

The Path to Master



For many, taking up a Martial Art is about recreation and fun, not to mention the many benefits of learning self defence skills. Yet, for many hardliners, Martial Arts start out the same and slowly descend into lifelong passion (even verging on obsession). ‘The Path to Master’ is not just about a persons journey, it unveils how one persons journey started like most, yet became one of the most turbulent rollercoaster rides of his life - TaeKwonDo became his saviour from a rough journey of life’s throwbacks, but the art would catch him and help him learn how to cope like many that have gone before him.

Read how rising through the ranks caused so many issues along the way personally and professionally, with some clearly out to try and destroy his TaeKwonDo career but, unbeknown to them, he was not just an average practitioner but one with resolve and spirit that would not break. Most would have just given up facing some of his attackers, rather than stand and fight for their place in TaeKwonDo as he did.

Read about how the boy turns to man using Martial Arts to help him along the way to Master grade (7th Dan Black Belt, conquering a 27 year dream completing 32 years), but not without facing many wars and, as most say, the ugly side of TaeKwonDo politics. Like many, he has his own story to tell - from the darkest to the brightest times of his life, he shares them here for the first time ever.

All is not how it seems, as you are taken on a journey reading never before published personal info about a young boy that turned negative into positive as he grew from a teen to a man - going from an unknown to a highly respected coach in TaeKwonDo, reaching out and using TaeKwonDo to help others through charity, even shaping his own place in the U.K. TaeKwonDo scene himself. Despite those that blatantly tried to disrupt him, he would not be stopped as he had his goal - his childhood would also mean he would be hard to break, as he would keep getting up when knocked down.

This is the path to a Master.

The early years

In April 1973, a bouncing bundle of joy called Chris (yep, that's me!) is born into a family of seven. I was the fattest baby you have ever seen (in fact so fat, I made a sumo wrestler look thin!). I am told for most of my baby months, I had to be propped up with pillows to help me sit up as I just rolled lol. My dad was Roy Snow, a hard worker in life (either working on the coal lorries or scrap metal dealing) but his demons were like most dads of the 70's - the dreaded alcohol and he smoked for England (in those days, many did not know the dangers of smoking).

Diane Snow was a stay at home mum of four girls and I – in the early days, she worked in the local perfume factory. In age order, the four sisters are Christine, Theresa, Angie and Mandy.

Sadly, Diane was unstable and, looking at things, possibly had undiagnosed mental health issues that resulted in her trying to take her life more than 30 times. On many occasions, my sisters and I would witness this first hand which would harm even the toughest minds. In the 70's and 80's, a person that took such action to harm themselves often ended up in psychiatric wards for weeks on end – this resulted in the kids being relocated to foster homes, or those able to live at home having to face many hours in the wards with relatives and loved ones.

Roll on six years - the family struggled financially (as you would expect with seven mouths to feed), so we were dressed in clothes from jumble sales. Food was also very scarce. The day came when a niece of my dad, Joyce, offered to look after me more permanently as she had looked after all of us over the years. I was just 6 years old when I went to live with Joyce & Terry. Soon I would feel at home and settled, at school also and I had new friends too. I would see dad about once a week, as he visited regularly. At 7 years of age, the couple decided they would like to adopt me as I was settled and extremely happy, so they began the process with social services. All systems were go but, at the drop of a hat, I was taken from the couples' care and put back into my real family. Over 30 years later, I met the couple again in an emotional reunion and I am given the truth that mum had found out about the intention to adopt me and she put a stop to it.

Within a few months of returning home, I am once again taken from my home - this time, I am put into a monthly boarding school which, years later, was closed due to the sexual abuse and bad treatment of the kids that were there. I am in hostel four, which was in all the papers as the head of care was one of life's evil predators, abusing some in his care (including me) over a number of years. My time came for him to try his ways with me - I remember him taking me down to my bedroom in the wing and play fighting with me, which ended up with him placing his hands down my pyjama bottoms. I punched him in the groin (why, I don't know) which lead to him nearly exploding with anger, but I knew what he had done was wrong. I was only 8.

For nearly four years after this situation, he would single me out and deliver some of the worst treatment on me - these varied from dragging me down the wing by my neck, ears and hair, slapping my bare legs in front of the other kids on the wing to try to make me cry, boot room punishments and forcing me to make my bed 70 plus times, leaving my hands red raw with blisters (our beds were made with two cotton sheets and a blanket). One night, he ended up dragging me from my bed for no reason and left me in a dark corridor alone until 5am. He would slap my bare legs so regularly, eventually I would become numb to his BS and not cry - I would actually smile at him in front of the other kids during his rages and he would bellow at me, even spitting in my face.

I hated him to the core (funny, only one other person has made me feel this way and they are a TaeKwonDo'ist) but, one thing's for sure, I would not be broken and I would never harm myself as my mum had often done – even at this young age, I had learnt it was not the solution. On my return home every three weeks, he would put his hands on my shoulders (and other students too) before the taxi picked us up and whisper “Don't go telling tales will you”. He lived on putting fear in us - I had so much I could tell about his antics, but being quiet was the best way forward. I have damped down what I saw and went through (much of it is in ‘Stolen Childhood’, a book I wrote over two years to fix my mind but have never published). So you see, the hard attitude I carry now stems from this part of my life in particular.

