very traditional manner. Can you tell us something about that training?

I conditioned my palms by hitting a stone for about 5000 times each session. Everyday I would go to the dojang and sit and hit that stone very slowly for hours. In the beginning my hand would get bruised and sometimes the skin would crack and bleed, but it didn't matter to me. I just kept hitting that stone. I don't know if that stone is still there. I doubt it because it's been so long ago, but I hit it so much in the past that it was soaked with my blood.

For my punching skills, my instructor, Chief Master Suh, would hold a piece of paper as a target for me to hit. Again, every day I would practice punching at the paper so many times I would lose count. I would stand there in front of the mirror or next to the wall, practicing punching at that paper three to five thousand times. After a long while Chief Master would look at my punching and say, "The paper doesn't move when you punch it and you don't break it now; that's good."



Today your dojang is modern and beautiful with air-conditioning, large mirrors, plush carpeting and works of art everywhere. How does our Houston dojang compare to the dojang where you studied in Korea?

I couldn't even imagine my current dojang during the time when I was first training. When I started, the dojang where I trained was so different. In the winter time we didn't have a heater and my feet were so cold they were like ice. We didn't have a carpet either; our floor was made up of a thick plastic cover and straw mat underneath and when you'd stand on it you felt like you were outside on the cement. My feet were cold and hurting so much, I would sit down and rub, and hit my feet to bring some relief. Anyway, we'd just start training and an hour later I'd lose any feeling in my feet because of the cold.

In the summertime, you can't believe how hot it was! We didn't have air conditioning or even a fan! Outside the dojang, the temperature would be in the eighties and nineties and you would be lucky to get even a little wind when you opened a window. That was if you were upstairs, but our dojang was in the cellar and we didn't have any windows, just one door to go in and out. The dojang would smell bad but it didn't matter because during training you just focused your mind and you didn't think about the smell or the heat or your feet being cold or whatever. You started your practice and went ahead and didn't think about all those other things.

Compared to that time, things are so different. On hot days some of my students will come into the dojang and say that the school is so hot even though we have the airconditioner on. I just agree with them and say, "Yes, it's so hot!." I can't tell them how it was when I was training.

The difference between thirty years ago and today is too drastic. If I told them about those times and asked them to train like that, I think all my students would say O.K. and good-bye.

Did you do a lot of outdoor training in Korea, or was it all inside the dojang?

We did a lot of outdoor training and a lot of running. Our instructor, Chief Master In Sun Suh, and the black belts would wake at 5 a.m. and run when there weren't too many people around. While we ran we'd shout "Kuk Sool, Kuk Sool, Kuk Sool Won." We'd run about two to three miles and then come back. Behind my house there was a mountain and we'd sometimes run up that mountain before sunrise. After a couple of hours of kicking and forms, the sun would come up. You can't believe how beautiful it was to see and feel that sunrise while you're covered with sweat. Then as the day went on, it would grow hotter and we would run back down the mountain, sometimes stopping to drink out of a natural spring. After dinner I would go to the local playground late at night where there was a sandpit. No children would be around and I would practice my forms on the sand. It was very difficult at first but as I progressed it got easier and my movement became better. At first people would stop and ask, "What are you doing?" because it was unusual for a young woman to be out late at night in such a situation. After a while they all came to know that I was practicing Kuk Sool.



In your early years in Korea you did a lot of demos. Can you tell us about that?

When I was around 16 years old, Kuk Sa Nym In Hyuk Suh, Chief Master and all the masters started doing demos in the public schools. There were about 300 public schools and we wanted to go to all of them in one year. At that time there was only one other female black belt training regularly so Kuk Sa Nym ordered both of us to do demos with the masters.

