

Kicking his way to Athens

BY ELIZABETH DONALD

Steve McArther started studying tae kwon do because he was afraid he'd get beaten up in high school.

He doesn't have to worry about that any more.

McArther has studied the martial art of tae kwon do for 21 years, achieving the level of master instructor. From the 13-year-old first learning to kick, he has become a fourth-degree black belt, practicing exercises with controlled power in his Collinsville dojang, or school.

Now, McArther is on his way to the world competition this April in Athens as part of the U.S. National Martial Arts Team.

"I started because I was a little guy, and I was afraid to go to high school, because I thought I'd get beaten up," he said. "I went, I loved it, and it's been in my blood ever since."

McArther teaches tae kwon do classes from his dojang in Collinsville. In April, he will join the U.S. National Martial Arts Team in world competition in Athens, where he will compete in tae kwon do sparring and forms.

Tae kwon do, a Korean martial art, is literally the "art of kicking and punching," McArther said -- mostly kicking. The philosophical concepts of tae kwon do include courtesy, integrity, perseverance, self-control and indomitable spirit.

McArther also incorporates the Japanese concepts of hapkido, the "way of coordinating power," into his teaching.

"Tae kwon do is relatively young, but its roots go back centuries," he said. "Because we're mainly focused on adults, we have a strict classroom environment."

Tae kwon do made a resurgence in the 1970s, and in 1988, it became an Olympic sport. That



Steve Nagy/News-Democrat

Steve McArther helped instruct student Jennifer Hodges of Edwardsville during class Thursday.

year, McArther made it to the pretrials for the first U.S. Olympic team.

"It wasn't meant to be," he said.

At age 35, McArther is considered old in the world of competitive martial arts. The U.S. Olympic team is in its late teens and twenties, he said.

"I hope to show that you're never too old," he said. "If you start at 40, you could still be doing it for a long time."

Tae kwon do and judo are the only two martial arts to be represented in the Olympics. The competition being held in Athens this April is to bring attention to 15 different forms of martial arts. The International Olympic Committee and members of the U.S. Olympic team will attend, McArther said, but the real audience is his students.

"They're proud and excited -- this is as much for them and the community as it is for me," he said. "Especially the kids. They're still trying to decide what they want to be in life. (Tae kwon do) opens a whole world of challenges and life experiences for them."

The only downside? U.S. National Martial Arts Team participants, including McArther, have to raise their own travel money, often thousands of dollars.

And what does McArther hope to bring home from Athens?

"Everybody has hopes to come back with a gold," he said, smiling.

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