At 10, I am to get the monster off my back - on one of my visits home, I have an accident on a moped. I was sitting on this at the top of a huge dell, The bike rools down the dell and the bike starts accidently, resulting in me going over the handle bars about 500 yards round and ripping my stomach open. This leaves me with hundreds of stitches in my stomach (they even gave me my own ‘L’ plate scar!) and having to spend about six weeks in hospital. This part of my life results in me having to relearn basic speech and balance skills. I am told that, on the first night, the vicar gave me the last rites as they thought I would not survive 24 hours (but, as Gloria Gaynor said ‘I will survive’).

Well, thank god I was given a second chance in life otherwise I'd not have been allowed to cause havoc on the many idiots I have met in TaeKwonDo. Right up to the age of 12, I am withheld from any sports as it is deemed too risky by the doctors (I think they were overreacting). Harris gets off my case and leaves me alone for about six months until I am due to leave school - only one incident happened, but I was tough enough not to let it bother me. Life as I knew it was good, as he was off my case.

I eventually leave that school about 7 months after my accident and use a method of pigeon holing and locking away my experiences for many years after. In fact, I was 38 when it all resurfaced and, boy, did it hit hard. It turned my life upside down - unbeknown to those around me, it rocked my life but I just put on a brave face. This was after learning the authorities had Harris on six counts of historic abuse, only to learn the animal had taken his own life.....before sentencing. This is where I had to write my book which took months.

My next school is Boxmoor House - I am 11 years old and Boxmoor is a boarding school of about 60 kids, but these were hardened kids (a school for troubled kids – this was the description in Yellow Pages). Most here only knew fighting as a way of coping. I witnessed many fights either in the wings or dorms. I remember in my first week, a 5th year comes over at dinner time and pushes me against the wall. He takes my tuck money from my pockets and warns me to shut my mouth or else. Day two, the same happens. Day three, I think “No, this ain't happening”. I had faced living with the devil himself for four years, so I was not scared of a school yard bully. He comes to get his money, I refuse and I am punched in the face a few times. I grab him, push him down some stairs (with me gripping on to him) and I climb up his battered body and punch him a few times in the face. Well, as you can expect, we are both given a dressing down by the teachers. He leaves me alone, but I am warned by two older lads I knew from Hilltop (Graham and Alan) to stay close to them as the lad had something bad planned. Two weeks later, one evening, I am alone (or so I thought). I am grabbed, pulled into the toilets by three lads - one being the lad in question. They shut the door and attack me - I am fighting back and determined not to give up. Suddenly, the door comes in and Graham and Alan come in – together, we give the three of them a good hiding. Needless to say, I was left alone after that.

Graham says “Listen, in a year I am leaving and you will be prey to the vultures round here - you need to learn to fight properly”. He had done many Martial Arts, so was a pretty seasoned fighter and knowledgeable about the arts. This was my turning point towards the Martial Arts, but I really knew nothing about them or the different styles. Little did I know once I found the art that suited my long legs and slim build, it would become my life as the years rolled on.



I became friends with a few lads at the school - one was Darren, a lad that could handle himself and was good at boxing (in fact, the best as a kid I had ever met). He tried to get me into boxing, but I hated it (my dad was an ex boxer too - over the years he had tried to teach me, to no avail). It was not long until I found my first TaeKwonDo class after trying a few other arts at age 12. Getting on board a Martial Arts class would be hard as hell. Firstly, I had to convince the school I was able to return to sports as I had done nothing since my accident, so naturally I had to get the ok from the doctors. This meant regular check ups even after I am training. The next step was to get my parents to sign that I could do the classes. The last step was for the school to agree I could take part, as I had to walk back to the school alone so a lot of trust was put in me - they also did not want Bruce Lee smashing up anything or anyone if I got good, so I had to sign a contract to say if I used the art in school, I would be stopped immediately.

Believe it or not, in 32 years I have never had a TaeKwonDo lesson paid for by anyone. In December 1985, I found a newspaper round to fund it (I would eventually have three rounds on a Friday evening for a few years). Whilst most relaxed at home, I would be out delivering papers until 8.30pm at night so I could pay for classes and buy what I needed - my family had no money and lived hand to mouth, so it had to be me who funded my art.

January 1986 is my start date and, well, I am buzzing as I have convinced Darren to try it too. I am also worried about my injury, so a lot is going on in my head about my first session. I had spoken to Mr Vigor, then 2nd Degree Instructor of Hemel Hempstead Mid West and he said he would keep an eye on me.

So, that's the background on me and, for many, it will explain my hard argumentative ways and attitude towards the many seniors in the U.K. TaeKwonDo scene that I have gone to war with. Let's call this my DNA. In the following, you will read about some blazing wars but every instance I recall has been when injustices have been served against me and my extended family (my students). To me, everyone must be held accountable and, by Christ, they have been....

The Beginnings

In January 1986, I try my first TaeKwonDo class under my first coach Billy Vigor. He was an amazing coach and a hard ass teaching TaeKwonDo. He also held a 2nd Dan in judo. I would stay at his club for about 8 months, learning the same stuff and not progressing. On a number of occasions he says you must grade, but I had no intention of grading as, in those days, I just wanted to learn how to fight. This was such a jerk attitude and I am embarrassed by it now. Eventually, I have to leave this class as it was clear Sir was not impressed by me not grading. I enrol with my next coach John McDonald, 2nd Degree, in St. Albans in late 1986. This was on a Friday evening at 7.30pm, so I would do my paper rounds 4pm to 6.30pm and then finish them off at 9pm so papers were often put out from 9.30pm to 10.15pm (worked out the age? Yep, I was nearly 13 doing this). John took no prisoners, telling me if you want to train with me, you grade to achieve. I could not take the next grading as I had not done enough time under him so, in March 1987 I take my first exam under the T.A.G.B.'s Ray Dennis, 5th Degree.

