

After 40 years of classes, American Kang Duk Won sticking with tradition

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By CRAIG FREILICH

Mixed-martial-arts cage fighting may be gaining in popularity across the country, but the North Country's American Kang Duk Won Karate is sticking with its 40-year history of teaching traditional techniques.

"We decided at the beginning not to go in the direction of sport and competition, but instead to stick to traditional teaching of fitness, discipline and respect," says Master Frank Palumbo of Canton, an English teacher in Gouverneur schools and a longtime proponent of the benefits of studying martial arts. When he's not in front of an English class, there's a good chance Palumbo, who began studying Kang Duk Won-style karate when he was an undergraduate at SUNY Potsdam, can be found standing in front of a class of people in traditional workout garb, demonstrating techniques and drilling students. He conducts evening and weekend classes several times a week in Canton and Gouverneur, while other instructors teach in Potsdam, Parishville, and other spots around the county and the region.

In addition to the regular classes for students of all ages, American Kang Duk Won participates in self-defense and anti-abduction programs and fitness seminars. They will begin a fitness campaign for students in Gouverneur schools in May, then include all school personnel in the fall, and they hope to bring it to other schools in the area.

In the face of growing concern about obesity in Americans and especially in young people, Palumbo wants to get kids "up and moving from the TV, away from video games, because obesity in adolescents is such a problem. It affects their health and their attendance in school. If they are fit and active, it will result in a better educational environment." He sees a relationship between nutrition, fitness, setting goals, and doing well academically.

In a recent class at St. Mary's School in Canton, Palumbo led a group of people ranging in age from elementary school kids to young adults. As he led them in exercises, even the littlest ones were paying close attention, focused on the drills. Several black belt instructors, "all adults, all with at least six or seven years of training before they work with kids," wander among the students, correcting postures.

"We require our students to do well academically. We check on them. We permit no substance use," Palumbo says.

"We can't walk home with them. We can't be with them 24 hours a day. But if you set an example and they know they have to meet the standards, it leaves an impression on them, usually positive."

American Kang Duk Won emphasizes the mental component of discipline and training.

"We say it's 90 percent mental," Palumbo says. "As in any other discipline, like music or dance, you see the physical part. But as you get more into it, you see that the physical part is less of a challenge than the mental part," he says.

"With more training, you see that the physical part takes you a long way – you get stronger mentally. We see this at all levels of training."

The discipline can be rewarding, Palumbo says. "It is individual in nature, like wrestling or long-distance running. But you're involved in a team, and progress is rewarded."

There are two main images of practitioners of martial arts in our popular culture, one of a thug bullying people in behalf of an evil master, the other of a righteous monk defending the downtrodden.

In the meantime another image of the martial-arts fighter, that of a well trained athlete competing in a closed ring on television and in arenas around the country, has taken hold.

"It obviously has a place because people are attracted to it," Palumbo says. "But it's violent, and not for everybody. The chance of injury is great. The individuals are very well trained, physically and mentally."

While "in the upper ranks we do some of the techniques you might see them use," Palumbo says "we're involved with school systems and they would be hesitant to support us" if they began training people for cage fighting.

But American Kang Duk Won's origins 40 years ago in Watertown are closer to that of the monk.

Palumbo explains that the variety of martial arts we see today, including karate and jiu jitsu, began in East Asia about 1,500 years ago and spread from there.

"It was developed to make the weak stronger," Palumbo says.

The Kang Duk Won style of martial arts, one of the first of the Korean Tae Kwan Do-style schools of karate, was originated by Park Chul Hee in Korea and was passed down to Kum Chun Kim, who taught students in the United States, including Master Robert Lawlor, founder of American Kang Duk Won, the Watertown school. Lawlor taught Palumbo.

The web site, americankangdukwon.org, is a good source of information about the school and its aims. It lists classes, many of which people can check out, and has information on, tournaments, camps, and special seminars.