

We Don't Always Eat Cake

By Marshall Honorof

They do it every year. Right around the beginning of the semester, anyone who lives on-campus gets a small yellow flyer with a picture on it. A young Asian man with a mouth full of cake smiles at the camera. "We don't always eat cake," the advertisement reads. "Sometimes we throw kicks and stuff, too." Below that, the time and place of a demo, and the name of the organization: the Johns Hopkins Taekwondo Club.

On September 10th, 2008, two days before the demo, a small subset of the club meets on the third floor of the Rec Center in a mirrored room with mats. Six intermediate belts, yellow to blue, meet in front of a tall, thin, blonde instructor. She shouts orders at them, and they respond with a hearty "Sir!"

The instructor walks her students through all the moves they want to use to attract new members. They throw punches in short, punctuated bursts. They throw kicks at head-level targets. They perform complex attack patterns strung together into forms. They don't look very good.

The members of the Taekwondo Club are undergraduate and graduate students from Johns Hopkins University, and like many other students, they have spent the summer in other states, or even other countries, visiting family, working, or studying. Muscle memory accounts for much of what they know, but their kicks seem much lower than at the end of the previous semester, their forms sloppier.

The instructor smiles, laughs, jokes, and frequently stops the practice in order to fine-tune a performance schedule. Will the incoming students want to see flashy, cinematic techniques that require years of training, or solid basics that they could feasibly

learn in their first year? She has never run a demo before, and she keeps a pen and a legal pad close at her side, constantly revising the order and content of the demo, trying to commit it all to memory.

With a rough idea of what they will be expected to do in two days, the intermediate belts bow to the instructor casually, and start chatting amongst themselves. They don't seem very apprehensive about their upcoming display of skill. The instructor reminds them, "If you make a mistake, keep going. No one in the audience is going to know." Martial arts are inherently theatrical.

The floorboards squeak under the mats as the advanced belts, brown and up, line up in front of the instructor. She decides that there won't be enough space to line up facing the front of the room, so she shifts the group to face the left wall. This is what the attendees of the demo will want to see: acrobatics worthy of a Hollywood film. As the instructor scribbles on her pad and tries to predict the tastes of a class of incoming freshmen, the advanced belts line up in two rows, five across, and try to decide whether their hands look more dignified at their sides or behind their backs.

The instructor decides that the first thing she wants to convey is a sense of progress. She has the advanced belts perform the same basic techniques as the intermediates. These techniques have a different feel to them: faster, crisper, and more precise. An audible "snap" sound emerges from the uniforms whenever an arm or a leg shoots out.

With some input from her students, the instructor decides that the brown belt form and kicking combination should grab and hold the spectators' attention. The advanced belts space themselves out and prepare for Hwa-Rang Hyeong, a hand-centric form with

a few strong blocks, many attacks, and an impressive jump at the end. During the kicking combination, the advanced belts spin, jump, strike, and shout with vigor. Their techniques are at least as rusty as the intermediates', but they seem to know by now that conviction, in a pinch, substitutes nicely for skill.

The instructor laughs often. She has been in the club for four years, and has a black belt embroidered with her name and rank in Korean. During a practice the previous day, she stopped practice and ordered the class to do forty pushups as a punishment for talking. Now, she tolerates all kinds of outbursts and suggestions. It's only preparation for a demo, after all.

She gathers both groups together and distributes a set of wooden boards: two to green belts, one to a brown belt, one to a black belt. No demo is complete without some wood-smashing, so she assigns techniques: a flying side kick, a knife-hand strike, and a sliding side kick. She assigns a green belt one last technique: a close-punch. This technique is not in the taekwondo canon, but rather, from Quentin Tarantino's *Kill Bill*.

One by one, the boards break, and the students go their separate ways. They will resume regular practice the next day, but their demo preparations are over. No one seems particularly apprehensive.

On Friday, September 12th, 2008 at 6 PM, the students gather again. The demo is still half an hour away. They come in wearing the pants from their uniforms, but t-shirts or tank tops instead of uniform vests. They tuck their shirts into their pants, don their vests and belts, bow, and amble onto the mats. Around them, the mirrors on both sides reflect their images into infinity.

They stretch on their own, but they do not practice their routine for fear that an early spectator might catch too much of the show. One student kicks his leg up towards his head, another splits her legs almost straight out. The instructor gathers her students together and verbally reviews the game plan once, then says nothing more about it. The audience trickles in, but at 6:30, the room is only half-full. By 6:40, a crowd of latecomers has run breathlessly in, relieved that they hadn't missed the spectacle.

The attendees gather in a square around the walls of the room, leaning against the mirrors, becoming part of the students' reflections. The students huddle in a corner in-between a set of cabinets and the front of the room as the instructor welcomes the audience and explains how to get involved with the club.

The intermediate belts perform first, and the polish in their act is evident. Their kicks "snap" as well as any advanced belt's, and their forms go flawlessly. The instructor bows them out of the spotlight and invites the advanced belts to join her. As the instructor continues her lecture on the benefits of taekwondo, the advanced belts smile at her jokes and examine themselves in the mirror. They think they look composed enough. One girl furtively adjusts her belt, and then fastens her hands behind her back.

The audience is lukewarm throughout the hand techniques and basic kicks, but snaps to attention when the instructor commands the advanced belts to perform hurricane kicks. These demanding kicks involve a crescent kick followed by a pump turning crescent, which essentially transforms a student into an airborne spinning top. The brown belts perform well, but the black belts elicit cheers from the spectators as they spin through the air, landing in perfect fighting stances.

The breaks do not go exactly as planned. A green belt has brought a block of ice to break instead of wooden boards. As his elbow connects with the block, wrapped in a towel, shards of ice explode outward and cover the mats. As the student basks in applause and cheers, the advanced belts scramble to collect the ice before it becomes a liability. A brown belt has hurt her hand, and decides to break with an airborne roundhouse kick instead.

The instructor thanks her students and the spectators, hands a bag to each of the black belts, and invites the audience, which by now numbers about forty, to throw a few exploratory punches and kicks. Most of them stand near the back and look confused. A few throw a halfhearted punch or two, but most chat with other spectators and ignore the opportunity in front of them.

A few intermediate belts grab the spectators and show them how easy it is to throw a punch, a kick, a back-fist. They smile nervously and hit the bag before gathering their belongings and leaving the room. Three or four prospective members tell the black belts that they've "had some training" and hit the bags in earnest. They don't punch as hard as the taekwondo students, but their technique isn't bad. They have some potential. Every spectator has potential, but few of them seem to care.

After about five minutes, the taekwondo students are mostly holding bags for each other. They practice more hurricane kicks, or toy around with split kicks, jumping kicks, or complex strings of hand techniques. The spectators file out little by little, until only the friends of members remain.

The members say little to one another as they stand by the edge of the mats and bow out. The mirrors reflect the empty room; they are not positioned to see the members' bags in the entry alcove.

“Good job,” says the instructor as she shuts off the lights. Everyone nods, and quickly puts the demo out of their minds. After all, they'll have practice again on Monday, probably with unenthusiastic new recruits. But they'll learn. And if they hold out until the end of the semester, maybe they'll even have cake.