Sadly I have to admit I was still a dreamer. I thought I was well hard, yet in fact I had no power. In those days, I simply trained then did nothing for the rest of the week so I was wasting my money, yet no one had told me this was the case. I was about to learn this the hard way.

October 87 - I am more dedicated now, doing about three times a week. I am in my garden kicking and a local lad age 15 walks past with his buddies, taking the mick out of me. I get my jacket on and walk down the road knowing full well I was gonna fight him (or so I thought). I go to the chip shop and the jerk is there. I then begin to realise I was out of my comfort zone - in boarding school, you fight one on one and in this situation I am in, it could lead to the lad and his mates fighting me together. So I get some chips and begin to walk home thinking that was close. As I get halfway home, Simon is there with his buddy and he starts to provoke me, He punches me in the face and I sidekick him, but he just stood there (did not go down like in the movies - DAMN!). The next few minutes resulted in me getting a beat down I would not forget. I remember staggering home, face like the elephant man - eye socket swollen, ribs broken, bruises all over and blood coming out of me like there was no tomorrow.

My family went ballistic - they wanted blood and the guy taken to task, but I said no, it was my fault, I caused this. This was the turning point for me, not my last serious scrap but possibly one of the top ten most vicious scraps over my life. Theresa was working at a wood factory at the time, so she said how about John (our lodger) and I build you a place to train in. This was a 30 foot by 10 across shed. It took about three months to build and it was amazing. It had electric, a punch bag and a multi gym in it. I spent thousands of hours in there (woman were of no interest to me at the time, fighting was!). After my rather big ass whooping, I would stretch and train two to three hours a day, building speed and power - even today, I still do two hours training a day for self preservation (admittedly, a bit slower due to age). Ironically I became friends with Simon after and never once did I want revenge for the beating. I remember saying to him you helped more than you know.

At school, I am settled down but my beating on the street meant I had to make the decision to change coaches again - my current coach seemed to have limited knowledge of explaining about real fighting and sparring, so the hunt was on. At a T.A.G.B. event, my path crosses with my next coach, Tony Manning, then a 3rd Degree. I get chatting to him and he says come down and have a try any Thursday night. Little did I know the class I would join had about 15 Black Belts and limited juniors like me (I'm a 7th Kup by now). I soon learn the extremely large guys at this class (including my coach) loved to scrap. I also learned that he was a fighter in the ring and out as he was an ex bouncer. With my sparring gear on, I am kicked around like a rag doll week in week out, yet I would return weekly. I knew every wall by first name and the four doors of the gym at one point or another (I had been kicked through them all lol).

I remember Tony saying one day after class after witnessing me being kicked around "Why do you keep coming back?" I simply reply "Because I love your classes Sir". He smiles and walks out of the changing room saying "Good". From there on in, he seemed to do what he could to educate me and turn me into a fighter. Yes, he kicked my ass many times to help me learn and he did not let my previous injury stop him pushing me.

Roll forward to 1988, I am informed dad has Parkinson's disease (this was a misdiagnosis that turned out months later to be a brain tumour). Dad went downhill pretty fast from 1988 to 1989 and at school I was struggling - getting in fights and training harder than ever before seven days a week, pushing my body to breaking point, the more pain the better. I'd return home and lock myself away in my gym, punching and kicking the bag until my hands and feet bled, often crying out loud being so angry as no one had bothered to tell me what the hell was happening, let alone why? In between me doing this, Dad was going for chemo and having stints at the Royal Free hospital and also going to St. Francis Hospice for respite.

I remember a lad called Paul was doing photography at school and he asks if he can take some photos when I'm training. Ok, I say! He takes some and when they come out, they are epic! Solid kicks that made me look like a Black Belt. Paul hands me about five photos and says "Give these to your dad Chris, he will be proud". That night, I visit Dad at the Royal Free with my family and I hand the photos to him - he takes the photos and throws them in the bin. I was broken..... He says "Only poofs use their legs to fight". This sent me over the edge; I hated him for saying this. I even refused to visit him a few times over the months.

It's 1989, I am at school getting ready for class on a Thursday as I was still boarding at school Monday to Friday and am seeing dad irregularly. I am told to go to the Heads office and Mr. Allen says "Chris, there's a taxi coming to get you. You must go home". "Has Dad died?" I ask. He says "Go home son". I go home and the family say Dad is at St. Francis hospice again. Christine says "You must come with us as it's time to say goodbye". I do what was asked. At the hospice, the family are going in pairs and coming out sobbing. The nurse says "Chris, you must go in". I was still angry and said "NO! I am not going in". She takes me to the side and asks why. I told her about the photos and she tells me my Dad used to always show the residents them every time he has come here. In fact, he had them in his bedside drawer then. She says "Chris, he is so proud of you - go in and say goodbye".

I enter the room which is dark with only a bedside light on. I sit by his side and say "Hello Dad" He is in a coma. I look in the drawer and the photos were there, which leaves me feeling guilty for my actions. As I am there holding his hand I say "Dad, I thought you were ashamed of me?" I feel him squeeze my hand, but he is in a coma - is this possible? I say "Dad, I promise you one day I will be a Master or a high ranking TaeKwonDo coach". I feel him squeeze again. I kiss his head and say "I love you Dad and always will". As you can imagine, I am sobbing by now. I leave the room knowing this was the end of an era and my Dad passes away that night.