We started the demos in the summertime and finished the next summer around July. In rain, snow, cold or hot -- it didn't matter -- we did the demos. Every day we went to four or five Korean high schools. At each school we had 3000-4000 students watching our demos. Sometimes it would start to rain really hard and while the students would go inside the classroom to look out from the windows, we would continue the demo. It was so funny because the rain made our thin uniforms stick to our skin and when Kuk Sa Nym and the masters would throw the instructors in that rain, it resembled someone tossing a wet rag around. But it was a great time. We did many more different demos in Korea but I remember these in particular as being the hardest ones and the best ones because almost every day for year we had several to do.



Can you tell something of your classmates over the years? Did you train with many women?

I trained with a few women but usually they didn't stay. In Korea when a woman is single it is no problem to train in the martial arts but at her engagement or marriage her husband doesn't like her to train and so she stops. Usually the women that I trained with only made black belt and then left. I ended up being the only woman training so most of my partners were men.



In Hyuk Suh arranged your marriage to a young American black belt instructor. How did that come about?

I saw all my female classmates stop training after they were married. I didn't want that to happen to me. At that time, Korean men didn't like their wives to train in the martial arts. So I asked Kuk Sa Nym In Hyuk Suh to find me a husband who was in Kuk Sool and who would want a wife as well as a training partner. Kuk Sa Nym identified three choices for me. I chose my husband, Master Barry Harmon.

Now you manage a school with your husband in Houston, Texas, and actively teach class everyday. How many students do you have?

We have about 350 active students. Everyday I go into the dojang to teach classes and to help in the office.

Is it true that every morning you do 1400 kicks as well as a very intense abdominal routine?

Yes, I have a routine that consists of 1400 kicks plus sit-ups and leg lifts.

With teaching classes everyday it must be difficult to also maintain a household.

Yes, it's not easy to maintain your own practice, teach classes and then take care of your family and children but you need to enjoy whatever you're doing. If you realize that what you're doing is what is important to you, then you have a different approach to the work. The most important thing to me is my children and my family. I cook everyday; I don't want someone else to do that. I also like my family to have meals together. Keeping the house clean is a lot of work but you need to enjoy all that. Don't think, "Oh, this is too hard" because whatever it is, you can overcome it.





You have two daughters; Emerald (Mi-Yong) and Jada (Mi-Ho). Can you tell me some of your plans for them? For instance, will they train in the martial arts?

My older daughter, Emerald Mi-Yong, was always with us in the dojang, as is my younger daughter, Jada Mi-Ho now. I don't push my children in one direction or the other but they are always around us as we teach and train. One day when Emerald was about four or five years old, she started copying my movements as I was

practicing one of the higher Kuk Sool Won forms. She was doing it really well so I asked her if she wanted to start training in Kuk Sool. She said, "No," so I dropped the subject. Then when she was six years old she asked me if she could start training. I talked to my husband and we agreed that if she started she would have to train at least twice a week.. I gave her the choice of starting as long as she maintained a steady training schedule.

Just this year she received her first degree black belt and she is so happy. She loves Kuk Sool and she told me that she's so proud of mommy and daddy and what we're doing. That makes me feel very good. I hope; she continues in Kuk Sool Won but it's her choice. Right now, Emerald also practices traditional Korean dance and has Korean language classes. I just want to help her in any way that I can.

It's my hope that my younger daughter, Jada Mi-Ho will also train in Kuk Sool but, again, it will be her choice when she is ready. I just want to help her if she decides it's something she wants to do.

Aside from your martial art training, would you describe yourself as a traditional Korean woman or one who is more Western?

Right now, young Korean women are emulating the American style. It's hard to explain what is the American style but I think the more traditional Korean style is for the woman to focus on taking care of her husband, her home and domestic duties. It's all right to have other interests but not to the extent that you forget about making a happy home. I guess to that extent I would be called more traditional, but I don't know.



The original contract or agreement you had with your first instructor was that once you started Kuk Sool Won, you would never give it up. Would you care to comment on the expectation that you will always continue?

I promised my teacher that once I started I would never stop -- so I can't stop. I'll try to make it to 100 years old and if I still have some energy I won't want to stop!