On the following Saturday, I am supposed to take part in a TAGB championships at the Link Leisure Centre – well, I am so flipping stubborn, I still turn up and take part. I was fine waiting to compete but, as soon as I get on the floor, I totally lose it and I am subsequently used as a kick bag, not throwing one punch or kick. Lesson learnt - don't enter an event when your life has suffered such a loss.

After dad dies and my situation with the tournament, I quit TaeKwonDo for about three months. During this time, the gym become a drug den for my friends (pot only, as far as I know) and I begin drinking, partying a lot and fighting anyone that wants to take the challenge, I had been kicked out of school for violent conduct - I was due to leave within three months anyway (I was not expelled, just put on leave). I was on a downward spiral.

I meet a girl at 16 – I can only say now this relationship was toxic. Five years I was with her. The usual would happen - I would wind her up and she would physically punch and kick me to the point of me having to restrain her. The crunch came when she tried to stick a knife in my back, so I called it a day. However, when I look at it now, I don't blame her as I was in a bad place, always flipping out and just being horrid with my words. Thankfully, the next girlfriend was a keeper, stripping back my issues and getting me to understand life is not about violence.

At 16, we were out every night as, by now, we just loved to cause havoc. This went on right up to the point when Terry Hobbs, a friend of my sisters, wrestles me to the floor one night in a fit of rage and says "What the fuck is up with you? You are turning against your family and friends - you need to sort it out". I remember getting a call shortly after this from my coach and he says "Well, are you ready to come back?" I said "Yeah!" and he said "It's time to sort yourself out now Chris!" Had someone spoken to him? Well, two weeks later, I am back at my club - I begin to get rid of those new friends around me, apart from the missus. Drugs and drinking is also knocked on its' ass. I am teetotal now, I don't drink, smoke or do drugs as my body is a temple.

I get back to training, only five times a week now (I still do this today) but the ex hated it. I return to the club with goals - these were to become a better fighter, get a Black Belt in TaeKwonDo, get a car, become a coach, but the biggest one I thought would never transpire - to attain the Master grade in TaeKwonDo. Was this a dream?

I am soon reaching my goals, even being asked to be part of Sirs squad (a kick ass squad!) at 1st Kup in 1991. I would attend every squad training session and have some amazing sparring buddies - Kevin Manning, Dave Townsend and Dave Jahoo - and we travel to Lemington Spar, Coventry, Leicester to fight against some of GBTA's top Black Belt teams and these were awesome. We had left the TAGB as Ray Dennis had issues with them, so a number of clubs left to form this new group under him but his etiquette was questionable as, at these events, drinking and cigarettes were all par for the course. So, I am in this team and, looking back at it, the lads were solid adults and I looked like Mr. Bean in amongst them. I never got to compete officially - I was the reserve which, now, I smile and think "Yep I was good", but I was not like the rest of our lads. They were scrappers, hard hitting adults, so I think Sir was saving me from an ass whooping and was humouring his prodigy.

We cruised along until 1992, but all was not good behind the scenes. Sir was travelling to Coventry weekly to train himself under Mr. Dennis, so I think he had had enough of uncertainty in his life. This year, we were all graded to 1st Degree under Mr. Dennis and this would be the last time I would see him. We were informed that we were to align with the B.U.T.F., which meant changes for us as our Black Belts had visited them to see what was what. We joined and had the first grading with the senior Instructor, a man I would learn to respect. He took no BS and he and I were to have many battles as the years rolled by, as my way was 'Be cool man' and his was 'Follow the structure or get out'. I began to see many of the older Black Belts I'd grown up with disappear as the months roll by - we went from 17 to 4. Years later, I am told by Tom Brennan that Tony had sent letters telling all to shape up or get lost. I can honestly say I never got this, so I guess I must have been doing something right.

The late Master Choy seemed to always be on my back from day one, but now I realise he was paving the way for me to take my place. I don't think he liked me, or was it that he saw potential so relished in pushing me for the good. Anyway, this only made me more determined that he would like me one day. That same year, he becomes a Master and my respect just grows for him, as he pulls no punches and he is nurturing me and shaping me to what I am today. In 1993, I contact Tony and say I want to become an Instructor (goal no 2) – well, he paves the way for me by getting me to help at his classes for a number of months. In February, I take my Instructors Degree under the BUTF by Master Choy. He leaves no stone unturned, making sure our knowledge is second to none - if you want to teach, show me you are up to the job. Boy, that man was demanding!

I am summoned to Master Choy's house shortly after as I want to open a club. Little did I know this was to be possibly one of the biggest dressing downs from him so far. I arrive and he takes me to the office - no sooner do I sit down, he sits in front of me and says "Drugs!" I say "Sorry Sir?" He says "Do you do them?" I think Tony had told him. I say "I did Sir". He says "How can you expect to be an Instructor if you are not going to lead by example?" I say "Sir, I have not done them for a long time and it was only pot". He explains what he expects from his Instructors very sternly and says "If you cannot give me this, you cannot teach for the B.U.T.F." In all honesty, I think this was where I saw things clearer, but things were already shaping up.



I open my first club around the corner to Tony's in Hatfield Road on Tuesdays, but Tony's classes are not being pushed by now. Within a year, Tony's classes are closed, as he is now focusing on his new Harrow class and not advertising St. Albans. He closes St. Albans and I moved to his venue in January 1995. I begin turning the school around and am getting 30+ members a year. I am also on my way to having a family, as my new girlfriend Tracey is pregnant with Lauren.

In 1995, I am rushed into hospital with internal bleeding and, boy was I ill. It turned out it was not my childhood injury, but the lining of my stomach bleeding due to the doctors and the dentist issuing tablets that interacted against each other. Once better and back at the club, I open Hemel Hempstead and one of my longest serving students, Stuart Smith, joins me in 1996. Little did I know he would be what I call a 'Lifer of TaeKwonDo', as he has completed 21 years with me now. He and his brother were skin heads from the Grove Hill estate, rough and ready when I was teaching. I whooped their asses time and time again and the results were they became my top fighters. Many called them

the Mitchell brothers, I called them the Right Said Fred brothers!

By this time, I have my own flat, a girlfriend of some years and another daughter on the way. I remember one time going on an Instructors course in the early days and forgetting my jacket (I was all the way up in High Wycombe at the RAF centre). Master Choy says "Go get your jacket now" and really reprimanding me. I was furious with him, as the journey was 35 minutes to home and another 35 back again. I get my jacket and return back to the centre - of course, it was a running joke from there on for all the Instructors over the years. I'd often get the first comment of the morning on all courses "Got ya jacket Mr. Snow?" I guess I deserved it. I think, due to this no Instructor ever left their jacket behind again in B.U.T.F.



The funny thing is I respected this, as he led with an iron fist and showed no weakness. On B.U.T.F. courses, you would be put through your paces time and time again until it was correct, as his vision was self perfection always. He would often say to us "Do a technique 1000 times wrong, it is wrong - do it correct once and it will always be correct". His sessions were pretty damn epic. I have not met another Master as precise as him in the U.K. yet and, if I am honest, it was him that made me the feisty bugger I am now (coupled with my tough childhood).

As I write this, I suddenly remember a full blown argument with the Master on the phone one night in the early days of becoming an Instructor. Often he would call me at 9pm (or it could be 10.30pm onwards) as, if he had an issue, you were getting it in the ear over the phone, which I think many will verify. I had a full out argument with him as someone had said I had said something (it had been taken out of context). We argued, I said to him "You are out of order calling me so late, as my children have been woken by your call". I can honestly say I think after this respect was there on both sides - after a few years, I am even buying my tropical fish from him and getting advice (I have now been fish keeping for 25 years by the way, thanks to him).

In the B.U.T.F. they set up a top Black Belt team - these students were solid. The head coach is Master Wolf, a top notch coach that has produced the best there is in the world. I am soon asking if I can do the squad training too. Now let's get something straight, I competed about four times a year in the B.U.T.F. and I had some amazing bouts, but I was never a top fighter - I was more of a 'have a go' guy.



I remember at one of the squad training sessions, I was sparring against Mr Gower, 2nd Degree, and got knocked out flat – omg, he could punch! Master Wolf says "How many fingers have I got up", leaning over me flat on my back on the floor. I'm thinking "You're joking right, I see three of you!" I guess you can say I had my bell well and truly rung lol.

I am competing regularly now and picking up bronze and silver medals. I remember competing against Mr. Ford who was often on Euro Sport TV at Battersea Leisure Centre. I seem to remember we were in the semi finals and it was two rounds. Sir says "You are ahead, keep using your legs". I did not listen and tried to spar with my hands and it ended with me taking a reverse punch in the gob. The bout is stopped, but I have no idea why. I walk off, as the ref tells me to go and clean up. As I get back to the changing room, Paul Gower is behind me – he says "Chris, are you okay?" I say "Yeah, why?" My voice sounds weird. He turns me round to face a mirror and my two front teeth are sticking out of my top lip and there's a lot of blood down my top. I guess I was in shock! I had to go to hospital and they removed the teeth and stitched the lip so, since then, I have worn a denture plate. I call it my war wound lol (it's great to scare the kids with too!)

The early days were pretty damn hard, but things would get harder due to politics and BS of the art. I would fight against the system under Master Choy even though I had respect for it and, to be honest, he always won. I was getting my grades, 2nd Degree then 3rd Degree, and running successful clubs with hard work of 100+ members. What was ahead would rock me to my core though, as I did not realise just how two-faced and nasty the TaeKwonDo world can be.

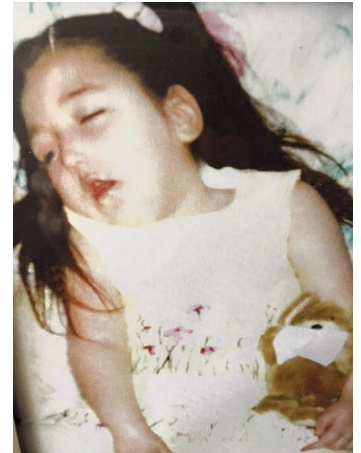
Stepping into the political arena

So, the year is 1999 and we are informed that General Choi Hong Hi would come to the U.K. that year to conduct a three day seminar for the B.U.T.F. By this time, I am embedded into the B.U.T.F. and a real advocate, but still arguing like the mouthy twat I was! I recall getting an Instructors only letter - it reads that Instructors should not make changes to their techniques after they have attended the General's seminar. This made me ask why; surely we are doing things correctly? After all, we are one of the most respected U.K. groups in Europe.

1999 is a pretty bad year - our family has a very special little girl in it that was a precious gift from God and we would lose her in this year. Gem was born in 1992 with a rare genetic disorder. The family are bonded together through grief, knowing that she was only on loan to us. Sadly, she passes away leaving a massive hole in our hearts and me being broken inside but, as the only man of the family, I just could not show my emotions (or so I thought).

This same year, the Founder arrives and I am there as a 3rd Dan. Next to me is Master Sanghas' son - as the Founder enters the hall, I hear a massive thud amongst the applause. I turn and see him fainted on the floor. I see a number of Black Belts instructed to get him off the floor. He was fine but, man, have some compassion I am thinking....

During the seminar, I can see the Founder getting agitated by a 3rd Dan junior who keeps standing up. The Founder said "Sit down. How can you be 3rd Degree?" At this point, its about Yul Gok - he suddenly points at me hidden behind many Black Belts (80+) yet, as he pointed, they moved aside and it was me he wanted to perform. It was a shaky start and, to me, the longest flipping time spent on one pattern. He kinda insulted me at the end by saying "With my methods, you could be good!" I remember thinking "That's a backhanded compliment!" I soon realised this was because his art was being instructed differently and did not meet his standards.



In 2001, I am informed by Master Choy I am to take my 4th Degree. I am told I will need to train with him, along with Mr. Pantelli. We had about 8 weeks of intensive training. Part of this was to work on 360 jump back kick - on one occasion, we had a task set to achieve 3 out of 3 breaks, both legs, and this resulted in us doing about 3 hours on breaking alone. Our legs were smashed, but I won a number of titles in breaking using this technique over the years after.

I take my grading to 4th Degree and I got my stripes, so I'm another step closer to my goal. However, the seed that was planted by the Founder in 1999 had grown and, by now, I am investigating this I.T.F. technique I keep hearing about. I am also visiting local classes to see what all the hype is about. It looks like TaeKwonDo, we wear the same suits and same practices - nothing is different. Has the Founder of TaeKwonDo sent me on a BS mission? I start to see sine wave, connecting movements and speed on different techniques but, to me, TaeKwonDo was and is being taught by the B.U.T.F. correctly.

Once I got my 4th Degree, for the next few months it felt like when I train at my coaches clubs (which was weekly), he is not so welcoming. To me, I felt like he really was not happy I got 4th Dan (with some of his discussions he had with me like "No one would blame you if you gave up" or "You have a young family - if you need to leave, do so". The last time I trained at his club, it was competition training - we were paired into fours, I remember it was my Instructor and two of his seniors as my spar partners. I am sparring and they are coming in hard, like harder than they ever had... what the fuck! At one point, my Instructor puts me on my ass with a back kick to my stomach and says "Come on, get up" aggressively. Okay Houston, we have a problem. Sparring one of the senior students, he lands a front kick in the back of my knee - this put me out of TaeKwonDo for eight weeks with nerve damage. I was so pissed off as the bruise spread all the way up my leg, leaving me unable to walk or train. Years later, I am told by that student that some of the members said I was hitting hard when I visited, so my Instructor decided to teach me a lesson (note - speak to both parties, as there are two side to a story). Is this true? I really don't know (or care now) but, thinking back, it pisses me off.

I also had an argument with Master Choy around that time and, at this point, I just say "Bollocks, I am not taking this crap anymore". With a heavy heart, I simply take the option of resigning my schools membership. However, I can say the way I left was not right - looking back now, I blamed him and I blamed the ways of B.U.T.F. when, in fact, it was my issue with what happened that evening. Don't get me wrong, Tony was like a dad to me - 14 years I was loyal to him and he is the best Instructor I have ever had the pleasure to study under. I just lost respect for him at this point as I feel if he had spoken to me, we could have sorted it out before it happened. Then again, everything happens for a reason, so perhaps what took place was meant to happen to make me what I am now.

Leaving the B.U.T.F. was tougher than tough, as most inside it turned their backs on me! Master Choy was on the B.T.C. at the time and, everywhere we turned, we were refused entry into the I.T.F. (as everyone knew him, so all U.K. doors were shut). We were directed to U.K.T.F. in Scotland, another great group at the time. To be part of us, you MUST come to our Instructors course, we were told - they really did not recognise our grades and our TaeKwonDo was dysfunctional in their eyes (which it was not, it was just missing some ingredients). Obviously, this relationship died a quick death (not before a lot of shit came my way from an international forum though). One of the coaches of the B.U.T.F. posted a two page topic on me, which was vile - years later, that same coach said it was not him and blamed it on the group but, to be frank, I had moved on. That issue had no effect on me now, as is the case with any other BS I have had from UK groups - I simply move on and don't dwell on it.

I remember in early 2002, I contacted Mr. Williams IV Degree of U.K.T.A. to see if we could join them. He explained I would need to go on an International Instructors course, so I took the course and got my plaque (in fact, everything I was told to do I did, even getting my 4th Degree ratified by I.T.F.). Sadly, the same year, the Founder passes away and the I.T.F. would break up like honeycomb.

Mr. Williams says "Join the U.K.T.A., this is the way forward for you" - for 13 months we were settled, doing courses, exams etc. but issues kept coming up (known now to many as red tape U.K.T.A. politics). I think the final straw was being told as a 4th Dan, I had to have a Master grade all my 6th Kups - years later, I was told this was false information. I was even getting aggro for sticking up for myself on line - well, that goes down

like a lead balloon and I just argue and disagree, leaving things at a stalemate. By now, we have about 4 schools and 180 members, so we get together and decide we should just walk away - this is in 2003.

In 2004, we change the groups name from 'Lions TKD Schools' to Lions TaeKwonDo Schools Independent and start to function alone. We find UK-ITF, so we join them as an affiliate. We start advertising and pick up a few new schools and, this same year, we create our first open Championships which attracted about 110 competitors. The L.T.S.I. has over 500 members by 2005, growing way too fast. The tournaments are moving ahead, attracting 180 per event and we are now hosting twice a year. All things were working well, but it seems everything I say on line is being reported back to their lead Master by someone in the UK-ITF and they would contact me saying I had broken some sort of rule. Give me a break! I had heard how political they could be, but I was soon to find out first hand how ruthless many around him were.

Comments were made such as "You are sitting on the fence, working with all the independents". Again, I just argued the toss and told them I am doing what General Choi wanted, getting all TaeKwonDo back together. I was invited to take my 5th Dan under the UK-ITF and passed. Things are going well and I keep my head down, mind my own business and have little to do with them (after all, I am just an affiliate anyway). From time to time, shit hits the fan and I have to contact them to explain things and, to be honest, I am getting sick of the feeling of them acting like we belong to them.

By early 2008, I finally get down to setting up 'Original ITF' magazine that, in its' peak, had 17,000 downloads a month. This was FREE and was a voice for all I.T.F.'s but, every time I published it, I faced an onslaught of BS and sniping. It appeared to me they wanted to control it, but I was determined to keep full control of the magazine. Round about this time, I was working closely with three other groups and our vision was to create a group in the Independent National Organisation (INO), as all of us were already working together doing seminars and tournaments, so why not? However, the powers that be made things difficult, contacting me by email accusing me of trying to set up an INO in opposition of theirs - I am pretty dammed heated at this point. Why? Well, there were four groups involved altogether, yet they were gunning for me. In my usual way, I went to war with them and a lot of crap followed. Well, I said sod it and resigned, joining up with I.T.U.K. (one of the four groups) for a little time. Issues happened again, as I.T.U.K. held a seminar with Grand Master Choi but I was not allowed to attend officially. I went, but as a reporter - you could have cut the tension with a knife and the staring with hatred from the high ranks towards me was immense but, guess what, I did not care!

Eventually, they used the magazine against me to expel me from ITF-C, saying I was bringing the I.T.F. into disrepute. In 2009, they say I have been expelled at the decision of the I.T.F. They subsequently ask in an email how would I like it if they used my emails on line to discredit me - I am so angry, I say "Do what you bloody want" and, within hours, all the emails are on line.

As from 2014, there is a new law on the internet however that, if you post something that discredits another on line that can damage them, you can be sued. I have contacted the complaints commission and directed them to all the content. I also officially informed them that the body has no permission to post this BS, as it is clearly there to discredit me only and was only put up after I lost control. The new law means I can demand it be removed. Currently I am not chasing this up, but if I hear it is still there, I will take it to the next step legally.

The three groups and I then join ITF-NK in 2009 but, before this happens, a number of our schools leave us reducing the L.T.S.I. to its' knees. At this point, we knew a lot of lies and BS had caused us issues but really had lost the will to live. We decided to distance ourselves from the online issues and I took the decision to close Original ITF magazine (I had thousands of emails asking why). The reason was simple - politics had won. I created a Facebook page dedicated to General Choi instead this year, which today has over 10,000 likes / subscribers on it. I search the internet for unseen images of the founder to preserve his legacy here.



The only way is up

In 2010, Master Harry invites me to take my 6th Degree exam - all in all, this was a good exam and I pass with flying colours, but I sustain an injury on my knuckle. Nearly a week later, I nearly lose my life after contracting cellulitis. I am at home and I knew the cut on my knuckle was infected, as I had been treating it but the pain was still extreme. I am doing some house cleaning and I feel something pop in my hand - over the next few hours, my hand goes red and it starts traveling up my arm. I pick up my wife and we head to A&E - once seen, the sister looks panicked as the redness is right up by my elbow now. A doctor comes in and confirms it is cellulitis. She says "You need to go to hospital now" - they place a canular in my arm and arrange hospital transport to take me to the Royal Free Hospital. By now, I am feeling sick as a dog, the arm is red raw and I am feeling pain like never before.

Tracey was told to make her own way to the hospital. As soon as I get there, there are Doctors and a medical team waiting for me. I am signing my life away and the doctor says "Listen, if that rash gets to your heart, it will be fatal". I am now realising this was a serious matter. I am taken to the operating theater and am there for six hours. It appears my knuckles had collapsed, so they had to remove, clean and rebuild the main knuckle. I was in hospital for about a week after, but all was fine apart from a scar. I cannot do knuckle push ups now, but that's a small price compared to what could have happened.

I tried to claim on the insurance, but now realise that you will never be successful, as the Martial Arts insurance is not worth the paper it is written on. I provide video footage, but am told it's inadmissible in court. So, forget claiming then.....



The L.T.S.I. decides to simply bail out of the U.K. scene on line at this time. No more on line battles - if they attacked us, we simply said nothing, as ignorance is bliss. We are still around, but our agreement is just be the best we can.... and that's what we done. We moved our events to a massive arena and hosted events, making many friends along the way. Ignoring the BS on line and even blatant attacks, we just laughed and got on with business. By 2012, our Opens are attracting 300 competitors, but we wanted something more. The relationship with I.T.U.K. had ended in 2010 and Master Harry and I were no longer talking.

In 2012, I am informed that mum is very ill - she is in hospital for six weeks until, sadly, she loses her life. Our relationship is, let's say, strained but, in the last six weeks, we get close again but I knew the outcome. Again, this makes me more determined to be a success in TaeKwonDo and it was here I started to think about

returning back to DJ'ing (which is my weekend job now and I am bloody good at it apparently!).

The L.T.S.I. then agreed to align to Unified ITF. A few months later, they contact me and say they want to host a Worlds at your tournament venue. I organise everything for them, going the extra mile. Contact levels were a joke and, despite all my efforts (even hosting a seminar with GM Hwrang), I had no thank you until I said "What, no credit". They knew I was annoyed and, on the last day, they mentioned my efforts in a throw away comment. It's not about them stroking ones ego, it's about giving credit when others go out of their way to help you. Again, this seems to be what some do in the I.T.F.'s - they use you to help them, then take all the credit... INTEGRITY!!!!

After this event, the manager from Herts. Sports Complex called me and they were not happy! It seems nine ambulances were called in one day and the venue were going to cancel our future bookings because of this. I said "Look, I stepped down on day one due to the contact levels, so I am afraid it was nothing to do with me - take it up with them". What I had seen was really wrong, I had never seen so much blood or hard contact and lack of respect. It was the first World Championships though, so many had an axe to grind. It was not semi contact, it was hard. Thankfully, in 2015 they learned from their mistakes, so levels were good. This year, I also see Master Harry and we finally bury the hatchet and agree to move on. At this time, I was at loggerheads with the organiser of the 2015 Worlds (as he had broken a deal with me, which lacked integrity in my opinion), so we fall out big time and stop talking. Due to this, we join I.T.F. Union - the group has a Facebook page but nothing else, so I get on board and build a website for them. In its' first year, it hits 100,000 visitors which was amazing in my book.

Master Dalton contacts me in May 2016 and says "The executive want to promote you - your tournaments, seminars, charity work and time served means we want to promote you to 7th Dan". I say "With respect Sir, I don't just want a promotion. I want to be graded accordingly i.e. a physical exam Sir". The phone line goes quiet and he says "Sir, you have enough credit and time served to take this promotion". I say "Sir, I'd rather not take the promotion, to be honest". We end the call and I am thinking I think I have pissed someone off. A few days later I get a call from Master Dalton - he says "Chris, I have organised my calendar. I will come in September to grade you. I am not happy, but I respect your decision. The executive are a bit miffed at your attitude, but I can see why".



So, we are on! I start training hard, 3 hours personal training a day. Summer comes and I am videoing all my patterns and watching them after to see any issues. Leading up to my grading, I am about to be tested as, in my home life, the shit hits the fan. My second born is involved in a family that are turning her against us, she is staying there more and more and it seems she is being groomed. I hear a photo of her is floating around the families phones and I go ballistic. The next thing, I am banging on their door and in a full on confrontation - with a bit of grabbing, I take the guys phone and find the image. I was ready to rip his head off... he is blubbering like a fool. I walk away saying "Go near my kid again and I will f***ing rip ya head off". The day before my grading, I hear that the boyfriend of my daughters friend has punched my daughter. Once again, I am pushed to the edge and am up their house, ready to break this guys face. The daughter was crying, saying her 23 year old boyfriend was not there. I say "Tell him I will be back" and go home. 30 minutes later, I have three police officers on my doorstep! I am fuming - this idiot hits my daughter

and now I am to face being nicked. In the end, they just warn me to stay away from them. As it was the day before my grading, it was too late to cancel, so I had to just take the exam and do my best. My mind was all over the place and, to this day, I still don't know how I passed.



I know that when you look at the film of the grading on my website www.stalbanstaekwondo.com, I looked like I was in control but, the fact is, I had a mind of mushy peas - thankfully, it was auto pilot all the way. I remember the night before, I kept getting up and going through patterns all night as the wife and kids were out at a function. It was a very important grade to me as it marked the end of 27 year promise.

On the day of the exam, we pick up Master Dalton (he'd just returned from Cuba). We head to my smaller hall and set up. I get dressed in dobok and stretch - "Are you ready, Chris?". Master Dalton, 8th Degree, is in front of me and my head is all over the place. He says "Chris, take five minutes out and relax". I do and, when I return, I am on auto pilot - even to this day, I can't remember doing the exam. 75 minutes later, Master Dalton asks a few theory questions. He is sat there quietly and suddenly says "That's it! I can confirm you have reached the standard that we expect of our members and now grade you Master. Congratulations Chris". I am sobbing and all I could think of was dad - was he looking down from heaven and saying "That's my boy". I relished in the thought he was probably there with my niece and mum, clapping as the promotion took place.

As a mark of respect for my father, I have embroidered on my belt 'The promise was achieved' under my name. Yep, many won't know the story unless they read this, but it's me giving credit to dad and that promise I made to him all those years ago.

I cannot say that there are excuses for some of my actions or behaviour over the years, only that I have stood toe to toe with the idiots of my chosen art. I would say 60% of all wars I have had have been created by others, with 40% caused by my refusal to let anyone walk over me. There have been times that I have been low and nearly not recovered, as the politicians attacked me and used rules to pick on me. I have stood three

times since becoming a coach in front of my members, teaching hours after family members have died. Many say why have you run classes when this has happened - well, because it's all I know, it's my way to cope. When I teach, I come alive - it's the joy of teaching others a skill that frankly has changed my life for the best and helped me cope with the worst times life can throw at you. To me, TaeKwonDo really is the art of life for me.

So, as you can see, it has not been plain sailing in any way, shape or form - if there is one thing I can say though, behind every Master, Instructor and student there will be some amazing stories. This was mine.

Written By Master Snow, VII